

REIMAGINING DHAKA'S PARKS

Rasulbagh shows the way

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A ninth-grader

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**Professor Rafiq Azam
Principal Architect of Shatotto**

Tucked into the narrow confusing lanes of Lalbagh is Rasulbagh Children's Park -- a rare slice of serenity in a city that often forgets to breathe. A place that once stood as a neglected corner of urban decay has now transformed into a vibrant hub of life, laughter, and hope. It's a story of how a small patch of land became a symbol of what Dhaka could be, if only we dared to dream bigger.

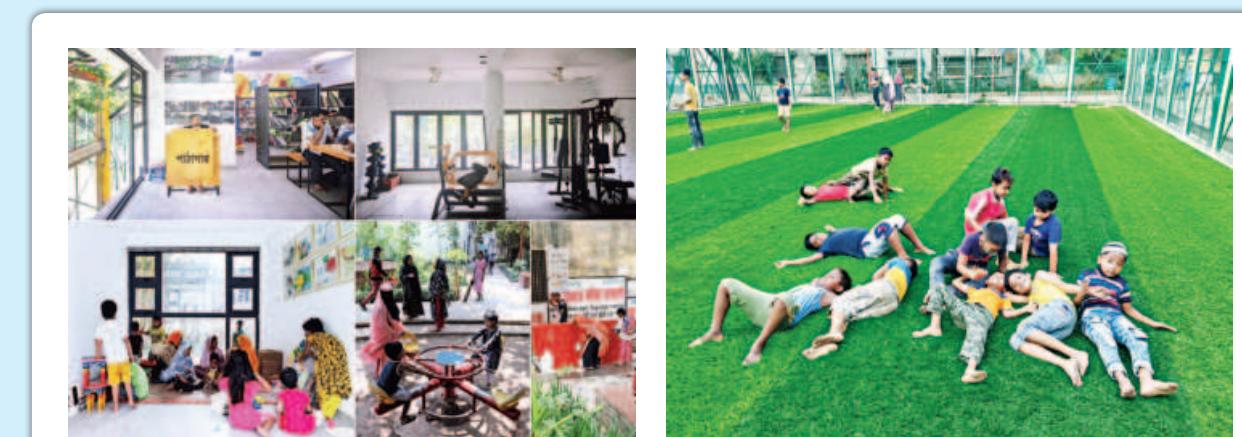
For decades, the park was an abandoned muddy plot, infamous for being a hangout for drug addicts and a waterlogged mess after every monsoon rain. It was the kind of place you hurried past, avoiding the accusing stares of its shabby walls and the uneasy whispers of its shady reputation. But today, Rasulbagh Children's Park tells a different story -- one of children playing football on artificial turf, elders strolling along shaded walkways, and neighbours gathering under the leafy embrace of a banyan tree. It is a space that has come alive, defying the odds stacked against it.

The heartbeat of a community

"I love this field very much," said Tahsin, a ninth-grade student with an infectious smile. "We have a football club, and we practise here after school. It's like our second home." Around him, kids darted across the AstroTurf installed in the park, kicking footballs and cheering each other on. Nearby, others played badminton, while a group of friends huddled together, engrossed in mobile games. For Niloy, a student of class 10, the park offers more than just a place to play. "I enjoy being here with my friends. The fresh air makes it even better," he said, glancing at the vibrant scene around him.

Outside the children's play area, Rony, a second grader, spun a *latim*, with unbridled enthusiasm. "Even after dark, I can play here," he said with a grin. "My parents don't mind because they know it's safe." The park's floodlights, installed as part of its renovation, ensure that the fun doesn't end with the setting sun.

Nasir, a shopkeeper whose small business sits adjacent to the park, has seen firsthand how the transformation has uplifted the neighbourhood. "After the park was renovated, I've had customers of all ages. Monthly sales of my shop also increased. It's wonderful



Facilities on the park premises.



Before installing Astroturf at the park.



Children having fun inside the park.



An aerial view of the Rasulbagh Park before it was renovated and the Astroturf was set up.

to see so much energy and joy here," he shared.

The vision behind the change

The park's transformation owes much to the vision of Professor Rafiq Azam, principal architect of Shatotto, a Dhaka-based firm. With over 30 years of experience, Professor Azam saw the potential for Rasulbagh Children's Park to become more than just a recreational space.

"When we started, the park was in a terrible state," Azam recalled. "There was no grass, just mud and debris. Illegal structures had taken over parts of the park, including a political office and a veterinary centre. It was a challenge to convince the authorities and the community to support our vision."

The project began as part of the "Jol Shobuje Dhaka" initiative, a city corporation effort to revitalise 31 parks and playgrounds across the capital.

For Rasulbagh, the vision was

clear: an open, welcoming space that encouraged community engagement and addressed the area's long-standing issues with waterlogging. "We decided to break down the old walls surrounding the park," Azam explained. "This 'unboxing' approach created a sense of openness and ownership among the local residents. It was important for the park to feel like it belonged to everyone," he said.

A community-centric approach

From the outset, community involvement was central to the park's redesign. Meetings were held with local residents on a regular basis to address their concerns and incorporate their ideas. Separate sessions were organised for younger and older residents, recognising that their needs and perspectives often differed.

"The older people were initially sceptical," Azam said. "But once they saw the plans and understood how the park could benefit everyone, they

became our strongest allies."

One of the most significant challenges was addressing the area's poor drainage system. Collaborating with experts, the team designed trenches beneath the walkways to collect and store rainwater. With a capacity of 1 lakh litres, these trenches not only prevent waterlogging but also supply filtered drinking water to the surrounding community. "It's a sustainable solution," Azam noted. "The water has been successfully used for the past few years."

Features that make it a bit special

The Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC) opened the "Rasulbagh Shishu Park" to the public after completion of the modernisation work in 2020. The 0.59-acre park has a range of amenities, from a library and gym to a mosque. Its AstroTurf field, installed in 2021 at a personal cost of Tk 50 lakh by Rafiq Azam, has become a focal point for sports and recreation.

Beneath the turf, a network of pipes aids in rainwater drainage, ensuring the field remains usable even during heavy rains.

"AstroTurf is expensive initially," Azam admitted. "But in the long run, it's the best option for a park like this. It's durable and easy to maintain."

Native trees line the park's edges, creating a sense of belonging and continuity with the area's heritage. Benches under the shade of trees offer a place for quiet reflection, while the mosque's perforated brick screen integrates seamlessly into the park's design, providing a serene space for prayer.

Challenges and lessons

Despite its success, the project was not without its hurdles. Bureaucratic red tape, resistance from local politicians, and the apathy of city authorities posed significant challenges. "We didn't receive all the funding that was promised," Azam revealed. "In fact, we had to use our own resources to complete some of the work," he further shared.

Maintenance remains an ongoing issue. While the city corporation and former mayor initially pledged to provide a dedicated team for upkeep, this promise has not been fully realised. Azam said, "We've had to hire two personnel ourselves to ensure the park is maintained. It is a common problem in Bangladesh - once a project is completed, there is very little follow-up."

A glimpse of what could be

For those who grew up in Dhaka, Rasulbagh Park feels like a slice of the city's past, reimagined for the future. It is a place where neighbours meet, children grow, and life slows down for a moment.

In a city known for its chaos, this small park offers a vision of what could be - a Dhaka where open spaces bring people together, where clean water flows, and where thoughtful planning creates lasting change. As Rafiq Azam puts it, "This park is not just about space - it is about joy, connection, and hope."

As the city continues to grapple with unplanned growth, pollution, and environmental challenges, Rasulbagh Children's Park reminds us that with proper urban planning, and even in the most crowded and chaotic corners of Dhaka, spaces of beauty and belonging can emerge - if only we have the courage to imagine them.

