

Once Dhaka was adorned with several hundred ponds. Like canals, only a handful exist now. But they are also in death throes due to negligence of the authorities concerned. Although, according to the Field, Open Space, Park and Natural Water Body Protection Act 2000, filling up of any water body including pond is illegal, it's going on unabated. The Daily Star found 63 ponds in the maps of undivided Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) in its 28 wards out of 90. A survey for the map was carried out between 2003 and 2011. But many of the water bodies were filled up before the period and also even after the survey. We are publishing the twelfth report of the series today covering the then DCC wards 73 and 71.



The Gol Talab pond remains an open invitation for all to enjoy its serenity. Located in the capital's Islampur, the around eight-bigha reservoir dates back to the 19th century. It is also an official heritage site, designated by the government.

PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

TO HEART'S CONTENT



HELEMUL ALAM

On a Friday afternoon, Shaymol Kanti Das, a local of the capital's Laxmi Bazar, decided to take his son on an adventure. But his 10-year-old is a very busy individual. He has to attend school regularly, and then study for exams. In this free time, he also loves to play cricket. So, when Shaymol asked him to come along, he was not thrilled. It was a holiday after all and he had plans. Soon the father and son headed out. Shaymol kept telling him that he

will enjoy the place they were planning to visit. But his son was not convinced. Shaymol also had a bag with him, which he held on tight much to the suspicion of his son. Suspicion turned to elation as soon as they reached their destination -- a pond in Islampur. The large round-shaped reservoir welcomed the duo cheerily. Shaymol then revealed his plan to his son. They will swim in the reservoir. He also brought an extra pair of clothes in the bag. "We don't have any pond where we live. This will be a nice experience for my son," said the father. "When I was a kid I used to swim in ponds regularly," he said. His son, meanwhile, was too excited to talk as he kept on jumping out of joy and calling his father to join him. "Look how happy he is," Shaymol told this correspondent.

Not only the father and son, people from Islampur, Babubazar, Badamtoli, Shakharibazar, Patuatuli, Tantibazar, Nayabazar and other areas also visit the pond to bathe and swim in its cool water. The around eight-bigha reservoir is known as Gol Talab (tank) or Gol Pukur. It is an oval shaped reservoir located immediately to the north-west of the Ahsan Manzil Palace and north of the Buriganga River. Also known as Nawab Bari Pukur, the water body is an official heritage site, designated by the government. It dates back to the 19th century. The view of the pond from top is stunning with its round shape and clear water. It is fenced and surrounded by trees such as coconut, mango, jackfruit and neem. The water body is maintained by the "Moulvi Khawaja Abdullah Welfare Trust". It has assigned the

Nawab Bari Tank Committee to look after it. Khwaza Danesh Kamal, vice-president of the tank committee, said the pond is there since the British period and anyone can swim in it for Tk 5. "We use the money for maintaining the water body." "The pond stays open throughout the day," he said. "Most usually swim in it for an hour." As he was talking, a group of children jumped into the reservoir and started playing. They were planning to spend the entire day swimming. Overhearing them, Kamal smiled. "Anyone can swim for as long as they want," he said. "But we don't allow swimming at night." "Also, we don't allow people to use shampoo or soap to keep the water free of pollution." The tank committee is looking after the pond for the last two years, he said. There is a ghat (landing spot) on

its north-western part, near the entrance, for bathing. In addition, there is a place where people can keep their valuables while swimming. Khawza Abdur Rahman, a member of the welfare trust, said, "We also hold fishing events thrice a year. After paying a certain amount, anyone can fish here." "Usually, we set up around 25/30 matchas (makeshift wooden structures) near the banks for people to fish. If it's a family event, we increase the numbers of the matchas." "People have to pay around Tk 20,000 for a ticket and they can fish on Fridays for eight consecutive weeks from dawn to dusk," Rahman said. One person can use one matcha for fishing. The area surrounding the pond becomes quite vibrant during the events, he smiled. "Couple of months back, a person caught an 8kg chital here."

"People from other areas also drop by to watch the fishing competition. There would be a community atmosphere surrounding the area." Rahman said there are two red ruhis and a black ruhi in the pond. "Those also enhance the beauty of the pond. To be able to catch one of those adds more joy to the occasion. Afterwards, we release them in the water right away." Anyone can bathe, swim or fish in the pond to their heart's content. Not just for fishing, the reservoir also comes handy during fire incidents. Anwar Hossain, a resident of Islampur, said couple of years back, a fire broke out at a market in the area. Firemen used its water to douse the blaze. "We are really lucky to have a pond like to call our own," he said.

Edited by HASAN MEER

A vibrant community atmosphere

The place always stays abuzz with activities. The elderly people sit in a corner and relax, while the children play around. Sometimes, there are noises of splashes, which will make the elderly look at the direction where the sound came from. But there would be no frown on their faces, rather a smile mixed with nostalgia. The area is also surrounded by trees such as coconut, betel nut, mango and lemon. Located in Bongshal of Old Dhaka, this around 2.5-bigha water body has been offering a much-needed respite to the residents. It is serving as a communal facility not only for the locality but also for people from other areas. The reservoir is over a hundred years young. It is one of the few water bodies that are maintained by the community. It was dug up during the British period under the initiative of one Armania, a British woman, and Haji Bhutto, an influential local. They donated their land so that people of the area could use it, according to locals. Besides being a natural haven, and a place to relax awhile, the water body used to cater for households of the community also. While visiting the area, this correspondent spoke with many of the locals. Everyone had fond memories of the reservoir that has become a part of them.



Be it for taking a dip or relaxing awhile by its banks, Bongshal pond provides a much-needed respite to the residents in the area.

The reservoir is now maintained by Bongshal panchayet (local governing body). Abdur Rahman, in-charge of its maintenance,

said the pond has two ghats (landing spots) and it is surrounded by grilled fences. "It was fenced in 2013 for protection," he

added. "Anyone can swim in the pond for Tk 3." Rahman said the money is being used for its

maintenance. "Every day over two hundred people, mostly children, use it for swimming or bathing." Pias Chakraborty, a sixth grader of a local school, was planning to take a dip along with two of his friends -- Bibek Chandra De and Kirish Chandra De. They said they swim in the reservoir everyday. There are also ropes hanging from a tree limb near a ghat. Pias held one with his right hand and waved at this correspondent before swinging into the water. Abdur Rahman said they also arrange fishing competitions four times a year. After paying Tk 10,000, anyone can fish for two days (two Fridays) from 6:00am to 6:00pm. The last competition was held in April. "We also decorate the pond area during the Eid holidays as it becomes a gathering place for families and friends," he said. Amid the hustle and bustle of city life, Bongshal pond continues to provide a place for the locals to meet and spend time together. Many from the other areas also visit the area -- sometimes for a cool refreshing dip in its clean water or taking a boat ride or just relaxing by its banks. The elderly residents this correspondent spoke with said the pond is a part of their identity. "We want it to be a part of our children's lives as well," they said in unison.

PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON