

TANGENTS

BY IHTISHAM KABIR



Circumnavigating Ubehebe Crater, Death Valley, 1983.

PHOTO: IHTISHAM KABIR

Death Valley

When friends suggested going to Death Valley for Christmas I was startled. It was not exactly a warm and fuzzy name. But in the end I agreed to join them for a camping trip in this desert wilderness in south-eastern California.

I was about to discover just how wonderful a desert could be. It was late afternoon when we arrived following a long drive from Los Angeles. After setting up camp, we started exploring. Within minutes of the campsite we found Zabriskie Point where, over the aeons, the elements had chiselled rocks into dramatic angular formations. With the deep blue desert sky as backdrop, the many hued rocks looked splendid as the sun started setting.

Nearby, a canyon called Artist's Palette let us walk among rocks coloured by minerals. Further south, a steep uphill drive led us to a panoramic view over Badwater, a long shallow water basin between mountains whose snow-clad peaks reflected on the still water. At 282 feet below sea level, Badwater is the lowest point in the Northern Hemisphere. Its undrinkable brackish water supports snails and the endemic Death Valley pupfish.

Two volcanic craters, Ubehebe and Little Hebe, sat a longer drive away. I circumnavigated Ubehebe's crater on a circular trail. At one point both sides of the narrow trail fell sharply and I froze, eventually crawling through that part. Later I saw others face trouble at the same spot. The bowl-shaped crater, covered with grey volcanic soil, descended several hundred feet.

The sand dunes in Mesquite Flats were continuously moulded by shifting winds. The sand made three-dimensional forms with soft edges that curved and twisted creating dramatic photographic opportunities. Nocturnal wildlife, including

sidewinder snakes, birds and lizards left their tracks in the sand.

We could stop virtually anywhere in the desert and start hiking. The terrain challenged but never stopped us. The air was so clear that it created telescopic vision making distant points appear closer. One morning I started walking towards a hill that looked ten minutes away. It took me an hour to reach it; along the way I encountered a friendly burro, the wild donkey that roams the desert.

I learned that a desert is not just sand. It is also mountains, rocks, canyons, caverns and even small bodies of water. Life here has adapted to the extreme conditions. For example, seeds of wildflowers stay dormant for decades until it rains. Then, for a short week, the desert becomes awash in colours. Once upon a time Shoshone Indians lived a nomadic life in this valley and the surrounding mountains but today park rangers and staff are the only residents.

But the best part of Death Valley was mental. Exposed to the elements in the wide open desert with few distractions, I was forced to look inward, marvelling at the passage of time, pondering my place in Creation and ultimately sensing an inner peace. I began to see how spiritual a desert could be.

Death Valley is in the Mojave Desert in South-eastern California, famous for being the hottest place on earth. Its name comes from a group of settlers who perished here in 1849 while trying to reach the California gold mines. A National Park was established here by President Clinton. Since that trip in 1983 I returned to Death Valley many times in winter. It always rejuvenated me.

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TREE FELLING AT SUHRAWARDY UDYAN

Protests rage on Cutting trees in name of dev must stop: experts

DU CORRESPONDENT

Protests against cutting down trees at the capital's Suhrawardy Udyan for the implementation of a mega project at the historic site continued throughout the day yesterday.

Demanding an immediate stop to the tree felling, the protesters said 10,000 trees at the park have to be planted there instead. Throughout the day, people from all walks of life including writers, poets, artistes, activists and members of various student organisations held rallies at the Udyan.

In the morning, youth organisation -- Green Voice -- demonstrated at the entrance to the park near TSC of Dhaka University.

They also placed a five-point demand, which included ensuring environment-friendly development at the park and stopping construction of concrete structures at the expense of greenery.

In the afternoon, Anchor Bangladesh, Swadhinata Udyan Cultural Alliance, and Green Planet performed a street play, highlighting various harmful aspects of deforestation. A group of artist-activists displayed paintings depicting their interpretation of the situation.

Environmentalists and educationists also lambasted the government for destroying the environment of the Suhrawardy Udyan.

Meanwhile, activists of Bangladesh Students Federation planted saplings -- as a form of protest -- at the same places where trees are being felled for the project.

In a protest rally, Zakir Hossain, joint convener of Mass Cultural Front, said, "Hills are being razed to make buildings and trees are being cut down for constructing restaurants. It's very unfortunate."

The Tk 265.44 crore project, titled "Shawdhinata Stambha Construction Project in Dhaka", began its third phase in January 2018 at the park.

Organisations tasked with the implementation of the project include the Liberation War affairs ministry, the Department of Public Works and Dhaka South City Corporation.

Under the project, public toilets, walkways, food courts, artificial ponds, underground parking lots, underpasses and mosques will be constructed.

The project was undertaken to develop the Udyan and make it greener. However, green activists said the authorities concerned are seemingly contradicting one of their own goals, as under the same project, they are felling old trees to construct buildings.

ABDULLAH AL-AMIN

Suhrawardy Udyan, located adjacent to Dhaka University, has a long history as a public park. From political rallies to public fairs, the grounds of this historic site have always been used for varied purposes throughout the years.

But today, the park has come to the limelight due to an unseemly decision to cut down trees to implement a "mega project".

The Daily Star spoke to eminent academics and intellectuals to explore the reasons behind, and consequences of such a decision.

Professor Emeritus Serajul Islam Chowdhury is outspoken about his lack of support for such an initiative.

"It is very much unfair. The number of trees in the city is already insufficient. We cannot support an initiative that fells trees. This will set an example, encouraging people to cut down trees in the name of development wherever they want," said Prof Serajul.

Professor of physics at Dhaka University, Dr Md Kamrul Hassan, said, "This move to cut trees must be stopped immediately. Trees must be replanted wherever trees have already been felled. This development project must be revised."

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PROFESSOR EMERITUS SERAJUL ISLAM CHOWDHURY

Cutting trees has a long-term adverse effect. When concrete structures replace greenery, surface water cannot go underground. So water level under Dhaka is decreasing every day.

ARCHITECT MUBASSHAR HUSSEIN

Prof Kamrul expressed his shock at the idea of cutting trees for "development".

"At mega cities in developed countries, every citizen has access to a park within a 30-minute walking distance. Moreover, we need more greenery because our population density is higher," he said.

"Instead, trees are being felled here. We cannot understand why restaurants would have to be constructed inside Suhrawardy Udyan," said Prof Kamrul.

"If this malpractice cannot be stopped, it will encourage further destruction of greenery. Trees would be cut for constructing car parking, shopping mall and other concrete structures," he said, adding that trees are particularly needed due

to the park's proximity to Dhaka University. "Trees are also being felled to make room for other constructions at DU. But trees are very necessary for the nearly 35,000 students of the university," said Prof Kamrul. "Now, the country is controlled by businesspersons who are taking advantage of the university's closure."

"If the university was open, students would surely protest. The university should protest this move," Prof Kamrul further said.

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Throughout the day, students and activists gathered at Suhrawardy Udyan to hold rallies, stage street plays, plant saplings and display pro-environment paintings, condemning the ongoing tree felling at the park.



PHOTO: COLLECTED

UNDER-TRIAL PRISONERS

Over 1 lakh released on bail in two phases

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A total of 1,03,432 under-trial prisoners including 1,291 accused children have got released from jails on bail from virtual courts across the country in two phases over 76 working days.

The first phase of virtual court proceedings started on May 11 last year and continued till August 4 last year and the second phase started on April 12 this year due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

A total of 422 children accused in criminal cases were released from jail after they were granted bail by virtual courts

concerned in last 18 working days.

With the 422 accused children, a total of 31,208 under-trial prisoners have got released across the country during the 18 working days, said Supreme Court Spokesman Md Saifur Rahman in a statement yesterday.

He said in the statement that a total of 1,917 under-trial prisoners got released from jail on bail on Thursday.

The courts and tribunals concerned granted them bail after virtually hearing and disposing of bail petitions in connection with 3,636 criminal cases filed against the accused.

Mamata thanks Momen, highlights stronger ties

UNB, Dhaka

West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee has thanked Foreign Minister Dr AK Abdul Momen for his recent congratulatory message to her.

Mamata hoped that the love and affection between the people of Bangladesh and West Bengal will further be strengthened in the days to come.

The Trinamool Congress chief was sworn in as West Bengal chief minister for the third straight term on Wednesday after she spearheaded her party to a victory in the assembly polls.

On May 5, Momen congratulated Mamata. "We believe, with your cooperation and commitment, our relations will be strengthened further and help resolve outstanding issues," he mentioned in his congratulatory message.

Filing complaints now easier than ever

DNCC's Sobar Dhaka app allows residents to post issues for authorities to solve

MATHEWS CHIRAN

It was quite a pleasant surprise for Kawser Alam when he found Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC) workers clearing the dumped waste in front of his house, a day after he lodged a complaint through an app called "Sobar Dhaka".

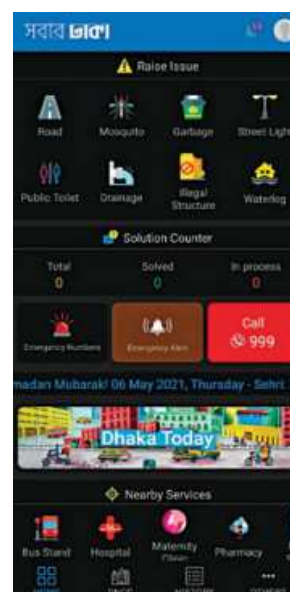
A resident of Mirpur (ward-6) for 20 years, Kawser had previously complained about problems regarding bad condition of roads, street lights and other civic amenities. But he would have to write down the complaints, go to DNCC's zonal office and then wait for a week for the problem to be addressed.

With the introduction of the app, however, lodging complaints is now easier than ever.

"I found the app while browsing YouTube. At first, I didn't take it seriously, but then I downloaded and tried it. I filed the complaint a week ago and uploaded pictures. The next day, waste collectors came and cleaned the place," said Kawser.

On January 10, DNCC launched the app to provide civic facilities for its residents. It allows residents to file complaints on eight matters: mosquitoes, roads, street lights, garbage, waterlogging, public toilets, drainage and illegal structures.

Four months into its launch, DNCC received 2,257 complaints till April 5, and solved 1,935. The remaining 322 are now pending, said officials. Overall, the app has created a positive vibe among city dwellers. However, the initiative is not perfect and residents expressed apprehension whether the service will be available in the long run.



Private job-holder Md Oliullah has been living at Mohammadpur (ward-33) for 5 years. He complained about a bad road in his locality two weeks back.

He said the problem was solved immediately, but claimed that his next complaint about a waste disposal problem was yet to be addressed entirely.

Furthermore, Oliullah was unhappy with the lack of communication from DNCC. "They didn't even bother to know whether I was satisfied with their work. They didn't call me back to know if the problem was really solved," he said.

Contacted, DNCC Zonal Executive (Zone-3) Abdullah Al Baki said, "We sort complaints into two categories -- long and short term. Complaints related to street lights and waste are solvable within 24 hours. But road repairing takes time, and we let the complainant know about the matter if it takes a long period."

He said due to the pandemic, eviction of illegal structures is not being conducted properly now.

During the app's launch, DNCC Mayor Atiqul Islam said it would help improve accountability of government services, and users would also be able to advise the city corporation through the app. The process involves a user posting a comment with a relevant picture. This will in turn reach relevant DNCC authorities, he said.

The app also includes two emergency helplines -- 999 and 333. There is a special feature for children named "Emergency Alert", and emergency numbers of different government agencies are also included.



Shopping for Eid is hitting the peaks at the capital's New Market. Though customers are bringing relief for traders, their overflow is a cause for concern during the pandemic, as enforcement of health guidelines has completely broken down. This photo was taken yesterday afternoon.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN