

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 sixteenth report of the series today covering the then DCC ward 57 and 56.

PART 16



The Gol Pukur inside the Faculty of Fine Arts of Dhaka University remains in a waterless state.



The dry pond at Shishu Park in Shahbagh.

PHOTOS: RASHED SHUMON

THE 'MYSTERY' OF DISAPPEARING WATER



HELEMUL ALAM

A pond is not just a water body necessary for reducing waterlogging in an area, it also comes in handy during a fire incident.

But most importantly, a pond tells a tale of time. The reflective surface of these centuries-old vital organs offer a glimpse into the past -- time spent together swimming or bathing in those, community atmospheres and upheavals of lives.

Most of the ponds in the capital have unique histories of their own. Many were dug up to help people get respite. Many to enhance the beauty of a neighbourhood while many as retention areas.

Some of these water bodies are not just rich with history, they are also "mysterious". Some are surrounded by shrouds of mystery, while some by superstition.

2 PONDS AT DU

There are two such "mysterious" ponds inside Dhaka University (DU). One of them is at the Faculty of Fine Arts, popularly known as Charukala, and the other one inside Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Hall.

GOL PUKUR AT CHARUKALA

There is a place inside Charukala, which from far looks like a large crater. It is circular and filled with various trees.

While speaking with many of the students, they said the crater is actually a pond. Known as Gol Pukur (circular pond), the area is around 2 bighas.

This correspondent also spoke with the university officials and teachers. They said the pond has been in a waterless state for years.

They have tried numerous times to fill it up. But the water inside the reservoir seems to... disappear.

Not just the disappearance of water, the reservoir also has a long history,

adding to its enigma.

The legend goes that the water body was dug up back in the 17th century. The owner of the pond was Naib Nazim Nusrat Jung. He was a deputy subahdar (governor of a subah or province) who used to assist the Nawab (ruler) in administering the outlying areas.

One Moinuddin Hossain used to recite from the Quran at his darbar (court).

Nusrat Jung was pleased with Moinuddin's performance and donated him a piece of land along with the reservoir. After Moinuddin's death, his son inherited the property.

The Nawab of Dhaka wanted to purchase the property. But the son had a condition.

He said a chamber with twelve doors known as "Baraduari" will have to be constructed along with a shrine of his father.

The nawab agreed. He also constructed a "hanging bedi" (platform) over the pond for arranging jalsas, which included singing and dancing. A house was also constructed on the western side for many of the performers to reside.

Once during such a soiree, around six people were killed as the platform collapsed. Since then, the performances had been stopped.

Afterwards, the property including the pond came under the Art College in 1952.

Architect Mazharul Islam following the suggestion of Shilpacharya Zainul Abedin prepared the design of Charukala in 1953, said Prof Nisar Hossain of the faculty of fine arts. But the Baraduari was already dismantled.

He said the shrine is still protected inside the institution. The authorities of the institution constructed the banks of the pond, which is still intact, he said.

"The pond had water in it till the 60s. During the early 70s, it was dug up more and as a result, layers of underlain sand came out from the bottom. Since then, the water did not sustain in it."

Prof ASM Maksud Kamal, chairman

of the university's disaster science and management department, said soil texture and structure greatly influence water infiltration, permeability, and water-holding capacity of an area.

"The clay from the bottom of the pond was removed, which affected the water body. Due to high permeability, water goes underground and does not sustain."

Also over the years, the groundwater level has declined for which it remains out of water. During the rainy season, the reservoir gets filled up a little as the groundwater level increases. But at other times, it remains



Though not devoid of water, the around 7-bigha pond at Shahidullah Hall is also surrounded by mystery.

empty, he said.

Prof Nisar said the clay of a pond holds the water and does not let the water go underground. "But due to a lack of clay, it's not happening here."

"We are not cleaning the pond so clay can be generated naturally through organic materials such as dead leaves and branches. Now, after a heavy rain, water stays in the pond for a few days," he said.

POND AT BANGABANDHU HALL

There is another pond inside the campus, which has also been without water, said Prof Nisar. The around 2-bigha reservoir is inside the Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur

Rahman Hall.

Vice Chancellor Prof Dr AAMS Arefin Siddique said the pond was polluted due to dumping of waste. "But after taking charge, I took an initiative to renovate it."

He said the water does not sustain in the pond despite digging. "But we don't want to dig too deep as that might be risky for the nearby buildings."

"We are taking steps to protect it considering the technical problem," said the VC.

Echoing him, Prof Mofizur Rahman, provost of the hall, said, "We

water. Afterwards, it took a long time for the water to recede. "But the pond dried up within a couple of days."

The Shishu Park was established on 15 acres of land in 1979. "There is a plan to construct water fountains in place of the pond. It will be done under a project of the Public Works Department (PWD)."

Prof ASM Maksud Kamal of Dhaka University said, "Like the other two ponds [in Charukala and Bangabandhu Hall], this one also remains empty except for the rainy season."

"The pond was dug up couple of

of the hall.

"There is something mysterious about this pond. Many have said they felt as if they were being pulled towards the bottom while swimming."

Mohiuddin, principal administrative officer of the hall, said, "Even good swimmers have drowned in it." He said they have set up signboards warning students not to swim there.

DU Prof Firoz Zaman of geology department, however, said there is no such mystery surrounding the reservoir. "The pond is very old and its water has become polluted. As the level of oxygen is less due to the pollution, the water



The reservoir at Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Hall.

times that affected the layer of clay. As a result, water does not sustain in it."

POND AT SHAHIDULLAH HALL
Though the pond at Shahidullah Hall is not devoid of water, it does not make it any less mysterious.

Many of the students and staff believe there is "something" in the bottom of the water body that pulls a person towards it while swimming.

Though experts have ruled out the superstition, almost every year people have died by drowning in it.

Around eight people including students of the university drowned in the pond in the last 10 years, said Billal Hossain, senior administrative officer

became heavier. As a result, it is difficult to swim in it even for the experts."

The hall was established in 1921. But the pond was there before that. Earlier, it was also used by the students of Dhaka College.

There are three ghats (landing spots) in it, two on the western side and one on the eastern side. The pond is around 7 bighas and surrounded by trees and benches.

Whether these ponds are surrounded by any mystery or not, they are still a vital element of the city and worth preserving.

(Edited by HASAN MEER)

Setting an example

The Dhaka University area is adorned with many ponds and most of them are being maintained with care.

The reservoirs are surrounded by trees and there are also benches by the banks where one can sit and enjoy the serenity of the water. Students are often seen gossiping or studying by the water bodies.

Vice Chancellor Prof Dr AAMS Arefin Siddique said they will take more initiatives to protect all the ponds of the university as there is a scarcity of water bodies in the city.

POND AT JAGANNATH HALL

The pond at Jagannath Hall is there since the British period. The around 4-bigha reservoir is used by the students for bathing and swimming. It is being

maintained with care.

There are two ghats on its western and eastern sides. The reservoir is surrounded by trees such as jack fruit, mango and krishnachura.

Nikunja Chandra Roy, a hall official, said they dug up the pond again around six years back as part of its renovation work. The ghat on the western side was constructed during that time. "We try to keep it clean regularly," he said.

POND AT SHIBBARI

Though around 50 percent of the century-old Shibbari Staff Quarter pond was filled up by the DU authorities to construct a multi-storey residential building for the university's fourth class employees, it is still in a relatively better condition.

The building was constructed in 2013-2014.

Contacted, the VC said the building was constructed to protect the pond properly. "We have already constructed the banks for its protection."

POND AT JAHURUL HAQUE HALL
The pond is there since the establishment of the hall in 1957. Sirajul Islam, principal administration officer of the hall, said, "We used to arrange swimming competition in it for students around 15 years back."

Earlier, the name of the hall was Iqbal Hall, and the pond was known as Iqbal Hall pond. "The hall was renamed Sergeant Jahurul Haque in 1972."

The depth of the around 8-bigha reservoir is around 15 feet. It is also

maintained by the authorities concerned on a regular basis.

"We would like to do some additional renovation work for that we need proper funding," he said.

The engineering section of the university used to maintain the pond, which came under the Hall Employee Samity in 1978. "We also cultivated fish in it, which stopped in 2015."

POND INSIDE MUSEUM

The around 1.5-bigha pond, located behind the Bangladesh National Museum is surrounded by trees and being maintained properly by the authorities concerned.

Sayed Shamsul, education officer at the museum, said, "We renovated the pond in 1983 after the museum was

shifted to Shahbagh. Before, it used to be an abandoned water body."

He said they try to keep the reservoir clean on a regular basis.

Litan Khandakar, a museum staff, said, "There was a scarcity of water in the area around 20 years back. The staff used to use it for bathing."

2 PONDS IN OSMANI UDYAN

There are two ponds inside Osmani Udyan that are being maintained properly by the authorities concerned.

Among the two, the one on the western side is around five acres while other one on the eastern side around 2 acres.

The reservoirs are surrounded by trees enhancing the serenity of the area. Many still bathe in those.

RAMNA KALI MANDIR POND

The centuries-old pond inside the Ramna Kali Mandir is in an awful state. It is currently owned by the government.

Amlan Kumar Kartik, member secretary (finance) of the Mandir, said according to historian AH Dani, the pond (dighi) was dug up by Queen of Bhawal Bilas Moni.

On the other hand, the documents of the British period shows that the reservoir was dug up by magistrate Charles Dawes to meet the locals' need for drinking water.

"We have already applied to five ministries for the ownership of the pond so that we can look after it..." he said.



The reservoir at Jahurul Haque Hall.



The century-old Shibbari Staff Quarter pond.



The around 1.5-bigha pond behind the national museum.