

Frightful footprints on ecology

While human impacts on the global environment has become subject of high-tech studies such as the NASA's recently-launched Earth Observing System mission, on a more localised day-to-day basis, our ecological footprints are becoming painfully visible to the residents of Dhaka, writes Sarwat Chowdhury

CHARLES DICKENS' DESCRIPTION of 19th century American cities provides an apt description of the perils of urbanisation: "... it was a town of machines and tall chimneys, out of which interminable serpents of smoke trailed themselves for ever and ever and never got uncoiled" (*Hard Times*). More than a hundred years have passed, but Dickens would perhaps be horrified to find his description rivaled by the extent of environmental degradation in the capital of ours.

The air quality in Dhaka looms as a grave environmental problem. Studies show that human beings breathe once every four seconds, which adds up to about 8.5 million times each year. With each breath, we inhale various airborne substances, some of which are natural, and others include by-products of human activities. The latter, especially in urban areas like Dhaka, consists of various pollutants that enhance our chances of being attacked with cancer, and various respiratory diseases. Smog or ground-level ozone can also reduce our body's capability to fight off infection, whereas soot or particulate matter can cause bronchitis, chronic lung disease, irritation of the eyes and throat etc.

Under the present management of traffic system in this city, rickshaws are definitely not friendly to the overall environment. Readers probably can relate to the countless times they have to wait patiently in traffic-jam caused by too many rickshaws moving in different directions, while various polluting vehicles with diverse speed ranges also try to remain mobile. Just by observing the number of makeshift masks (which are mostly unable to protect us from air pollution), one can have some idea about the air quality surrounding us. Unless one is fortunate to be inside an air-conditioned vehicle, no other passenger in the street including the drivers, the pullers, the pedestrians, or the traffic police is safe from

breathing in the onslaught of noxious air. What has become obvious is: we have to find a way to regulate the traffic, including the rickshaws --and this should be done immediately.

This brings in the second point related to our air quality. Despite various attempts to gradually lift them, the number of two-stroke baby-taxis in this city do not seem to have gone down. If we are really serious about our own health, especially of the children, can we not make a policy decision to implement this well-recognised imperative?

The negative effect of using leaded gasoline has also been documented time and again. Whether the gasoline sold in our 'petrol pumps' is really lead-free remains questionable. It is also important to install catalytic converters in the fleet of cars pulling polluted air in our streets.

Apart from the risk of road accidents, mismanagement of traffic in the roads have made life quite uncertain in the city. To account for traffic jams, one has to start well ahead of time hoping to reach their destination close to the hour of appointment. We are wasting valuable time and energy in the process, and of course the longer we wait, the longer we inhale the polluted air.

In terms of what can be done, there are various obvious ways to meet these urban problems. Some welcome moves in the city include introduction of long-distance buses such as 'Nirapad', taxicabs etc. There is also talk of having more 'rickshaw free' streets, and having special lanes designated for the rickshaws. To be fair, rickshaws can be an effective vehicle for short-distance travel especially within residential areas. They do not pollute the air, cause less sound pollution, and short-distance rickshaw-pulling is probably more reasonable for the health condition of the pullers as opposed to the long-distance ones which is more strenuous, and the fare is often not justified. In contrast, considering the traffic

situation in the busier streets such as commercial areas, it is crucial that rickshaws are not allowed.

We also need to decide and urgently implement sound parking policies in the streets of this mega-city. Even in the narrow streets, city dwellers often park their cars without any attention to the flow of traffic. If there is a strong parking policy, and the parking fees are high enough, people will be forced to pay attention, and act more responsibly as city dwellers in many other countries of the world already do.

A stringent policy for curbing sound pollution has also become essential in this mega-city. Very often the drivers in the city vent their frustration by unnecessarily using their horns. In the United States, honking is considered rude, and used only in extreme cases. Here, it seems that the use of horn is the norm. Sometimes one is appalled to think about the effect on the condition of the patients in the city clinics/hospitals who are subject to this form of pollution all day long (unfortunately many of the city health clinics are located on busy streets).

Dhaka would look quite different with no two-stroke baby taxis, rickshaws in selected streets and lanes, clean cars, and lots and lots of buses. Buses are very important from an environmental point of view. If they are properly maintained (that is, they do not spew black smoke), they are a much better option than each individual car emitting pollutants into the environment. In 1998, a European study focused on reducing energy consumption found that cities with efficient bus service have lower energy costs. As long as the schedules are reliable, people will get used to taking the bus, and with greater ridership, the costs will go down. Such efforts have already worked in other countries. For example, in Curitiba, Brazil a co-ordinated programme for transportation and land use to support efficient public buses has been introduced successfully. Although the city has one car for every three people, two thirds of all trips in the city are made by bus. Again, Chattanooga, Tennessee, a leader in recycling and electric buses, has transformed itself from the most polluted city in the United States to one of the most livable in less than three decades.

There are various innovative transportation approaches gradually being introduced in developed countries. In some communities around the world, a growing movement called 'car sharing' is becoming popular. The idea is: you don't have to own a car to drive one. Begun in Europe a decade ago, car sharing allows members access to a fleet of vehicles at minimal cost and minimal hassle. Members pay only for the hours and the miles they drive. All other expenses such as gas, insurance, repairs, and maintenance - are covered by the car-sharing organisation. The idea has caught on in countries like Germany, Switzerland, the Netherlands and in Canada as well. While car sharing is not as convenient as owning your own car, it does limit the number of cars in the streets, and for those who live in urban core -- this can be an attractive option. The city of Copenhagen, Denmark has an

other novel (and even more eco-friendly) approach: it maintains a fleet of bikes for public use that is financed through advertising on the wheel surfaces and bicycle frames. Innovative efforts for cleaning up streets include volunteer activities such as the 'adopt a highway' programme in the US. This story is quite interesting. It began on a lonely stretch of Texas highway where two state transportation employees erected a sign in 1985. This kind of volunteer work helps keep the highway clean. Families, businesses, civic groups -- basically anyone can become involved by agreeing to pick up litter during several designated times of the year, while the state's department of transportation provides people with trash bags, vests, important safety information etc. In the state of Virginia, this programme began in 1988 with fewer than 100 volunteer groups and by mid-1999 the numbers had grown to 8,000 groups, and 14,000 miles of adopted highway. Such efforts work because: a. clean roads naturally make people reluctant to throw out trash from their car windows etc. and b. after spending a few hours cleaning up after others, the volunteers would also be hesitant to litter again.

In terms of global research on impacts of urbanisation on the ecology, author Molly O'Meara identified six areas: water, waste, food, energy, transportation, and land use that are needed to make cities and the huge areas they affect better for both human beings and the planet. This article has attempted to touch on transportation issues: it is essential that we begin to develop a holistic viewpoint on the other factors as well.

On a lighter note, the air quality in Dhaka reminds one of the old Los Angeles, California, joke, "I don't trust air I can't see." The truth is: you can see the air in our capital, and is not an appealing sight. One may say that the high population pressure is at the root of all the problems. This is of course true. While we attempt to counter that social problem, the role of information and awareness should be given due importance. In environmental ethics, when we discuss issues related to intergenerational equity, it is often customary to cite the rights of the future generations (those who will bear the effects of our present decision on resource usage, and resulting pollution). For obvious reasons, they are unable to voice their opinion on these matters. Considerations of intergenerational equity can be difficult because it is not easy to visualise an offspring four generations down the line, and to genuinely care about his/her well being. However, by our own doing, the ethical dilemma is becoming much more straightforward. It is our own children, and grandchildren that will blame us for not taking a stronger stance for keeping our city livable. This New Year is symbolic of various things to many of us, and we can perhaps share in one resolution: to soften our ecological footprints on this mega-city. The sooner we begin to carry out this resolve, the better.

The author is a Ph.D. candidate (environmental policy) at University of Maryland, USA.

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Of course, destruction alone did not mark the arrival of the New Year. Instead of going out to parties and celebrations, most people chose to spend time with their families. Perhaps it was because of the new millennium and the prospect of not seeing the next one, but still this undoubtedly reflects the family values. Bangladeshis are

known for. However, atrocities overshadowed any sign of well being and changes for the better. Added was Eid-ul-Fitr. Both celebrations merged together and partying seemed never ending. However, the element of 'shopping' outshone any other activities to have fun. Shopping became everyone's favourite game: a game all were eager to win. Although people had started shopping for Eid way before Ramadan had even started, the mad rush after the New Year was one to see. Shopkeepers were also anxious to sell their products. This was the time to test their marketing skills.

There was of course the usual array of exotic gharara, lehenga, saree, shalwa-kameez and other garments at equally exotic prices. "There's nothing new this year," commented many. But there was. Ever heard of 'Titanic' fabric? This is a material that was very popular during the 'shopping festival'. This is supposedly the same material that Kate Winslet wore in the film. 'Kuch Kuch Hota Hai' saree became very popular, too. This is a chiffon saree with a similar blouse laced on the fringe that Kajol wore in the popular Hindi movie. There's more. 'Dil Se' jeans, Urmila dresses... There were many outfits with the name of Shahrukh Khan, the Hindi filmstar, starting from 'punjabi' and 'sherwani' to shirts and casual wear. This is because Shahrukh Khan played so many kinds of roles in so many films. You see, the 'sherwani' here is like the one he wore in *Badshah*; he wore shirts like these in *Phir Dil Hai Hindustani*. So we have a variety of Shahrukh Khan clothes," explained a shopkeeper at Elephant Road.

Interestingly, there were no Poppy mini skirt or Shabnoor gharara. There were no 'Baba Keno Chakor' 'punjabi' or 'Bidroho Charidrey' jeans either although there were many Bangladeshi films that got released for Eid. However, there was one type of saree named after a Bengali song, though. *Ammajon* is one of LRB's hit songs. *Ammajon* sarees too became a major hit. And the marketing strategy was fitting too. Shopkeepers sang *Ammajon* while displaying the sarees.

The mad rush of the shoppers resulted in our Finance Minister's comment that this is an indication of good economic performance and development. What actually caused the people to shop till they dropped is questionable. After all, we are a nation known for autonomous consumption. Even if we don't have money we lend in order to spend. This may well be the case here. Alternatively, Mr. Kibria may be right. "Where did all this money come from?" is a valid question, if anyone stopped to think in the midst of all the hue and cry.

Well, now it's all over. In retrospect, does anyone ever think, "Was it really me who fought through the crowds to buy dresses?" Does anyone think that his resources may have been better utilised if used for the long term? Does the ruffians regret the atrocities they perpetrated on New Year's eve? Eid holidays saw death of 18 people. Is this what celebration is all about? Questions remain.

Tinkering with time

With their bare hands, they have taken on computerised machines and hairline technology for a place in the watch-repairing industry, writes A Maher amazed at the dexterity and precision with which they go about diagnosing and remedying flaws in different kinds of watches

IF TIME COULD be classified as something productive then it would be a fitting definition to accredit some of the existing livelihoods that have spawned over the years in a 'survive-to-sustain' Dhaka city. Some have, with no uncertaingivings to their future, started professions that have stuck then coalesced with the people and the society. One group of such imaginative opportunists are the watchmen of Dhaka's flea market. These "subordinates" of the watch-repairing industry have decided to take on computerised machines and hairline technology with their bare hands and shaky four-by-four stalls, kept standing by plastered wood. They repair almost any kind of watch that has a removable part inside and even famous brand names have found a place inside the "workshops".

The technicians themselves are something unique; their dexterity and precision with tweezers and minute watch parts are simply amazing. Kalam is one such worker. At 56, an age which has been made to look like time herself because of his profession, Kalam's daily routine consists of opening up the back of wristwatches and poking a small metallic probe into the maze of numerous gears, levers and wheels. This goes on for about forty seconds or a minute and then he looks up at you with a mystical expression that speaks of a tear in the fabric of time.

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Comes Eid and even eager proverbial rickshaw-pullers want to face the new dials of an unknown cadence. But to Selim these sort of returns only come once or twice a year and that

too, as he unconsciously mutters, "seems to pass fleetly. Maybe what remains is the charm and passion with which the watchmen amuse themselves and their customers."



Releasing death into air

Big impact of little learning

In every society, education is politically sensitive. So why did communist China allow WWF to include environmental elements in its centrally controlled primary and secondary school system? Because the Chinese government recognises that teaching people to respect natural resources is important for future prosperity and social cohesion, writes Claude Martin from Gland, Switzerland

THE DRAMATIC ECONOMIC and social changes that have taken place during the 20th century have produced, among many other things, a debate about the fundamental nature of education. Some argue that learning must be basically vocational, equipping young people with skills that will benefit both them and their national economies. Others take a loftier view, seeing education as essentially a way of describing what the world is really like, and thereby helping people to live in it.

The truth is probably somewhere between those two positions. For instance, the United Nations Population Conference in Cairo a few years ago recognised that education plays an important role in population control.

So it is with the global environment. Education can describe what is really going on in relation to say, climate change or loss of biodiversity and at the same time can encourage the habits of thought and provide the tools for people to come to grips with those challenges. Many of us in the environmental movement have known for some time that education is a crucial factor in our campaigns and I have been pleased recently to note that our efforts to promote specific environmental elements in learning are beginning to bear fruit.

More and more often these days I meet young people -- many of them employed in business -- to whom I do not need to explain that the resources of the planet are limited and that there are economic consequences arising from the fact. It is a reality they have learnt at school and are therefore able to notice and react to the evidence surrounding them.

The international conservation organisation WWF has been involved in environmental education since its early days and I do not regret a single penny we have spent on it. What is a matter of some concern, however, is the difficulty we sometimes have in persuading donors that investment in education will reap handsome dividends. Animal-lovers tend to be concerned with immediate solutions. Education is all about the future. It can also seem like a rather undesirable activity, given that it is politically sensitive, has no short-term effects and is difficult to fund.

Yet the practical impact of environmental education is becoming evident, perhaps nowhere more so than in China, the most populous country in the world and one of its vital repositories of biodiversity. WWF became involved five years ago, for the simple reason that environmental education can hardly be more im-

portant than in a place containing fully a fifth of the planet's human inhabitants.

Our task was a daunting one, not merely because of geographical area and the numbers involved -- China has 220 million primary and secondary level students -- but also because of the extreme sensitivity of an education system that has been seen mainly as an instrument for transmitting the ideology of the communist state. Curiously, though, the discipline required for the management of such a huge population and the maintenance of socialist purity has worked in WWF's favour.

The curriculum in Chinese schools is, like much else, centrally controlled, with the result that there is a very high degree of uniformity across the country, ethnic and cultural diversity notwithstanding. At the same time, what might be termed the propaganda elements in teaching serve to promote the idea of patriotism and it is in that context that students have been taught to see the idea of environmental care and protection.

This does not mean, however, that the system is static. Like everywhere else, China is changing and the education system must change with it. WWF has been able to contribute to reform of the curriculum. The Ministry of Education is now committed to using our approach as a basis for teacher

training and curricular development right across China.

The Environmental Educators Initiative will be incorporated in teacher training programmes and the concepts of "educational for sustainability" will feature in a new series of textbooks being produced by the People's Education Press for use in primary and middle schools. A further exciting development is the creation of the Beijing Environmental Education Activity Centre, run by the China Association for Science and Technology in partnership with WWF. The centre has already received more than 20,000 students and more such places are planned in other Chinese cities.

So who says investment in environmental education does not produce rapid and visible results? By any standards the progress of education programmes in China has been remarkable. For this, though, we have to thank not only the vision of our donors but also the Chinese government, which clearly sees the connection between economic and social well-being and the protection of natural wealth.

The lessons of environmental education are not only for schools.

— WWF Feature
The author is Director General of WWF International, based in Gland, Switzerland.