

Drama of a Town

Maung Physo

Sometimes, I think there might be a close connection between our environment and our behaviours, much closer than instinct. I live in Hlaing Thaya, on the outskirts of Yangon. But actually, it is not the outskirts, because the Hlaing River runs between Insein, the true outskirts of Yangon, and my town. Therefore, it would be more appropriate to say that it edges the outskirts of Yangon with the help of Hlaing River. It adjoins Ayawaddy Division. We were forced there by General Saw Maung in 1989 from my native town of Insein, not long after the outbreak of the 1988 uprising. I still remember us moving there on one early and chilly November morning, crossing the Hlaing River by ferry, as there was no bridge. Plots for our houses were laid out in the paddy fields. There were no roads, only small embankments in that makeshift quarter. Now, Hlaing Thaya is the most densely populated area in greater Yangon.

Many of my friends and some acquaintances have remarked that Hlaing Thaya is a cosmopolis of mean characters, the scum of Yangon. I cannot deny that their remarks hold a bitter truth for me. Many of the minor crimes and some of the major ones in the western district of Yangon Division in one way or other belong to heroes from my town. It may be because we all came from different corners of Yangon and gathered in Hlaing Thaya. None of us were well off when forced to move here. That is the point. The very one which I lost at the tip of my tongue and the point I would like to shoot at whoever dramatises my town. Nobody ever moved here on his or her own accord. We HAD TO move here. We were FORCED to move here. That is why.

We had to commute to downtown Yangon by old buses on a few bus lines. We had to make two transits daily, which both involved at least an hour waiting for the ferry. Most of us lived from hand to mouth. Our bus rides were long, unavoidable nightmares. When buses were impossibly jam-packed we walked the 3 miles home before darkness blanketed the town. We had only 1 main paved road then. In the quarters, streets were just long mounds passing by our houses down in the roadside paddy field. All the streets were beautifully decorated with potholes, puddles and mud in the rainy season, whirlwinds of dust in the hot season, and a layer of dust and ash in the cold season.

In the rainy season the roads were slick all the time. Strangers or visitors were easily distinguishable from natives as they slipped and fell so often. Such sights inspired us with great pity, and also filled us with the thought of teaching them how to balance one's body on the slippery streets. In fact, this beautiful art was confined only to slum-dwellers like us.

Water supply and electricity supply were scarce in the 1990s. Electricity was a prestigious possession, like a mobile phones. So, we resorted to candles. Maybe it was a blessing in disguise as we managed to hold candle-lit dinners every night. We were blocked from the outside world. Maybe ours was another world. We flocked to the house where television was shown and paid an entrance fee. After long and boring foreign and local news programmes, we could enjoy movies, sometimes in series.

All the streets, houses and even quarters bore the same look. But we had a nice idea, very helpful for any visitors. In front of each house, a bamboo pole was erected, and at its tip was tied a round bamboo basket or a galvanized zinc circle, on which the name of the house-owner was painted. No visitor ever missed it or got lost. This 'Hlaing Thaya Directory' was already in vogue some 20 years ago.

The year after our settlement there was a flood. As our house was as good as a hut, we had to sit up on wooden boxes.

Luckily, the flood ebbed away in a few days. Those mornings found us feeding on a thin *talabaw* soup.

Around 1993 each household was ordered to contribute labour to widening the roads. Each was tasked with digging a trench 10 square feet in area and 5 feet in depth. The earth was parched and hard. We had to pile the blocks of earth near the Htain Pin cemetery. Those who failed to carry out the task were fined 5000 kyat, a large sum of money at that time, with which the Quarter Law and Order Restoration Council would hire workers. I was 14 years old. Ten years passed me by before I came to understand that it was a kind of forced labour.

I first saw live fish when I moved there. Hlaing Thaya taught us survival skills including how to catch fish, how to make fire with dried dung, how to glean rice from the paddy after the harvest, and how to balance on the slippery streets, digging our toes in the mud. Those hardships were like strokes of a rod to us and Hlaing Thaya was a very strict teacher with that rod in hand.

We gradually fell in love with that teacher we had once loathed. I also learnt to stand in defence when he is frowned at.

Hlaing Thaya managed to shake off many of those drawbacks in 2 decades. Now it has become the most populated area among the satellite townships of Yangon, with the largest industrial zone in the country. In addition, Hlaing Thaya possesses the greatest variety of bus lines, and is easily accessible. Traffic jams and over-crowded buses are another story. It does not reveal as many spots for visitors to take part in amusing activities that act as recreational outlets as downtown Yangon does. But it can show you the true colour of the outskirts, blended in a matrix of social classes, high and low. At the least, you will come to know the discrepancy between what life means to us and to others.