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A dream picture of Dhaka

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As a nation, we have indeed come a long way since the autocratic Pakistan days, when we grew up with street slogans such as 'government ka maal, daria mey dhaal', or something near about (pardon any slips, please), meaning 'if it is government property, dump it in a river'. That was because it was Pakistan and my generation was born when celebrations, albeit subtle, was already on for the Bangalee's emancipation from the clutches of a despotic state.

While we shall continue to depend on service providers, the onus is on each individual citizen, in his or her individual and collective role, to create a situation that corporate bodies such as DCC, RAJUK, DWASA, metropolitan police, traffic sergeants, and gas providers can also rely on them. If we believe the government belongs to the people, and it does, we must appreciate the limitations that it and its wings are beset with. What we should not tolerate is negligence to duty, misuse of funds, inordinate delay in imparting service and preferential treatment by a government

electro-mechanism. Alternative and effective jobs must be found for those who will be replaced by automation in traditional occupations, for manpower shall remain our biggest wealth for as long as we can see. Sadly, it can also continue to be a burden if not usefully employed.

We must find ways to allure people back to our towns and villages. We cannot ask people to serve outside Dhaka as doctors, engineers, and teachers while not willing to set foot beyond Ashulia if called for with this excuse or that. We must be willing to sacrifice for the gain of a people who

will be able to stand taller.

In five years time we may be holed up in multi-storied slums, content that we have a place to hide our head. We may be able to reach Motijheel in five hours from Uttara. We may be buying a bagful of groceries with a carload of banknotes. We may be getting a menial job with a high university degree, and then being questioned by Dudok why we are being corrupt.

Alternatively, we may reach Tongi from Jatrabari in one hour. We may have trees sharing the land with our buildings. We may have processions of professionals demanding posting to mofussil towns. We may argue over what vacation spot to choose while having a hefty meal with the entire family.

The choice that will be laid on our table clearly depends on how we each act our part as citizens and as members of a society. It is not the task of the level-headed to blame every ill on the government while enacting a nefarious deed to serve one's self-centred purpose at the cost of the community.

This city they say has a population of plus ten million. If we consider fifty

percent of them above ten years, we have approximately five million people who can do at least one good deed each day, such as not litter the street, not spit in the open, not encroach on unauthorised property, not waste natural gas, not destroy public assets, help an aged, teach an illiterate, plant a sapling, pay utility bills, not use illegal electric connections.... That would be one hundred and fifty million good deeds a month. Do you think anyone could stop us from attaining honour and dignity?

Let it not be said that this country lacks good laws and able people. We are short of neither. We require proper execution of laws and judicious utilization of our human resources to see a Dhaka that need not be defined. We each have a dream picture of Dhaka in five years, and beyond. All we need to do is wake up and fulfil that dream individual and collective.

Along with calls to dump government property in the rivers, we also grew up with classroom slogans, such as 'God helps those who help themselves'.

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It is not acceptable that a citizen will flout building rules by erecting what is not permitted, and then expect that his garbage will be collected on time by the city corporation. The two tasks may not appear seemingly related, but they are. One must make one's positive contribution before expecting others to perform positively. One cannot carry out unlawful practice at work and home, and then expect the city to be fine; that is simply not workable.

Despite an arduous, painful, and sacrificing 24-year long struggle to establish our national identity, punctuated by momentous events such as 1952, 1954, 1969, 1971, 1990 and 2008, the attitude of the people towards the government remained unfortunately unchanged. Shall we be wrong in stating that the feeling was mutual?

Seldom do we bear in mind that this government of Bangladesh, for which we sacrificed so much, is our government. Many of us have goose pimples recalling the excitement of the formation of our very own government under the mango trees of Mujibnagar, Meherpur 1971. And yet there remains a wide gap of understanding between the government and the people, particularly in terms of the role of each constituent; in the context of Dhaka City with respect to services expected and the services disbursed. Only a government based on truth and imbued with the spirit of independence, the persistent struggles for a Bangalee nation and the heroic war of liberation can taper that fissure of suspicion, accusation, and answerability.

Even as you read this there are fellow citizens who are saying in baithak khans that Dhaka will be unliveable in the next five years. The good news is that the sceptics have been saying that for the past four-five decades. The best news is that they have not yet left the city, which means all is not lost up till now. As for the rest of us we survive on the same hope.

To begin the task of raising our capital city to the ranks of the envied and functional cities of Asia and the world, we must first ensure that our government adopts national strategies that are people-oriented and pro-poor housing, healthcare, education, mass transportation, flood protection, urban agriculture, and effective municipal services should be some of the foci of the state administration.

Policies, legislation, planning, grants, implementation, approvals, and punitive measures must all be based on truth, sensitivity and sensibility, and not on egotism, whims and nepotism. Government officers and the public, the armed forces, police and other law-enforcing agencies, lawyers, doctors, management personnel and business administrators, architects, engineers, planners, constructors and developers, must all rise above self-interest, family interest, group, and party interest.

Let us begin at the individual level, at my level, at your level when a sacrifice is expected. Let us promote collective interest even if it means that I/we have to give up something. Let us remember that I/we too shall be benefited from the common betterment of the lot, for I/we are also part of that community and neighbourhood, that country, and nation.

servant or an office.

For instance, it is not acceptable that a citizen will flout building rules by erecting what is not permitted, and then expect that his garbage will be collected on time by the city corporation. The two tasks may not appear seemingly related, but they are. One must make one's positive contribution before expecting others to perform positively. One cannot carry out unlawful practice at work and home, and then expect the city to be fine; that is simply not workable. To create city icons such as a Singapore or a Kuala Lumpur or a Dubai, their people have cooperated with sincerity, honesty, patience, and belief. There is no better a player to make Dhaka a liveable and enviable city in the not-too distant a future.

Our expectations must match our mutual accountability and respect. It serves least a nation if only we expect playful bunnies, but are not willing to grow the carrots. Nor shall it be wise to cultivate carrots on lands on which the farmers have grazed the cow for centuries. A balance between need, sustainability, and future projection must be struck, and landmark decisions must be based on extensive studies, in-depth analyses, patriotism, facts, and legitimacy.

It is important to realise the need to start early this education regarding one's responsibility and role, and national goals. Topics covering what the government agencies do are as important as what those agencies can expect from the people they serve. Primary education should infuse nationalism in the heart and mind of every child so that they can see the entire build up to the War of Liberation, the nine-month war and sixteenth December being enacted with them as participants. Their realisation of their responsibilities will follow naturally.

Public awareness is at its lowest ebb when it comes to defining a citizen's role in national survival and development. We usually think in terms of getting, not giving our dues. The case of a minister advising us to pay our taxes almost daily on national television channels and the print media, and then being discovered that he had not fulfilled his annual duties is a terrible and pathetic case in point. The minister tried to succeed as member of the cabinet but failed as an individual citizen. That phenomenon (being repeated in every office, industry, business, corporation, college and university, association and union) is what is setting us back two steps every time we move forward three.

In five years time, Dhaka is likely to have more people, but many of them will be environmentally conscious, as is the trend, and that is one positive sign. Service agencies will have to switch from manual dependency to

