



More than 500 trees – many of which were planted more than 15 years ago – have been mercilessly felled to make way for a new median on Satmasjid Road in Dhanmondi.

PHOTO: NAIM UL HASAN

## Why I feel suffocated by Dhanmondi



THE SOUND & THE FURY  
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Dhanmondi, let's face it, has long ceased to be the tranquil haven surrounded by trees, lake, and playgrounds. Long gone are the quaint two-storey houses with trees in the yard. Children no longer ride their bicycles or play cricket or badminton on the streets during the weekend. The chirping of birds is replaced by honks, blares, and loud profanities of frustrated drivers as soon as day breaks, and major playgrounds are at the mercy of ruling party elites, commoners be damned.

Dhanmondi these days is a cacophony of people, traffic, events, vendors, schools, hospitals, restaurants, and construction sites. For most residents, it is a challenge to simply get out of the area. During school hours, as I try to strategically manoeuvre the minefield that is Dhanmondi traffic, without losing my sanity (or my job, to which I risk being categorically late), I often bemoan the tragic fate of the directive issued by the High Court over a decade ago to remove all commercial establishments from the area.

Responding to a writ petition from a citizens' group in Dhanmondi, the High Court in June 2012 declared that operations of commercial institutions were illegal in the residential area, except for the establishments on Road 2, Road 27, and Satmasjid Road. Predictably, there was pushback from the schools – Maple Leaf International School filed an appeal against the order. What's surprising, however, was that the Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC) also filed a petition stating that it was not obliged to implement the High Court's verdict. (It's anybody's guess why the foremost city authority for Dhaka South would be so averse to bringing peace and tranquility back to a residential area.) In August 2016, the Supreme Court upheld the High Court verdict against unauthorised commercial activities in Dhanmondi to protect its residential character and environment, and dismissed the DSCC petition.

A decade ago, when I had questioned the authorities about how they planned on implementing the directive, they had engaged in what the city authorities inevitably seek refuge in every time we ask them why they are failing to do their job: try to pass off the responsibility to others. The DSCC pointed to the Rajdhani Unnayan Kartripakha (Rajuk), Rajuk pointed to the Public Works Department (PWD), and the PWD seemed flabbergasted that someone had the audacity to expect them to know what to do. The answers have remained much the same over the decade – a reluctance to accept responsibility – and on our end, too, the questions have

dried up. Citizens' groups, who actively sought to implement the directive by mobilising on their own at the beginning, eventually gave up and/or decided it wasn't worth displeasing the powers-that-be who, after being in power for over a decade, have become less and less receptive to public opinion.

In a country that has no shortage of progressive laws, policies, and court directives, but no willingness to implement them, it is perhaps no surprise that the Supreme Court directive now exists only on paper, as if to tease Dhanmondi dwellers of what could have been.

As someone who loved growing up in Dhanmondi, I now feel increasingly suffocated by it. The playgrounds which we frequented when we were younger are no longer accessible, unless you know someone who is a Big (BCL) Brother or are associated with the clubs who now lease them. The Dhanmondi Road 8 field has been occupied for over a decade by the Sheikh Jamal Dhanmondi Club for training and practices. The protracted fight by environmentalists and residents to stop the occupation back in 2008-09 could not save the beloved playground from its eventual demise as a public space, nor did the 2011 High Court order that the playground be freed for use by the children and other residents in the area, or the show cause notice issued by the court again in 2013.

The largest playground in Dhanmondi, known as Abahani playground, was leased out to Abahani Limited Dhaka on a long-term basis by the PWD. After being fenced off for construction and beautification for a long period of time, a small part of the playground was reopened to the public. Excited by the prospect of introducing my two-year-old toddler to the field in which her uncle grew up playing football, I took her for a visit on a weekend. But it was so dusty – from the unfinished construction work – that we had to leave almost immediately. Meanwhile, the Kalabagan Krira Chakra occupies the Kalabagan field, while the field at Dhanmondi Road 4 is occupied by the Dhanmondi Cricket Academy.

As residents, we deserve to know why these public grounds were leased out or allowed to be occupied for the use of a few people, depriving thousands of people of much-needed breathing and recreational space. The community was clearly never consulted before such decisions were taken, and the residents' protests over the years have been largely ignored or strategically silenced.

The Dhanmondi Lake, our pride and joy, has turned into a hub of commercial activities too, leased out to six different businesses,

which are mostly affiliated with the ruling party. According to architect Iqbal Habib, who helped design the Dhanmondi Lake Park, only three percent of the lake was supposed to be dedicated to cafeterias and restaurants, but thanks to the DSCC, commercial activities now take up 12-15 percent of the area. It is little wonder that there are plastic cups, plates, straws, and garbage littering the now green water of the lake and surrounding pathways, with the lessees least concerned about ensuring management, clean-up, and security of their designated sectors, as per the conditions of the lease. Given the identity of the lessees, it is hardly a surprise that the DSCC, which earns a whopping Tk 2.93 crore each year from the leases, doesn't monitor or hold them accountable for such gross violations of the terms.

In a residential area where people's concerns and needs have long taken a backseat, it is perhaps only fitting that a ludicrous project like the one on Satmasjid Road would be undertaken. To begin with, the new median has blocked off all the turns on the busy road which used to allow and ease the constant flow of traffic from the inroads of Dhanmondi. This has led to more traffic building up inside the residential part of the area, as well as making it considerably more inconvenient for people living in West Dhanmondi and Rayerbazar to commute. Simply crossing the road – which takes two minutes on foot – can now easily turn into a 30-minute misadventure if you're in a car or rickshaw.

It is inconceivable that more than 500 trees – many of which were planted more than 15 years ago, by the admission of the DSCC itself – have been mercilessly felled to make way for this ill-thought-out scheme that we are supposed to embrace as "development." One can easily imagine the motives behind breaking the existing median and building a new one – given that it is part of a Tk 1,719 crore integrated project (*chanching!*) – but the authorities are yet to provide a logical explanation as to why the new median could not be built while keeping the trees in place. Once again, the DSCC did not bother to seek public or expert opinion, nor did they seek permission from the forest department before carrying out the massacre. And even in the face of protracted protests from environmentalists and residents, under the banner "Save the trees of Satmasjid Road" – some of whom have been guarding the trees at night for the past months – to stop the onslaught on the trees, the DSCC mayor has not even felt it necessary to meet with them and at least hear out their concerns and demands.

It is evident that we, as residents of Dhaka, have no say over the quality of our lives in this concrete jungle that we lovingly or grudgingly call home. And most of us seem to have accepted this fate, if the turnout at the protests at Satmasjid Road are any indication. It's time we organised to demand the kind of city that we need and deserve, because clearly no one else is looking out for us.

## What's in a girls' toilet at a rural school?

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SYED SAAD ANDALEEB and M IBRAHIM KHALIL

Three years ago, an experimental toilet was built for girls at a rural school in Jhalakathi district. While the original idea was to address typical social and hygiene-related problems of young girls coming into puberty, we also felt that a gender friendly toilet would improve the self-confidence and self-esteem of girls and benefit them in many ways. Moreover, the project was intended to "change the attitudes of schoolteachers, parents, local community leaders, and even adolescent boys" in the area/school.

Soon after the toilet's construction, the Covid-19 pandemic spread ominously and a follow-up to observe the changes brought about by our project was shelved. Assessing its impact was revived again in 2022 as schools were fully reopened after

the facility. Hygiene has now become a familiar subject in the school. Girl students feel at-ease discussing the problem with other female students irrespective of their senior or junior status. Guardians have also become more open to the matter. Thus, an inhibiting topic has become a familiar subject of discussion in the school.

### Odour problems gone

The schoolgirls indicated that, in the past, they were hesitant to use the school toilet as it was rather unclean and a foul odour was a constant presence. Faulty construction and inadequacy of running water, in addition to the unavailability of toilet paper, were major problems. Besides, they also had to wait in a queue sometimes as the number of

when they became unmindful and could not concentrate on their studies. Besides, they were unable to attend school regularly. In some cases, they stopped going to school for days. Missing classes impacted their education adversely. Now, they no longer miss school and go home at the normal time, even if their periods commence abruptly.

### Increased use of sanitary pads

In the past, the girls used rags and other unhygienic solutions instead of sanitary pads. There was a likelihood of infection if the rags were not clean. Moreover, they could not change them once they came to school. Now, they get a pad free of cost from the school. This has made their life easy, they opined.

### Sense of privacy and security increased

Privacy is an important issue for female students when attending school together with male students. Being able to dispose of their used pads discreetly is a great relief now, in addition to having access to soap



ILLUSTRATION: REHNUMA PROSHOON

nearly two years' hiatus.

The toilet has two washrooms surrounded by an outer room with running water. Sanitary pads, soap, and liquid handwash are available in the outer room. The girls can change pads when needed and drop the used one in a bin using a poly bag. In addition, there is a whiteboard where the girls can write the date of their period. The two toilets placed in an inner room provide privacy and safety

from prying eyes.

Here, we report what impact the toilet has had on the girl students themselves. On the basis of qualitative interviews with the girls of Classes VII-X on their school premises using a structured guide, we assess whether and how the availability of the specially built toilet affected their attendance and attention in school, their mental and physical well-being, and the challenges they face during their monthly cycle. The following thematic issues emerged.

### Silence broken

One of the girls said in the past that discussions on menstruation were considered taboo or shameful at the school. Neither the guardians nor the teachers felt comfortable discussing the issue openly. The girls were even unwilling to carry a pad in their bags; instead, they opted to stay at home during their periods. After the construction of the toilet, female teachers briefed them on the uses of

washrooms was inadequate. This was a privacy issue for many. Moreover, there was no sanitary pad dispenser or a basket where they could dispose of the used pads. The existing facility addresses all these issues, providing a hygienic and healthy internal environment.

### Release from period phobia

One of the girls said, "One day, I was feeling pain in my abdomen and after going to the toilet I found that my period had started. I was at a loss and decided to go home." Some girls mentioned being unable to remember exactly when their period would start; it may not begin as scheduled.

Timing could also vary from one month to another, and the process could start abruptly. As a result, they suffered from anxiety. Remembering to carry their own sanitary napkins was also stressful. However, now they have little worry as sanitary pads are readily available in the new facility and they do not need to go home or stop going to school. They can also write down their period dates on the board in the toilet, making their school attendance convenient.

### Improved school attendance, concentration on studies

In the past, the girls related experiences of uneasiness for the entire day for lack of a proper toilet. The situation worsened if they experienced unexpected periods,

and other basic toiletries to refresh themselves. They also feel at ease as the bathroom is located at a distance from the boys' toilet. Moreover, if there is any problem in the toilet, the authority takes necessary measures to fix it. It was a real big change for them, said one girl. They opined that the newly built toilet gave them a sense of privacy and confidence to attend school.

### Mental peace and happiness

They used to have anxiety and a feeling of shame concerning periods in the past. Now, they have a clean and comfortable place with running water. They feel physically fresh and mentally happy now. One of the girls said, "We can change our pads when needed. Our life has become much better than before."

### Conclusion

A simple, functional, box-in-box toilet can bring about dramatic change in the lives of young girls aspiring to lead better lives. That this basic matter continues to be ignored in schools across Bangladesh speaks about the status of women in this day and age and the patriarchal attitudes and sense of priorities that continue to dominate civic life in the country. It is time for policy intervention to construct girl friendly toilets in all secondary schools across the country as more young women step forward and take charge of their lives.

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