

Field Trip 3

Locations visited: Zinda Park, Narayanganj

Places visited: Zinda Park

Date of visitation: 1st of April 2019.

Participants: Jobaida Behtarin, Graduate Research Assistant; Marjan Hossain, Graduate Research Assistant

Report:

We visited Zinda Park on Monday, 1st of April 2019. We set out from university premises at 10:38 am and reached the park approximately within 1.5 hours. The route to Zinda park wasn't congested with traffic, even though we went during peak hours, thus, not much time was lost on the road.

On reaching the park, we paid an entry ticket of 100 taka and then went on to contact the manager of the park (with whom we had corresponded earlier). The following report contains information that was recorded during an interview with the park's manager.

Origin Story:

Zinda Park, built on 100 bigha of land, was established with the intention of providing to the community. Tobarak Hossain Kusum, one of the main founders of this committee realized that his community and surroundings didn't have a proper field for recreational sports, a school, mosque—the things that a society usually needs for functioning. He was in grade 8 or 9 (around 1980) when he envisioned on creating a committee within the community that would initiate such development.

Initially, he sent letters, sought approval and aid from the elders of the village regarding this idea, but it was in vain. However, he remained adamant, and decided to reach out to four others.

The founding members thus consisted of 5 people, with two currently being abroad and the latter still actively participating.

This committee was formed, with a small amount of 60 taka. The funding involved a monthly donation of 10 taka from its members (it has increased to 100 taka now), which was then used to purchase school stationary and consecutively sold to children in that community. This was their first means of financing their community development endeavors.

Since, the elders of the village had turned a deaf ear to their vision and efforts, they decided to reach out to the youth in the village to join their committee. The invitations were initiated through conduction of meetings with teenagers and youngsters who would come to play in the fields. The meetings were meant to encourage them to help out eg. providing assistance in paving roads, planting trees etc. and to make them more aware of the community needs.

Soon, this gained popularity amid the villagers, and the number of committee members as well as the funds started to increase. Once the funds were of a sufficient amount, small and micro loans were disbursed at very low interest rates (he hadn't mentioned the exact lending rate). The disbursed amount ranged from a minimum of 5000 taka to a maximum of 1 lakh taka (depending

on the borrowers requirements). The loans were given to farmers, emigrants, small business owners, which would eventually be repaid on a monthly basis (along with interest payments). The community now involves people from eight to ten villages, with committee membership being provided to people from all around the country (committee membership was initially exclusive to people from within the village or from the neighbouring villages). Membership costs an amount of 5500 taka. The committee provides their members with an annual dividend (at a rate of 1.2%).

This park now consists of primary and secondary schools, a five storey library, a mosque, several offices, a restaurant, eidgah and some shops here and there.

The committee also has a fund (called AID fund) which makes donations to poor villagers incapable of affording to get their daughters married off, or to those who lose their homes due to river erosion, natural disasters etc. Teachers and those who are employed in maintaining the park or any other related activity are also compensated via committee funds. When low on funds, they reach out to their members for donations, to which members of the community chip in with whatever they can contribute. Usually, after five to seven substantial contributions, the necessary funds are restored.

Regarding the income earned from ticket sales for the park, there are on an average of 50-60 visitors every day at Zinda park (with tickets costing 100 taka for adults and 50 taka for children). According to the manager, even though the number of visitors is quite low, the amount that arises from it is enough to cover park maintenance costs.

Crime and extortion rates are very low, since almost everyone in the village is involved in the committee and its efforts for social development. The collective efforts ensure no formation of groups among the villagers. The villagers are also aware that this is a social initiative and this is not meant to add to individual gain.

Conflict with Rajuk

Zinda park has been under this community's care long before Rajuk began its development projects. During 1994, Rajuk wanted to re-establish their control over the park, however, community protests prevented Rajuk from moving forth. However, soon they found out that Rajuk had acquired this piece of land along with other plots in Purbachal. After the acquisition, they ensured the community that they shall not be evicted-- Zinda park will remain under their care. Rajuk's assurance led the community to feel empowered in a way, and they felt they had a stronger footing in the matter, with the authority's approval. The community then learnt of Rajuk's plans on building high-rise buildings in the area, which compelled them to protest on an even larger scale than they had done before. The protests got media coverage which ended up drawing positive

attention on the park and its community. Once it was realised, that this particular community was actually not working against the environment, rather preserving it, they (Rajuk) temporarily rescinded their orders for eviction, and subsequently credited the area as a park.

Some time between 2010 or 2011, Rajuk's chairman paid a visit to the park and its people as a means to appease community concerns regarding eviction-- he ensured them that despite Rajuk's acquisition of this land area, it would continue to remain under the community's administration and care. However, a month and a half later, the community people came across a shocking revelation from an advertisement placed in the newspaper-- an open tender for leasing this particular area of land. The chairman then proceeded to inform them that they shall be invited to participate in the bidding process. The invitations that were supposed to be sent to the community via mail, never happened to reach the community at all. Frustrated, the community people filed a case at the high court. The court case has been active for about 6-7 years now.

On the 4th of April, 2014, Rajuk decided to send them yet another notice of eviction, regardless of the ongoing court case. This led the community to buckle up their resistance efforts as they gathered about 800-900 police officers from four to five neighbouring districts, along with villagers from eight to ten villages-- which summed up to a total of eight to ten thousand people opposing this eviction command. Their efforts paid off, as after a whole day of protests, the officers from Rajuk yielded to their demands. They provided them with a sign board that read "This land belongs to Rajuk, but establishment, development and oversight will be under the community and it's committee." (a rough translation of the bengali heading)

The manager also felt that the government could easily allocate the land to them if they wanted to (he mentions the example of the government acquiring 6500 acres of land in the Purbachal area and then allocating plots on an individual basis, and in that context, he felt, it could easily be done for their case too).

Observations made on the trip

During this trip, we were impressed with not only the architecture and its aesthetics, but also the maintenance efforts by the community members of the park. It was clean, the grass was well-groomed (we found lawn mowers too) and the buildings were designed exceptionally well.

If one were to step inside their primary school, they'd be surprised with the contemporary style of design employed in the architecture. Had the fields been drier, we would have been able to capture the full building in view. Zinda Park should be re-visited with a lot of time just to bask in its scenic, serene ambience.

Reported by: Marjan Hossain, Graduate Research Assistant