

THE ISET PLATFORM LECTURE

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Institute for Social and Environmental
Transition-Nepal (ISET- Nepal)
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Dhaka City

Stressed but Alive!¹

Dhaka remains an enigma. A living nightmare yet remains awake day and night. There is, indeed, a mysterious side to its birth. The city's name seems to have derived from the temple of the 'hidden goddess' – *Dakeshwari*, suggesting thereby the remoteness or secretive origins of the place. And this could be for reasons ranging from inhabitable forestry to a countless number of waterways, helping to protect the sanctity of the goddess or should we say, of the place! But then no one is fully sure as to when Dhaka came into being. Some say four hundred years, some say six hundred, and some even take the birth of the city as far back as the sixth century AD.² The city attained some distinction, however, in the seventeenth century during the Mughal era when it became the capital of *Subah-e-Bangla*, the province of Bengal, in 1610. The actual year is still disputed. Some take the birth of the provincial capital two years before in 1608. The discrepancy between the two probably lies in the fact that while the latter stands for the proclamation of the capital the former stands for the actual establishment of the capital.³ There is, however, a consensus on one particular issue: the city could not have emerged without the waterways - the rivers, *khals* or canals, ponds and lakes, the latter making the place accessible to trade and habitation. Dhaka is practically encircled by rivers and canals. In the south the city is bordered by river Buriganga; in the east flow the Balu and Sityalakhya rivers; in the west there is river Turag; and in the north flows the Tongi canal. In fact, as late as the nineteenth century, James Taylor, a British officer stationed in Bengal, found Dhaka "with its minarets and spacious buildings...like that of Venice in the West...a city rising from the surface of the water."⁴ This merits attention, not only because Dhaka gives a different look now, more bricks and mortar than water, but also because much of the stresses faced by the city could actually be linked to this transformation. The birth of Dhaka is otherwise inextricably linked to the rivers, indeed, the ones flowing down from the various parts of Bangladesh and beyond.

But then what are rivers for or even a city without people? As Aristotle reminded us, "A city is composed of different kinds of men; similar people cannot bring a city into existence."⁵ On this matter, Dhaka actually had more than it could hold. Like the waterways people flocked into Dhaka and made the city what it is now.

Not only in its more recent four hundred years of history did Dhaka find people of different races, religions and languages arriving from faraway places, including the Afghans, the Armenians, the Arabs, the Chinese, the Persians, the Greeks, the Portuguese, the Dutch, the French and the English, mostly for reasons of trade and commerce, but also in its post-1971 phase found itself flooded with people from all over Bangladesh, mostly for reasons of shelter and employment. The population of the city increased exponentially. From a meager 69 thousand when the first census of the city was conducted in 1872 to nearly 240 thousand in 1941; 2 million in 1974; 10 million in 2001; and now a little over 16 million and is projected to be about 20 million by 2025!⁶ This has literally transformed the composition of the city. Apart from becoming a megacity and experiencing all the ills related to it, particularly in the backdrop of not having the adequate infrastructure, the city began to engage itself and take pride in collective resilience, thanks mostly to the female workers arriving from the rural areas and now employed in the garment sector in and around the city. I will have more to say about this shortly.

But masses of disempowered people residing in one location, and having to hear the loss of a 'glorious past' and the imminent arrival of a 'heavenly future,' could have other consequences as well. Post-colonial Dhaka, while being thrust upon with the responsibility of redressing the grievances of the disempowered, soon became a political city. In fact, in post-colonial Bangladesh all great political movements took place in Dhaka. From saying 'No!' to Muhammad Ali Jinnah in 1948 when the latter declared that "let me make it very clear to you that the State Language of Pakistan is going to be Urdu and no other language"⁷ to the shedding of blood for the restoration of the mother tongue in 1952; from non-cooperation movement against Mohammad Ayub Khan in 1968-1969 to the raising of the flag of the new nation in 1971; from overthrowing the military government of Hussain Muhammad Ershad in 1991 to all other major movements of recent times - all took place in Dhaka. Even today, almost every day, there are street processions, human chains, slogans and speeches, passionately calling for the democratization of the state and society while demanding one thing or another. But there is also a flip side to this development. Not only Dhaka has come to experience the worst kind of violence as a result of political agitation and probably includes the largest number of martyrs in any city in this part of the world but also given the concentration of power and wealth it has ended up harbouring corruption of all kinds, contributing further to its stresses. But oddly enough, this did not stop the city from remaining vibrant round-the-clock. And there lies the marvel!

Dhaka, although originally a *hydrological city*, is now a land-centric *megacity* carrying the burden of being a *political city* as well. And it is the combination of all three that has made Dhaka overly stressed but equally alive. This requires further exposition. I will limit myself to three areas.

(Mal) Development

There is a colonial legacy to Dhaka's maldevelopment. The British colonial power, driven by its own prejudices, could not help transforming the riverine or hydrological city into a land-centric city. During pre-colonial times the heart of the city stood at the banks of the rivers, particularly the Buriganga. In fact, the British, enamoured by modern technological innovations in the transport system, with increasing reliance on roads and railways, shifted the heart of the city from the banks of the Buriganga to the interior north - the latter is situated slightly at a higher altitude and is composed of relatively dry land. This was a major shift in so far as the foundation of the city was concerned. In fact, colonial management of the city not only replaced the waterways with roads and rails but also displaced the boats with rickshaws. What started with only six rickshaws in Dhaka, thanks to a Bengali zamindar and a Marwari businessman, in 1938 ended up with more than 400,000 in 2002.⁸ Dhaka soon earned the distinction of being called the 'rickshaw capital of the world'! Roads, railways and rickshaws practically transformed Dhaka from what it was in pre-colonial times.

Migrants, including internally displaced persons (IDPs), contributed to the spectacular growth of Dhaka's population. 1947 partition created a situation when Dhaka found itself flooded with (Muslim) immigrants from across the border, although the number of (Hindu) emigrants from the city during the same period was relatively less⁹ The city, however, was hardly prepared to accommodate the sudden rush of Muslim migrants, including non-Bengali Muslims commonly referred to as the 'Biharis'. But before the city could properly rehabilitate the migrants and complete the development projects to meet the demands of the 1947 partition it turned into a centre of yet another political struggle, and this time emerged as a full-fledged capital of a new country in 1971. Indeed, in the aftermath of the nine-month bloody war there was again a rush of people towards Dhaka, this time not from without but from the rural areas of the new-born country on account of unemployment and lack of entitlement. The famines of 1973-1974 bore witness to this. The matter, however, did not stop there.

IDPs, resulting from economic and environmental insecurities, began to flood the city, making Dhaka the fastest growing megacity in the world with a growth rate of 3.2%. In fact, every year 300,000 to 400,000 new migrants, mostly disempowered, enter Dhaka.¹⁰ The city obviously lacks infrastructure to cope with such a flow and so the bulk of the rural migrants end up in city slums. One estimate showed that there are 4,966 slums in Dhaka in 2005,¹¹ a considerable rise from 2,156 in 1991 and 3,007 in 1996.¹² Around 675,000 households or 3.4 million people live in the slums.¹³ In fact, over 50% of the total slum population of Bangladesh, which is around 5.5 million, lives in Dhaka city. River bank erosion, search for work, and landlessness (20%, 40% and 31% respectively) are the main reasons for coming to Dhaka and ending up in slums.

It may be pointed out that 25.7% of slum population resides in government-owned land while 70.3% of slum population resides in private land, the latter factor contributing further to their misfortune. 70% of them are also unskilled with little or no literacy, and it is amongst this group of disempowered people that not only a vibrant 'informal market' flourishes but also 'uncivil' elements (*mastans* and goons) become active. With the state often failing to deliver the essential services like water and electricity the latter becomes critical in ensuring the delivery of such services either through the use of money or muscle! I will have more to say about this in the next section.

Cities often get reproduced through what Adam Smith or Robert Merton would say 'unintended consequences.'¹⁴ Slum population in Dhaka, despite its disempowered status, did have the effect of contributing enormously to the economy of Bangladesh! And this relates to the development of the RMG (ready-made garments) sector. The first apparel export started in 1978 but now the industry includes 4500 factories and 4.2 million workers, mostly female, almost all employed in and around the city and living in slums.¹⁵ The growth of this sector resulted from the internationalization of production, commonly referred to as globalization, where cheap labour made a big difference to the cost of production. Bangladesh became a quick destination because no other country could offer such a low price when it comes to labour. This led to the further rural migration to the city, with more women joining the cue. In fact, RMG factory-owners preferred Dhaka not only for reasons of connectivity but also for putting into work masses of low wage female labour located in one place, mainly for remaining competitive at a global level.¹⁶ Currently, RMG exports is worth USD 24 billion (2012) and accounts for nearly 80 % of the country's total exports and over 13 % of GDP.¹⁷ Nonetheless, it had mixed blessings.

Dhaka not having the bare necessities is one. Take, for instance, the availability of public toilet. One calculation shows that more than five million people in Dhaka lack access to a public toilet.¹⁸ It may sound shocking but the city has only 67 public toilets, out of which only five are fully operational with a urinal, washing and toilets.¹⁹ The rest of the toilets, nearly 70%, are used by the local operators, as one researcher found out, 'to wash cars, sell water, sleep, or as small shops.'²⁰ Moreover, only 43% of the facilities have regular water supply, and only 20% of toilets have lighting facilities that work.²¹ And this is a city of 16 million people with more than one million commuters every day and more than 400,000 rickshaw pullers! The matter is even worse when it comes to gender, particularly in the backdrop of millions of female workers employed in the RMG sector and the bulk of them having to make a long walk or a ride from their workplace to the slums, both within the vicinity of the city.

The matter is no different when it comes to waste management. One calculation indicates that waste generation rate in Dhaka ranges from 0.325 to 0.485 kg/cap/day, most of which are from the residential area (over 75% of the total

solid wastes).²² Dhaka City Corporation (DCC), the agency which is in charge of waste collection, lacks both financial and technical resources to do the needful. The DCC, however, remains relatively attentive in collecting wastes from 'posh' residential area, which has made removal of municipal waste from public streets, public latrines, urinal drains and dustbins from the less fortunate areas all the more 'ineffectual' if not a herculean task.²³ This is bound to contribute to health hazards, particularly those living in low-income areas and slums.

The pathetic state of public toilets and waste management otherwise shows that the 'development' of the city is skewed in favour of the ruling elite with little or no recognition of the plight of the disempowered. And this brings us to the issue of 'developmentality,' one that 'demands an endless cycle of inputs, outputs, consumption and waste on a finite planet,'²⁴ pushing for the relentless growth of the city and contributing to the chaotic state of the city. An example or two will make this clear.

Slums in cities indicate that the elite – 'the better-offs' - are around. Dhaka is no exception, as Doug Saunders could not help telling us:

From the high-rise apartments of Gulshan, Dhaka's most desirable district, Karail fills the horizon, a shimmering plane of corrugated-metal roofs covering a thin peninsula in the middle of an inner-city lake. When I first came, nobody in Gulshan seemed to know how to reach the squatter enclave, though they spent all day looking at it. Karail appeared, to these better-off Bangladeshis, as an impossibility tight nest, or perhaps an infestation: hundreds of human silhouettes dangling their children into the lake to wash, or fishing, or lighting fires to cook. Packed into this dense space are between 16,000 and 20,000 people, living so close together that there are no gaps between their roofs.²⁵

The gaze of Dhaka's elite may not include the distress experienced by the slum dwellers, but it does include the image of a city found in the developed West. But then such image is not so much on the changing dynamics of Western cities as much as it is on the machineries required to run those cities. Post-colonial Dhaka continued to develop in the image of Western cities, resulting in the proliferation of machineries, particularly motor cars. This came handy to the elite because the motor car could be used as a marker of power in the society; unmindful of the fact that in the long-run this would help neither the elite nor the masses in communicating from one place to another. Let me explain.

According to Bangladesh Road Transport Authority, every year around 37,000 cars are added to Dhaka's roads, of which 80% are private cars.²⁶ This would imply that every day 101 new, mostly private, cars are added to the city's

transport system, with the infrastructure (the number of roads, by lanes, footbridges, etc) remaining the same. The massive traffic jam in the city therefore is no surprise. The elite's hold on the road is certainly a factor. To provide one example, rickshaws take up 40% of road space and transport 54% of vehicular passengers, while cars take up 39% of the road space but transport less than 9% of the passengers.²⁷ That such a development defies reason and is harmful to both car-driven elite and those using the rickshaw is understandable from the fact that both require double transportation time. Indeed, on an average out of 2.35 hours spent by the commuter in the traffic 1.30 hours are due to traffic jam.²⁸ Moreover, the cost of traffic jam is enormous. One study reveals that there is a financial loss of USD 3 billion every year due to traffic jam in Dhaka, and this includes wasted time, environmental cost and losses to the business.²⁹ There is also the issue of road accidents, particularly between motorized vehicles and paddled rickshaws, making roads unsafe for both children and elders. 'A solution is not difficult to find' is what the critics will say. The very fact that buses take up only 6% of road space but transport 28% of passengers is an indicator to those schooled in the development discourse that Dhaka requires a mass transit system.³⁰ But then without delegitimizing 'developmentality' or putting an end to elite's passion for cars and stopping new ones from entering the roads endlessly I am afraid the mass transit system will only bring temporary relief just like the flyovers now octopusing the city.

'Developmentality' impacted upon the housing sector as well. Given the spectacular growth of Dhaka's population it is understandable that housing will be a major issue. Number of houses required has gone up, as one calculation of 2002 showed that at least 700,000 new houses are required but only 300,000 are built.³¹ With the rise of Dhaka's population the figure must have doubled by now. This has prompted a rat race amongst the developers, with little or no attention given to the landscape and sustainability of the city. In fact, many now refer to the city as a 'concrete jungle'³² Population pressure and the need for housing coupled with the factor of new-found wealth helped swell the price of land in Dhaka. For instance, in Gulshan area the price of one *katha* (720 sft) land increased from Taka 25,000 in 1974 to Taka 1.2 million in 1998. And now the price for the same piece of land is between Taka 35 million to Taka 60 million!³³ Other areas are not so much different - at Motijheel it ranges between Taka 30 million and Taka 50 million, at Shahbagh from Taka 30 million to Taka 35 million, at Maghbazar from Taka 40 million to Taka 50 million and in old Dhaka it ranges from Taka 15 million to Taka 25 million - although there are still areas in Dhaka, depending on location, where the price will range from Taka 2.5 million to 8.0 million *per katha*.³⁴ But then, despite the high price of the land there is now a booming construction industry, with the housing expanding only vertically. On the one hand, this indicates that Bangladesh is doing well economically and certain sections of the people are benefitting from it, but then, on the other hand, it also shows that how desperate is the

city's housing situation, which in the midst of unplanned growth, natural calamities, violent politics and corruption seems almost destined to end up with terrible consequences. Security of the city dwellers is certainly at stake.

(In) Security

Dhaka faces insecurity from both nature and humans, at times as a result of a combination of both. Take the case of earthquake, for instance. Five earthquakes of large magnitude, that is, greater than 7.0 Richter scale, already affected Bangladesh in the period between 1869 and 1930. Amongst the five, the Great Indian earthquake of 1897, affecting Shillong in Assam, had an epicentral distance of about 230 km from Dhaka.³⁵ In fact, Bangladesh is located close to the intersection between two subduction zones created by two active tectonic plates: the Indian plate and the Eurasian plate, and neither of them have settled down. The city is otherwise near the seismically active zone. Any large earthquake, measuring 7 magnitudes on the Richter scale, as one study showed, could destroy about 35% of the buildings and kill around 25,000 people.³⁶ But then earthquakes by themselves, unless located at the very epicenter, do not end up destroying things or killing people in large numbers. Rather, it is the faulty building structure resulting from lack of knowledge and corrupt practices and in the midst of high population density that makes a city like Dhaka extremely vulnerable. Indeed, in the aftermath of a large earthquake secondary hazard like fire break out from gas and electricity line could bring even greater damage to the city.³⁷

The case of flood is no different. I have already referred to the fact that Dhaka is a hydrological city. It is therefore quite natural for Dhaka to see flood water flowing through it. However, it becomes a problem when rivers are not dredged and barriers are constructed around the city so that no water can come in. And this is precisely what was done in the aftermath of the great flood of 1950 and following a request by the then government of Pakistan for international support. A Commission, headed by none other than a member of US Army Engineer Corps (I), recommended the construction of big water development projects, including the DND (Dhaka-Narayanganj-Demra) Project, for controlling the flood waters.³⁸ During the Pakistan era (that is until 1971) this did not go very far, largely because of the unwillingness on the part of the (West) Pakistan government to commit funds for the betterment of the people of East Pakistan now Bangladesh.

The pre-1971 recommendations for controlling floods via embankments, however, got a big boost with the onslaught of yet another big flood in 1987-1988. This time, with the Bangladesh government as an active member and the World Bank as the chief coordinator, the international donors opted for the same old embankment approach, albeit with the addition of a guideline

for people's participation, including the recognition of the benefits of normal flooding. But then, how sound is the embankment approach? A study carried out by K. Stewart in October–November 1988 found that the average material damage was worse inside the embankment.³⁹ This is because the drainage after the flood is much more rapid on the riverside of the embankments than on the side that is embanked and protected. Moreover, the condition of the embanked area becomes more acute when the flood is caused by excessive rainwater, and Dhaka has experienced cloud bursts often running uninterrupted for two days.⁴⁰

Why embankment construction is then vigorously pursued? Nazrul Islam answered this well:

[T]here are powerful material *interests* at work. Big embankment projects are often lucrative to the government because these can bring in large amount of foreign aid. This makes some politicians happy because they can then show the electorate that they are bringing home money. Embankment projects make some bureaucrats happy because they can preside over large spending programs. Such projects can make consultant, engineering, and construction companies happy because they can all get large contracts. It is easy to extend this list of direct beneficiaries of embankment program. Add to this the possibility that some of these actors may actually be *corrupt*, and hope to illegally benefit from these projects, and it is easy to understand why passions can run very high....⁴¹

Added to the ill-conceived policy of embankment is the issue of commercially motivated encroachment of flood flow zones and river foreshores. In the 1990s a Detailed Area Plan (DAP) for Dhaka was chalked out as part of a 20-year Dhaka Metropolitan Development Plan (1995–2015). The DAP, in fact, recommended the reclamation of more than 2,500 acres of flood flow zones and agricultural land from illegal housing scheme developers. But a recent report indicates that the realtors, with the complicity of government officials and political elite, and that again in last five years, have destroyed 80% of the capital's conservable floodplains and water retention zones.⁴² In fact, 21 *khals* or canals of 78 km in length were to be cleaned and restored, as part of the Plan, but already 50% or more got encroached and some have disappeared completely.⁴³ The head of the DAP technical committee, Jamilur Reza Chowdhury, could not help saying that "As a consequence, an unsustainable future is awaiting Dhaka with floods and pollution."⁴⁴ Insecurity otherwise largely stems from transforming a hydrological city into a land-centric city infected by corruption. More on this shortly.

But then there are more direct human elements to Dhaka's insecurity. Polarized politics could certainly be one. Bangladesh had the misfortune of experiencing colonialism twice, first, under the British (1757-1947), followed by the so-called 'internal colonialism' under Pakistan (1947-1971). As a result, political parties in Bangladesh could not help resorting to violence and becoming polarized following protracted campaign to displace the colonial and semi-colonial regimes. The legacy of violence and polarization continued in post-independence period, and ironically often for championing the cause of democracy when the incumbent government turned non-democratic - tyrannical, military or totalitarian. One indicator of this would be the number of *hartals* (work stoppage) enforced violently and not surprisingly mainly in Dhaka to make the maximum impact. Indeed, since 1991, that is, from the time of the on-going democratic system, the average number of *hartals* per year has been 46, three times higher compared to earlier (semi-military) regime.⁴⁵

Loss from *hartal* is substantial. World Bank estimated that during the 1990s USD 50 million per day or approximately five percent of Gross Domestic Product was lost annually due to *hartals*. Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), on the other hand, estimated that it lost USD 18 million a day during *hartals*.⁴⁶ FBCCI's current estimate (2013) is USD 1.3 billion per day loss from *hartal*. In fact, largely because of political violence and *hartals* GDP growth rate in FY 2012 fell in the range of 0.2 - 0.9 percentage points,⁴⁷ putting further pressure on the economic security, including employment, salaries and purchasing capacity, of the people. But *hartal* is more than an economic issue; indeed, no less critical is the issue of political killing and that again, mostly taking place in Dhaka.

Dhaka became a political city ever since the first partition of Bengal in 1905. British colonial power divided Bengal into two parts: Western Bengal, with a population of 51 million, of which 42 million consisted of Hindus and 6 million Muslims with Calcutta as the capital; and Eastern Bengal and Assam with a population of 31 million of which 18 million consisted of Muslims and 12 million Hindus with Dhaka as the capital.⁴⁸ But then, following mass protest led mainly by the Hindus, Bengal partition got revoked in 1911. In return Dhaka got a University "as a splendid Imperial compensation."⁴⁹ Since then, neither Dhaka University nor the city where the University is located could rid itself of its political foundation. In fact, Dhaka University was at the forefront in the demand not only for a separate homeland for the Muslims during the colonial rule under the British but also for the independence of Bangladesh during the semi-colonial rule under Pakistan. Progressive as it may have been at the time, the University came to be viewed as a place of anti-state dissent and violent agitation. On the night of 25 March 1971, Dhaka University became a predictable target of the Pakistan military and ended up becoming the epicenter of 1971 genocide.⁵⁰

Post-independence period made no significant difference to Dhaka's status as a political city. On the contrary, newer dimensions got added. In fact, Bangladesh politics got so much infected with polarization and intolerance that cadres and supporters of political parties, particularly Awami League (AL), Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and Jamat-e Islami (JI), constantly resort to violence and killing. Table 1 provides some figures.

Table 1
Killed in Political Violence⁵¹

Year	1997	1998	2000	2001	2002	2003	2005	2006	2009	2012
Total	69	101	208	656	420	436	310	374	251	169

A breakdown of the incidents will show that the bulk of the casualties, with injury running in thousands, occurred in Dhaka. In 2012, for instance, 42 of the 52 *hartals* called by the opposition parties included Dhaka.⁵² Many of those *hartals* were followed by violence and destruction of motor vehicles. Interestingly, during the two-year (2007-2008) military-backed Caretaker Government no political killing was reported, although there were cases of extra-judicial killing, which figured 184 and 149 in 2007 and 2008 respectively.⁵³ The extra-judicial killing continued even under democratic regime: 154 in 2009, 127 in 2010, 84 in 2011 and 70 in 2012, almost all in the name of police/military action and 'crossfire',⁵⁴ and that again, mostly taking place in the vicinity of the capital city. As a 'political city' Dhaka not only became a 'city of martyrs' but also a 'city of killing dissenters,' and this contributed further to Dhaka's trauma. But this had other, equally critical, ramifications for the city.

Dhaka as a political city could not help but get infected by the politicization of religion or what could be best referred to as the Wahhabization or Salafization of Islam with JI and other outfits promoting the creed. Apart from having the greatest number of mosques, which has various kinds of implications and about which I will have more to say later, Dhaka found itself intimately connected to the Arab world through the propagation of religious discourses and the flow of petro-dollars, including remittances, incidentally through both formal and informal channels. The fasting month of *Ramadan* is a good example as the city gets transformed into having a month-long 'food festival' with streets full of sumptuous *iftari* items! But at the same time what is alarming is the growth of religio-patriarchal intolerance with women often finding it difficult to move around freely, particularly when alone, without the aid of *hijab* (veil). There is also a noticeable *blackization of the veil*, which only reflects the importation of Saudi/Salafi/Wahhabi practices found in the Arab world.⁵⁵ Polarized politics also sees a rat race on the part of mainstream political parties to win over the religio-communal forces, indeed, for reasons of electoral politics, which often ends up reproducing rituals and discourses found in the Arab world but very much external to the Sufi and Hanafi traditions prevalent in South Asia.

Unless contained, intellectually as well as institutionally, this is bound to lead to greater contestations, even violence, in the future.

Polarized politics also end up reproducing the power of the *mastans*. Motiar Rahman, a police officer, describes the latter well:

Mastans are thugs committing a wide range of crimes such as taking meals in restaurants without payment, forcible extraction of tolls and subscriptions, particularly from house owner, tenant, shop owners, businessmen, contractors, bus stands, real estate companies, owners of industries and clinics, etc. *Mastan* gives also mercenary service such as kidnapping for ransom, grabbing of property, murder, dacoity, etc., in exchange of cash or kind from anybody. Some of them have made fortune by grabbing real estate property, shops, buses and trucks....[They] extort huge amount of money from businessmen, contractors and others and no one dares to oppose them or lodge complaints with the law enforcement authority for fear of retaliation.⁵⁶

The power of *mastans* or *mastanocracy*⁵⁷ mainly comes from impunity. And that is where politicians and polarized politics come to play a part. Since there is a lack of democracy within the party politicians make constant use of the *mastans* for enforcing conformity or obedience within the party, helping them to contain those trying to challenge their leadership. Some politicians also use them for raising funds. Again, with little or no inter-party democracy the *mastans* often become handy in the business of containing the power of the rival party. The *mastans*, however, reap the benefits when the leader or the party of their choice comes to power. The latter then not only overlooks their unlawful activities but also protects them from the hands of the law enforcement authority. And this creates space for criminal activities, and Dhaka, as a 'political city,' suffers the most. One figure indicates that amongst the six metropolitan cities of Bangladesh Dhaka shared 70.48% of the total crimes committed during the period between 2008 and 2012. And such crimes include dacoity, robbery, smuggling, narcotics, explosives, kidnapping, violence against women and murder.⁵⁸ Few people are hopeful that Dhaka's state of insecurity could easily be contained. And the reasons are not difficult to find.

(Mis) Governance

In Bangladesh misgovernance is good for politics and business! Let me take politics first to explain this. Good governance in politics would imply the institutionalization of democracy and democratization and some kind of professionalism in the political party where leadership would emerge from

rank and file through an established process of elections held regularly. In Bangladesh, however, all major political parties, as indicated earlier, suffer from a want of democracy both within and without. Parties are run on the basis of authoritarian leadership and coupled with this element is *familiocracy* (the predominance of family members). Both authoritarianism and familiocracy end up reproducing patrimonialism, sycophancy and *mastanocracy*. In fact, the only way a person would get a position in the party or a nomination to stand in elections is through an unflinching support of the leader and at the behest of the leader. Lots of mythicizing, if not deifying, the leader takes place and *mastans*, often in the guise of sycophants, play a prominent role. Structures of misgovernance are now so much in place that political or party reforms for ensuring good governance would mean less power for those in power and their beneficiaries. In a situation like this, misgovernance becomes the norm.

Business is no different. Good governance in the business sector would mean transparency not only in getting contracts and business deals from the governmental agencies but also in disclosing the income and submitting wealth statements and giving taxes duly owed to the state. But this would deprive the businessman from getting contracts through unfair means and amassing wealth illegally. It is no surprise therefore that a sizeable number of business people join politics. This is because a place in the ruling party or in the government comes to aid the business. In fact, in the last parliament an overwhelming majority of the parliamentarians had business links (52% were self-declared businessmen) and about 30% of them owned RMG factories. More specifically, AL had 235 members in the parliament, with 120 of them self-declared businessmen; while BNP had 30 parliamentarians, with 18 of them self-declared businessmen.⁵⁹ The figure probably will be the same in the current parliament, despite the absence of BNP which resulted from the latter's boycott of January 2014 national election.

What we have here is a political-business-bureaucratic nexus. And it is this nexus that is in charge of the Dhaka city. Not surprisingly, not only do we find more than a dozen agencies servicing the city but also one agency's jurisdiction conflicting with the other to the point of doing more disservice than service! However muddled this may sound it helps the nexus more than anything else in remaining active and relevant. Indeed, among the many service providers in the Dhaka city include the Dhaka City Corporation (DCC), Rajdhani Unnayan Kartripakhya (RAJUK), Dhaka Water and Sewerage Authority (DWASA), Dhaka Electric Supply Authority (DESA), Titas Gas, Housing and Settlement Directorate (H&SD), Roads and Highways Department (R&HD), Bangladesh Telephone and Telegraph Board (BTTB), Department of Health (DOH), Department of Fisheries (DOF), and many more. But as Mohammad Hanif, the former Mayor of Dhaka, while narrating his experience as Mayor, reminded us how the jurisdiction of the various governmental agencies create problems in improving the service:

I was elected Mayor in January 1994. In 1995, Dhanmondi Walkers Club invited me one morning for tea. They fed me well and informed me about the problems of the Dhanmondi area. ...They said that right now the biggest problem was the rehabilitation of Dhanmondi Lake. Was it a lake, a pond, a ditch or a slum, it was not clear. They said, please fix our lake. I said, Insha'Allah, I will work on it from tomorrow.

I began work. I sent my team of engineers to Dhanmondi Lake and they were obstructed. They were asked why they had come. They said that they had been sent by the Mayor for the beautification of the lake so that the people of the area could walk by the lake to have some respite in the morning and evenings. They were told to go back. Why? Because the water of the lake were of the Ministry of Fisheries. The banks of the lake were of the Ministry of Works. They said that unless they were given permission, they couldn't start work there.⁶⁰

What is equally astonishing is the fact that despite the severity of the lack of coordination there is no urgency to reform the agencies and improve coordination among them. This could certainly mean inertia on the part of the officials of the various agencies. But the problem seems deeper, one that is related to power and material interests of the service providers. Improved coordination or governance would mean diluting one's power and letting go the sources of unlawful income. The greater the difficulty in providing the service the greater would be the eagerness on the part of the consumers to seek 'other,' presumably unlawful, means to get the service delivered. This could be carried out by making use of all kinds of networks – family, village, community, political party, including getting help from the *mastans*, and contributing a hefty amount to the nexus. And this is how misgovernance while encouraging corruption ends up benefitting the nexus.

A way out is not difficult to comprehend, as Rahmatullah, former chairman of RAJUK, pointed out:

If Dhaka is to be improved there has to be coordination between all the service providing agencies. It should be under one man's control. He should be independent and responsible for the job. There should be no interference from outside.⁶¹

Instead of "one man's control" the government opted for a "two-man's control" solution in 2011! This refers to the dividing of the Dhaka city into two: the Dhaka North City Corporation and the Dhaka South City Corporation. The division, however, had more to do with partisan politics than providing better service to the residents. It may be pointed out that the Dhaka city is run by an elected Mayor

since 1994, but no elections were held since 2007. And this is mainly because the incumbent AL regime is not confident that it could win the mayoral election in Dhaka, and one way out was to divide the city into two and win at least in one. But that hope did not last long. And soon the mayoral elections in north and south Dhaka were postponed following a stay order from the High Court in April 2012.⁶² Holding the mayoral election in Dhaka became furthermore problematic when the AL regime lost all the mayoral elections in five different cities, including Gazipur where it had a support base for many years, in June-July 2013. If anything the division of Dhaka created further mess and ended up empowering the nexus. Not only government bureaucrats now run the two newly created mayoral offices but also the mismanagement arising from the sudden division of the city has made service delivery even more cumbersome, with the consumers having no option but to seek support of the nexus.

This is nothing but a reflection of misgovernance in national politics, an issue that got further reflected during the 5 January 2014 national election. Not only did the opposition parties, including BNP, Gano Forum, Bikalpa Dhara and the Communist Party of Bangladesh, boycott the election but more than 52% of the members of the ruling AL got elected to the parliament uncontested, indeed, without a single vote being cast. Moreover, some of the members of the Jatiya Party, which is now formally in the opposition in the parliament, are also holding posts in the government as cabinet Ministers. This has made the Westminster model of the parliamentary system of government in Bangladesh almost laughable! Not surprisingly, save India, none of the universally recognized democratic regimes have welcomed the election nor have they congratulated the post-January AL regime. This is hardly good news for the city. Many fear that it will not take too long for the city to return to the political chaos of pre-election days. Dhaka as a *political city* will once again face demonstrations, *hartals* and the violent policing of the dissenters. Military's support of the incumbent regime and limits of familiocracy in Bangladesh politics,⁶³ particularly in the opposition ranks, can make some difference but then how long will these be able to prop up a regime whose credibility is still an issue both nationally and internationally remains an open question.

In the process, Dhaka is bound to suffer the most. This is because with little or no space for voicing dissent the streets of Dhaka literally end up becoming the centre of political rallies and protests. At times, this brings the whole city to a standstill. Earlier there were well-recognized areas, like the *Paltan Maidan* or *Suhrawardy Uddayan*, where political parties could gather and hold rallies but these were either turned into stadiums with shops around or narrowed down to make ways for gardens, monuments and museums. Moreover, government permissions are hard to get for holding rallies in these areas. In fact, there is hardly any open space in Dhaka which could serve as a meeting place for the dissenters to voice their grievances and agitate. Interestingly, the democratic space of the city got squeezed following the military takeover of the country in 1975, notably with

General Ziaur Rahman who is said to have remarked that “I will make politics difficult for the politicians”⁶⁴ and did go on to change the *Paltan Maidan* into a hockey stadium! Successive regimes, whether elected or not and authoritarian as they were, continued with the policy of squeezing the democratic space of the city. Dhaka is otherwise fully stressed out: maldeveloped, insecure, and misgoverned. Not surprisingly, Dhaka this time earned the notorious distinction of being called the ‘the worst city of the world to live in!’⁶⁵

Conclusion: But still alive!

Despite the manifold stresses, the city never sleeps! This could be for reasons of sheer survivability related to life and livelihood as it could be for reasons of culture and religion. I have already referred to the fact that Dhaka had a mysterious yet spiritual birth. Currently, however, with the majority of the population being Muslims the place of the ‘hidden goddess’ came to be populated by over 700 mosques, which soon earned the place a new name - ‘the city of mosques!’ Layers of spirituality, in fact, help the city to remain awake, indeed, from the time of the first light in the eastern hemisphere when the *azan* (call for prayers) is aired over the loudspeakers in hundreds of mosques throughout the city. Indeed, with *azan* five times a day hundreds of people congregate in the mosques and take turn to socialize, discussing things from mundane to serious.

The city, however, got fundamentally transformed with the arrival of the female workers now employed in thousands of factories in and around the city. In the morning as well as in the evening the female workers would all be walking to or returning from their factories, often in groups, forcing the mechanized vehicles to drive by slowly. In many ways, this also had the effect of making the streets secure, particularly in places where the female workers have come to dominate the walkways. But this had other consequences as well.

Humans when faced with a common threat have a tendency to join hands and face the threat collectively. This is precisely what has happened with the millions of RMG workers, who are often compelled to work in unsafe conditions. In fact, when the Rana Plaza, a garment factory in the peripheral area of Dhaka, collapsed on 24 April 2013 for reasons of corruption and unlawful building structures hundreds of fellow workers and volunteers literally from nowhere came to rescue the victims. And the latter came to the scene long before the governmental machineries, including the military, were put into operation. The disaster killed some 1200 people and the building was far from being stable yet the rescuers worked day and night, some even without informing their family members that they were helping the rescue effort. Over the years, faced with one crisis after another, Dhaka has come to nurture a sense of collective resilience. And this helps Dhaka to bounce back when many would think of giving up.

The economic dividends from such collective resilience were no less striking. In November 2012, for instance, fire in one RMG factory killed 190 workers and the reputation of the apparel sector got heavily tarnished, yet apparel exports rose over 20 % compared with the year before.⁶⁶ Similarly, despite the Rana Plaza tragedy the export of woven garments in July-January 2013-2014 went up by 17.32%, while knitwear garment export rose by 18.13% compared to the same period previous fiscal.⁶⁷ There are critics who would see such growth in RMG exports resulting from our capacity to provide cheap labour, as Mohammad Faras Uddin, the former Bangladesh Bank Governor, harshly remarked: "Our export will go up regardless of all problems because no countries in the world can export garments so cheaply."⁶⁸ But this would be to undermine the tenacity of the workers, for no amount of compulsion, even dire necessity, can propel a growth of nearly 20%!

The city of 16 million, however, gets reproduced not with tragic and somber incidents all the time. Humans, after all, are not only *homo politicus* (political beings) and *homo economicus* (economic beings) but also *homo culturicus* (cultural beings) and this is so much true for the people of Bangladesh. But then Bangladesh is particularly blessed for there is an endless *cultural wave*, particularly running from December to May, and this would include Victory Day (16 December), Merry Christmas (25 December), Happy New Year (1 January), *Pahela Falgun* (first day of spring, mid-February), Language Day (21 February), Independence Day (26 March), *Pahela Boishak* (Bengali New Year, mid-April), May Day (1 May), *Pochishe Boishak* (7 May), Rabindranath Tagore's Birthday, and almost ends with the birthday celebration of Poet Nazrul Islam on 24 May. One may also add here the month of *Ramadan*, which in Dhaka has now become a month-long food festival! Indeed, in all these days and months, Dhaka takes a festive look and transforms itself into a city of celebrations. In some of these events millions come out on the streets, indeed, wearing colourful dresses and celebrating life in the midst of all the stresses.

Modern technology too has mobilized and socialized Dhaka and has kept the city alive. Anyone knowing a Bengali would know that it is *adda* (from senseless to sensible talk) that keeps a Bengali going! As a group of researchers working on Dhaka city maintained,

Dhaka city, despite its growing stratification, still offers some kind of an open society, where, beyond a level, which is not very high, everyone either knows or knows of everyone else through birth, marriage, association and evening *adda*....Consequently, it is said that nothing can be kept secret in Dhaka city for long. Rumours spread quickly, and often many rumours turn out to be true.⁶⁹

Adda also works as a therapy when there is a need for relieving the stresses. And over a dozen television channels in Dhaka city have come to aid the Bengalis providentially to see, listen and even contribute to some of the *addas*. I am of course referring to all the 'talk shows' in various television channels that start running throughout the evening and ends past midnight hours. Indeed, it has come to a point that even common people, like bus drivers, police constable or shopkeepers, would know all the talk-show personalities and if by chance they come to meet the person on the road or in the market they would begin a conversation with him and narrate his views. What else would it take to make a city alive!

May be nature has also something to say. Life in Dhaka city continued even during the big floods. Take the case of the big flood of 1998. The city was completely submerged under the water, yet people continued trading, traveling, profiting, even innovating, without giving up on life for a moment. Syed Imtiaz Ahmed describes this well:

The devastating flood of 1998 shattered the life of millions throughout the country. Living has been particularly difficult for the city-dwellers in Dhaka, as the entire infrastructure of this 'modern' city is not equipped to face such a huge surge of water....But life did not stop. People devised their own methods, tactics and measures to cope with this extreme situation. People were seen working round the clock to protect the DND embankment....Hundreds of boats plying over, what once were metalled roads, became a common scene....The flood has also turned boat manufacturing into a profitable sector....The submersion of regular market places did not stop buying and selling in flood affected areas. Many shopkeepers have rearranged their shops on platforms high above the water level....To paddle through the floodwater safely a new style of trouser became popular. It has chains along the knee-side and it can be pulled up over the knee. This saves the trouser from getting wet....The city lacks proper flood protection mechanisms. Yet, the people have demonstrated tremendous resilience in facing such disasters and in their own innovative ways have kept the life in the city going.⁷⁰

May be time has come for the city to return to its roots, indeed, return to being a *hydrological city*. A journey of de-stressing could certainly begin from there. The future of the city lies in making water, including rivers, a substantial part of the future!

Notes

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- 63 'Familiocracy' incidentally gets reproduced in Bangladesh mainly because of what could be referred to as the 'politics of empathy or sympathy'; and can hardly be extended to a second generation of family members unless they too suffer from tragic events. It may be pointed out that none of the great political leaders of Bangladesh, including Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Maulana Bhashani, A.K Fazlul Huq, Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy or even Ziaur Rahman, came from political families. In fact, none of their parents were ever directly involved in politics. The sooner the major political parties, particularly BNP and AL, take cognizance of this factor the sooner will they be able to reform and democratize their respective parties and overcome the power of the nexus and at the same time attract a greater number of non-committal yet critical voters.
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Situated on the delta formed by Ganga and Brahmaputra rivers modern day. Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh, faces many stresses while functioning as a gateway and opportunityshed for millions of Bangladeshi nationals. In the past, the city has endured many devastating disasters including floods exhibiting an unique capacity to survive. How the stresses and opportunities play out in the future harmoniously will depend on how Dhaka residents reinvigorate the city's dependence on rivers.



Imtiaz Ahmed is Professor of International Relations and Director, Centre for Genocide Studies at the University of Dhaka. Professor Ahmed was educated at the University of Dhaka, Carlton University, Ottawa, and the Australian National University, Canberra.

He is also currently Visiting Professor at the Sagesse University, Beirut. Professor Ahmed is the recipient of various awards and honours. He has authored, co-authored, or edited 18 books and 6 monographs. More than 110 research papers and scholarly articles have been published in leading journals and chapters in edited volumes. His recent publication is an edited volume titled: Human Rights in Bangladesh: Past, Present & Futures (Dhaka: University Press Limited, 2014). His forthcoming publication is People of Many Rivers: Tales from the Riverbanks (Dhaka: University Press Limited, i.p.).

Website: <http://www.calternatives.org/imtiaz.php>