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Once the lifelines of Dhaka, the city's canals are now mere shadows of their former selves—clogged with pollution, suffocated by encroachment, and neglected due to flawed urban planning. In this seven-part series, The Daily Star explores the current condition of the capital's canals, botched restoration attempts, and how the sorry state of these waterways is exacerbating the city's waterlogging woes. Together, these stories reveal what it will take to bring Dhaka's dying canals back to life. Here is the second part of the series:

BOX CULVERTS

A curse in disguise

HELEMUL ALAM

Is it a road or a lake? This is the question that commuters often ask themselves when they step into the streets of Dhaka even after a little drizzle.

In these streets, lie some man-made structures with a problematic history: box culverts.

A concrete box designed to encase canals underground, these structures are meant to solve the city's waterlogging woes, instead, they made things worse.

THE BIRTH OF A PROBLEM

The box culvert story begins in the aftermath of the catastrophic 1988 floods, which submerged most of Dhaka.

A high-powered government committee recommended turning open canals into covered culverts to make way for roads.

By the 1990s, construction was in full swing, with Dhaka City Corporation (DCC) and Dhaka Water Supply and Sewerage Authority (Wasa) leading the charge.

In areas like Rayerbazar, Razabazar, Kathalbagan, Gopibagh, Shyampur Kadamtala, and Maniknagar, canals were filled up to construct roads and drainage systems.

Key canals like Segunbagicha, Dholai Khal 1 and 2, Debdholai, Dhanmondi, and Mohakhali were narrowed for box culverts, which often remain clogged due to poor maintenance.

Across Dhaka, 9.2km of box culverts have been built – 6.2km in Dhaka South City Corporation and 3km in Dhaka North City Corporation.

In Dhaka's eagerness to modernise, the city buried its thriving canals under layers of concrete.

WHAT EXACTLY IS A BOX CULVERT?

Imagine a giant rectangular pipe that carries water underground. That's a box culvert. It's designed to replace open canals, directing stormwater beneath roads. In theory, this sounds well thought out and planned – a win-win for urban development and flood management.

However, Dhaka's box culverts have become water traps.

WHY ARE THEY MAKING THINGS WORSE?

Experts argue that box culverts are inherently flawed, especially in a city like Dhaka.

Box culverts require meticulous planning and maintenance.



PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN, HELEMUL ALAM

A road built over a boxed canal in Purana Paltan, Dhaka. *Inset*, what remains of the Gopibagh canal.



Unfortunately, neither happened here. Sandbags and construction debris were left inside during installation, reducing the water-carrying capacity from day one, said Iqbal Habib, vice president of Bangladesh Poribesh Andolon.

"The design is faulty, and such systems have no place in any country due to their rapid blockage," he added.

SEDIMENTATION BUILD-UP

Water doesn't flow as freely through culverts as it does in open canals. Over time, sediment builds up, further blocking the flow, said Mohammad Azaz, chairman of the River and Delta Research Centre (RDRC).

He said contractors, especially those working on the Paltan and Dholaiapar projects, did not clean construction materials after installation, leading to early obstruction in the flow of water, which gradually worsened over time.

LACK OF MAINTENANCE

Dhaka's culverts remain neglected, with only the top layer occasionally cleaned.

This limited cleaning capacity leaves the rest of the culverts clogged.

Mohammad Fazle Reza Sumon, convener of the advisory council of Bangladesh Institute of Planners, said box culverts gradually lose their functionality due to poor maintenance, with sedimentation continuing unchecked.

REDUCED RETENTION CAPACITY

By prioritising roads over canals, Dhaka

lost crucial water retention areas. This not only worsens waterlogging but also increases flooding risks during heavy rain, said experts.

Sumon said box culverts are not a viable solution for handling increased rainfall due to climate change, which could lead to floods that the current system is not equipped to handle.

THE CANAL SITUATION: POINT BY POINT

Dhaka's network of canals has been steadily sacrificed at the altar of urbanisation. Here's how the destruction unfolded:

DHOLAI KHAL

The DCC turned Dholai Khal-1 and Dholai Khal-2 into box culverts during the 90s.

Dholai Khal-2 used to flow into the Buriganga from Dayaganj Bazar via Sutrapur, Gendaria, Dayaganj, Wari and Shahar Dhaka Mouja while Dholai Khal-1 originated from Dholai Khal-2 and emptied into the Buriganga near the second Buriganga Bridge, said a Wasa official.

The flow of water has since been obstructed through the canals, creating blockages and causing waterlogging.

DEBDHOLAI CANAL

Debdholai canal was once connected to Dholai Khal and the Balu River through canals in Trimohoni but was converted into a box culvert by the DCC in 2004-2005.

Mir Hajirbagh resident Faruk Hossain recalled, "The canal was around 100 feet wide even around 25 years ago. The

waterbody was gradually grabbed and filled up. Many Mir Hajirbagh residents constructed buildings on it."

GOPIBAGH CANAL

Once a thriving waterway, the canal connecting Motijheel to Kamalapur was a lifeline for locals, linking the jheel behind Bangladesh Bank to Segunbagicha and Arambagh. Boats glided through its waters, ferrying passengers one point to another.

Jahangir Alam, a long-time resident of RK Mission Road, recalls when the canal was replaced by a road in the '90s, reducing the jheel to a pond.

Yet, this remnant remains a shortcut for many, costing just Tk 5 to save precious minutes.

For boatmen like Mohammad Dana Miah, 52, this shrinking waterbody is both livelihood and heritage. "As a child, it was only 15 paisa per trip. Now, six of us row by rotation to survive," he shared.

With the pond facing imminent disappearance, Dana sees his profession slipping away too.

"When the water is gone, so is my life's work," he says, rowing against time.

SEGUNBAGICHA CANAL

There used to be a jheel at Matsya Bhaban connected to Ramna Lake, from where the 2.8km Segunbagicha canal originated.

It was linked to the jheel behind Bangladesh Bank.

Over time, many canals were replaced by box culverts as jheels and water bodies were filled for road construction.

The Segunbagicha canal was turned into a box culvert near Shilpakala Academy, though some parts remained open and were linked to the Arambagh canal, which was also later covered.

"Before independence, boats used to ply the canals, which connected Gopibagh and major waterways like Manda," recalled Mohammad Shahid of Fakirerpool.

This correspondent observed a similar situation after visiting Dhanmondi canal, Kathalbagan canal, Rayerbazar canal, Mohakhali canal, Shyampur-Kadamtali canal, Gabtoli canal, Paribagh canal, and five other waterways.

TIME TO REVERSE THE DAMAGE

Dhaka needs a dramatic rethink in urban planning to undo decades of damage, according to experts.

The three experts this newspaper interviewed suggested the following:

The only way forward is to convert these box culverts back into open canals. Open canals ensure better water flow, sediment management, and ecological balance.

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Face challenges with courage

Army chief urges new officers

UNB, Chattogram

Chief of Army Staff General Waker-Uz-Zaman has urged newly commissioned officers to prioritise patriotism and demonstrate courage in handling any situation.



The army chief made the remarks during the President's Parade, marking the commissioning of new officers at the Bangladesh Military Academy (BMA) Parade Ground in Chattogram yesterday.

General Waker-Uz-Zaman emphasised the grave responsibility placed on the new officers to safeguard the country's independence and sovereignty.

"You [newly commissioned officers] have to be ready to face any challenge," he said.

Highlighting the importance of patriotism, he said, "Patriotism should be given the highest importance in keeping the military consciousness and values in harmony and in taking any decision."

He also urged the newly commissioned officers to set exemplary standards for their subordinates in the workplace.

Waker-Uz-Zaman reiterated that discipline is the cornerstone of the army.

A total of 231 officer cadets, including 24 female cadets, were commissioned from the 87th BMA Long Course and the 59th BMA Special Course.

The parade began at 9:00am at the BMA Parade Ground in Bhatiari. The army chief, as the chief guest, inspected the parade and received the salute.

Neutral, corruption-free police force

Demand people in survey by reform commission

- ➔ Total respondents: 24,442
- ➔ 89.5pc seek interference-free police
- ➔ 74.9pc want accountability
- ➔ 95pc demand ghost-case reform

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

People want a law-abiding, neutral, and corruption-free police force that will operate without any political influence, as per an online survey conducted by police reform commission.

The survey, titled Kemon Police Chai (What kind of police we want), gathered responses from 24,442 participants who answered 19 questions. The survey results were released on the PRC's official website yesterday.

Key findings show that 89.5 percent of respondents want an end to political interference in police activities, while 77.9 percent demand the eradication of corruption within the force. Additionally, 74.9 percent emphasised the need for accountability and punishment for rights violations, such as enforced disappearances and extra-judicial killings.

On the issue of "ghost cases," 95 percent of participants called for ending this practice, and

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Environment for free expression a must

Says Matiur Rahman

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Prothom Alo Editor Matiur Rahman yesterday said significant reforms are needed in the state administration.

"And in order to be successful in state affairs, there needs to be an open democratic environment and an environment of free expression throughout the society," he added.

Matiur made the remarks as a guest speaker at an award ceremony held in honour of the late Professor Sitara Parveen of the Department of Mass Communication and Journalism (MCJ) at Dhaka University.

The event took place at the Professor Muzaffar Ahmed Chowdhury Auditorium in the Faculty of Social Sciences.

He said there should be more open discussions on all important state issues.

"We have to do journalism with courage from an independent and non-partisan position," Matiur also said.

At the programme, DU VC Prof Niaz Ahmed Khan paid glowing tribute to the memory of Prof Dr Sitara Parvin.

A total of 10 meritorious students of the Department of Mass Communication and Journalism of DU were recognised with the Prof Sitara Parvin Award for their outstanding results in BSS (Hons) final examination of 2022.

Prof Sitara Parvin, daughter of former President Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed and wife of retired MCJ Prof Ahaduzzaman Mohammad Ali, died in a tragic road accident on June 23, 2005 in the US.



Security personnel ramped up measures at the Indian High Commission in Dhaka yesterday, following an attack on the Bangladesh mission in Agartala on Monday.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

Informal Sector Rights of workers must be protected

Says Labour Reform Commission

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The rights and dignity of marginalised workers in the informal sector must be protected, said Labour Reform Commission at a discussion yesterday.

The event at Shram Bhaban in Dhaka brought together sanitation and domestic workers to share their views. The commission gathered their opinions and recommendations for reform.

Lipti, a young house help, said, "Since we don't have employment papers, our jobs lack security. Employers can fire us at will, and we often work on festivals as if holidays don't exist for us."

A female sanitation worker shared that, despite working in a government office, they must wait over a

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