

Old Dhaka's tenement houses

BYEZID ISMAIL CHOWDHURY

HOUSING problem in the urban areas of Bangladesh stems from the dynamic rate of population growth and the extreme scarcity of public and private resources in the housing sector. The poor level of living, low productivity, and low income all accentuate the situation.

Urbanization and housing situation are the severest in Dhaka, the capital city with a present population of 9 million, poised to exceed 11 million by the end of the century. Dhaka has a high population growth rate (5 per cent plus) characterized by the ever increasing migrant population composed of landless destitute from the rural areas who flock to the big cities in search of jobs and shelter.

Of the total housing supply in the urban areas, less than a tenth is covered by the public sector. Its provisions are limited to sites and service plots mostly for the affluent, and government staff housing. Most houses in the private and informal sector are unaffordable and lack proper services and amenities. In the meanwhile, an informal housing type in the private sector has emerged in the last four decades which has largely remained unnoticed and hence undocumented. Nevertheless, this typology, the tenement house, has become an affordable form of housing mainly in the old part of the city.

Tenement house in Dhaka

Tenement house is a dwelling which is jointly shared by the owner and the tenants. It can be a building divided into small and cheap dwelling units occupied by the different individual of households under the same roof. Usually these are a row of houses with the occupants sharing common facilities and services. This reduces floor area per household and increases density. Therefore, this kind of development becomes cheaper than other types of housing solutions and is availed by the lower and middle-income households.

Tenement houses in various forms and names initially built as low-income housing or as dormitories for workers can be found in many cities. In early industrial cities these were built as cheap accommodation for the workers by their employers. However, in recent times when new industries are being set up away from the core areas, the old industrial zones near the city cores became rundown areas. Households from the high-

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and upper-middle-income groups only could afford to move out of these areas. Thus these dormitories were gradually converted into small family units soon to become popular and acceptable to the low and lower-middle-income group.

There are housing shortages in many cities of developing countries. As a result, the poor resort to sub-standard housing in the informal sector. Sharing of essential services and public spaces is an effective way of reducing the housing cost as these would allow a reduction in the size of the dwelling units and in the number of service outlets. Tenement houses based on this concept presents a potential solution to the housing crisis in the developing countries.

Evolution of tenement houses

With the increase of immigrants in Dhaka, the commercial and industrial potential of this area attracted a large number of migrants and other less-skilled working people. This led to the evolution of a new habitat like tenement housing. This was started by the indigenous households of low-income profes-

sionals like *coachwans, ustagers, bajnewalas, mistris, kumars, etc.* This was a response to the demands of a growing centre of commerce and administration and a way to increase income (reduced by a lack of demand for traditional craftsmen and services) by letting a part of the dwelling to rent.

The large mansions were also automatically converted to tenement houses due to the multiplicity of ownership claim and occupation. Later, an increase in the demand and popularity of such houses and the resultant high economic viability lured other owners to convert their dwellings into tenements. Besides, the migrants responded positively to this housing scheme because it is supportive of their survival and congruent with their life-style.

Form of tenement house

In analyzing the form of the tenement houses of old Dhaka, it was seen that the socio-cultural background, upbringing and life-style of the particular class of people inhabiting these houses guide the spatial composition of the house. Most of these people originated from the

rural area and maintain a strong link with their past. Living in the rural Bangladesh, and also in smaller towns has traditionally been around a courtyard which is fast vanishing in a metropolitan city like Dhaka. However, the tenement houses still embody the environment while at the same time respond to the demand of high density low cost dwelling units close to the sources of income for the lower and middle-income groups.

Tenement house in the form of workers' dormitories existed since the Mughals. Traditional urban settlements are mostly composed of misused *mahallas* delineated by streets fronted by shop-houses while the core was the large courtyard houses. Traders and craftsmen used to live in the shop-houses which also accommodate their working place: a shop, workshop, go-down, etc. Behind the workshops across the courts on the ground floor were the workers' quarter who mostly had their family living in villages. This system of living prevails to this day while the large courtyard houses got subdivided into smaller tenement units.



Many tenement house can be found with work shops or business spaces on the ground floor.

Two distinct forms, devised out of the necessity and use, can be established in the tenement houses of old Dhaka. The first form is that of the converted tenement houses which are mostly large buildings dating back 50 years. These usually have more than one court which forms the hub of most activities.

The other one is the purpose-built tenement house which usually takes the form of a group of dormitories connected by long corridors. Compared to the converted tenement houses, the purpose-built tenement houses are of recent origin. These were constructed with the motive of acquiring the maximum return. Some were developed temporarily by owners who moved into a more expensive permanent multi-storied development later on.

Therefore, instead of having courtyards as an integrator of spaces and accommodator of common functions, long corridor or verandas are used for linkage, circulation and location of shared services. This last type of arrangement sometimes is made at the expense of privacy.

Tenement houses consist mostly of people accustomed to the traditional norms and values of their predominantly rural backgrounds. Initially they find a separate cultural and social milieu in their present address. As the question of their survival becomes of prime importance, the traditional values and norms take a passive role.

The system of collective co-habitation in the tenement houses creates a new expression of these norms and values for the newly urbanized people. Under the circumstances, the traditional concept of male and female domains could not be fully maintained; yet these were not ignored in a system of collective living. The internal division of the tenement houses reflects a balanced community within a building where they live in a coherent manner irrespective of socio-demographic and economic background.

Tenement house is a distinct form of housing in Dhaka that was created by the users as a response to the crisis in last four decades. There are 50,000 such units providing accommodation to more than half a million people. The reasons that it evolved only in the old Dhaka are mainly two. One, old Dhaka being largely a commercial, manufacturing area, attracts less-skilled

workers who tend to flock to the old city from rural areas; two, there are many houses in old Dhaka that are fit to be used as tenement houses because of their location, ownership, physical pattern, and demand. These are also suitable for small-scale manufacturing and cottage-industries, trading and commercial houses, etc. However, most of them are deteriorating for reasons mentioned above. Also in terms of services and provisions, these are inadequately equipped.

Since tenement houses are a potential solution to the unresolved housing crisis, more severe in old Dhaka, growth of these should be encouraged. However, the environment must be made conducive to their proper and healthy growth. For example, the situation with the precarious services must be reversed. Landlords should be encouraged to build tenement houses. They can be provided with incentives as tenements are a form of social housing. Among such incentives can be tax relaxation, easy term credits, advisor services. However, in return, the tenement developers should ensure a basic standard of services which shall be enforced/facilitated by Building Code and Development Authority's by-laws. For example, constructing on property lines and keeping inner courtyard/light wells are pre-conditions for high-density developments in old Dhaka. However, neither the National Building Code advocates it nor building by law allows it. Therefore, changes in these regulations are necessary for legitimate development of tenement houses.

By adopting this typology, per family housing cost can be reduced by a third by sharing services. Each year, the urban areas of the country need at least 500,000 new housing units. Provision of these would take half of the annual development budget of the government while the allocation in the entire housing sector has been less than 5 per cent on average in recent years.

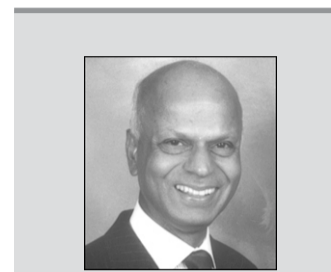
That is again wasted on subsidized staff housing and sites-and-service projects for the upper middle- and higher-income groups. In order to address the housing crisis effectively, the government should re-orient its priorities and strategies towards making provisions which would facilitate the growth of cheap, small and popular housing units. Encouraging tenement housing could be one step towards that.

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Apology accepted

LETTER FROM EUROPE

I am convinced that it was an unfortunate slip, and that the pope deserves our respect for offering such a clear apology. I think it is time to move on and engage in "a genuine dialogue of cultures and religions, based on reason."



CHAKLADER MAHBOOB-UL ALAM writes from Madrid

ON September 12, Pope Benedict XVI delivered a scholarly address at Regensburg University, Germany, in which he said that violence in the name of religion is contrary to God's nature and reason; therefore, there is a need for faith and reason to go together.

This is not only an admirable subject but is also very pertinent to the current world situation where so much faith-based language is being used to justify, or perform, so many irrationally violent acts.

However, it is unfortunate that while looking for examples to support his thesis statement he recounted a conversation which apparently took place between the fourteenth century Byzantine emperor Manuel II Palaeologus (1350-1425) and a Muslim scholar.

According to a medieval text, the emperor had asked the scholar: "Show me just what Muhammad brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached."

If we examine Manuel's comments in their proper context it is not at all surprising that the antepenultimate Byzantine emperor should have expressed such an unfriendly opinion about Prophet Muhammad and Islam. After all, over the centuries, the Byzantine Empire lost much of its territory in Africa and Asia first to the Arabs, later to the Seljuk Turks and finally to the Ottoman Turks, all of whom were Muslims.

Actually, the empire came to an end in 1453, when Byzantium, or Constantinople (Istanbul), fell to the Turks after a prolonged siege. In his youth, Emperor Manuel II was captured by the Turks and forced to spend some time in Ankara as a prisoner. Unable to defend his empire militarily Manuel II was forced to suffer the humiliation of declaring himself a vassal of Sultan Mehmed I, and pay annual tributes. Utterly frustrated, Manuel II abdicated in favour of his son in 1424 and retired to a convent. He died in 1425.

Unfortunately, there is often a difference between what a religion preaches, and what its followers practice. All through history men have exercised violence, often in clear violation of the teachings of their religions, to conquer territories or to propagate their faiths or ideologies. If the pope's central thesis was to condemn violence for the purpose of spreading or protecting, a particular faith, he could have found examples nearer home.

For nearly two centuries (from 1095 to 1270) his predecessors in Rome exercised unparalleled violence and caused untold suffering in Muslim countries in the name of Christianity. Just to give an

example, on July 15, 1099, the crusaders belonging to the first European military expedition of this nature captured Jerusalem and slaughtered all its Muslim and Jewish inhabitants. This crusading spirit of the papacy was so irrational that in 1212 it organized something as ignominious as the Children's Crusade in which thousands of European children perished, and the survivors were sold into slavery.

Again, another of Pope Benedict's predecessors, Pope Gregory IX, established the infamous papal Inquisition in 1231 to apprehend and try the so-called heretics. In 1252, Pope Innocent IV authorized the use of physical torture to obtain confessions from the accused. No one exactly knows how many thousands of suspected heretics, crypto-Jews and crypto-Muslims, were burnt at the stake in Europe and elsewhere by courts set up under the Medieval Inquisition. Even Protestant Christians suffered at the hands of the Roman Inquisition, which was established in 1542 by Pope Paul III. Under Pope Paul IV (1555-1559) and Pius V (1566-72), many excesses were committed by the Inquisition against the Protestants, who were not considered as true Christians.

Christopher Columbus's discovery of America in 1492 gave a new impetus to the propagation of Christianity among the natives. Today, there are hundreds of millions of people living in the Americas and the Philippines whose ancestors were converted to Christianity because of aggressive policies pursued by the Church.

Within minutes after the delivery of Pope Benedict's speech the quotation from Emperor Manuel's conversation with the anonymous Muslim scholar was given wide publicity all over the world causing anger and protest in the Muslim countries, and consternation in many moderate Christian circles. Doubts were expressed, and questions were raised about the pope's intentions. Did he really want to insult Islam, or was it merely a slip in the speech of an absent-minded professor?

On September 17, the pope issued an apology to extinguish the flames of anger and protest among Muslims all over the world: "I am deeply sorry for the reactions in some countries to a few passages of my address at the University of Regensburg. These were in fact quotations from a medieval text which do not, in any way, express my personal thought." He repeated the same message on September 20: "In no way did I wish to make my own the words of the medieval emperor."

I am convinced that it was an unfortunate slip, and that the pope deserves our respect for offering such a clear apology. True, the pope should have realized that, over the centuries, Christianity has come to be identified, in Muslim countries, with acts of extreme violence perpetrated by European colonialism and American imperialism. But I think it is time to move on and engage in "a genuine dialogue of cultures and religions, based on reason," as he himself suggested in another part of his long speech delivered on September 12.

The writer is a columnist of the Daily Star.

The wages of cooperation in the War on Terror

RON CHEPESIU

LAST May, the US authorities hailed what they described as a major victory in the War on Terror: the conviction of 23-year old Shahawar Matin Siraj, a radical Muslim who had plotted to bomb a busy subway system in New York City. In a press release issued soon after Siraj's conviction, Raymond Kelley, the New York City Police Department (NYPD) commissioner, praised the police officers and prosecutors involved in the trial and conviction, including an undercover Bangladeshi-American police officer who infiltrated and monitored New York City's Muslim community, and then used an alias in his court testimony.

Kelly did not mention the contribution of Osama Eldawoody, a naturalized US citizen from Egypt, who was largely responsible for uncovering the plot. Now, four months later, Eldawoody has

become an embarrassment for the NYPD, for he has gone public, complaining that the US authorities have not honoured their part of the deal.

The consequence of being an informant for his country, Eldawoody charges, has been financial hardship for him and his wife and daughter, even though money was not his motivating factor. In an interview with CBS, a leading American television network, Eldawoody said that he became an informant because of what happened on 9/11. "I'm an American. I like to do my part for my country," he explained. But duty has come with a big price according to Eldawoody. "I got damaged big-time," he complained and added: "I'm in a bad situation."

In 2002, a NYPD detective recruited Eldawoody for the undercover assignment after making a routine visit to his Staten Island home. For his services, Eldawoody

received a payment of \$100,000 spread over three years, but he said the money covered little more than his expenses. Moreover, he had to turn down a well-paid translator's job in Iraq because he had to remain in the US for Siraj's trial.

Eldawoody's covert assignment involved infiltrating the Islamic Society of Bay Bridge mosque in Brooklyn. By all accounts Siraj, whom Eldawoody met at the Islamic bookstore next door to where Siraj worked, was not the brightest of young radicals. Martin Stolar, a lawyer for Siraj's defense, described his client as "not the brightest bulb in the chandelier."

Eldawoody made more than 500 visits to the Brooklyn mosque, but he heard or discovered nothing eventful outside of the comments of a visiting imam who, Eldawoody reported, told congregants to "arm yourself with weapons to defend Islam."

But Eldawoody's visits to the bookstore, and his discussions with

Siraj, were another matter. Siraj worked behind a glass counter and openly shared his radical views, and disdain for America, with anyone who would listen, including Eldawoody and the undercover Bangladeshi cop.

Eldawoody taped hours of conversations with Siraj. When Siraj learned that Eldawoody had studied nuclear engineering in Egypt, he inquired about the possibility of obtaining nuclear material for a bomb. Siraj complained about the treatment of Muslim prisoners at Abu Ghraib prison, and according to Eldawoody's trial testimony, he said, "if we do not attack the Americans, they will keep on harming Muslims. I will teach them a nice lesson."

Eldawoody also taped Siraj's friend, James Elshafay, another Muslim who later pleaded guilty in the subway station bombing conspiracy and testified that Siraj had planned to place explosives near

the subway.

Siraj's lawyers offered what amounted to the "entrapment of a dimwit" defense. They argued that their client came up with the terrorism plot because he became jealous of Elshafay when Eldawoody praised him after he had announced plans to bomb bridges and police precincts on Staten Island. As the Associated Press news service explained: "The defense has sought to portray Siraj as an impressionable simpleton who was lured into a phony plot by a paid informant eager to earn his keep."

Siraj's legal team took a chance and allowed their client to testify in his own defense, but the jury didn't believe that he had been entrapped. After deliberating ten hours over two days, it found Siraj guilty of conspiracy to plant, and detonate, an explosive device on New York City's mass transit system. Sentencing guidelines call for

Siraj to be sentenced for anywhere from five months to life in prison.

Since then, Uncle Sam has kicked Eldawoody off his payroll, and he is now struggling to support his family. But what really bugs Eldawoody is the US government's failure to honour another critical condition for his cooperation: keeping his name secret. Eldawoody is now concerned that he could become a target.

The US government should be concerned, too. Authorities have often said that the cooperation of America's Muslim community is vital in the War on Terror. But how many Muslim-Americans will be willing to step forward and offer their services, either as volunteers or paid informants, when they hear what their reward will be?

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Tyranny

KAZI KHALEED ASHRAF

IF one could write a narrative of the nation now in one sentence, it would be this: the worst governance in the history of the country. And to think that the votes of the majority endowed us with a government of tyranny and turmoil.

While most of us sat around eating cake and sipping tea, the country slid down into a path of record-breaking degradation. We witnessed no vision for national and social progress, no program for carrying us through the twenty-first century, unless one counts the banning of polythene bags! The present government has been relentless in fulfilling only one goal and one only: the mobilization of the whole national apparatus and its resources for beating the opposition into pulp.

No government is elected to run down the opposition, whoever they

may be. There are other pressing matters, if one may say so: to take us onwards into the international community of nations with some decency and grace, to make life a tad bit better for all of us (and I mean: all of us), and to ensure that our children feel safer and a little prouder.

On all grounds, however, with no exception, there has been unforgivable failure. If only the fury and energy mustered for mastery over a hapless opposition were shepherded elsewhere, even cutting canals, the last five years would have been a bit more glorious, and the perplexed voters would have felt a little reassured. The last five years have been a waste.

The list is long and wearisome: One damning incident after another, over electricity, over water, over gas, over garments, over wages, over onions, over potato, over sugar, over the stuff of our

day-to-day life. Villagers shot by law enforcers, one times too many, villagers declaring virtual republic, villagers celebrating state capitulation, one times too many... by most standards, this is an image of a society in anarchic convulsion.

In the Portuguese writer Jose Saramago's majestic, allegorical fiction "Blindness," people go blind one after another, and slowly the whole society descends into the pit of unimaginable inhumanity, doing things only a quadruped would stoop to do, which is exactly what a blind person is reduced to trying to go somewhere.

Saramago's nameless city is fictional, while blindness is in full bloom in the alleys, gullies and powerhouses of this resplendent city. Follies and hypocrisies, arrogance and ignorance, abuse and more abuse, of office and power and speech reek from the powerhouses. And greed, limitless, lurch out with

the sucking power of a black hole that drains the life of any object in its path. Except for the prize given at the end of the year, for the last five years. We pretend we do not see.

And in the meantime, manipulating the law with machiavellian cunning, the arms and organs of law and order go piling up one extra-legal corpse after another, applauded on, I must say, by our middle-class complacencies and complicities. Thousands of people arrested just because they are people. Journalists and professors rounded and roughed up so that blindness could prevail. Our eyes do not see, for we must get up in the morning and go about our jobs.

In the crescendo of grenades and free passage of uncountable weaponry, militants and assassins struck too many times for even our middle-class apathy. Strewn across the landscape of the delta, mimicking the horrors of some

despot fascist country, lay the bloodied and quite dead bodies of judges, journalists, professors, businessmen, and former ministers. Answers are not forthcoming, and clues vanish like mist. We added another padlock to the door, and pretended we are blind. And the police brutality on the streets, day after day, mindless, endless, remorseless, without a shred of human decency, and how can it be when a pregnant woman is beaten like an animal, and never mind the concerted onslaught on opposition figures who, as an overly solicitous writer in a newspaper wrote, should not have been on the streets. What shame, what utter shame for the nation, while the civic leaders go searching for "honesty" in a magical election? Do they not see?

And there is the election, with its pendulum of redemption and repetition. The prime minister

knoweth better what she wants: a dialogue on reform with an overture to "conspiracy-hatchers," or election without any negotiation with hatchers and plotters? With one hand she giveth, and another she taketh, one assumes.

The civil initiatives, magnificent and laudatory as they are, have long been bypassed by the tyranny of the time, by the sheer brutishness and viciousness on the ground, of the exile of logic, humanity, and decency. Civil society finally meets its nemesis: anticivilization.

Politics is not my forte, but it would be more than foolish at this juncture to say let the people eat cake. The role of any decent citizen at this point, if I may quote something I read off a bumper sticker, is to defend one's country from one's government.

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Holy Ramadan

KAZI AULAD HOSSAIN

RAMADAN, the ninth lunar month of the Islamic calendar, has great and unique importance. Most Merciful Allah Rabbul Alameen was graciously pleased to reveal the greatest Book, al-Quran, unto the greatest man, Muhammad (sm), during this holy month of Ramadan. Muslims all over the world are required to fast during this month, which is "Farz," or obligatory, on their part.

In Ayat (verse) 183 of Sura (Chapter) Baqara (or the Heifer) of the Holy Quran, Almighty Allah declares:

Ayat 183: "O ye! who believe fasting is prescribed to you, as it was prescribed to those before you, that you may (learn) self-restraint."

The grand edifice of Islam stands on five "Rokons" (pillars) viz: Iman (faith), salat (the formal daily 5-time prayers), Siam (fasting) — during the month of Ramadan, Hadj (pilgrimage) and Zakat (alms).

It may be stated here that fasting not only teaches a Muslim to abstain from all kinds of unjust, evil, and shameful deeds during the holy month of Ramadan, but it also teaches him to abstain from the unjust, evil and shameful deeds

during the remaining eleven months of the year.

In fact, such a commendable practice of abstinence should continue till the last days of his life for Merciful and Gracious Allah bestows His Bounties on His pious "Bandas" (servants). We all must also remember that a Muslim's fast is not self-torture. A Muslim is pleased to endeavour to restrain himself from food, drink, and sex, as well as from all kinds of evil and shameful deeds.

Besides the Holy Quran, all other holy books, including the Injil (Bible) and the Taurat (the Torah), were also revealed during the holy month of Ramadan. And what was the exact day when al-Quran was revealed to Prophet Muhammad (sm)?

The day was, according to a highly authentic source, Ramadan 21 (Monday) night, which was August 10, 610 AD, when the Holy Prophet was exactly 40 years, 6 months, and 21 days old.

So let us hail the holy month of Ramadan, and observe the rites and other relevant daily duties with due solemnity and fervour.

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