

## Urban land use in Narayanganj

*Dominance of economic activities, squeezed for social space*

*Mohammad Sirajul Islam and Kazi Niaz Ahmed*

NARAYANGANJ City grew in importance during the British colonial period as a river-port for inter-regional and international trade. In the recent past, it underwent rapid industrialisation, which has led to growing urbanisation to accommodate the increasing number of workers. But most of this has taken place in an unplanned manner. Current land-use pattern in Narayanganj is skewed towards economic purposes. This, coupled with associated informal intermediation in urban land-use, is squeezing social function of urban land and making the city less pleasant to live in.

Forty-one percent of the city's land is used for residential purpose. It increased from 9.44% in 1978 to 38.17% in 2009. This housing expansion is private in ownership and horizontal in nature, causing wastage in land use. The second largest proportion of urban land is used for industrial and commercial purposes (26%).

The amount of land being used as parks, gardens and walkways with public access is seemingly non-existent, as vacant lands have been gradually transformed into profit-making establishments. Disappearance of open spaces through conversion into warehouses and then into factories has been ongoing.

Fifty-five percent (1,052 factories) of the country's total knitwear factories are located in Narayanganj. Knitwear manufacturing started in privately owned residential houses in the mid-1980s without planned industrialisation. When the business started making more profit, hundreds of knitwear industries were set up wherever space was available.

The growth of apparel factories has created pressure on urban land for housing for workers. More than 0.7 million workers (52.32% of the total 1.4 million) are involved in the knitwear factories located in Narayanganj. Since factory owners do not provide accommodation for workers, slums or privately-owned lands cater to their shelter needs. On the one hand, slum erection leads to illegal encroachment of public land, such

as the 3.27 acres of the railway's Gymkhana land; on the other hand, private provision of workers' shelters causes wastage of land through conversion of farmlands into residential facilities.

Such land use pattern for housing has resulted in the reduction of agricultural land in Narayanganj. During 1998-2009 agricultural land decreased from 15.32% to 3% and residential land use increased from 24.51% to 38.17% in Narayanganj Sadar. The number of knitwear manufacturing companies increased from 197 in 1997 to 1,686 in 2010 in the country -- highlighting a positive correlation between growth in residential land use and knitwear manufacturing growth.

Industrial and commercial activities within Narayanganj City Corporation (NCC) provided incentives for illegal encroachment of public land and toll collection. A truck stand was illegally built on the main thoroughfare of the city, rendering it almost unusable (it has recently been evicted by the NCC). About Tk. 1 lac used to be collected every day from this truck stand.

Encroachment on public land for profit-oriented activities is managed through informal intermediaries, and is possible because of the huge amount of khas land and vacant land in the cities. Private vested interest groups or individuals attempt to grab these lands because of promising economic gains from land use on one hand and demand for informal provision of economic services, e.g. shelter, truck stand, etc. on the other. Their endeavours turn into successful ventures with the support of formal land management authorities and the ruling party's patronage.

Both legal and illegal usage of urban land limits the provision of social space in Narayanganj. High economic returns of urban land use often de-motivate government agencies to create the provision of social space. The NCC has 285.13 acres land in its three zones -- Sadar, Kadam Rasul and Siddhirganj. Eighty per cent of this land has been leased out as markets. However, the NCC has recently taken an initiative to construct a children's park under Public Private Partnership in Panchobati area.

Interestingly, NCC had taken several initiatives to create social space on the lands of other government agencies, which could not be implemented due to legal and procedural complexities as well as vested interests. For instance, the Corporation wanted to use 6.42 decimal khas land under Shitalakhya mouza for the time being as dumping ground for wastes and, later on, to develop it as open space for the city

dwellers. But its attempt was not successful due to non-cooperation from the administration.

There had been initiative is to build a park and walkways in 16.32 acres of the railway's Gymkhana land when the city was a municipality. In 2004, the communications minister of the BNP-led four-party alliance government agreed in principle to hand over the railway's land to the municipality. But this was stopped due to political rivalry between the ruling party's local MP and the opposition party-backed mayor. The City Corporation applied again to the railway ministry for this land in October 2012 and is awaiting the ministry's decision.

All these have resulted in near-absence of social spaces in Narayanganj City, affecting urban life. In the absence of park and green spaces, 62.78% of city dwellers visit shopping plazas, 17.77% go to archaeological and historical monuments, and 19.45% pass their weekends by visiting the riverside or other temporary open spaces.

We do not criticise the economic activities on urban land; we rather argue for balanced land use in order to make the cities more economically prosperous and environmentally and socially livable. The following steps can be considered for balanced land use in cities:

- \* A well-articulated urban land use plan including provisions for proper rehabilitation of people affected by the implementation of this plan, which will be approved and implemented by the elected mayor;
- \* Addressing urban land-based informal intermediaries by changing the existing khas and vacant land-management system -- it is not only important for a balanced land use but also for maintaining law and order in the city;
- \* A welfare approach for workers' housing -- undertaking social housing projects in conjunction with the employers, BGMEA, BKMEA, and the ministries of industries, labour, finance, and commerce or other concerned authorities; and
- \* Provision of social spaces by the City Corporation since it is a local issue.

**The writers are Research Associates of BRAC Institute of Governance and Development, BRAC University.**

**E: mail: sirajul@igs-bracu.ac.bd and niaz@igs-bracu.ac.bd, respectively.**