

Saving our rivers

“There are several laws which remain largely unenforced”

Dr Muzibur Rahman Howlader, chairman, National River Conservation Commission (NRCC), talks to Naznin Tithi of The Daily Star about issues relating to the protection of our rivers and why empowering the commission is absolutely necessary.

Why despite so many HC directives could the pollution of Buriganga river not be addressed? Could you please tell us about the current condition of the Buriganga? What about the other rivers surrounding the capital?

It is most unfortunate that the situation of the Buriganga could not be improved much even after taking so many steps and projects. Although a lot of the factories and industries were shut down or shifted from the banks of the Buriganga, the condition of the river remained pretty much the same. One of the reasons is Dhaka does not have a proper waste disposal system, and so all kinds of waste, including industrial waste, are dumped into the rivers surrounding the capital. Even state agencies such as Wasa have been found to be polluting the Buriganga. The situation of other rivers across the country such as Balu, Turag, Shitalakhya, Meghna, etc., are also similar. Household and other waste are dumped in the landfills which are situated near the rivers or water bodies. So, the waste essentially mingles with the river often obstructing their flow. Therefore, in order to stop the pollution of our rivers a proper waste disposal system is essential.

In Gazipur, the flow of the Labandaha river at the confluence point with the Turag was obstructed by all types of waste. We went there a few days ago and observed firsthand the disastrous impacts of the waste dumped on the Dhaka-Mymensingh highway. Apparently, all the waste of Sreepur municipality is dumped on a particular point of the highway beside the Labandaha river. There are also several factories that are dumping their waste into the river.

We also went to see the situation of Meghna and its tributaries last week and found that many renowned

companies have encroached upon the land of the river. The companies were dumping untreated waste into the river defying the law.

Although many of the industries situated on the bank of the rivers have Effluent Treatment Plants (ETP), they have not been constant in their use of the facility. They only use it when the factories are inspected by the Department of Environment (DoE) and other relevant authorities.

Do you think the NRCC is playing its desired role? What are the problems that you face while carrying out your duties?

The NRCC is responsible for the conservation and overall development of the rivers. Although we have been given a lot of responsibilities we have to work under many limitations. Still, we are trying to do the best we can in our limited capacity. One of the biggest problems is that we do not have enough manpower. I have four members, but only one of them remains with me full time, others only attend meetings. We have informed the government that we need manpower. Moreover, we need security from police in carrying out our duties.

Besides, when it comes to protecting our rivers, there are several ministries involved and we have to work in coordination with all these ministries. While Ministry of Shipping is responsible for taking care of river vessels, water resource management is the responsibility of the Ministry of Water Resources. The land related issues are taken care of by the Ministry of Land, while the Ministry of Environment is responsible for environment related issues. So, the work is more complicated than one would assume.

About waste management, we are trying hard to convince the local government institutions to set up

modern waste management systems. If that can be done, pollution of our rivers will be reduced to a great extent. In 2007, when I was the economic minister of the Bangladesh embassy in Japan, we sent several Wasa personnel to Japan to participate in a training on waste recycling. After they returned, a project was also piloted with fund from Japan. But then there was no progress on this.



Muzibur Rahman Howlader

We have directed the local government institutions—the city corporation, municipality, district council, upazila council, union parishad—to apply the 3R (reduce, reuse and recycle) system in waste management. If the DoE sets up recycle plants, the local government institutions can run them.

In order to stop pollution of the Labandaha river in Gazipur, we arranged a meeting with the deputy commissioner of the district, the DoE and environmentalists. We told the district administration to seal the companies who were polluting the river

there. We also directed the municipality not to dump waste on the highway.

We have also taken many steps to protect Buriganga from pollution. The DoE currently only imposes fines on the factories that are not using the ETPs. But clearly, that is not enough. We have told the DoE that cases must be filed against those not complying with the law. If jail term is given to the offenders, they will definitely comply. The DoE has now taken a project to monitor the factories on the banks of the Buriganga online. The project will start in a couple of months.

Is NRCC's responsibility restricted to making recommendations only? Or can the commission take any action?

It is true that we do not have any statutory power of implementation but what we can do is instruct the various authorities to enforce the law. In many cases, the authorities do not feel encouraged to take action against the grabbers and polluters because they are politically powerful and influential people. The UNOs, assistant commissioner (Land), even the DCs fear that if they take action against the grabbers they might be transferred.

We have assured them that when they will take action against influential people we will provide them with every support that we can. We are putting pressure on them to take action against the law breakers and we will continue to do so.

Moreover, we have warned the district administrations, DoE, Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) and other authorities that if they fail to take action against those who are destroying our rivers we will be forced to file cases against them.

There are several laws which remain largely unenforced. For example, section 133 and 139 of the criminal

law can be used to arrest the offenders. The law says that if anyone obstructs the flow or channels of any river it will be considered as destruction of public property and the police can arrest those responsible for such acts and can hand them to the district magistrate. If needed, the district magistrate can employ a first-class magistrate, and after inquiry, can try them.

How can the NRCC be empowered so that it can take action against the encroachers, polluters, as well as the concerned government agencies?

Although we have been facing many obstacles in carrying out our responsibilities, we are not losing hope. I believe that the NRCC will be able to bring some positive changes soon. Since the NRCC is an autonomous institution, we have proposed the government that we should work with the cabinet division. That way we will be able to better coordinate with all the ministries concerned and can also work with more freedom.

The law based on which the NRCC was formed has to be amended. We have already drafted the changes that are needed to strengthen the commission. After the amendments are done, we will be able to enforce the law in cases where the administrative bodies fail to do so. We will also have the power to take action against the authorities concerned if they fail to enforce river related laws.

Moreover, we are trying to have a mobile court with us and also planning to establish a Special River Protection Tribunal. If we succeed, the cases filed against the grabbers and polluters can be disposed of within a short period of time.

We believe people will see some visible changes within a year.

The smog was the limit

HUMOROUSLY YOURS



Naveed Mahub

EVERYONE knows you are the sharpest officer, but be prepared to put “Maj. (Retd.)” before your name once you hang up your uniform for good. Ok, maybe not.

Since you stand out so much from the rest, you’ll advance further, to the rank of Lt. Col., tops. Ok? Now go, finish up your staff college and be happy with “PSC” at the end of your name and stop dreaming of adding an NDC (National Defense College) on your business card.

This is really the farthest that a “Bangalee” officer could have expected to go. Had there been no December 16, 1971, this would be today’s story too. Who knows, maybe a tad different, as the tapering off point could have been “re-adjusted” to that of a captain (no, not a Navy captain), in order to make room for the more “deserving” officers in an expanding military.

And this would be just one small speck in the marginalised East. The CSP (Civil Service of Pakistan) officer would go into LPR (Leave Preparatory to Retirement) as a happy Deputy Secretary. No wait, as a career diplomat, you could be posted at the coveted Washington DC mission, as a second secretary, tops. The faculty member



An Oscar statue is seen during a media preview of this year's Academy's Governors Ball in Los Angeles, California, US, February 15, 2019.

PHOTO: REUTERS/MARIO ANZUONI

of Dhaka University, herself a first class first from the Department of Economics, would be poised for her government funded and approved PhD from the prestigious University of Madagascar, Antananarivo campus.

The booming IT sector would see the techies on the eastern front working at the back end of the back end of the back end of Goldman Sachs. Sakib Al Hasan would be the 29th man on the squad, running to the field with

Gatorade, no, Shezan, while Shakib Khan would play the pivotal role of the tea server in the Oscar nominated Best Foreign film. The pilots with spotless records and highest flying hours would be three-striper first officers flying turbo

props on internal routes, and I mean, REAL internal routes—short range ones not overflying (or bypassing) Indian air space.

The list goes on, with the culmination of the formation of SAARC with six countries.

The scheme, marred with gin and tonic, ensured a zero margin of error in marginalising a whole population. However, the “Bangalee”, forever destined to pull each other down in different forms and shapes, most recently through cyberspace, is surprisingly highly cohesive when faced with a collective wrong. So, we took a time out to put aside our caste, creed, social status, religion (or none of it), education, degrees, careers... that we today have so efficiently utilised to create a thousand splits, and took up the aged 303’s in shorts, trousers, lungis and sarees. The goal: to eventually pull each other down once again, but in our own language, on our own soil and through our deserving ranks at the very top of our careers. We are thus now happily united in being characteristically divided, thanks to the unimaginable sacrifices of millions who made it possible for the sky to be the limit, a far cry from the low lying smog it had been not too long ago.

Naveed Mahub is a former engineer at Ford & Qualcomm USA, the former CEO of IBM & Nokia Networks Bangladesh turned comedian (by choice), the host of ATN Bangla’s *The Naveed Mahub Show* and the founder of Naveed’s Comedy Club. E-mail: Naveed@NaveedMahub.com

QUOTABLE Quote

PARAMAHANSA YOGANANDA
(1893–1952)
Indian yogi, monk and guru

The season of failure is the best time for sowing the seeds of success.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Boxcar rider
- 5 Trembled
- 11 Stratford's river
- 12 Still green
- 13 Goose egg
- 14 "Nashville" director
- 15 Make mistakes
- 16 Purposes
- 17 Desert spot
- 19 Gift topper
- 22 Sunups
- 24 Diver's gear
- 26 Valhalla VIP
- 27 Steel ingredient
- 28 Like urban areas
- 30 Got along
- 31 Easter quest
- 32 Dome-shaped home

DOWN

- 1 Visibility lessener
- 2 Finished
- 3 Some bank activity
- 4 Lennon's love
- 5 Sort of
- 6 Except if
- 7 Liberal study
- 8 Kipling book
- 9 MPG-rating org.
- 10 Bear's lair
- 16 Battleship letters
- 18 Last Stuart ruler
- 19 Digging tunnels
- 20 Clarinet's kin
- 21 Prop for Potter
- 22 Take a nap
- 23 Sick as –
- 25 "See ya!"
- 29 Some semiconductor
- 30 Take wing
- 33 Gaggling group
- 34 Coffee, slangily
- 36 Savvy about
- 37 Former spouses
- 38 Lyricist Gershwin
- 39 Pay stub line
- 40 Neckline shape
- 41 Writer Rita – Brown

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

LAMP CARBON PAPER SEESAW TOSE SLATS ARE TOPER BABE ANGUS APES PROTON LIT PEAPORO LETTER PAPER OCEAN TWIST TERN S LATH

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

I THOUGHT YOU PUT PLEXIGLASS IN MY WINDOW SO IT WOULDN'T KEEP GETTING BROKEN

I JUST FIXED THE LAST PANE WE BROKE

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott

YOU JERKBALL! GIVE IT BACK!

BAH! BAH! BAHIIIIH!

IF YOU ARE PREGNANT, MAYBE THE FOURTH TIME IS THE CHARM.

DON'T EVEN JOKES ABOUT IT!

WRITE FOR US. SEND US YOUR OPINION PIECES TO dsopinion@gmail.com.