

# Fifteen points for making Dhaka a city: A manifesto for a civic place

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**D**HAKA is not a city, yet. Dhaka has transformed tremendously in the last fifteen years or so sporting more sparkling buildings, larger number of swanky automobiles, a greater sense of urban hustle and bustle, and yet, Dhaka is not a city. It is only a gigantic, bursting agglomerate of buildings, bazaars, and glorified bustees. A more popular imagery projects the city as an environmental time-bomb where sewage bubbles, fumes spew, vehicles run amok, parks vanish, and lives perish wantonly. We don't need an Amartya Sen or some Japanese research team to tell us how horrible things are; if we had a little self-respect, we should be able to confront the mayhem ourselves.

A city is not easy to define. All cities are alike and yet each city is different. A good place to understand a city is its meaning in different languages, revealing something of the dream and desire of its people. Of the Bangla terms "nagara" and "shahar," the former of Sanskrit and the latter of Persian origin, "nagara" relates to a place of buildings and structures, and also describes what is clever and cunning (things that are in abundance in our own city). The "nagarika," for example, is someone adept in the pursuit of "kama" and "artha." Suffixes in names like "pur," as in Gazipur, refers to a fort, while "ganj" to a market.

None of these terms suggest the idea of a civic polity, the ethical and spiritual basis of collective living in a modern city. In the grand sweep of our agricultural rhetoric, our deep and ancient sentiment for the soil, we continue to see the city as a curse when in fact it is now as essential and crucial as the paddy-field.

The English term "city" derives from "civitas," a Latin word with a cluster of meanings: citizen, civic, and civilization. As the city draws people from various ethnic, racial, and social categories into one space, and becomes a place where differences and complexities occur by definition, the most critical need for a city is a civilized mode for addressing differences. New York City or New Delhi works superbly with its multiethnic complexities (and when they do not, it is apocalyptic). We with a more homogeneous society, on the other hand, have elevated disagreement to a national institution, where conflicts and confrontations, and indifference and intolerance have become main modes of our social interaction. Our civic commitment and civil responsibilities lie completely abandoned.

When we raise 15 points for making Dhaka a city, we would like to maintain that Dhaka lacks fundamental ingredients that make a city a city. And unless an agenda for a civic life is advanced, Dhaka will continue to spiral down into more and more anarchy.

Here are then fifteen wishful points for a better, livable, and decent city:

1. A "good" city does not just happen; it is envisioned, planned in a professional manner, and then implemented with meticulous dedication. Before anything else, we need an understanding on what makes a good city: What kind of urban life and culture will deliver the most collective good to most of its citizen (something that hasn't been discussed in our plentiful seminars and symposiums). This is followed by a vision, a comparatively clearer articulation of what a city wants to be. Finally, the "Master Plan" of a city becomes a concrete document of that vision: recommendations for urban policies and forms. So far, Dhaka has had no vision whatsoever but a spate of mediocre plans produced by some third-rate inter-

national consultants. The contribution of local institutions and experts has been hopelessly useless. Why should we not receive the best? Let our governments have the vision and the audacity to go and seek the best professionals in the world, if that is necessary, but let us entrust the future of the city to people who understands cities, knows how they work, and how they can be reorganized. As ever newer forms of modernization and globalization hit the horizon of Dhaka, it needs a more informed and dynamic attention.

2. In the meantime, Dhaka is growing, if it can be called growth, through a worst spurt of ad-hocism; the only planning technique that exists is "jokhon jemon, tokhon temon." The institutions empowered to manage the city have failed miserably in their role. In fact, much of the woes of the city can be traced back to the corrupt chambers of these institutions. Everyone knows that but nothing is done. The present structure and method of operation of these urban institutions will not - WILL NOT - produce anything productive and progressive for Dhaka. First things first. If we really desire a better city, all those dysfunctional and diseased institutions should be thoroughly overhauled, transformed, or even disbanded if need be. Next, we need a mayor - a Teddy Kolek who transformed a sleepy Jerusalem into a modern city, a Rudy Guiliani who changed dreary parts of New York to an upbeat one someone who loves his city dearly and wishes to see it bloom, and not a political toady whose idea of development is to legally vandalize the city by mindless markets and tottering over-bridges.

3. Dhaka is a traffic nightmare. That is perhaps the biggest understatement about the city of Dhaka. Our street manner is a vivid manifestation of our deeper urban behaviour: self-centered, undisciplined, and life-threatening to others. Only by a radical restructuring of the traffic network can Dhaka function as a truly cosmopolitan place. 50% of Dhaka's traffic problems emerges from a lack of traffic and civic sense, and the other 50% from lack of roads. The same surface of roads that existed in the 1960s is servicing Dhaka now while traffic volume has increased tenfold. The city of *ba-anno bazaar* and *teppanno goli*, the capital city of a nation, has only two premier roads (Airport Road and Mirpur Road) running north and south along the axis of the city's development. What about a water bus system circling the city, following the natural course of rivers framing Dhaka? What about a mass transit railway that both circles and intersects the city, but in both cases gets people off the clogged inner streets and into a faster way of moving? Is anybody noticing? Is anybody listening? Roads, roads, we need more roads! We just need more ways of getting around.

4. People in Sao Paolo say about their polluted city that one of the best things about it is you can at least see the air you breathe. If Sao Paolo is up there, Dhaka is not far behind. To the title of "one of the top twenty populous cities of the world" we can add another glorious one for Dhaka: One of the, if not the, most polluted cities in the world. The malaise is monumental: Air pollution. Water pollution. Noise pollution. Visual pollution. And then there is the perennial problem of garbage clearing and disposal in our *le nagari tilottama*. An idea: How about organizing a rally, gather all our trash in rented trucks, go in a colorful procession, and dump it in the lobby of Nagar Bhaban? How about doing that every month?

5. Urban spaces are the most important ingredients of a city. Buildings alone never make a city, but buildings and spaces in a well-

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knit fabric. The spaces - lungs, if you will - include large areas of assembly, parks, gardens, lake-fronts, riverfronts, etc. Dhaka one time had an enviable resource of such spaces; now they have either vanished or are vanishing in an avalanche of greed and manipulation. "Light, Green, Air!" that old modernist slogan that produced cities like Chandigarh and Brasilia is not as defunct as one thinks. Dhaka was, and is no longer, but again can be a place of light, green, and air. An immediate and water-tight moratorium should be set on all open spaces. And spaces that have been brutally violated should be recovered without mercy. The mayor of Istanbul in the 1980s bulldozed his way through indus-

7. "A city is a place where a child walking on the street decides one day what he wants to do with his life." The architect Louis Kahn made that observation about the vitality of a city, about its institutions that cater to the mental well-being of its people. Active institutions like cultural centers, libraries (the only inspiring library in the fine city of Dhaka belongs to a foreign council), museums of all kinds, athletic centers, movie theaters... are essential like oxygen to the future of a city (and in turn the nation). Think of your ten-year-old. Where can you take her for a spark of inspiration, for a possible magical moment that just might change her life? It should not be acceptable that we leave things to fate in Dhaka, and let that child

generation know that there used to be canals crisscrossing old Dhaka, somewhat like Venice? How many realize Dhaka is an island framed by three rivers? Well, how many know that there is actually a river in Dhaka? The choking of Buriganga is the most tragic event in recent times, something that continues shamelessly despite the continuing uproar. A similar fate awaits Asulia and other wetlands around the city. A radical overhaul of Buriganga river and its banks is crucial for an economic, transport and cultural revitalization of Dhaka. The river can again become a major life blood, and the riverfront a much more organized area providing renewed recreational, civic, economic, and transport facilities for the residents

environment - benches, sculptures, fences, light-posts, signages, billboards, bus stands, newspaper stands, the whole paraphernalia that falls under "urban art." Every little thing matters. And being a poor country who shouldn't we be concerned about that? Why then should we endure those ugly concoction out of bathroom tiles, those horrific things that sell for art and get constructed for money, that cartoon of an Islamic architecture in the form of arches at ZIA VIP terminal, or that ungainly bird sculpture in a city crossing that neither inspires nor edifies, or those obnoxious boxes set up as newstands right in the middle of a footpath? Perhaps an Urban Arts Commission made of

not just a numerical and fiscal matter; it can enhance the quality of life, both the life of the immediate dwellers and the life of the city. And yet housing is Dhaka's greatest failure. One reason for the city's chaotic condition is that we have not been able to create suitable large-scale residential models for the many different communities that inhabit it. The public sector housing, catering to government and corporation employees has no innovative models unlike say New Delhi and Karachi with similar financial and social resources. The limited and lower income groups have been completely ignored in whatever housing programs we have. In short, our platoon of housing experts has not been able to provide any vision of how we should live as a group in new urban conditions. They are still floundering with two dull-witted models: the individual plot with the independent bungalow-style house, and the individual plot with a clunky apartment building. The two does not add up to a wholesome whole, nor create any fabric of a residential complex, a cohesive community with an admirable quality of life. The brainless strategy of making "new" housing areas by plotting and subdividing land should be ceased immediately, and alternative imaginative models of mass housing should be explored. In Dhanmondi, for example, instead of building up a whole plot in an individual manner, 7 to 8 plots could be pulled together and developed as one single housing complex with various internal facilities including generous open spaces for the whole complex. Similar strategies may be taken for Uttara, Purbachal and other so-called planned towns.

12. The general form of a city - its physical and spatial configuration is capable of nurturing or disrupting the nature of communities. Dhaka has seen a gradual deterioration of its communities, seen in the collapse of the idea of the *moholla* and tattering away of the cohesiveness that defined it earlier. Dhaka has become a city of fragments, broken down to the individual households living in their walled enclaves. Notice how the biggest investment in the city is walls and fences, none of which fare in our rural dwellings... so much for civic polity! The reasons may be fodder for sociologists and anthropologists, but it is possible that the development of a thoughtless physical fabric is affecting the social one.

13. Certain areas in the city "urban treasures" - should be immediately marked as special zones, and every means should be adopted with the utmost urgency to preserve them through regulations. If there are few places left in Dhaka that could be labeled as urban

treasures, Sherebanglangar is one of them. But in our urban illiteracy we do not realize that Sherebanglangar is a masterpiece in world architecture, created by one of the greatest architects of the twentieth century. With the buildings in a setting of lakes, gardens, orchards, and parks, it is perhaps the closest modern vision for a "Bengali city." Sometimes it's a mystery how that chemistry was possible in this city of mediocrity. But fear not, souls braver than you and I, greater than Kahn and Michel angelo combined, are fully active in their intent to "civilize" Sherebanglangar. They are building mind-boggling boxes all around the complex, they are converting Kahn's brick buildings into glorified slums, they are driving away people from the plaza, they are building over lakes, they are even "beautifying" spaces within the Assembly, all these in their sly process to steal from this hapless city one bit of world-class phenomenon. Forget special zone, why not paint the damn building pink and get it over with?

14. Architecture - building as a catalytic event - has often been an occasion to give new impetus to a city. The building of Sherebanglangar was such an occasion; it oriented the growth of Dhaka to the north but also provided an urban anchor for the city beyond the old railway lines. If Sherebanglangar was a spark produced in the 1960s, Dhaka needs another one. Like the inspiring architectural showmanship in Berlin where the best architects of Europe were invited to build exemplary buildings, or the Pompidou Centre in Paris that converted an anonymous area into an urban mecca, or the Asian Games Village in New Delhi that provided a new model of urban housing. What is needed is to take a large area in the city and develop it in an exemplary way to inspire and edify people. The old airport area is right there under our nose waiting to be used as a talisman for the city (before it is schemed off as plots). We should invite ten top architects of the world to provide their visions for Dhaka using that area, and perhaps implement one of the ideas. Even if the process costs a fortune, it is nothing compared to what priceless gift it will bring to the future of the city.

15. In the absence of any solid tradition of civic urban culture, Dhaka city is the sole model, the city par excellence in the country. It is ironic that every small town, every nook and corner in the mofussil wishes to mimic a dysfunctional Dhaka in some form or other. The future of the country depends on what we make of Dhaka city.

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tries and warehouses that clogged up the banks - once gardens at the edge - of the Bosphorus, and recovered the open spaces again. It's possible!

6. The sidewalk (or the footpath) is the supreme mark of a civility of a city; it belongs to the culture of walking, strolling and promenading. The quality of sidewalks gives evidence to what the city managers think about a fundamental human condition: the pedestrian and his humanity. Dhaka shows no such conceptions. How can it? It's a city where driving a car is a symbol of status, and the poor pedestrian is just a pitiable creature at the bottom of the totem-pole. Such urban pedestrian devices as boulevards, promenades, riverwalks, just simple sidewalks with various activities that are the hall mark of all livable cities - Paris, Florence, New York, Istanbul, even our neighboring Mumbai, Kuala Lumpur, and Kolkata - are completely non-existent in Dhaka. The only decent sidewalks are in Sherebanglangar, and that because it was conceived by a humanist American architect. All other sidewalks in this city of 10 million are but an extension of the open drain, and whatever is there - two feet or three - are occupied by vendors, bovines, and the debris of urban negligence.

groped around for an elusive destiny. We need to manage and maneuver our fate. We need catalysis for our imagination, and challenges to our cocoon-like existence. We have every right to participate in a world culture, as we should have the imperative to contribute to it. So, why not few movie theaters that show the finest films from every corner of the world (and we find out how even countries like Iran and Vietnam are producing world-class films)? Why not outdoor theaters where we invite to perform a flamenco group from Spain, a *qawwali* ensemble from Pakistan, a jazz band from New Orleans, a *No* theater from Japan, a *rai* singer from Algeria, a fusion band from Mali? Why not a truly dynamic museum sidewalks with various activities that are the hall mark of all livable cities - Paris, Florence, New York, Istanbul, even our neighboring Mumbai, Kuala Lumpur, and Kolkata - are completely non-existent in Dhaka. The only decent sidewalks are in Sherebanglangar, and that because it was conceived by a humanist American architect. All other sidewalks in this city of 10 million are but an extension of the open drain, and whatever is there - two feet or three - are occupied by vendors, bovines, and the debris of urban negligence.

8. How many of the younger

of the vicinity, and the city in general. Like the horse-racing in Sienna, the bull-chase in Spanish towns, or the Sanja Matsuri festival in Tokyo, the now lost boat racing (*nouka baich*) could be revived into a spectacular event for Dhaka.

9. "Trees." Just that single word changes the perspective on a city. A model in the mind is the street in front of Dhaka Medical College, or what it used to be, a most dignified row of shadow-giving, corridor-creating trees, or a street intersection in Becharam Dewry with a banyan tree creating a cool space-defining public square. But that was band from New Orleans, a *No* theater from Japan, a *rai* singer from Algeria, a fusion band from Mali? Why not a truly dynamic museum sidewalks with various activities that are the hall mark of all livable cities - Paris, Florence, New York, Istanbul, even our neighboring Mumbai, Kuala Lumpur, and Kolkata - are completely non-existent in Dhaka. The only decent sidewalks are in Sherebanglangar, and that because it was conceived by a humanist American architect. All other sidewalks in this city of 10 million are but an extension of the open drain, and whatever is there - two feet or three - are occupied by vendors, bovines, and the debris of urban negligence.

10. The proper imageability of a city is given by all those things that add up to the total urban visual

seriously committed lovers of Dhaka who knows the art of urbanity might be entrusted to monitor such imageries for the city.

11. Housing is the fabric of the city. How we define and conceive housing is finally how we see our cities, and vice versa. Housing is

## Natural carp breeding ground under threat

GAZI NURUL ALAM

**F**ISH is a much loved food in this country and a major source of protein for the people. Traditionally in this riverine country fish had been plentiful in supply and a fish-based dish was part of our characteristic dietary culture.

But "go fishing and live happy" days have disappeared as indigenous fish resources have dwindled to an alarming level necessitating adoption of new concepts like "fish sanctuaries" and high tech fish farms. The natural reservoir of fish resource is facing severe man made threat of extinction. The 'Halda river' is one of the revealing examples. What is happening there? Halda river flows through Roujan, Hathazari and Fatikchhari thana of North Chittagong. This river is known as "the potential natural breeding ground of carp fish" since time immemorial. According to the Fish Catch Statistics of Bangladesh, Department of Fisheries (1994-95) an estimated 9,144.54 kg of carp fingerlings used to be produced from different natural sources like Halda, Jamuna, Padma, Arial Kha and Modhumoti rivers. And out of those natural sources, Halda river was the major breeding ground for carp fish. In the year 2000-2001, the carp hatchling production from natural sources came down drastically at 1,872 kg. (Sharanika, fish weekly, 10-24, August, 2002).

Obviously the question arises --

what are the reasons for this drastic decline in carp fingerlings production? Carp is a major inland fish of Bangladesh. An estimated 384,289mt of carp fish is produced from different inland sweet water sources (DOF, MOFL, GOB, 2001-2002) and this fish species contributes roughly 20-25 per cent of the total fish production. A lot of people are engaged in this sector and they entirely depend on it for their livelihood. But unfortunately this carp fishery is now facing crucial days in its open water habitat (excluding closed water sector). The spawning ground of major carps (Rui, Catla, Mngale etc) in Halda river is under threat and on the verge of ruination.

Actually what is happening in Halda river? According to a report published in "Prothom Alo" a few months ago (14 May, 2003), the carp fishery in Halda river was under strong threat. The carp hatchling production in Halda river is decreasing alarmingly -- at the rate 25-30 per cent per year. Because the nearby people are catching the egg-laying/brood fish from the river during the breeding time (April, May). They are mercilessly catching the brood fish (varying in 10-25 kg of body weight) by different fishing methods. If the brood fish are caught before spawning -- there can't be reproduction and multiplication in their numbers.

As a result the fingerlings production is in danger and the river is getting empty of both carp fry and adult fish. Actually though the gov-

ernment department concerned declared the 10 km vicinity along Halda river (in Hathazari and Fatikchhari thana under Chittagong district) as "Fish-Sanctuary" two years ago, the enforcement of this declaration could not be ensured due to boundary dispute between the two thanas. So the people of the said areas take the opportunity to catch brood fish and gradually destroy the future carp fishery. According to the report, these brood fish (Rui, Mrigale, Kalabauth, Catla etc.) migrate to this part of Halda river for the purpose of spawning in the month of April and May from Karnaphuli, Matamuhuri and Shangu rivers. All these brood fish tend to float on the surface of water before and after spawning because at this time they become very weak physically. At this moment the opportunistic people catch the fish mercilessly. As per available local report it is known that these people set their nets in Halda and Karnaphuli rivers under Roujan and Hathazari thana in order to trap the brood fish during the breeding season. All this unauthorised fishing goes on in collaboration with local musclemen.

But the general local people are quite against this unauthorised fishing. It is their view that if the brood fish are caught like this then their fish trade will decline in the following years. According to the statement of a local old man who is involved with fish trade in the area for the last 40 years, he used to get

plenty of released carp fish eggs in a single fishing effort. But now the situation is quite opposite. Even if he is involved in fishing for continuous ten hours, it is still difficult to manage or collect even two kg of eggs. He thinks that the only reason behind this is that brood fish are being caught indiscriminately.

It may be stated here that Halda river is the only source of sweet water perhaps in the whole world where the professional fishermen can collect fertilised eggs from the river bed and arrange for hatching them into spawning later on. But in other rivers only the fish fry can be caught, not the eggs like in Halda river. So in the prevailing condition in Halda river the breeding ground of major carp is going to be destroyed. It is high time for us to protect this silver resource of ours.

Under the present crucial situation in Halda river one likes to suggest the following in order to conserve our silver resource.

(1) It is highly essential to demarcate the exact area of natural breeding ground of carp fish in the Halda river. In this connection a team of fisheries experts may contribute their effort to the concerned GOB department.

(2) Once the boundary line of the breeding ground is fixed then the area needs to be declared as no-fishing zone (fish sanctuary). The concerned GOB department should take necessary action in this regard.

(3) The declared zone should be brought under constant watch in

order to check unauthorised fishing specially during breeding period (April-July).

(4) The local people living near the spot should be motivated not to practice such unauthorised fishing of brood fish. They should be briefed about the importance of brood fish.

(5) Enforcement of fisheries laws should be strictly applied for the greater interest of the nation.

**Conclusion:** Fisheries sector plays an important part in the economy of Bangladesh. This sector contributed to 5.3 per cent to the GDP in 2001, and 11 per cent to foreign exchange earning. Besides, a lot of people are engaged in this sector to earn their livelihood. So this sector needs to be attended urgently.

Fish is a renewable resource, but it must be conserved and due care should be taken. Bangladesh could feel proud that it still has vast sweet water fish population and some 260 fish species use to roam across different parts of the country along the water routes. But we must not feel complacent as each.

The age-old proverb needs refurbishment. Instead of 'go fishing, live happy', we should popularise 'cultivate fish, push poverty aside'. Fish is our silver resource. Top priority should be given to their protection.

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