

# Dhaka is an island



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Living within the hullabaloo of the city, in the belly of the beast, so to speak, there is a vital aspect of Dhaka that has become invisible. We can no longer see a city framed and encircled by rivers. How ironic is that! In a *nodi-beshito* landscape, the river has disappeared from view. Not quite literally, but perceptually and ideationally. And, often, quite literally. That is, the river is no longer in our minds and is not accessible either. This is not the case for someone living in Paris, Bangkok, or Kolkata. Think of Buriganga, that is, if you can, the banks of which nurtured the beginning and growth of Dhaka. The river is now polluted beyond repair and its banks are almost inaccessible to the general public.

Once upon a time, rivers, wetlands, flood plains and canals used to completely girdle the city in a beautiful tapestry of green and blue. Now, a short ride on any of the rivers of Dhaka will show how that landscape is being mistreated and abused. A couple of days back, a few of us took a boat ride on the Balu River. Other than one or two leisure boats, 90 percent of boats were sand barges slithering on the darkish water for the purpose of filling up nearby wetlands. We found a few instances where the riverbanks were recognised, but mostly it seemed like a long disowned wasteland. Even such planned enterprises as Purbhacahal and Jolshiri failed to recognise the beauty of the rivers in their grand plans.

I describe this phenomenon, in which the rivers have receded from our lived experience, as the vanishing scope of the city. Accelerated by planning priorities and development drives, and a clear disregard for the virtues of rivers, rivers and a whole ecology associated with them are receding from our urban priorities. This is unequivocally disastrous.

Writing in the book *Designing Dhaka* in 2012, I proposed the viewpoint that “Dhaka is an island.” The architect Muzharul Islam made a similar claim in 1993: “Dhaka has rivers on three sides, and lowland on the other, it is extended along the north-south. It is like an island.” The claim is both rhetorical and prospective. It is rhetorical in the sense that Dhaka city is not quite an island but the way it is framed by water on all four sides, it appears to be one. Metropolitan Dhaka and its immediate areas are framed by four rivers—the Buriganga, the Turag, the Balu, and the Shitalakhya. Like a garland or ring, the four rivers encircle a region on which the historic city of Dhaka originated and developed, and where the expanding footprint of the modern city is fast growing. We calculate that the total linear length of the four riverbanks, considering both sides, is 216 kms!

The historical importance of this “ring of rivers” cannot be overemphasised. British cartographer James Rennell’s map of Dhaka clearly showed its location in a riverine geography. Earlier, in the 15th century, the Chinese emissary

Ma Huan and his companions travelled up to Sonargaon and Dhaka in their Chinese junks. At the southern tip, Idrakpur Fort was constructed by the Mughals at the perfect location facing the daunting south that brought in marauders and troublemakers. Birulia village, once a hub of commerce, now sits as a desolate island in the river route

of the Turag. Jute factories on the Shitalakhya led Rumer Godden to write her novel *The River* which became the basis for Jean Renoir’s 1951 film of the same name. It was Renoir’s film that inspired Satyajit Ray. Such is the web of rivers.

Rivers are not just ribbon-like channels. It also suggests a vast water ecology that includes canals, lakes,

wetlands and floodplains that still infiltrate the body of the city. Let us not forget the essence of a river: it is all about flows. The blatant increase in impermeable surfaces and engineered systems have disrupted both flows and absorptions. If we are deleting rivers from our horizon, we are actually nullifying the life-enhancing gift of nature.

Claiming that Dhaka is an island is an earnest call for an ecological and nature-oriented restoration of the city, and to experience, in the words of the Chinese landscape architect and ecological planner Kongjian Yu, the “free, fertile, vigorous and poetic landscape.”

By prospective, I mean how we can erect our buildings, infrastructures and cities, that is, a whole new city form, with the rhythm of the river rings. How can we create an active public realm all along the riverbanks? And how can we experience a passenger river route in the ring? There are a few tasks involved here.

The first task is environmental, that is, to retain the rivers as rivers, by cleaning up the rivers, depolluting them, and maintaining their flow. This is fundamental and there is no two-way about this. The second task is legal, to create distinct policies for the definition and usage of the riverbanks for what happens on riverbanks lead to the eventual deterioration of rivers. Both these tasks are fairly well known in our discourse on rivers, but they have not been able to restore the primacy of those rivers. If policies and outcries will not, what will?

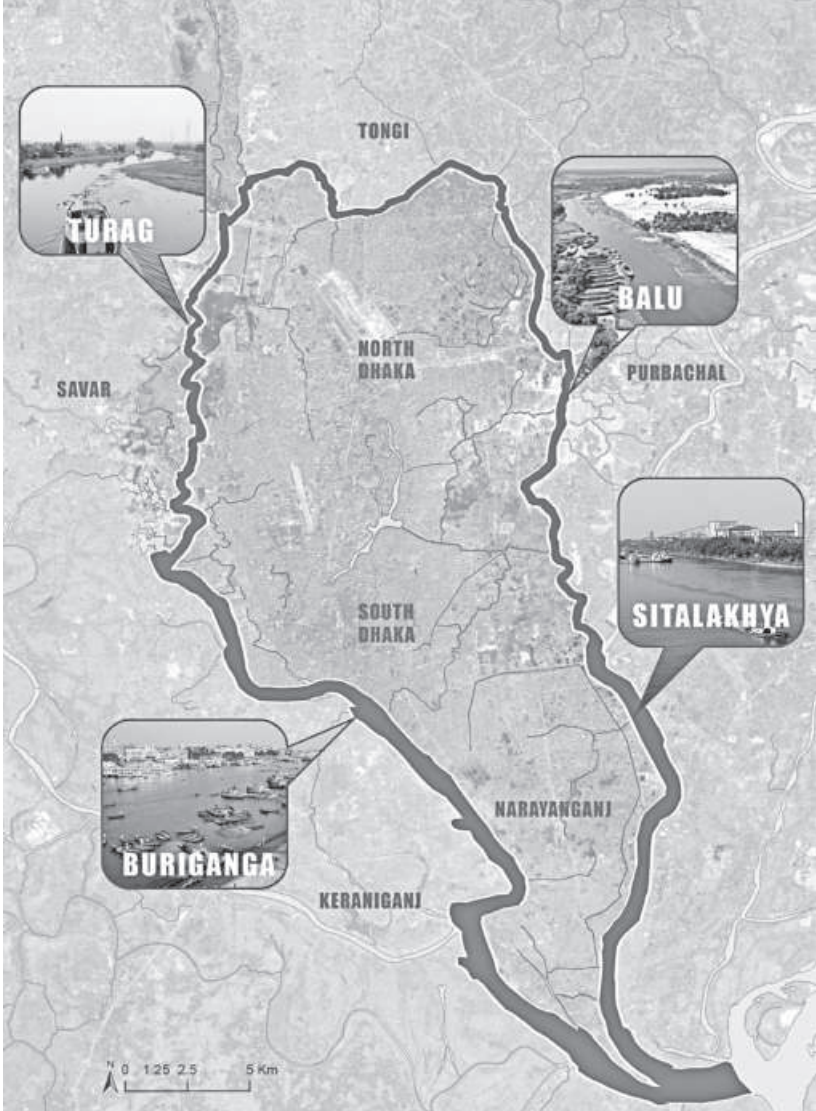
There is a third task that may actually save rivers—we need to show by examples how the rivers and riverbanks can be used. I argue that people abuse the riverbanks when there is no demarcated or defined public realm. Riverbanks are actually a natural public realm. Anyone should be able to reach an

urban riverbank, unfettered and unobstructed. And once there, he or she should be able to take in the full glory of a river. A singular and time-tested way to preserve riverbanks is to create unobstructed walkable public spaces along all the riverbanks. Our rural riverbanks are like that but the moment a river enters or passes by a city or town, it immediately becomes an object of abuse in which encroachment and privatisation turn the rivers black and deny the riverbanks to the wider citizens. If any strategy that will save our riverbanks, it is the publicisation of its banks.

It does not take too much to create public spaces along riverbanks. All that is needed is an attention to public access and making simple gathering spaces such as parks, gardens and pathways. Pathways could be for both walking and biking. Ideally, I should be able to walk from Ashulia along the Turag and the Buriganga and reach the southern tip of Narayanganj (we calculated it would take 9 hours at 10 mins/km).

We need to develop a hydrophilic image of the city, where the rivers are passionately loved and used. A civic activism is needed around the primacy of rivers in the life of a city. A map of a city is often a way to iconise that primacy. Such an iconic map of Dhaka is yet to be drawn. We propose a new visualisation of Dhaka in which the ring of rivers is prioritised.

In Kongjian Yu’s optimistic view, rivers and civilisations are closely bound up in which the big rivers will continue to nourish human civilisations. “No rivers, no dreams,” as he declares. One could add: no dreams, no humanity. In a time of paradoxical development, when industrial growth and technological optimism have wrought havoc on Earth, we need to explore a “nature-based path” for redemption in which the central role is played by the river.



MAP COURTESY: RIDA HAQUE

# July revolution and Prof Yunus: A winning combination



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When Prof Yunus was sworn in as the chief adviser of the interim government on August 8 of this year, a feeling of déjà vu consumed me. I was transported back to 2006, when I was a graduate student at a university in California. I was working out at the gym in the morning. The TV right in front of my treadmill flashed Prof Yunus, as the newscaster mentioned that he had won the Nobel Peace Prize. I jumped out of the gym and started running to the office of my course coordinator. Before she could greet me as she suddenly found me next to her chair, I said, “Dr Lynne, a Bangladeshi won the Nobel Peace Prize this year.” She smiled and said, “We know Professor Yunus. You are the next.” I was so delightfully delusional that I had no idea what she meant. All I knew was that Bangladesh achieved nothing more dignified and desirable than winning the Nobel Peace Prize since our independence in 1971. When I left her office, I realised that Prof Yunus had re-defined Bangladesh, which was off to a new beginning. Unfortunately, nothing apparently has changed since. Politics has swamped everything.

While our political crisis climaxed this past July, Bangladesh has always been politically precarious since its bloody birth in 1971. The lever of political power alternated between demagogues and dictators. Most of them were intellectually half-baked. They understood neither politics, nor economics. All of them were apparently con artists. They attempted to become popular, while their credibility nixed. They rigged elections. They celebrated trumped-up victories. They led without knowing whatsoever how a country runs. The country runs anyway, backward or forward, with or without a leader. A gated community of gonifs (the Haniifs, in our case!) feeds the fantasy of such a leader that she is inevitable and accomplished. While she ensconces herself in power and pride, the carpetbaggers erode the vitals of the country. Mismanagement

metastasises. People feel betrayed and vulnerable. What happens when such political paralysis persists? Hasina happens! Fascism happens! Genocide happens! In a political climate such as this, winning a Nobel Prize is apparently criminal. No wonder that they filed 198 court cases against Prof Yunus, as *Deutsche Welle* claims. Nothing, however, diminishes the fact that Prof Yunus is our one-off achievement. He has the charisma and credibility to help the nation achieve further.

The Hasnats knew it. When the July revolution culminated in Hasina’s flight from the country on the August 5, the architects of the revolution (i.e., the student coordinators) realised that it occasioned an extraordinary opportunity to reclaim and reform the country that the Hasinas continue to own and run and ruin for decades. Unless a comprehensive electoral, judicial, financial, bureaucratic, and constitutional reform is enacted, the Hasinas will continue to kill the Abu Syeds. The nation will continue to barrel backward, when crime, corruption, and injustice mount. Under these circumstances, the country didn’t need a steward, who could smoothly transition power through an election. The country needed a reformer, who would ensure a fair and participatory election having undertaken some fundamental reforms. The country needed someone, who was authentic and exemplary. Only Prof Yunus seemed to have the sentimental and professional capital to fill the slot. Hasina’s government was so disconnected from the people that they didn’t realise that the more they disgraced Prof Yunus, the more love and respect and empathy hemmed around him. Add to that his accomplishments, global connections, and reputation. When he consented to become the chief adviser of the interim government, the most critical foundation of the July revolution was laid.

As we started to look forward when the interim government took over, the

forces of the fallen regime threatened to push us backward. Movements erupted. Law and order deteriorated. The country seemed volatile and unpredictable. People started to feel hopeless and helpless. The interim government looked severely strained. Such a situation was very unfortunate but was never unexpected. Hasina flooded the country with illegal arms

anything but a magician.

A transition from a dictatorial regime to democracy is almost akin to breathing life into a corpse. Dictators are addicted to killing. They kill people. They kill institutions. They kill courage and conviction. Along the way, they massively infiltrate the members of incestuously interconnected families into a system

unemployment, and zero net carbon emissions. He is deeply invested in making the world a better place. Besides, he has aged gracefully. He is never publicly angry or annoyed. He maintains a low-key demeanour. A personality of his stature doesn’t fit in the political mess that Hasina’s Bangladesh was. It’s, however, no longer Sheikh Hasina’s Bangladesh,

\$17 billion was syphoned from the country’s financial system in the 15 years of Hasina’s regime. The country is apparently cash-strapped now. When the country reels under heavy foreign loans incurred by Hasina’s government, the interest rates continue to spike, adding further financial burden to the interim government. Inflation increases and the prices of commodities spike. It’s a vicious cycle the interim government is trapped in, which seriously threatens its popularity and capacity. Policing would have contributed to streamlining commodity prices to some extent. The police department has crumbled under its own crime and corruption, thanks to Hasina. While considerable improvement is visible on these fronts, I apprehend that these problems might linger a little longer.

Under any circumstances, though, nothing can fracture Prof Yunus’s fortitude. He is focused on and heading steadily towards the goals the Tabassums, along with the rest of the people of this country, want him to accomplish. Never before has so much possibility beckoned Bangladesh. Never before have so many problems beset Bangladesh. The country is hollow at the core. Conspiracies and propaganda brew constantly. Neighbourly knavery flares up. We are in an extraordinary phase of our national history. If we don’t move ahead cautiously, tomorrow’s Bangladesh is anyone’s guess. Arundhati Roy reminds us in her *Boston Review* interview, “How to Think About Empire,” what Prof Yunus reiterates since he took over that we must not fool ourselves into believing that the change we want will come with fresh election as the “old bastards” are out of office. They will bounce in if we renew the politics of voting with the same old system in place. That’s not an option for the new Bangladesh that emerged following the July revolution.

It was a goosebump moment for me when Prof Yunus won the Nobel Prize in 2006, and the same feeling renewed in 2024, when he was sworn in as chief adviser. I’m persuaded to think that no one is more poised to embody and draw from the unity and harmony that the July revolution built across Bangladesh. We needed a stalwart, who is above partisan interest and material greed, for Bangladesh to emerge anew. We have it now.

Relax, Bangladesh!



**Nobel Laureate Muhammad Yunus is pictured during a press briefing as he arrives at the Hazarat Shahjalal International Airport, in Dhaka, Bangladesh, August 8, 2024.**

FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

and money. The country was already massively insecure and explosive. The agents of anarchy stalked all around the country. They resisted, as Hasina suddenly sneaked out of the country. And their resistance was not political; it was existential, instead. They stood exposed and felt endangered, as Hasina’s regime fizzled. They wanted her back for their survival. Hasina has been a textbook example of a dictator, like the Peruvian dictator, Oscar R Benavides, who famously said, “For my friends everything, for my enemies the law.” She changed the political culture and calculus of the country so irreversibly during the last 15 years that a quick fix is unlikely. However, the “reset button” is already set. As things gradually continue to fall on the right track, we must remember that Prof Yunus is

that thrives in isolation, intimidation, and pessimism. Resistance and unity dwindle. Stupidity becomes strength. Arrogance becomes a virtue. In the meantime, some bridges, flyovers, and tunnels happen. The cronies besetting the dictator construct a grand narrative of development claiming, “She has shown us out of pobet[sic].”

Hasina’s Bangladesh was a political circus. She had “LOL” models to rule the country, who were devoid of brainpower, integrity, and patriotism. Prof Yunus exists at the opposite end of such a political spectrum. He is an intellectual, who is worldly. He knows how politics functions. His vision of the world is not romantic or recondite. He wants the political system re-shaped around the economics of zero poverty, zero

as our Law Adviser Asif Nazrul said.

Therefore, Prof Yunus becomes critical to guiding and transforming the nation to a new height. The nation wants to get out of the politics of bullshitting and blood-shedding. However capable Prof Yunus potentially is, we must not forget that he has inherited bankruptcy. Hasina left the country shattered. Hasina was psychologically unhinged. She was a narcissistic megalomaniac. She was always smut and huffy, when she pretended that she was above human follies. She never confessed to have erred. For example, she bragged about her zero-tolerance policy to corruption, when she claimed that her peon scrounged around Tk 400 crores. Citing the governor of Bangladesh Bank, *The New York Times* reported recently that about