

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 Playground, 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 fifteenth report of the series today covering the then DCC ward 60 and 62.

PART 15



Once a gathering place, Pushpa Pukur has fallen victim to urban sprawl.



The Balurmash in Lalbagh used to be a pond.

PHOTOS: RASHED SHUMON

# STILL IN RECORDS



HELEMUL ALAM

There are three six-storey and two three-storey buildings and a rickshaw garage among other structures located between Shahidnagar and Amligola of Jagannath Saha road in the capital's Lalbagh.

Next to the structures, there is an open space with tin-shed houses on one side. The open space is mostly used by locals for dumping waste.

The entire area is around 2.5 bighas.

At first sight, it seems like another example of urban sprawl due to the ever-increasing population of the city.

But this place is not just that.

While passing by, this correspondent saw many of the locals, especially the elderly, sighed looking at the structures.

They said there used to be a pond

instead of the concrete structures around a decade ago. It was fondly called "Pushpa Pukur" (flower pond). And, like a flower, the reservoir used to beautify the area as well as their soul.

The water of the pond was clean. It used to shimmer and reflect the golden light of the sun, said the nostalgic locals.

Abdus Salam, a resident of the area, said, "There were two separate ghats (landing spots) for men and women. The one on the eastern side was used by men and the one on the western side by women."

"Look, this is where I used to bathe. The last time I bathe in it was in 1988," sighed the 70-year-old, pointing towards the rickshaw garage.

The memory of the water body is still fresh in the mind of the locals. They said the encroachment started in the late nineties, and it was completely filled up during the 2000s. The structures were built upon it over the years.

But according to the government documents and map, the

pond still exists.

In the base map of Dhaka City Corporation (DCC), prepared in 2004-2005, the place where the Pushpa Pukur used to be is earmarked as a water body (river/lake/canal/pond).

Locals alleged that it was filled up by some influential people over the years while the authorities concerned turned a blind eye to the illegal activity.

According to locals, the reservoir was dug up in 1938 by one Hari Madhab Saha, son of Jagannath Saha. Hari named the pond after his sister, Pushpa Saha.

The pond went under the Dhaka district administration after independence as the family left the country in 1966/67, said Saimul Islam, president of Pushpa Saha Pukur Rakkhya Committee.

The area of the pond is around 50 kathas (2.5 bighas) and it is earmarked as a water body in the Detailed Area Plan (DAP) of Rajdhani Unnayan Kartripakkha (Rajuk), he said.

The filled-up land is also men-

tioned as a pond in CS (Cadastral Survey), SA (State Acquisition) and RS (Revisional Survey) records, he said.

He alleged that one Nazim Uddin is claiming ownership of the land. "A legal battle is ongoing in this regard."

The district administration tried to conduct a drive to stop the encroachment but the drive stopped as a case was filed against it, said Saimul.

In 2010, the High Court issued a stay order to stop the construction work on the land and the eviction drive.

"Though the authorities concerned did not conduct any drive afterwards, setting up structures by encroaching on the property is still going on," he alleged.

Contacted, Mosharraf Hossain, councillor (ward 24) of Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC), said, "We have issued three letters to the DC (deputy commissioner) office, informing them about the encroachment. They are yet to take any steps."

He said they recently complained to the DSCC mayor. "A decision was taken

by the mayor to send a DO (demi-official) letter to the DC office for handing over the land to the city corporation so that they can protect it."

"If we get the land, we will demolish the illegal structures right away," he said.

Ilias Mehedi, deputy collector (revenue) of Dhaka district administration, who was officer in-charge of Arpita Sampatti (vested property), said they will investigate the issue. "Necessary actions will be taken based on it," he said.

Nazim Uddin, who is claiming ownership of the property, could not be reached for comments despite numerous attempts.

## BALURMATH POND

There used to be another pond in Lalbagh, which was filled up during the 90s. Now, the filled-up land is being used as an Eidgah Maidan (field) and a playground.

An influential local filled it up in 1988/1989 and started selling portions of it as plots, alleged locals. But they protested the move and tried to

put up resistance.

They filed a writ petition with the High Court in 2008. "The Dhaka district administration also filed a case against the encroachment at that time," said Saimul Islam, president of Pushpa Pukur Rakkhya Committee.

He said the High Court after two years issued an eviction order and the illegal structures were dismantled. "The land is being used as an Eidgah field ever since." The DCC also enlisted it as an Eidgah.

The around two-bigha pond was mostly used by women of the neighbourhood.

Asia Begum, a local, said, "I used to bathe in it and use the water for household chores as Pushpa Pukur remained crowded."

"It was a place where we used to relax and spend time together. My friends and I swam in it regularly," said the 80-year-old.

(Edited by HASAN MEER)

# Not as vibrant as before

There was a time when the capital's Azimpur area was vibrant with four ponds. Among the four, three of them are still surviving, while the other one was not that fortunate.

Among the surviving three, the condition of one is deplorable. Also, access to the other two has become limited for protection and cultivating fish in one of those.

Many of the elderly residents still get nostalgic while talking about the time they spent swimming in those or relaxing by the banks.

Three of the water bodies belonged to the Public Works Department (PWD), while the other one was privately owned.

## MASJID MAJAR POND

While many of the capital's water bodies have fallen victim to encroachment or pollution, the pond beside the Azimpur Colony Masjid Majar remains an example of how those can be restored and kept alive.

Once, the around 1.3-acre reservoir used to be a perfect place for the people of the neighbourhood to spend their leisure time. It was there since the Pakistan period.

But over the years, it lost its natural look and the water became polluted. The water body also became a breeding ground for mosquitoes. The PWD restored the reservoir last year.

The Tk 2.6 crore renovation work was done under the direction of the prime minister and an additional secretary of the finance ministry, said Tushar Alam, sub-assistant engineer of the PWD.

Boundaries were constructed around it for protection. There is also a ghat (landing spot) with benches, where people can sit and enjoy the serene atmosphere.

Foyez Uddin, a resident of the area, said the fisheries department used to release fish fries in it before the renovation work. Also, a good number of people used to swim and bathe in it.

Now, swimming and bathing have become limited in order to keep it free of pollution, said Tushar Alam.

## POND AT DAYERA SHARIF

The pond at Azimpur Dayera Sharif Khankah is as old as the place itself.

Hazrat Shah Sufi Syed Mohammad Dayem, one of the prominent Sufi saints, founded the shrine of Dayera Sharif in the 18th century. It has been said that the pond is there since then.

Shah Sufi Saiyad Ahmadullah, mutawalli (custodian) of the Dayera and an inheritor of Hajrat Dayem, told The Daily Star that the pond used to be around two bighas.

"Around 18 kathas of it has already been sold by another owner, who got



The reservoir beside Azimpur Masjid Majar is properly maintained.

it as a successor," he said. At present, the reservoir might be over one bigha.

"Though it is still there, we may not be able to keep it intact due to a continuous demand for accommodating our large group of family members."

"Once, we used to cultivate fish in it.

We stopped doing that as we didn't make any profit," he said.

Anwar Hossain, a local, said everyone had access to the reservoir and they used to bathe in it. "It was filled up partially around 20 years back."

Rowshan Ullah, a successor of the

owner, said the pond is in death throes. "Its water has become polluted as people from the nearby residences continue to throw waste in it," he alleged.

"We want to keep it alive. But we're not sure if we can, due to a lack of funding," he said.

## 2 PONDS NEAR AGRANI SCHOOL

There used to be two ponds near Agrani School and College inside the Azimpur Colony. One of them is in a comparatively better condition, while the other has been filled up to make way for buildings.

Parvin Begum, who looks after the around 1-acre pond, said people still bathe or swim in it. However, a restriction is imposed for a few months when the fisheries department releases fish fries for cultivation.

She said she has been taking care of the water body since her husband, who used to work for the PWD, passed away. "We release fries such as ruhi, katol, silver cup, tilapia, and chital in it."

Also, there used to be another pond on the south side of the school. Now, buildings stand firm on the around two-bigha land that once was a reservoir.

The PWD filled it up in 1995 to construct five five-storey buildings. Many of the government officials live there, said Tushar Alam, its sub-assistant engineer.

He said the condition of the pond was not good.

But a resident of the area, Rafiqul Islam, said he used to bathe in it even in the 90s. "Not just I, a good number of people used to use it." The pond was there since the Pakistan period.



This centuries-old water body at Azimpur Dayera Sharif lies neglected.



The pond near Agrani school is still used by locals.



A pond used to be here on the south side of the school.