

Can Dhaka Traffic Be Improved?

by AN M Eusuf

In the recent past, to facilitate improved traffic movement, a number thoroughfares roads have been declared to be one-way roads. Although all types of vehicles violate this rule occasionally, the rickshaws almost always do it. The New Baily Road is a glaring example of such violations.



Traffic violations take place in the very presence of the traffic police on duty. In the past, they would at least try to bring some semblance of sanity. Now they look the other way.

THAT the traffic situation in Dhaka city is in a terrible mess, is an understatement. What are the reasons for this deteriorating situation? The reasons are many and complex. One reason, of course, is that although Dhaka has grown from a small town at the time of partition, to a metropolis of more than 8 million people, and traffic has grown from several hundred motorised vehicles, horse-carts and rickshaws, to hundreds of thousands of motorised and non-motorised vehicles, particularly rickshaws, the road network remains virtually the same. There have been cosmetic changes here and there, and beautification of some roads, but net increase to road mileage has been very negligible. Therefore, when there is a pressure on a major road due to some reason, there is hardly any alternative road to take.

Dhaka is growing towards the north. The main posh areas of Gulshan, Banani and Baridhara are located towards the north of the city centre. Towards further north, we have the international airport, Uttara township and Tongi. Until recently only two main roads linked up these areas with the city centre — the Airport Road and the Tongi Diversion Road, both of which merged with the New Airport Road at Mahakhali. So from that point onwards there was only one road — the New Airport Road. There is another road towards the north — the Rampura Road via Baridhara. But until recently the condition of this road was so deplorable that it could not be used as a trunk road. I don't know whether in the meantime the condition of the road has improved. If so, a large number of north-bound vehicles can now take this road.

There is yet another road which, if used as a thoroughfare, can ease traffic congestion to a considerable extent. I am talking about the road which passes through the Dhaka Cantonment and meets the New Airport Road at a point beyond the railway gate. If the Cantonment road is opened to north bound traffic (excepting bus and truck) the pressure on the New Airport Road from Mahakhali to the railway gate will be considerably eased. In this connection it may be mentioned that a road has been constructed connecting the New Airport Road with Mirpur at Ibrahimpur (Kachukhet Market) at a considerable cost. But the benefits of this road could not be realised as part of the road remains closed to traffic although it has been completed almost a year ago.

During the last few years several new link roads have been constructed. These are Bijoy Sarani, Panthapath and the road linking the Tongi Diversion Road from in front of Sonargaon Hotel. The benefits of these roads are there for everybody to see. Unfortunately, construction of link roads falls far short of requirement and expectation. For instance, Bijoy Sarani should have been further extended to link Old Air-

port Road with Tongi Diversion Road. The road network would improve considerably if the road linking Old Airport Road with Tongi Diversion Road is further extended to connect Rampura Road. This would be a parallel road to the Outer Circular-Eskaton Road. This road, if constructed, would improve traffic flow and the congestion at Malibagh and Magbazar intersections will improve.

The most important factor which has contributed to the present situation is the presence of several hundred thousand rickshaws on the city roads. According to unofficial estimates, there are approximately 3,00,000 rickshaws of which about 80,000 have valid licence issued by the City Corporation. The rest are unauthorised. Such a large number of rickshaws has virtually choked the city roads making free flow of traffic almost impossible.

It is not only the number of rickshaws but also total disregard of traffic rules by the rickshaw-pullers which make the roads so hazardous. The rickshaws are violating all the rules in the books with impunity as if traffic rules are not meant for them. It is obligatory for vehicles to have lights for using roads after dark. The rickshaws never display lights. The authorities have on several occasions threatened action against this violation. But no action was taken.

In the recent past, to facilitate improved traffic movement, a number of roads have been declared to be one-way roads. Although all types of vehicles violate this rule occasionally, the rickshaws almost always violate this rule. The New Baily Road is a glaring example of such violations. This creates traffic congestion at various points. In a number of roads the rickshaws ignore the traffic divider and ply both ways in the same lane in order to avoid a longer turning.

In the Airport Road, where entry of rickshaws is banned, at times rickshaws do ply at some points. The road from Cantonment main gate to Mahakhali rail gate may be cited as an example.

On other busy roads, for example the New Elephant Road, the rickshaws occupy almost the whole road effectively blocking movement of other vehicles which have to crawl behind the rickshaws. At Shahbagh Road intersection the rickshaws move in such a manner that the whole road from the road divider up to the pavement is effectively blocked for other vehicles.

Traffic violations take place in the very presence of the traffic police on duty. In the past, they would at least try to bring some semblance of sanity. Now they look the other way. At any time, about 30 to 40 per cent of the rickshaws on the roads are empty. They move around in search of a fare. Pressure on the road could be eased if empty rickshaws are not allowed to move aimlessly.

Yet another factor contributing to traffic congestion is the deplorable condition of the roads. Most of the city roads are

in a sorry state of disrepair. All types of vehicles naturally try to avoid potholes, ditches and open manholes. This accentuates traffic congestion, particularly during the rainy season. It is interesting to note in this connection that the authorities have taken up a large programme of beautification of traffic islands and road dividers. New traffic islands/road dividers are also being constructed. Tree plantation on road islands/road dividers is going on in full-swing. There is no doubt that tree plantation on road islands/road dividers will enhance the beauty of the roads. But since our resources are limited, we have to determine our priority. Repair of roads should take precedence over tree plantation. Only after we have reasonably maintained and repaired the roads we should embark upon beautification programmes. One word of caution about tree plantation. If sapling and plant species are not carefully selected and the plants are carefully nurtured, the traffic islands may become an eyesore. One only has to look at the trees planted on the New Elephant Road traffic island.

Haphazard parking of vehicles in busy commercial areas also contribute to traffic congestion. In Motijheel commercial area and New Elephant Road or for that matter any commercial area, there is no proper parking place. The vehicles are parked on the road which causes tremendous traffic jam.

Footpaths and a good part of the road is always occupied by hawkers and vendors. The road surface available for movement of traffic is so reduced in the commercial areas that traffic congestion is inevitable.

In the recent past, a lot have been said about political meetings on roads. There is no doubt that such meetings cause serious dislocation to traffic movement. It has also become fashionable to hold various other types of meetings — religious, social, cultural and the like, blocking whole or part of the road. A road is a road, should be used as such and for no other purpose.

Rallies and processions have become very common. Most of the time, irrespective of the number of participants, the road or the lane is totally blocked. The traffic is seriously dislocated. As rallies and processions cannot be banned it has to be ensured that the procession/rally does not occupy the whole road. The traffic should be allowed to move normally.

Outdated traffic signals contribute to traffic congestion. In most of the traffic intersections where there are traffic lights, the green light allows traffic to move from opposite directions and also allows right turn. The traffic is, therefore, at collision course. The traffic lights at New Elephant Road will illustrate

this point. In more advanced countries, this would not cause much of a problem as traffic going straight will move first and those turning right or left as the case may be will wait for their turn. But not so in Bangladesh; there is a mad rush to cross the intersection and a serious traffic jam is created. Traffic lights should be organised in such a manner that the traffic is not at a collision course.

At some intersection the synchronisation of time is not very logical. A good number of vehicles take a right turn towards Minto Road at Shahbagh intersection. But the green light indicating right turn remains on for not more than a few seconds which allows only a few vehicles to take the right turn.

At some other intersections the traffic light and the traffic police work at cross purposes. Take the case of Panthapath-Green Road intersection. There is traffic light, but there is also a platform for the traffic police at the centre of the road. Most of the time the hand signals shown by the traffic police on duty, who cannot see the traffic lights, are opposite to what has been indicated by the traffic lights. This creates unnecessary confusion for the road users.

It also happens in many cases that the traffic police on duty allows traffic to move although the red light is on, frustrating the road users who have the right of way at that particular point of time. Such actions

are ostensibly taken to ease traffic flow. I don't think this helps to untangle the traffic jam. Normal traffic movement should not be obstructed.

One major cause of traffic congestion is uncoordinated digging of roads by various agencies — WASA, T&T Board and others. Such diggings are required to lay pipes and cables and therefore, unavoidable. What is avoidable, however, is digging the same road over and over again, for which coordination amongst the various agencies is a must.

The causes of traffic congestion are many and varied. One can go on and on listing the causes. In the foregoing paragraph, I have mentioned some of the major causes. In the following paragraphs I shall make some suggestions for improving the situation.

Improved bus service and the Maxi service is a step in the right direction. But the number, frequency and coverage should be improved.

We have been hearing for some time that metered taxi service would be introduced anytime. But nothing has happened. Bureaucratic and procedural problems, if any, should be sorted out so that such service is introduced without further delay. Ideally rickshaws should operate only in the periphery and narrow lanes and by-lanes where it is not possible for motorised vehicles to operate.

Empty rickshaws should not be allowed to move aimlessly. As soon as a passenger is dropped, the rickshaw or the autorickshaw must go to the nearest stand. It will be necessary to increase the number of stands to enforce this.

As a prelude to eventual complete withdrawal of rickshaws from the city roads, more and more roads should be made off limits for rickshaws. A firm timetable should be prepared for gradual phasing out of rickshaws. In the meantime, they should be made to observe all traffic rules including display of lights after dark.

A large number of multi-storied parking places should be constructed all over the city. Initially the lead may come from the City Corporation. Eventually the private sector will come forward. But they will have to be provided with the land, where available, and bank loan facilities. In the not-too-distant future, it should be possible to prohibit roadside parking of vehicles at least in the commercial areas.

One major activity in the short-term should be intensive media campaign to educate the road users to abide by rules and observe safety measures. The traffic police on duty also need training and motivation. Improvement in the traffic signal system, media campaign for educating the road users and training of the traffic police should go on simultaneously.

A number of improvement programmes may be undertaken in the medium-term. These activities may include construction of more link roads, flyovers at some important intersections, foot-bridge/underpass and multistorey parking. Some important shopping areas may be made traffic-free during peak shopping hours. For example, the New Elephant Road from Bata shop to Mirpur Road may be closed to traffic during the peak shopping time of 5 pm to 7 pm.

In the long-term, the city traffic system should be completely overhauled and modernised. Some of the major activities should include construction of ring roads, circular railway and mono-rail. The traffic signal system should be modernised. Turn-only lanes will have to be introduced to facilitate smooth flow of traffic. Considering the environmental hazards posed by two-stroke autorickshaws, these also will have to be phased out.

Are we being served? No. Not really. But there is no reason why it should not be possible to serve us better. Dhaka is going to be a mega city in the not-too-distant future. The traffic system should be developed befitting a mega city.

AIDS in Bangladesh and Mongla Port

WHILE the deadly disease, AIDS, is terrorising some parts of the world, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, it has in recent years turned aggressively towards Asia. According to WHO, the number of AIDS cases has already increased more than eight-fold over the past few years in Asia (30,000 to 250,000). It is feared that the number of HIV positive individuals will reach a staggering number of about 10 million in Asia by the turn of the century.

Bangladesh is geographically surrounded by high-prevalence areas such as the Indian state of Manipur, Mizoram and neighbouring Myanmar. In addition, the sprawling sex industries in Thailand and India are not only posing threat to the respective countries but also to their neighbouring countries, including Bangladesh.

The first HIV positive case in Bangladesh was detected in 1989. So far, we do not have actual figures regarding the number of AIDS infected people in our country. According to available statistics, a total of 80 HIV positive cases have already been officially detected. Among them, a total of six AIDS victims has died, while others six have been struggling with death. A WHO projection said, the number of AIDS infected people in Bangladesh may be more than 30,000.

Most of the HIV positive individuals in our country, according to the estimates, are emigrant workers (32 per cent), mainly coming from the (greater) Sylhet. Others are generally from Dhaka, Chittagong and Noakhali. They are mostly rural inhabitants and predominantly adult males.

Among the possible modes of entry and spread of HIV in Bangladesh are:

- Bangladeshi emigrant workers returning home. About 74,000 Bangladeshis go abroad every year for earning their livelihood.
- Foreign tourists visiting Bangladesh. On average about 100,000 tourists visit Bangladesh every year.
- There are about 100,000 commercial sex workers (CSWs) in Bangladesh. Customers are usually businessmen, students, rickshaw-pullers, truck driver and foreigners. Sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) are widespread among the CSWs.
- Use of unchecked blood and

its products.

• Drug addiction. The existing health problem of Bangladesh, compounded by poverty, ignorance and illiteracy, along with prevalence of promiscuity, prostitution, and STDs make Bangladesh a high-risk country for a severe epidemic outbreak for AIDS. Sero-epidemiological survey carried out so far in Bangladesh clearly indicates that an epidemic has already been started in this country. Nevertheless, the country is still a low-prevalence area, but this situation could rapidly change unless preventive measures are taken immediately.

Against this backdrop, the government and some of the NGOs are taking initiatives to address the causes of the disease to prevent its spread. The government has formed a National AIDS Committee (NAC) in 1985 that has recently been reconstituted with nine key ministries, some MPs and representatives from the NGOs. It is now known as Bangladesh AIDS Prevention and Control Programme.



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A Case Study

Mongla, the second largest sea port of the country, is being considered one of the most vulnerable entry points of AIDS in Bangladesh. Every potential element — brothels, foreign crews, dock-labourers etc — is here in the port for welcoming causes of the deadly disease through this route. Considering the vulnerability of this area, World Vision, an international Christian relief and development organisation, started the Mongla HIV/AIDS Prevention Project in 1993 to help prevent the spread of the killer disease.

by Nikesh Chandra Das

In Bangladesh, covering about 38 square kilometre area of Bagerhat and Khulna districts, the project targets 69,000 people as its direct beneficiaries that include commercial sex workers, dock labourers, youth, student and housewives.

Some Statistics of Mongla Port Area:

- Approximately 600 sex workers including, registered, unregistered, seasonal and floating ones are stationed at the area.
- Exposure to extra-marital sex is the highest (92.86 per cent) in this area.
- Only 31 per cent brothel clients use condom to ensure safe sex.
- Only 7 per cent of men who have extra-marital sexual exposure use condom while having sex with wife.



Bananta brothel at Mongla

• Village doctors (having no academic medical knowledge) and pharmacists are the most common service providers and first-hand informant of STDs.

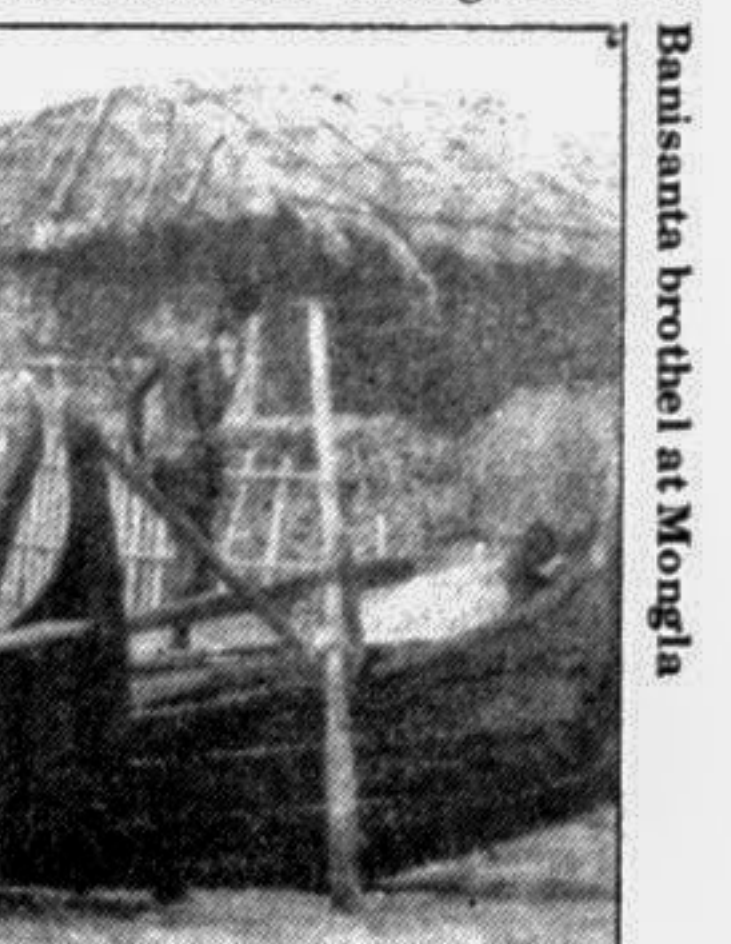
- Twenty-four per cent dock-workers do not know how to use condom.
- Forty-one per cent brothel clients are businessmen.
- The male-female ratio is 70:30 in the area.

Still today, they do not have adequate sanitation facility. They are under the constant threat of tidal surge and cyclone, as the area is well exposed to these natural calamities.

The aims of the project are:

- a) To motivate the people including the commercial sex workers to use condom to prevent AIDS, b) To disseminate the knowledge about the causes of the spread and transmission of HIV/AIDS, and c) To provide necessary medical facilities and support in preventing the spread of AIDS.

As people are very secretive regarding sexual diseases, the projects staff initially faced huge difficulties in working on the issue. The people were not ready to speak up. However, with the active and sincere motivation of the project staff, the scenario has changed a lot.



Bananta brothel at Mongla

Now about 70 per cent people show interest to listen and talk about AIDS that is totally a reverse situation in comparison with the previous one," said Matru Rahman, 18, one of the volunteer of this project.

The project's operational strategy is based on community volunteerism. The volunteers are the main helping hand in implementing the programmes in the community. At present, the project has 82 volunteers most of whom are students. The project has trained them on STD/AIDS. The project staff including the trained volunteers communicate AIDS messages through family visits, individual counselling, group discussions, folk-songs and seminars. They also distribute handbills, booklets and posters to disseminate information easily to the targeted people.

When the project staff first approached the Bananta brothel in 1994, the sex workers responded negatively. At first, they thought their positive response might hamper their business. Gradually, they were convinced that the activities of the World Vision project are helpful for them in maintaining a safer life.

Recently, the sex workers have formed a group of 20 peer educators among the sex workers. The aim of the group is to disseminate messages concerning AIDS among the CSWs. After having training on STD/AIDS, these group members have been working in disseminating health messages among the sex workers.

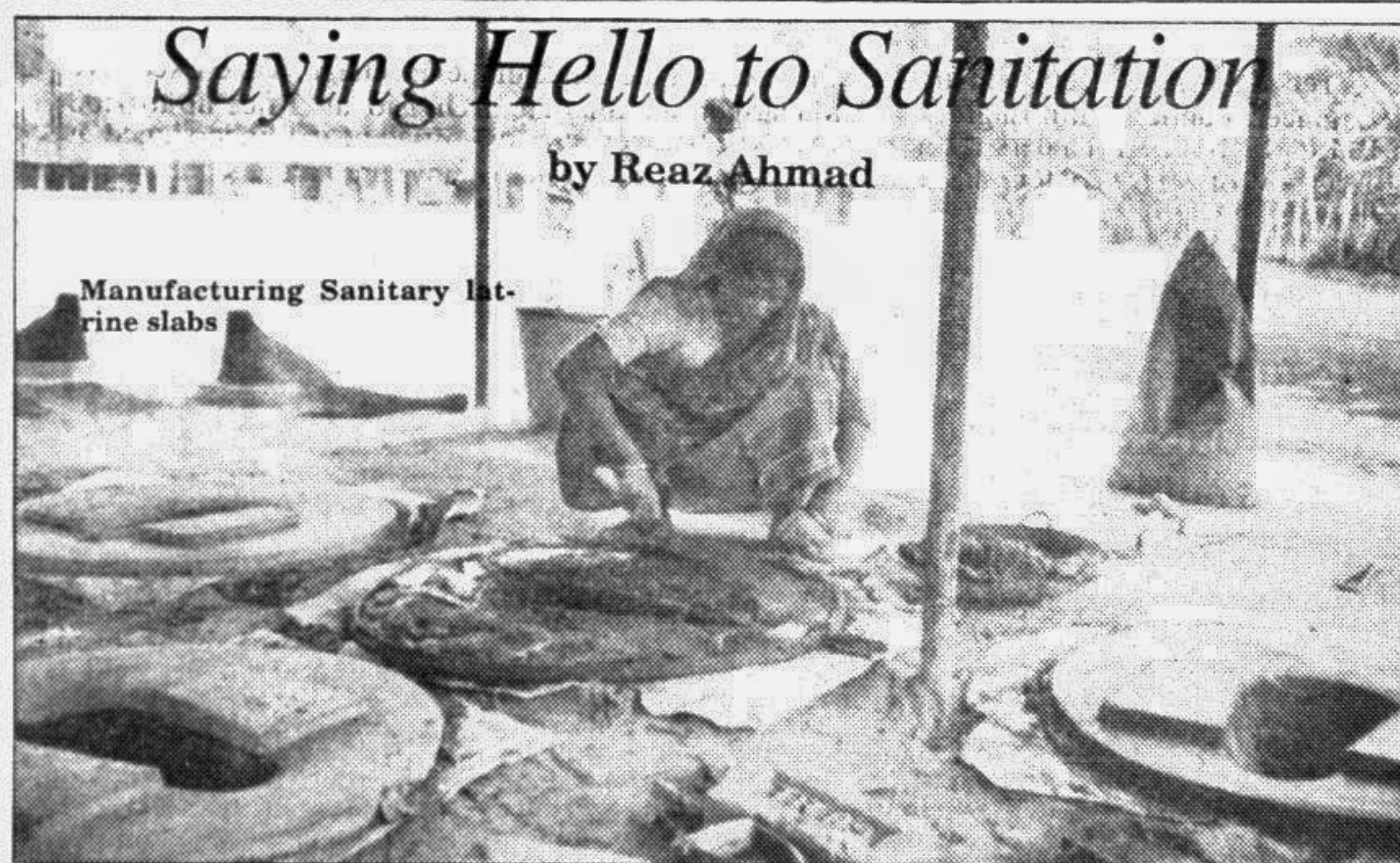
Salina Begum, 28, is one of the 20 peer educators selected from about 400 commercial sex workers. She is engaged in educating the sex workers in the brothel. She feels delighted to know that the project cares for the sex workers.

"Before World Vision's activities, we even could not avail the services of a qualified doctor. Now we are much better than ever before having the medical and other health services of the AIDS project," Salina said.

"We have learned a lot of health messages about AIDS over the last couple of months from the Mongla HIV/AIDS Prevention Projects," said Salina Begum, adding: "We have learned how AIDS spreads, how to use condom to protect it and we hope to learn more in the days ahead."

Obviously, AIDS has emerged as a serious threat to the existence of a healthy human race. In Bangladesh, if we want to avert an AIDS epidemic, we must immediately start massive concerted programmes incorporating both GOs and NGOs for a better future. If we fail to respond to this burning issue with due attention, we may have to pay a high price for this in the days ahead.

Statistics and information regarding country situation have been taken from 'Meeting The Challenge of AIDS in Bangladesh' published by Bangladesh AIDS Prevention and Control Program, September, 1997. The author took information on Mongla area from Baseline Survey Report, June '97 done by World Vision of Bangladesh.



Manufacturing Sanitary latrine slabs

OTHERWISE a serene typical village, Shibnagar — one specialty has turned it to be unique for which the villagers can take pride. One hundred households in Shibnagar under Chowgachha thana of Jessore have built one sanitary latrine each.

Nasima Begum, Director of Shishu Niloy, says even before her organisation became a partner to NGO Forum for Drinking Water and Sanitation in 1989, it used to link up motivation on water and sanitation with its other programmes like child education, health and group formation for savings.

Apart from Shibnagar, Shishu Niloy, a Jessore-based NGO, scores hundred per cent success in sanitation coverage at some other villages as well. These are: Mohammadpur, Phulsara and Shoula under Chowgachha thana and Khitbodia under Sadar thana in Jessore.

Shibnagar is a hard-to-reach remote village of Chowgachha where people belonging to Hindu and Muslim communities have been living in peace from time immemorial.

Shishu Niloy started its activities in Shibnagar back in 1988. However, its water and sanitation programme got into motion with sinking of a tube-well in the village in 1990. Yet, not before three more years passed by, that Shishu Niloy ventured sanitary latrine drive in Shibnagar.

"There were hardly five to seven tube-wells in Shibnagar and again not in very good shape — it was then when we started sinking tube-wells in 1990," recalls Nasima. Only five per cent homesteads in Shibnagar had sanitary latrine attached in 1993 and the rest were not even aware of health hazards they themselves exposed to by discharging excreta under the open sky in the fields, says Nasima.

Shishu Niloy chose Shibnagar for setting a target of hundred per cent coverage with an aim to create an example that neighbouring villages would feel inspired. Besides, there was enough life and sincerity among villagers. "It was like a candle to

be lit; Shishu Niloy lit it, and the light spreads, spreads and spreads," — describes an active worker in this field. Initially, things did not move as fast and uninterrupted as it is now. There were people not at all enlightened and used to argue about necessity of hygienic sanitation. They even sometimes took it as an unwanted intrusion into their private life that wants to command their drinking, bathing and washing habits.

One fine morning, a group of village women sat on a mat under the shadow of trees at the courtyard of Mostafa Mia's hut in Shibnagar. Shihani Mitra, a dark complexioned woman in her early thirties with full of enthusiasm and flushing eyes, was their leader.

They opened the Pandora's Box and showed how a quiet revolution has taken place in Shibnagar. A couple of years back, womenfolk of Shibnagar got themselves united under the banners of five associations — 'Palash Mohila Samity', 'Shanti Mohila Samity', 'Shapla Mohila Samity', 'Golap Mohila Samity' and 'Joba Mohila Samity' — in five zones of the village incorporating members from areas that fall in advantageous proximity.

"In the initial stage of group formation," narrates Phoolmoti Begum, a group member, "husbands used to forbid their wives and in extreme cases there were incidents of physical assaults also. But, we successfully overcame the barriers of backwardness."

Ambia, wife of host Mostafa Mia, laughs, stares at her husband and says, "Yes, now my husband does give enough attention to problems that women face; he values my opinion in any family decisions." Shihani, the leader, nods in agreement.

Nurjahan, sitting far behind Shihani, tells her story then. Her family members used the backyard bush of their house as lavatory. But, that 'gifted' lavatory on natural settings brought much danger when Nurjahan's husband narrowly survived a diarrhoeal death. It has been three years now her house has a sanitary latrine.

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Empty rickshaws should not be allowed to move aimlessly. As soon as a passenger is dropped, the rickshaw or the autorickshaw must go to the nearest stand. It will be necessary to increase the number of stands to enforce this.

As a prelude to eventual complete withdrawal of rickshaws from the city roads, more and more roads should be made off limits for rickshaws. A firm timetable should be prepared for gradual phasing out of rickshaws. In the meantime, they should be made to observe all traffic rules including display of lights after dark.

A large number of multi-storied parking places should be constructed all over the city. Initially the lead may come from the City Corporation. Eventually the private sector will come forward. But they will have to be provided with the land, where available, and bank loan facilities. In the not-too-distant future, it should be possible to prohibit roadside parking of vehicles at least in the commercial areas.

One major activity in the short-term should be intensive media campaign to educate the road users to abide by rules and observe safety measures. The traffic police on duty also need training and motivation. Improvement in the traffic signal system, media campaign for educating the road users and training of the traffic police should go on simultaneously.

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In 1995, continues Shihani, government sanctioned 13 sets of sanitary latrines for village Shibnagar. Those who had produced these and set in their houses within a 15 days time later, got back Tk 200 each from the government as subsidy. This stimulated the already built-up awareness among the villagers, opines Shihani.

Shihani, who also engaged herself in Shishu Niloy's education programme, says that in her class lectures she usually teaches highlighting benefits of using sanitary latrine and leading hygienic a life.

Anju Rani, a young mother, with a toddler on her lap sucking the mother's milk, says it has been over two years now that Shishu Niloy is no more providing tube-wells to the village. Shafia Ara Begum agrees. They say, earlier through NGO Forum Shishu Niloy had sunk five tube-wells in Shibnagar free of cost but now Niloy only gives loan for sinking tube-wells, no more free of cost.

Oilar Rahman, a supervisor of Niloy, fully endorses village women's observation and explains: "As a policy, we provide free tube-wells in a locality where coverage is relatively less. For example, we give one for each 10 houses." Now, Shibnagar has as many as 20 tube-wells which means there is one for every five households.

Shafia recently sunk a tube-well at her house. Anju also loaned Tk 3,000 for the same purpose. She says it will take her one year to repay the money and cost her Tk 144 per thousand as interest. "Still, I want a tube-well for my family exclusively. It is not always pleasant to fetch water from a neighbour's tube-well."

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