

# MONSOON ASSEMBLAGES

## DHAKA FIELD TRIP REPORT February 2018

Beth Cullen



Dhaka Field Trip Report by Beth Cullen

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**UNIVERSITY OF  
WESTMINSTER**

**MONSOON  
ASSEMBLAGES**



Horizon 2020  
European Union Funding  
for Research & Innovation



<b>Week 1</b>	Monday 12 <sup>th</sup> February	Tuesday 13 <sup>th</sup> February	Wednesday 14 <sup>th</sup> February	Thursday 15 <sup>th</sup> February	Friday 16 <sup>th</sup> February	Saturday 17 <sup>th</sup> February	Sunday 18 <sup>th</sup> February
	Dhaka				Chandpur		
Notes	AM: Arrived in Dhaka  PM: Arrived to hotel	AM: Meet a friend  PM: Visit to Old Dhaka	AM: Meet a Research Fellow  PM: Meet Architect 2; dinner with Chennai Academic 10	AM: Meet a Research Director  PM: Lecture 'Streams & Waves' (Bengal Institute)	AM: Trip to Chandpur  PM: Return from Chandpur; dinner with a Research Director	AM: Tour of Old Dhaka  PM: Tour of Old Dhaka	AM: Project planning  PM: Meet soil expert
<b>Week 2</b>	Monday 19 <sup>th</sup> February	Tuesday 20 <sup>th</sup> February	Wednesday 21 <sup>st</sup> February	Thursday 22 <sup>nd</sup> February	Friday 23 <sup>rd</sup> February	Saturday 24 <sup>th</sup> February	Sunday 25 <sup>th</sup> February
	Dhaka						
Notes	AM: BC unwell  PM: Project planning	AM: Meet with a research Co-ordinator  PM: Meet with Architect 2 and his team; dinner with a journalist	AM: Meet a meteorologist  PM: Meet an urban planner; trip along Madani Avenue	AM: Visit Parliament Building  PM: Trip along Mirpur Road	AM: Old Dhaka  PM: Old Dhaka; dinner with a journalist	AM: Visit Arcadia Education Project and brickfield  PM: Meal with Architect 1	AM: Depart for London

## FIELDNOTES

### Summary

During February 2018, Beth Cullen and Christina Geros spent two weeks in Dhaka conducting fieldwork. The aim of the trip was to establish contacts and identify potential research themes in advance of a longer fieldtrip in June and July of the same year.

### WEEK 1

#### Monday 12<sup>th</sup> February

Arrived in Dhaka around 10am. Amazing flight over the Meghna River and outskirts of the city. Took video footage of sun reflected on paddy fields from the plane, even at the driest point in the year the land is wet! First impressions of Dhaka: traffic, dust, noise! Air quality is very poor. Vegetation along the side of the road covered in dust. Huge traffic jam on the way to the hotel, took us some time to arrive. Spent the afternoon settling into the hotel (located in Banani) and sorting out money and SIM cards.

#### Tuesday 13<sup>th</sup> February

- Met a friend of Harshavardhan Bhat who works on renewable energy and is currently involved with USAID and UNDP funded projects. Spent much of the morning talking with him about his work, made some interesting comments about road construction and maintenance work taking place in pre-monsoon season so it can be extended into the wet season as a vehicle for corruption. Also mentioned influence of monsoon on development cycles – USAID projects don't do fieldwork during monsoon (dry season bias).

- In the afternoon he took us to see Dhaka University and his favourite biryani place in Old Dhaka. Showed us where textiles are sold at low prices from the garment factories. Apparently industrial zone in the north is predominantly related to garment sector. Noticed women wearing yellow flowers in their hair, were told that today is Pohela Falgun (first day of Spring). February is apparently when air pollution peaks.

#### Wednesday 14<sup>th</sup> February

- Arranged to meet with a research fellow at the Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS). Conversation was quite awkward at first as the MONASS approach doesn't fit conventional research paradigms. Things eased up as we started to speak about the monsoon, interesting comments about differences between how people experience and relate to the monsoon in urban and rural setting.
- In the afternoon we met with architect 2 at his Institute. He was very welcoming and made some helpful suggestions about focusing on seasons and practices related to weather and sites where we could observe urban development processes, including Madani Avenue. Mentioned an architect who has worked with slum communities in Dhaka called who designed the 'platform of hope' and floating schools. Mentioned a lecture taking place tomorrow and invited us to attend.
- Had dinner with academic 10 from Chennai who was visiting Dhaka for work and gave us useful suggestions for people to contact including Institute of Water and Flood Management

(IFWM) at BUET University and the director of ICCCAD who is working on climate change adaptation.

#### Thursday 15<sup>th</sup> February

- Met with the research director of a research institute and one of her colleagues. We had been advised to make contact with her due to her work on Participatory Action Research in Bangladesh. Had a great conversation and she made some suggestions for potential monsoonal sites including Dolai Khal in Old Dhaka, the Bede community in Savar and new urban developments to the north-east of Dhaka.
- In the afternoon, we travelled to Dhanmondi where the lecture mentioned by architect 2 the previous day was going to be held. Decided to go early due to the traffic. Spent time observing road works and building materials, also lots of dust and air pollution in evidence.
- Attended lecture '[Streams and Waves](#)' at the Chhayanaut Auditorium. This was a conversation between two architects about the architecture of Bangladesh, its past, present and future. After the lecture bumped into a student from the Bengal Institute, originally from Sylhet, who commented that Dhaka is the worst place to study the monsoon because it pays absolutely no regard to water! Made similar comments to the research fellow about the differences between the monsoon in urban and rural areas.

#### Friday 16<sup>th</sup> February

- Arranged to accompany a friend on a trip to Chandpur, a town south of Dhaka at the confluence of the Meghna and

Padma rivers. According to him, Chandpur is described as the 'land of hilsa' a fish that migrates seasonally with the monsoon. Took the early morning ferry from the Sadar Ghat on the Buriganga River. Ferry journey was an amazing opportunity to observe the river, spent much of the journey photographing and videoing brick kilns that proliferate along the river banks.

- Arrived at Chandpur and had some breakfast at a local restaurant and then went with the friend to a fishing village on the edge of the river where he is exploring the possibilities of erecting wind turbines. Spent time in the house of a village leader who offered to take us out on the river in a fishing boat. Travelled around on the boat near the village and were able to see hilsa fishers at work as well as sand mining activities. When we got back to the village we were given lunch of fried hilsa fish, rice and vegetables.
- Left the village and made our way back to the ferry terminal and caught a late afternoon ferry back to Dhaka. Took more video footage and photographs on the way back.
- In the evening, we were invited to have dinner with the research director at a friend's house. We were joined by a person from an organisation monitoring freedom of expression violations towards journalists and communicators across the region. They were all extremely hospitable and offered to put us in touch with relevant academics at Uni. of Dhaka.

#### Saturday 17<sup>th</sup> February

- Decided to spend the day following up on some of the sites that had been recommended to us by the research director

and arranged to visit Old Dhaka. We were accompanied by a friend who was keen to see parts of the city that were unfamiliar to him (and he thought we should not do this alone) and arranged transport for the day. Started out by trying to find the Dolai Khal – an old canal which used to allow boats access to the city but has since been cut off by a sluice gate. We managed to find the located (with some help from Google maps) and spent some time walking the site from the sluice gate to box culvert where the canal disappears under a road. Managed to gain access to the pumping station at the sluice gate and spoke briefly with the manager.

- Stopped to have tea at a small tea-stall and spent time talking with local residents and boatmen about the history of the area. Men working on the ferries offered to take us out on a boat in the Buriganga River. Great opportunity to get another perspective of the river, and to see how the infrastructures related to the Dolai Khal prevent access. Also experienced the pollution of the river first-hand – waters were black and smelled pungent!
- Walked along the Ahsanullah Road towards the Sadar Ghat and observed the vegetable market along the edge of the river. Took video and photos. From the Ghat we made our way towards the Ahsan Manzil Museum, palace of the Nawabs of Dhaka (1800s) featuring an extraordinary pink façade! Spent time walking around the museum which featured interesting historical information.
- Made our way back from Old Dhaka to the hotel but the journey took hours due to extremely heavy traffic.

### **Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> February**

- Decided to spend the morning doing some strategic planning and processing information that we had gathered so far in order to plan the next week's work and site visits.
- In the afternoon, we met with met a soil expert who is working on a project to produce a soil map of Bangladesh. Interesting conversation, but not really relevant to the project.

### **Monday 19<sup>th</sup> February**

- Did not make any plans for the morning as BC not feeling well and needed to rest.
- In the afternoon, we continued the work on site planning that we had started the previous day and made arrangements for additional meetings with various contacts that had been suggested and transport for the final days.

### **Tuesday 20<sup>th</sup> February**

- In the morning, we met with a research coordinator at a climate change centre and his team members. We had a very valuable conversation about the main climate change issues that they see affecting Dhaka, how the monsoon affects the city and its inhabitants and their urban research programme. They spoke with us about their work with slum populations, many of whom are migrants to Dhaka as a result of climatic changes and extreme weather events.
- In the afternoon, we had a meeting with Architect 2 and his team. We were introduced to the various team members who spoke briefly about their work and we spent some time talking with architect 1 about his work on the Arcadia

Education Project (floating school) and he offered to arrange for us to visit the site on Friday.

- In the evening, we had dinner with a journalist working with the Dhaka Tribune who had participated in the Monsoon + Other Airs symposium at the University of Westminster. Over dinner we followed up on some themes that she had mentioned in her symposium presentation including how the monsoon is reported on, air pollution issues, and food traditions associated with the seasons.

### **Wednesday 21<sup>st</sup> February**

- Spent the morning meeting with a meteorologist at the Dhaka MET Office, working within the Storm Warning Centre. (We had been given his details by a PhD candidate at Stanford University who is conducting research on social construction of weather and material effects of ecological change in Bangladesh). Spoke briefly about monsoon dynamics in Bangladesh and agreed to meet with us further during our next visit to Dhaka and recommended some further contacts.
- Following the meeting at the MET Office we had lunch with an urban planner who leads the UNDP's National Urban Poverty Reduction Program in Dhaka. He was a student at the Harvard Graduate School of Design with Christina and they had worked together previously in Jakarta. We spoke about his work in Dhaka and their efforts to establish bottom-up approaches to city planning.
- After meeting with him, we took a trip along Madani Avenue, a site that was mentioned by architect 2 and others we had met (and which seemed like an area of significant

development activity from studies of Google Map imagery prior to fieldwork). Arranged to drive along the whole length of Madani Avenue from the American Embassy to its termination at the Balu River. Absolutely incredible to see the extent of urban development and sand mining along the whole stretch. Vast areas being filled in with sand via snaking pipelines. Spent much of the afternoon photo and video documenting the site.

### **Thursday 22<sup>nd</sup> February**

- Architect 2's staff arranged for us to visit the Bangladesh Parliament Building in the morning. We were taken around the building by a member of staff who gives guided tours due to its architectural significance.
- Following the Parliament tour we went to Gulshan Lake to record this site in more detail. An example of a former khal and the site of a large informal settlement. BC spoke with man visiting the site who turned out to be Mott McDonald engineer working on Dhaka water supply project.
- After visiting Gulshan Lake we took a trip along the Mirpur Road to the west of Dhaka on the edge of the Turag River. Witnessed more sand pumping and construction work along the river. The trip terminated at Uttara where the third phase of the Uttara Model Town development is underway. Also saw significant work being undertaken in relation to the Metro Rail construction.

### **Friday 23<sup>rd</sup> February**

- Spent the day in Old Dhaka, had arranged to go back to the Dolai Khal pumping station to speak with the manager. On

the way there we visited the Nawabbari Tank, an example of a former tank undergoing community restoration efforts. Passed along via the Sadar Ghat and vegetable market, before arriving at the Dolai Khal sluice gate. Spent time talking with the manager of the Dolai Khal pumping station and were taken on a tour. He showed us some of the machinery as well as their equipment to clean the canal from trash, which accumulates during the monsoon season.

- From the sluice gate, we attempted to follow the route of the Dolai Khal along roads (which it is now buried beneath). We passed through an area which seemed to specialise in manufacturing and repurposing old cars to an old junction point where all that remains is an abandoned pond hidden from the street behind concrete walls. The filling in of canals for the construction of roads is partially responsible for the flooding that Dhaka experiences during the monsoon.
- In the evening we had dinner again with the journalist.

#### **Saturday 24<sup>th</sup> February**

- Arranged to spend the final day in Dhaka visiting the Arcadia Education Project or floating school which had been developed by Architect 1. He arranged for one of his assistants to accompany us and take us around the site. As

the school was located outside Dhaka it took a while to reach the place. Once we arrived we spent time walking around the school and speaking with the staff. As it was dry season the school was not floating!

- During the visit to the school we noticed the adjacent brick kiln and decided to spend time there – bricks has been identified during pre-fieldwork research as a significant ‘monsoonal indicator’. Spent time walking around the brick field documenting the various processes and activities using photographs and video. Spoke with some of the brickfield workers who showed us their extremely basic accommodation and living conditions. Manager of the brickfield was not happy for us to speak with the workers so our exchanges were cut short.
- On our return to Dhaka we were invited to have a meal with Architect 1 at his home. After this we spent some time walking around Dhanmondi and visited Dhanmondi Lake.

#### **Sunday 25<sup>th</sup> February**

- Departed for London early on Sunday morning.