

WORLD RIVERS DAY

Lessons from the Baral River movement



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There is a paradox in the situation of rivers in Bangladesh. On the one hand, thousands of so-called “water development” projects have been implemented across the country. Yet, these projects have generally led to the gradual decay and demise of rivers. About one-third of rivers have simply disappeared. Many that remain are in their death throes, being severely encroached, polluted, and turned miserably shallow.

Why is this a paradox? Why have thousands of water development projects rather killed our rivers instead of making them healthier? The answer lies in the fact that, from the very beginning, the water development effort in Bangladesh headed in the wrong direction. In fact, the direction was just the opposite of what was needed.

We all know that Bangladesh’s rivers are characterised by extreme seasonality. This follows from the seasonality of rainfall, about 80 percent of which is concentrated in just four months of the year. The rivers, therefore, swell during the rainy season and overflow to the floodplains. Bangladesh’s rivers are also the most sediment-laden in the world. Much of this sediment is carried as suspended load and gets deposited on the floodplains through these overflows. The overflows, therefore, have dual positive effects. On the one hand, they revitalise the floodplains, raise their elevation, keep the flood level low, recharge the water bodies, which then serve as a storage of water for the dry season. On the other hand, the overflows reduce the sediment that gets deposited on the riverbed, and thus help the rivers to remain deep and healthy. Bangladesh, therefore, needs the “Open Approach” to rivers, under which floodplains are kept open to river overflows.

However, water development in Bangladesh, from the very beginning, was undertaken under the aegis of foreign agencies, who, not unsurprisingly, brought in foreign consultants to chart the course of water development in Bangladesh. These foreign experts were naturally guided by the experience of their own countries, where rivers hardly have seasonal fluctuations or sedimentation. To them, river overflows

appeared to be a nuisance, and they believed that the primary task of water development in Bangladesh was to confine the rivers to their designated channels. They therefore imposed on Bangladesh the “Cordon Approach”, under which floodplains are cordoned off from rivers by constructing embankments along their banks. The concomitant of embankments was the sluice gates. Thus, thousands of sluice gates were built with thousands of miles of embankments. The net result of this Cordon Approach is the demise and decay of the Bangladesh’s rivers. In addition, it created a new problem—waterlogging, which resulted inevitably from the obstruction of river flows by embankments and sluice gates.

A good example of the wrong-headed character of Bangladesh’s water development efforts is provided by the experience with the Baral River of North Bengal. It is a unique river, flowing mostly west to east and connecting two of the most important rivers of Bangladesh, namely the Ganges and the Jamuna Rivers. It takes off from the Ganges River at Charghat of Rajshahi district, flows through the Chalan Beel area and meets the Jamuna River near Baghabari after merging with the Hurasagar River. Baral serves as Chalan Beel’s backbone, into which most of North Bengal’s north-south flowing rivers used to converge.

However, in the 1980s, to prevent Baral from overflowing, the Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB) constructed a sluice gate at Charghat to reduce the flow from the Ganges into the Baral River. This three-vent sluice gate was only about twelve feet wide, when the natural width of the river at its mouth, according to the cadastral survey, was about 500 feet. It was therefore totally inadequate for the Ganges flow to enter the Baral River. Furthermore, being obstructed, sediment got deposited in front of the sluice gate, eventually blocking it completely. The Charghat sluice gate thereby triggered the process of the demise and decay of the Baral River. The process was aggravated further in the 1990s when BWDB constructed several more sluice gates on Baral. Two of these were at Atghoria, one being just a one-vent sluice

gate meant for the entire Baral River to flow through it! By that time, being disconnected from the Ganges, Baral had little, if any, flow left, making it an easy prey for encroachment and pollution. Thus, the river disappeared completely in the 18-kilometre stretch from Atghoria to Bonpara. In the rest of it, a good number of cross-dams were constructed, converting the river into a series of ponds, which were then leased out for fishing to

actual process of substitution of the cross-dams by bridges began much later. However, BWDB was unwilling to remove the sluice gates. Unable to oppose the task force’s decision openly, it urged a study to assess the possible impact of removing the sluice gates. It then engaged a consulting firm of its choice to conduct the study. Not surprisingly, this firm ended up supporting BWDB’s position and recommended constructing another

task force’s original decision about removing the sluice gates cannot be delayed. Under the circumstances, BWDB was forced to remove the plates of the sluice gates.

This simple step has now resulted in a miracle. Water has been gushing from the Ganges into the Baral, and thousands of people from far and wide are flocking each day to Charghat to witness this miracle. The Baral experience thus vindicates that the



Being disconnected from the Ganges, Baral had little, if any, flow left. But after the plates of the sluice gates were removed recently, water has been gushing into the river. FILE PHOTO: STAR

interested quarters. Thus, the Baral River was destroyed. No wonder people started calling Baral the “Mora (dead) Baral”.

The common people, however, could not accept this sad outcome. Soon, they started “Baral Raksha Andolan” for the restoration of the river. Supported by Bangladesh Poribesh Andolon (BAPA) and Bangladesh Environment Network (BEN), this movement gradually gained strength, culminating in a 220-km human chain held in 2013 along the entire riverbank from Charghat to Baghabari. The authorities could not ignore the demand. The government’s river task force decided to free up Baral by removing the sluice gates and the cross-dams. The

three-vent sluice gate at Charghat beside the existing one!

BWDB’s position and actions contravened not only the spirit of the task force decision but also the directive issued by the High Court in 2019 to free up Baral. Needless to say, all those who have been struggling to free up Baral for several decades were enraged by BWDB’s machinations and resumed their movement.

Fortunately, the adviser for the Ministry of Water Resources of the interim government sided with the demand for freeing up Baral. Upon visiting the area and holding discussions with the stakeholders, she was convinced that the implementation of the

“Open Approach” is the right approach to rivers in Bangladesh. Unfortunately, there are fears that BWDB probably has not given up yet and is waiting for an opportune moment to replace the plates! However, the miracle of seeing Baral rejuvenating after the removal of plates has now generated so much conviction and enthusiasm that any attempt by BWDB to replace the plates and delay the replacement of the sluice gates by full-length bridges will be met by vigorous resistance from the people.

So, this year’s World Rivers Day’s message for Bangladesh should be “Learn from Baral! Remove sluice gates from Bangladesh’s rivers!” This is the only way rivers of Bangladesh can be protected.

Remembering Salahuddin Ahmed, a mentor and friend



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ABDULLAH SHIBLI

Bangladesh’s former Attorney General, Salahuddin Ahmed, my teacher, colleague, and mentor, passed away in Dhaka in the early hours of September 21. While I have lived abroad for the last 48 years, Sal B, as we fondly called him, and I have been in touch through thick and thin, and the credit goes to him. His evergreen personality and likeability, which shone through his strong sense of discipline and forthrightness, were a big draw for my wife Rumi and me.

In my book—*A Fairy Tale: Autobiographical Stories*—written three years ago, I mentioned him as “one of my teachers, whom I have now known for almost half a century, and now proudly call my friend, is Salahuddin Ahmed”. Those who knew him only as a lawyer probably missed the charming versatility of this brilliant man.

Sal B became our teacher at the economics

department of Dhaka University (DU) after the independence. He taught us microeconomics (paper I) in honours in 1972-73. After I joined the same department as a lecturer, he and I bonded socially and intellectually. I went to his wedding in May 1977 as part of a bridal procession from Dhaka to Chattogram, and he was in my wedding a few months later.

I have many stories to share, but I will recount only two here.

Once during his lecture, I sneaked out of the classroom through the rear exit. I was my father’s chauffeur, and I would take him to the Supreme Court every morning after my class was over. One morning, the class went past the hour, and I left without permission. Sal B noticed but said nothing to me, but later told the classroom, “Please ask him to see me in my office”. I went to him after dropping off my father at his workplace and explained, he

was sympathetic and did not hold it against me. He even helped me during my BA exams in December 1973. He was a proctor for paper I, and while passing by my desk, he asked me how many questions I had already answered. When I informed him that I was still working on my first one and almost two hours had already passed, he advised me to keep an eye on my watch and finish all five questions on time!

After we became colleagues, he also became my friend, and I would frequently visit his house on Larmini Street, where he’d entertain us by playing the sitar, which he learned as a student of Ustad Abid Hussain Khan. Of course, we’d occasionally have sumptuous meals thanks to the hospitality of his gregarious family, including his two younger brothers (Saeed and Shahid) and four younger sisters (Nasreen, Saeda, Zakia and Shahin). We did not see much of his elder sister, Niloo, who was married to Kafiluddin Mahmud. Sal B was my companion when I went to the party in Mohammadpur, where I met Rumi, my would-be wife, for the first time. He was a source of guidance during my year-long romantic relationship and helped finance my wedding and subsequent trip to the US for higher studies.

Over the years, I followed his career in Bangladesh, as an attorney, in the

government, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and academia. He served first as additional attorney general, and then as the attorney general during the caretaker government of 2007-2009. Then he became the managing director of Karnaphuli Fertilizer Company Limited (Kafco). After that, he became the head of the Department of Law and director of the Law School at the University of Asia Pacific.

He had a career that only a few can imagine. However, his humility was his shining armour. When asked by the media, Sal B, while serving as attorney general, said: “At the moment, this is a job with great responsibility. Due to the present political situation, it would be more difficult than before to discharge the responsibility. Time will say whether I will be able to perform the duties.”

During a casual conversation, I once asked him about the experience in the caretaker government, and pressed him to share some tidbits. He confided, “Once we were before a High Court bench, and the attorney general’s office was tasked to engage the court until we had all the ducks in a row lined up. So, as the additional attorney general, I had to stand there and address the court for a non-stop twenty-four hours!” I congratulated him on his successful filibuster tactic.

He was the eldest son of Sultanuddin

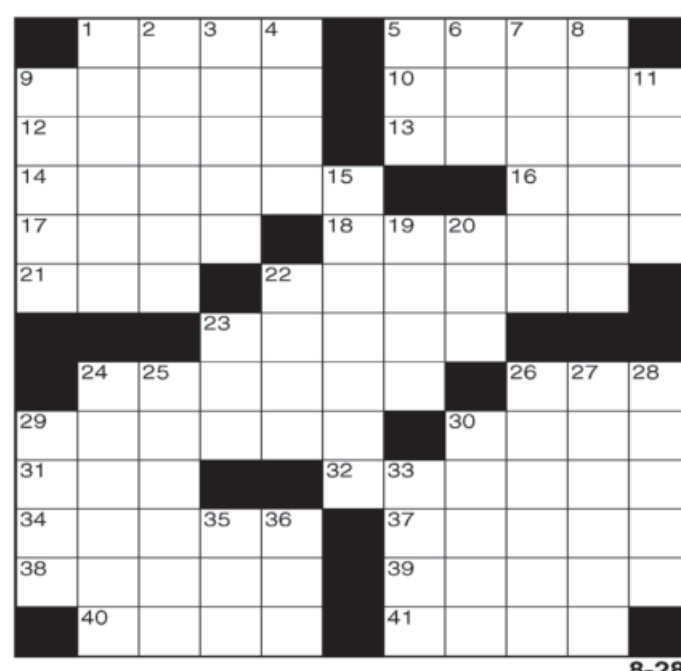
Ahmed, former governor of East Pakistan. He had his higher education in the UK, a BA from the London School of Economics and Political Science and an MA from the University of London, and passed the last civil service examination of Pakistan in 1970 with distinction. However, after independence, he chose to teach at DU. And then, regardless of his enormous popularity at DU, he went ahead to join the UNDP, Dhaka. After a two-year stint there, he became a lawyer at Kamal Hossain & Associates in 1980 and earned an LL.M from Columbia University. When he resigned as attorney general after the Awami League assumed power in 2009, Sal B was appointed as the chief executive officer (MD) of KAFCO, where he was on the board of directors. He finally came back to academia in 2017, and appeared to be very glad when Jamilur Reza Choudhury invited him to join UAP.

He was buried in Azimpur Graveyard in his father’s final resting place. He is survived by his widow, Selina, two sons and a daughter, and their spouses and children.

As Dr Shahdin Malik said in a tribute in *Prothom Alo*, “To my knowledge, Salahuddin Ahmed is the only person with degrees in two different disciplines (economy and law) from the world’s top two academic institutions”. I might add that he was a brilliant individual with diverse interests, and he was my hero.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
1 Parcel (out)
5 TV viewing spot
9 Last
10 Wise saying
12 Spoken exams
13 Musing of “Will & Grace”
14 They may run underground
16 Give permission to
17 Hideous
18 Plains homes
21 Call on
22 Loving touch
23 Hooded snake
24 Bar perches
26 Slump
- 29 Paper fastener
30 Surrounding glow
31 Ball
32 Dark-furred martens
34 Buffalo team
37 Piglet’s creator
38 Command to Fido
39 Notions
40 Catch sight of
41 Bears’ lairs
- DOWN**
1 Desert sight
2 Make possible
3 Add the score
4 Different
5 Feeling down
6 Exalted poem
7 Aesop’s stories
- 8 Concur
9 Concentrate
11 Has dinner
15 Horse homes
19 Makes mistakes
20 Stew sphere
22 Chilled
23 Member of the force
24 Rank indicator
25 Café fixtures
26 Morose
27 Sports sites
28 Neon and helium
29 Laments loudly
30 Tolerate
33 Surrounded by
35 Track circuit
36 Cloud setting



YESTERDAY’S ANSWERS

