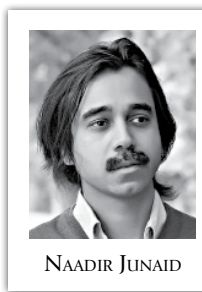


# We must protect the trees at Suhrawardy Udyan for our own wellbeing



CONSCIOUS citizens were appalled after seeing the photos of chopped branches and logs in Suhrawardy Udyan after several mature trees of the park were cut down as part of an ongoing government undertaking—the

Independence Monument Construction (Phase III) Project. According to government officials, sculptures, an underground car park, food kiosks, walkways, a children's park, a water body, and a mosque will be constructed on this historic site under the project. Several large trees, some of which were planted nearly 50 years ago, were chopped down recently in order to make room for these food kiosks and walkways.

Much has been said over the years by environmentalists across the globe about the adverse impacts of removing trees on the environment and biodiversity. The tree felling in Suhrawardy Udyan sparked a storm of protests from green activists, student organisations, architects, academics and artists. The Liberation War Affairs Ministry and other government organisations in charge of implementing the project were not able to confirm how many trees have been removed thus far. Doesn't this failure of the authorities indicate that a judiciously-made plan was not followed, but rather, these trees were cleared haphazardly? People would visit Suhrawardy Udyan to attain historical consciousness and to satisfy their intellectual appetite by seeing various memorials to our Liberation War. Will food stalls selling multi-course meals or light snacks seem suitable in such a historic place? As various restaurants are available nearby Suhrawardy Udyan, is it necessary to

construct seven food stalls or kiosks inside the park by destroying trees?

In a contemporary society deeply influenced by the canons of consumer capitalism, the tendency to emphasise business interests and consumer goods seems to be of paramount importance. But isn't it more important to create an atmosphere in Suhrawardy Udyan that would make the visitors think deeply about the days of trial and triumph, of gloom and glory, experienced by Bangladeshis in 1971? At the same time, the atmosphere of this public park should provide people with the opportunity to experience mental nourishment in the midst of lush greenery. The famous American writer Henry David Thoreau highlighted the idea of deriving spiritual bliss from the wilderness, which the hustle and bustle of city life could not offer. It is necessary to make sure that profit-making enterprises will not invade Suhrawardy Udyan, which would be at odds with the serenity of this area.

This act of cutting down trees also brings to mind the analysis of modern cities carried out by French sociologist and philosopher Henri Lefebvre. For him, urban spaces are constructed according to the interests of large corporations and capitalists. The common people do not get the opportunity to give their opinions about how the cities should be built. Private spaces such as shopping malls, posh hotels and restaurants, and office centres continue to flourish in the urban area. The general people barely find places that satisfy their need for an escape from the pressures and anxieties of daily life. Thus, the increasing disappearance of playing fields and parks has an adverse effect on people, and this may result in serious psychological and social issues such as depression, crime and alienation.

The concrete jungle continues to swell in Dhaka city due to the incessant construction



These trees were cut down to make way for a government project at Suhrawardy Udyan.

PHOTO: COLLECTED/STAR

of shopping malls, restaurants and apartment buildings. Consequently, the natural habitats of various living things are being disrupted, having a destructive impact on biodiversity. According to a study conducted by Bangladesh Institute of Planners (BIP), green spaces constitute only 9.2 percent of the total area of Dhaka city, whereas about 82 percent of the city is covered in concrete. As the number of vehicles increase, the city experiences greater emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases. Given this situation, it is of crucial importance to protect plants and biodiversity.

American biologist Edward O Wilson, known as the "father of biodiversity," said that destroying rainforests for economic gain is like burning a Renaissance painting to cook a meal. Wilson's scathing remark

surely alludes to people who neither possess an interest in perceiving the beauty and profundity of Renaissance paintings, nor do they understand how crucial the preservation of nature is to human existence. Human actions marked by the disposition to crave money more than anything else can pose serious threats to the environment.

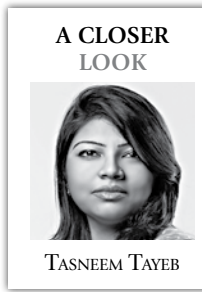
Despite knowing that Dhaka is currently one of the world's worst cities for air pollution, the decision to cut down trees at Suhrawardy Udyan seems far from sensible. Trees, as we know, absorb the human-caused carbon dioxide and release oxygen, thereby making the air we breathe cleaner and healthier. If a significant portion of one of the few green spaces of the city is covered in concrete, that will surely have far-reaching environmental consequences.

However, a press release given by the Liberation War Ministry states that although several trees were cut down during the implementation of this project, about 1,000 more trees will be planted soon. Such an initiative is certainly worthy of praise, but according to scientists, the removal of even a small number of trees has a negative impact on the biodiversity of a park or a forest. Thus, we cannot surmise that the felling of several large trees did not put pressure on the habitat of squirrels, bats, kites and other birds, and various species of insects in Suhrawardy Udyan. Only a very small number of insects and birds serving as pollinators can live on the ground and within urban settings. Habitat disruptions may lead to the decline in populations of pollinators. As a result, the production of seeds and fruits will be adversely affected. So, even a bee or a butterfly can play an important role in ensuring human well-being. Edward O Wilson, therefore, rightly said that we should preserve every scrap of biodiversity as priceless while we come to understand what it means to humanity.

As part of our duty to uphold the spirit of the Liberation War, it is of course important to build sculptures and monuments in Suhrawardy Udyan that would remind people of the sacrifices made and the valour shown by our countrymen in 1971. But it is also necessary to make sure that an invaluable natural asset such as trees are not cut down during the implementation of this project for constructing specific concrete structures that are not essential to this historic site and can have a harmful impact on nature. If we are to ensure our own well-being and that of our future generations, we must remain aware of our responsibilities to protect greenery and wildlife.

Dr Naadir Junaid is Professor at the Department of Mass Communication and Journalism, University of Dhaka.

# As Covid-19 relief starts rolling out, the urban poor find themselves in a grey area



AS the government rolls out a financial assistance scheme in the country to support the poor in the face of the economic fallout of the pandemic, the urban poor are finding themselves in a tight spot.

According to a recently published study, Bangladesh now has 16 million new poor and a lot of them belong to the urban poor category. "The workers' wages declined by 42 percent in Dhaka and 33 percent in Chattogram districts. The decline in income of salaried workers was much higher at 49 percent due to a sharp reduction in demand for the services," reported this daily earlier in April, citing the study.

The study further stated that three percent of the workforce have lost their jobs with a footprint of 1.08 million jobs in the urban informal sector. With income opportunities minimised at best, and gone at worse, the poor are becoming poorer in the city. And their situation, compounded with rising prices of essentials, is becoming grimmer by the day.

There have been reports in the media of families being ousted from their homes by landlords because they could not pay the rent. Social media feeds are flooded with stories of the underprivileged sharing their woes and sorrows, the bleak stare of the hungry faces leaving behind a haunting trace. And these stories of the affected people certainly raise questions about the preparedness of the government to address the situation.

A recent report in *The Daily Star* quotes Md Murshikul Islam, president of the Bangladesh Hawker Workers Trade Union Centre, as saying, "Our lives are going up in flames, but nobody is thinking of us and how we are struggling to survive. We have so far not got any support from the government. How can we live?"

Only recently has the government announced its plan to disburse financial assistance to 3.5 million poor families. It may be noted here that last year as well, the government disbursed financial assistance among 3.5 million poor families, against a target of five million poor families. The reason for the shortfall was an inadequate database.

Earlier this month, the government started extending financial assistance among some affected families. A total of Tk 8,800

been able to update the database in the last one year? If not, why? Did the government not anticipate the second wave and its effect on the economy in 2021?

And even the amount of Tk 2,500 financial assistance offered by the government is inadequate. Nazneen Ahmed, a senior research fellow of the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies, referred to the 2016 Household Income and Expenditure Survey to explain that a four-member household needs

Last year, the target beneficiaries of the Tk 2,500 one-off financial assistance included day labourers, rickshaw-pullers, transport workers, construction workers and shop employees, among others; but there have been reports that many fallers in these categories did not receive the said aid.

"At this point, we don't really have that many social security schemes for the urban poor. The major initiative last year was the Open Market Sales (OMS). However, the stock is limited this year, so I doubt the government will be using that window," said economist and chairperson of Brac, Dr Hossain Zillur Rahman, while sharing his views on this issue.

And there are two major challenges that need to be overcome to reach immediate social safety assistance to the urban poor. The first is the identification and listing of legitimate recipients, and the second is smooth distribution, especially in view of the fact that this year, OMS is not an option.

While discussing the way forward, Dr Rahman suggested the government initiate specific social safety measures with a focus on the urban poor.

"A major challenge here, where we all have to contribute, is to target the recipients properly. And here it seems the government is not taking a very useful approach in the sense that they are mostly looking for support from administrative wings, such as DCs. Also, political actors are being considered to do the listing. However, if you want to make a list of the urban poor, two criteria would be useful to work on: one is focusing on living areas with high concentrations of the urban poor, meaning the slums mostly. We know the physical locations of these places. So, we can move forward in an area-based approach for targeting," suggested Dr Hossain Zillur Rahman.

The other criteria that Dr Rahman suggested is occupation based. The urban poor are involved in various types of occupations, with a high concentration of rickshaw pullers, transport workers and municipal cleaners.

Even sex workers have their own organisations for representation. These organisations can be approached to reach aid to the relevant clusters. In this way, the government can move forward with this two-pronged approach to fast-track the listing of the urban poor, who should be included as recipients of the social safety assistance measures.

And while the government cannot go ahead with the OMS of rice due to shortage of stock—the government's rice stock has plummeted to 300,000 tonnes, the lowest in 13 years—it can surely opt for direct cash assistance for the urban poor through mobile financial services.

To expedite the identification and listing of the urban poor, Dr Rahman suggested that the government can collaborate with development sector actors—NGOs and community forces—who work directly with the affected communities. The government should be open-minded about exploring such possibilities to save livelihoods while saving lives during the pandemic lockdowns.

Such collaborations would minimise the possibilities of the systemic exploitation of relief that is so rampant in our country. Collaboration with the development sector can not only reduce the anomalies in listing, involving the development sector actors in relief distribution can also have a positive impact on ensuring fair distribution of the relief or assistance.

The most vulnerable of the urban poor are migrant workers coming from all over the country, who have left behind their loved ones and their support networks in search of livelihoods. Now, deprived of opportunities to make a living, they find themselves trapped in what must feel like an alien city. The thriving economy of Bangladesh, the shining offices, the modern factories, the broad roads, all depend on these workers. Today, in their time of need, they must not be forgotten.

Tasneem Tayeb is a columnist for *The Daily Star*. Her Twitter handle is: @TayebTasneem



One of the suggestions for listing the urban poor for providing assistance is to focus on slum areas, since a large number of slum-dwellers are struggling to survive during the pandemic.

PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

million (880 crore) is supposed to have been disbursed under this scheme, with each family getting Tk 2,500.

However, the number of poor has increased since last year. So why is the government distributing financial assistance among 3.5 million families only? Who will support the additional poor families? And why is the government not targeting reaching five million affected families? Has the government not

Tk 6,000 per month to make ends meet in urban areas. So, how can a one-off payment of Tk 2,500 pull the urban poor out of the desperate position they find themselves in?

While the current last-minute initiative to disburse social security assistance has not been well thought out, there is another issue at hand: how many of the urban poor is the government supporting through this programme?

**QUOTABLE Quote**

**VOLTAIRE**  
(1694-1778)  
French writer

*The right to free speech is more important than the content of the speech.*

**CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH**

**ACROSS**

- 1 Makes sense
- 7 Folk singer Joan
- 11 Split start
- 12 Norwegian city
- 13 Shrewd one
- 15 Layers
- 16 Flight cost
- 18 Poker game
- 21 Green stone
- 22 Threw a party
- 24 Log chopper
- 25 Cargo unit
- 26 Rink makeup
- 27 Lemon color
- 29 Bus. sch. course
- 30 Penn of "Milk"
- 31 Join the game
- 32 Preacher's book
- 34 Jokester
- 40 Revered one

**DOWN**

- 1 Crunch targets
- 2 River blocker
- 3 Some crime evidence
- 4 "No Exit" playwright
- 5 Loosen, as laces
- 6 Tempo
- 7 Increases
- 8 Inquire
- 9 Quarterback
- 10 Tony winner
- 11 Caldwell
- 14 Director Welles
- 16 Phoned copies
- 17 "Hello" singer
- 19 City on the Mohawk River
- 20 Wooden duck
- 21 Crested bird
- 22 Question of method
- 23 Comfy room
- 25 Gin mixer
- 28 Record companies
- 29 Votes in
- 31 Site
- 33 Rotten kid
- 34 Costume part
- 35 Marrying words
- 36 Lawn material
- 37 Model buy
- 38 Adam's mate
- 39 Carmine

WRITE FOR US. SEND US YOUR OPINION PIECES TO [dsopinion@gmail.com](mailto:dsopinion@gmail.com).

**BEETLE BAILEY**

**YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS**

B R A V E P O S S E  
R E L A X U N T I L  
A D E L E R O A D S  
E R R S G E E  
B U R N T O U T  
A L O T D E A L E R  
S N A I L D R I V E  
E A R N E D A M E N  
O N E O N O N E  
H O T D E N T  
A M A Z E T I D A L  
M I X E R A N O D E  
S T I E S P O N D S

**BY MORT WALKER**

YOU WERE OUT ALL NIGHT?  
YEAH, I FELL ASLEEP ON BUXLEY'S COUCH  
I'D FIND THAT HARD TO BELIEVE IF IT WAS ANYONE ELSE BUT YOU

**BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT**

GUNS, I WANT YOU TO DO ME A FAVOR.  
I MIGHT DO BUSINESS WITH THE COMPANY THAT MAKES THIS TOY, AND I WANT TO KNOW IF IT'S ANY GOOD  
PERMISSION TO GO FULL HAMMER ON IT?  
GRANTED  
RUN, PLASTIC DOG! RUN!