

Dhaka: A choking city cries for relief



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OVER the last two decades the country has experienced a phenomenal urban growth. And with rapid growth compounded by high concentration of population, the capital city has now become an epitome of squalor, poverty and environmental abyss. Despite the everyday trauma, exhaustion and rigours, people are endlessly attracted to the city, for it seems to have work, livelihood and even prosperity on offer. But during the last one decade, the pace of urbanisation in Dhaka has resulted more in proliferation of population, poverty and pollution. At the same time quality of housing, health and hygiene has gone down.

The conscious citizenry have time and again voiced their concern over the way urbanisation was taking place and the wheels of development have defied reason and rational consideration. In absence of clear-cut policies, they complained, shopping plaza, hospitals, clinics, English medium schools, coaching centres and private universities have mushroomed in the residential areas in total disregard of a healthy living. Ominously still, unscrupulous and greedy people believably with

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political backing have encroached on the river Buriganga and Baridhara-Gulshan, Banani and Uttara lakes as well as Ashulia and Uttara Khan haor areas to perpetuate their business interest. Shockingly, every inch of available space, either over land or water is being gobbled up for housing, legally or illegally.

On the other hand, after 35 years of independence, the country's rural areas look as bad as it could be. More than 70 per cent of the people live on almost a pittance, more than half of them are completely illiterate, have no access to sanitation and health care or even clean water. Things are so bad in the countryside that hundreds of thousands of people of all categories pour into the metropolitan cities especially Dhaka everyday because life on the pavements of the city seems somewhat better to them than in those villages that we once admired so much. Dhaka is now a human sea that moves in massive surges. With population now ballooning to almost 13 million, the city is suffering a serious growing pain. Even the footpaths recently constructed in the posh areas are in the possession of hawkers with little space for people to walk.

To meet the mounting pressure of population, the city's skyline now thrusts aggressively upwards seemingly in a bid to pull down the

city now stretching from Dhanmondi to Banani to Gulshan to Baridhara to Uttara embodies the idea of innovation and achievement in a dazzling range of human endeavours. People of all categories from around the country are streaming into Dhaka, as if it is the only city of activity and business, to test themselves against the toughest competition and to reinvent lives that seem to be so hard, stale and unrewarding in any other setting.

Dhaka is fast becoming a city of the future apparently through building of skyscrapers all around its limits. But as population has swelled in the city, so there has been a surge of violence and crimes. Shockingly, this city now magnifies a myriad of social ills because of administrative inaction and lax enforcement of laws. Conscious citizenry would in no time find Dhaka as one of the ugly human settlements on earth: a city that defies conventional notions of urban planning, human behaviour, rationality and environmental awareness. It is becoming an urban jungle where even new waves of architecture and lifestyle -- not always pleasing to be sure -- are grotesquely on display today. With a huge population it is one of the most crowded cities in the world with facilities rapidly becoming inadequate with every passing day.

In the game of making money mostly at the expense of people's suffering, city planners and utility agencies concerned have forgotten the older part of the city namely Sadarghat, Gandaria, Wari, Nawabpur, Chawkbazar and Hatkhola etc. Paradoxically, other cities like Tokyo, Hong Kong, Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok and Singapore in the Asian region with such growing populations are dazzlingly alive. To outsiders, Dhaka, is an urban nightmare with skyscrapers thrown helter-skelter against a backdrop of exhaust fumes, snarled traffic in a tangle of winding streets and towering residential and commercial blocks mixed together.

During the past years, Dhaka has disappeared beneath a vast terrifyingly crowded urban settlements which seem to rise out of a sea of uncollected garbage, choked drains, and potholed roads. Because of the awakening created in the masses garbage disposal in the affluent parts of the city is now being done by community participation but in the less fortunate areas garbage spills out of the houses, restaurants, hotels and market places into the street so that along both sides of it you see pavements covered by household wastes, rotting poultry residue, animal excreta, vegetable peels.

Once a calm and tranquil city,

Dhaka now bears a distressing resemblance to a vast filthy construction site. The lure of happy life in the city has transformed it from a sleepy town or a manageable urban centre of the past into a bursting human hive. New arrivals are pouring in at the rate 200,000 a year crushing into an area that constitutes only one per cent of the nation's land. This high migration has been spurred not so much by rural restlessness as by sheer natural catastrophe like floods, cyclone, river erosion and joblessness in villages. Travellers may marvel at the city's gleaming skyscrapers or admire the modern high-rise apartment buildings in Motijheel, Karwan Bazar, Dhanmondi, Gulshan, Baridhara and Banani area but the average family income is only \$30 a month. Precisely speaking, behind the blinding glitter of the new millionaires the city is failing back of its citizens. Even the basic rudiments of a civic life seem to be evaporating from the city.

Reports from population census council says that population density in the country is now 2000 persons per sq. mile whereas in Dhaka it would shoot up to a staggering number of 8000 per sq. mile. In view of the land space limitation coupled with great rush of people to the city, construction of multi-storied apartment blocks in an eco-friendly environment



with provision for green space, spots for recreation, schools, market and games facilities for children close to these apartments is a call of the hour. But apartment blocks have sprung up in different localities of the city not accessible to motorised transports or even ambulances or fire brigade vehicles. Some of these apartments in different localities of the old town or even in the posh area have been raised on hidden sewer lines or gas pipelines. Neither RAJUK, nor Dhaka WASA nor TITAS Gas nor DCC intervened or made any mandatory check when these blocks were raised or are still being raised in flagrant violation of building codes. Such flouting of rules and regulations and mandatory safety provisions sometimes invites disasters of unimaginable proportions as it did in the Phoenix building collapse in Tejgaon or Savar Garments factory collapse in recent time.

Nobody disputes the fact that the need for construction of such multi-storied flats in the Dhaka city is now a historical necessity because the same space, say five kathas of land that could create living facilities for just one family comprising six members has to accommodate now 80 to 100 families comprising 1000 members at least, and these are being sold like hot cakes because people want to rush into Dhaka to have a secured living, to educate their children and to have hospital facilities when they are sick. Villages have offered them neither income nor good schools for their

children nor good doctors and hospital with minimum facilities in their hour of need -- a pathetic situation that can only be attributed to government apathy.

The phenomenal growth in tall building structures in the city areas namely Shantinagore, Paribagh, Bailey Road, Eskaton, Shyamoli, Dhanmondi, Green Road other than Gulshan, Baridhara and Banani leaves much to be desired in respect of meeting the environmental needs, management of water, electricity, gas and sewerage connections and lift services. Shockingly, most of the apartment blocks built these days in different locations of the city ignore the safety regulations to be met in different aspects. Experts in environmental and geo-technical engineering apprehend that in absence of proper sewerage line with manageable discharge capacity of the effluents -- toxic and hazardous sometimes -- the existing sewer lines might crumble down after a few years posing a serious threat to health and sanitation of the people at large. With surface drains by the side of the streets getting choked under heavy load of effluents, residents are experiencing a miserable existence.

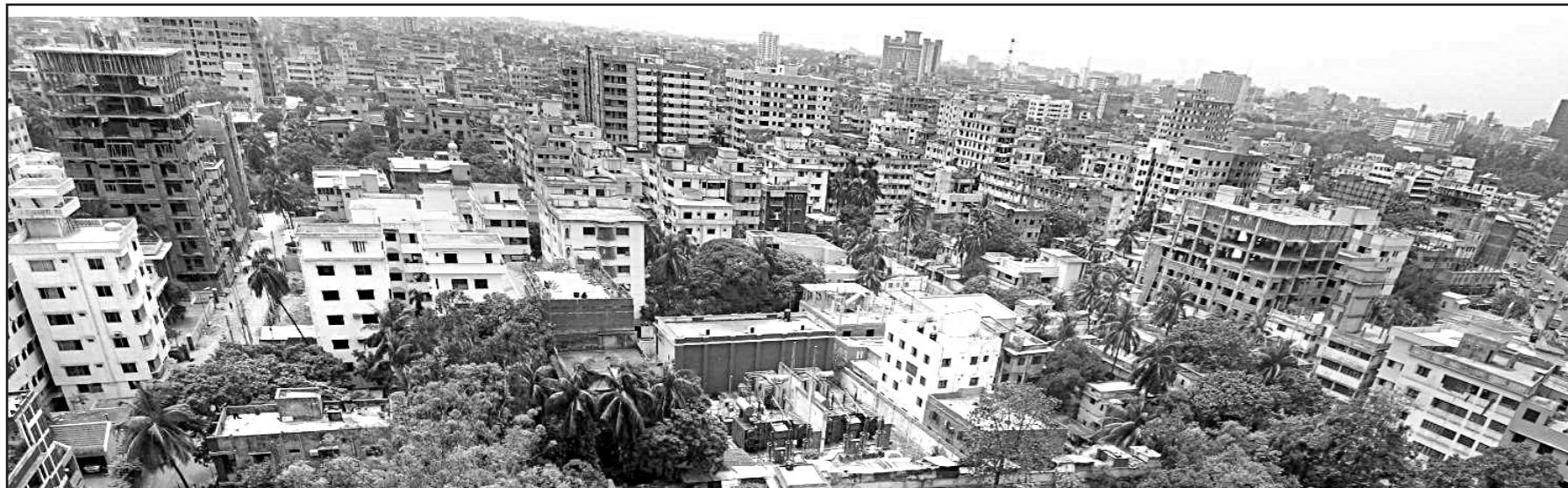
Four million people commute everyday mostly by motorised transports in an area of 100 miles. Bereft of any subways or mass transit system most needed for such a fast expanding city, Dhaka till now is a harrowing labyrinth of streets and alleys that make no geometric sense in these days of

technological innovation and fast movements. On the other hand unbridled development ate away Dhaka's past charm and blanketed it in a layer of blue haze.

Precisely speaking, tall buildings have turned to be an inevitable historical necessity to meet the growing needs of expanding population and urbanization. But shockingly, this city of gardens as the names of different areas like Segunbagicha, Malibagh, Rajarbagh, Madhubagh and Lalbagh imply has become a victim of neglect and policy myopia. With developer-sponsored high rise apartment blocks going apace, government must see that it is pursued with a vision and planning process that ensures quality of life. Undeniably true, ensuring quality of life should be high on the agenda of city planners and city administration. If you are adding population in the city, you are also adding pollution, congestion garbage and water scarcity.

In Bangladesh, especially in Dhaka city till now we haven't seen any concrete action to check the pollution menace. Undeniably true, overcrowding, noxious fumes, power shortage water scarcity and contamination have all played a part in turning this once growing charming city into a choking hell now. But public reaction to all these human factors is mostly mute. And surely unless public takes unanimous stand, Dhaka's decline will continue.

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Boat people of Buriganga

TABASSUM AMINA

BANGLADESH has been going through difficult times from the beginning. Though condition has improved in certain areas it deteriorated in others. Poverty is an endemic problem yet to be overcome. Every country has its percentage of low-income earners, but some countries have many more people living in unfortunate circumstances than others. The distribution of wealth is unjust not only among countries, but also within the countries. One million of the richest in the world are 150 times richer than the 1000 millions of the poorest, and this difference too has doubled in the past 30 years.

I had conducted a study on the livelihood and socio-economic condition of the boat dwellers. It is an issue that received importance in quite a few countries in the last few years. But in Bangladesh, it is yet to get such attention. We went to the Buriganga river to find them. On reaching there, we saw boats

There are various ways in which government and non-government organisations (NGO) are involved in reducing the burden of poverty among the non-slum dwellers. But the non-slum dwellers who live in boats have remained outside the periphery of such projects. This is because they haven't even been considered as part of the non-slum dwellers. But how can we expect to bring sustainable development and reduce poverty without bringing this segment of population within the folds of development activities?

that were old, dilapidated and poorly maintained.

Those who live in boats are called the boat people. But for our purpose, boat people are those who have selected their homes in boats. Boat dwelling is a phenomenon peculiar to this largest city of Dhaka in Bangladesh. They are also radically different from what people generally understand non-slum dwelling to be. People actually live in those old boats in various rivers surrounding Dhaka city and earn a living from the city. Some 30-40 people use each boat as their dwelling at a time. As a result the occupants have little privacy, or protection from the

weather.

Predictably, boat dwellers are amongst the very poorest income groups in urban Bangladesh. Though a large population live on boats not a single study is known to have been conducted to understand their living or socio-economic condition. As a result a large portion of non-slum dwellers aren't counted in various studies which claim to have covered all areas of non-slum dwelling. There is a small community in Bangladesh like snake charmers called 'BEDEY' who also spend their lives with families in boats. But the boat people we talk about here live in the boats alone leaving

their families behind in villages.

Length of their stay in the boat varies from a few months to 15-20 years. Most of these boat dwellers are married with children. But some are still single. Family size varied greatly from 2-3 children to 8-9 children. Those who aren't married have mostly 5-6 brothers and sisters. So, most of them come from or possess large families. Some have very strong family ties and feel it to be their only reason for staying at Dhaka. While others stay in Dhaka to be free from the family responsibilities that would fall on them if they stayed back with their family in their villages.

Everyone in boats eats three meals a day. They have to pay Tk. 30 per day to the boat owner for lunch and dinner. They don't have to pay rent for living in the boat. Most of them take bath in the river. Once a week some take bath in the nearby mosques by paying Tk. 3. Though it isn't hygienic the boat dwellers use toilet that is situated at the back of each boat.

This area of boat dwellers is right next to Sir Salimullah Medical College Hospital. Most of the boat dwellers go to the hospital when they become sick. Some of them go to homeopath doctors.

Most of these boat people migrated looking for job and perhaps hoping to build a better future. They weren't able to do anything significant in their villages. Some respondents migrated just for thrill. But once migrated they had to stay and make a living. They couldn't go back because it would be shameful and embarrassing. They started by looking for a suitable job

but finally ended up doing whatever was available. Most of them work long hours in laborious jobs. The most common jobs are that of rickshaw puller, day labourer, coolie and cleaner. Most of them are illiterate. Some of them can write their names but nothing more. Very few have completed primary education.

Eighty percent of them consider themselves to be in a substandard condition. They say their needs and wants are not fulfilled and that they are unlucky. But there are some respondents who are happy. They feel that this is their fate and they can do nothing to change it. Some feel that they are better off than others (like beggars on the streets). So they are grateful that they can have three meals a day.

According to Rowntree's primary and secondary poverty line none of the boat dwellers fall below the primary poverty line. But if we bring their families into the picture then the analysis will be different. The respondents living alone in Dhaka city spend minimum Tk. 50 per day on food. This means in a month they spend minimum Tk. 1500 only on food for themselves. They send home on an average Tk. 1000-2000 per month. In a family they have at least 4-5 members who live on that amount of money. So it can undoubtedly be said that their families suffer from primary poverty.

Relative poverty exists among 80 percent of the dwellers. They feel that they are poor compared to their relatives, neighbours, or friends. When they compare themselves with people living in Dhaka city with family in squatters or slums they feel that they are



more poor because they cannot bring their families to live with them. Some feel that they are relatively poor because they weren't able to receive proper institutionalised education. They also feel poor compared to other non-slum dwellers who receive help and aid from NGOs.

So these men have to feed not only themselves but also a few other mouths. But the amount of money they earn they spend half, if not more on themselves. With the rest amount their families struggle for survival. So to understand their actual financial condition study alone on boat dwellers isn't enough. It is important to study their families also. Only through doing a broad study will it be possible to understand the actual condition of the boat people.

The study on life of boat people anchored at the river Buriganga reveals some unexplored aspects

of their lives. They are mostly unknown to the mainstream of our society and hardly any studies have been made on them. They live in an extremely unhygienic condition, take inadequate life sustaining food requirements like proteins and vitamins. Their earnings are very meagre on which they themselves and their family members living far away in villages have to depend.

There are various ways in which government and non-government organisations (NGO) are involved in reducing the burden of poverty among the non-slum dwellers. But the non-slum dwellers who live in boats have remained outside the periphery of such projects. This is because they haven't even been considered as part of the non-slum dwellers. Mainly pavement dwellers, rail and bus station dwellers, or in other words vagabonds have been

included. But how can we expect to bring sustainable development and reduce poverty without bringing this segment of population within the folds of development activities? They have to be included in our development programmes. Poverty has many facets, some are easily identifiable while many remain unknown, unexplored and unattended. Without improving the condition of those hitherto forgotten people the nation cannot claim to have addressed poverty in real sense of the term. So, it is high time that necessary and effective steps are taken to improve the socio-economic and living condition of the boat people. The NGOs, government agencies and researchers---all have a role to play.

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Courtesy: Photosearch