

Selected extracts from the March issue of Forum



# Making Dhaka livable

SADIQ AHMED

**D**HAKA city's traffic congestion has reached nightmare proportions. Unless corrective actions are taken soon, there is a risk that this could sharply reduce the city's productivity. In view of Dhaka's dominance, this could reduce the incentive for domestic and foreign investment and pose a serious threat to the country's growth momentum.

However, an approach to resolving the traffic problem alone may at best bring short-term relief. The traffic mess is simply a reflection of the deeper problem of poor city management. So, a longer-term sustained progress in the traffic situation requires a holistic approach to improving the overall city management that aims at making Dhaka more livable.

## The Dhaka City Challenge

With a population of almost 13 million, Dhaka Metropolitan City is the 16th largest city in the world. At the same time, it is consistently ranked as one of the world's least livable cities. Although income growth is higher and the poverty incidence is lower than the rest of Bangladesh, Dhaka still is a low-income city with large numbers of poor when compared with most mega-cities of the world.

Holding the prospects for better income opportunities than most parts of Bangladesh, rapid migration is causing Dhaka's population to grow much faster than the rest of the country. This fast urbanisation is putting pressure on the city's limited land, an already fragile environment, and weak urban services.

Poor city management, low efficiency, and pervasive corruption are exacerbating the problems. Traffic congestion has become unbearable, creating huge delays in covering small distances. There is an increasing risk that the central city may soon get divided into "islands" with little or no connectivity with each other, creating huge loss of productivity and high transaction costs. Water and air pollution from poor waste and traffic management poses serious health risks. The already acute slum population is growing further, contributing to serious human

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# A new Dhaka is possible

KAZI KHALEED ASHRAF

**O**NCE upon a time, Dhaka was a very fine city. There were shaded and leafy streets, boats plied in the heart of the city, the air was cleaner, there was a sense of community among its citizens, people promenaded on the banks of the river, children played on open fields, until all those were usurped by the fangs of merciless urbanisation.

Dhaka is now marked more by a frenzied economic engine and a lopsided sense of its future. What is touted as "growth" in Dhaka is actually the pillaging of the city in the name of planning and development.

The end result is the same as elsewhere where the city is left to such pillage: curse of pollution, widening social inequality, increasing break-down of community, wretched transport and road system, blatant occupation of land and waterways, and ravaging of public spaces. No wonder Dhaka has acquired the dubious title of being one of the most "unliveable cities" of the world.

Many modern cities have encountered pains of ruthless urbanisation, where development was not orchestrated by determined planning but by a combination of laissez-faire, ad-hoc, and pell-mell procedures. The city, in such a condition, practically becomes a hostage "in the hands of the mobs," as one writer was to comment on a major American city in the 19th century.

The British writer Francis Trollope wrote about another American city from the same time: "Every bee in the hive is actively employed in the search for honey ... neither art, science, learning, nor pleasure can seduce them from their pursuit."

The city of possibilities slowly becomes a curse, a wretched place, when it succumbs to the relentless pursuit of monetary profits unless a combination of careful planning and civic commitment can turn that around. Dhaka is far from turning around; we are very much in the bowels of a disorder and don't quite know, besides some false promises and fake grandiosities, where to go with our city.

In the epoch of digital revolution and increased GDP, climate change and energy conservation, where is the vision for the city and its regions? Where is the place of cities in our national vision in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

We seem to be hop-stepping from one problem solving gesture to another: it is transport one day and housing another day, and then it is cleaning the river one moment and land-grabbers another moment. While all those enterprises are crucial, and we feel a little assured that some of those concerns are now part of a broader consciousness, the city is basically seen as a series of problems, and we are merely busy fixing them. We are basically proceeding without an understanding of the city as a civic, living experience.

A good city is a civic organism. If piling buildings after buildings next to each other, on top of one another, does not make a city, what does? The term "city" itself derives from civitas, a Latin word with a cluster of meanings: citizen, civic, and civilisation. As the city draws people from

various ethnic, racial, and social categories into one space, it becomes a place defined by differences and complexities.

The most critical need for a city is a civilised means of addressing and sorting out these differences. The city ought to be a place where one may find one's personal and spiritual fulfillment in the company of others, uncoerced and in the light of human dignity.

The ultimate expression of a well-formed civic place is the cosmopolis that becomes, in the view of the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, "a city of refuge," a place that guarantees anyone the right to residence and hospitality, and the opportunity for work, recreating and creative activity in a "durable network of fulfillment."

For the full version of this article please read this month's Forum, available free with The Daily Star on March 8.

Kazi Khaleed Ashraf is an urbanist, architect, and writer, and teaches at the University of Hawaii. Ashraf's writings on the urban future of Dhaka, including sections of this article, appeared in The Daily Star and FORUM since 1996, which have occasionally been co-authored with architect Saif Ull Haque.

# The only solution

MD. SAIDUR RAHMAN

**T**RANSPORT is the lifeline of a city, and choices on public transit options are fundamental decisions which affect a city's future growth and development. The selection of an appropriate mass rapid transit (MRT) system is crucial, not only for creating a transit-friendly city where the urban poor have affordable and hassle-free access to transportation, but also for securing long term advances.

Currently, about 90 percent of transport sector budgetary allocation is for road sector development.



Though Dhaka is one of the least motorised cities in the world, its traffic congestion is one of the highest. Unplanned urbanisation, poor transportation planning, and lower land utilisation efficiency has turned the city into a dangerous urban jungle.

In a new report of the Economist Intelligence Unit, it has been ranked the world's second least livable city, ahead of only Harare. Although Dhaka's area is less than 1 percent of the country's total land area, it supports about 10 percent of the total population and 30 percent of the total urban population.

During the last four decades, Dhaka has recorded phenomenal growth in population

and area. It is presently one of the ten largest mega-cities of the world with a population of about 14 million and the highest annual growth rate and is expected to be the second largest city of the world with a population of 22.8 million by 2015.

The rapid rise in population along with increased and versatile urban land use patterns has generated considerable travel demand as well as numerous transport problems in Dhaka city. It has resulted in deterioration in accessibility, level of service, safety, comfort, operational efficiency and urban environment.

Bangladesh witnessed rapid growth of transport since independence in 1971. The overall annual growth rate is nearly 8.2 percent for freight transport and 8.4 percent for passenger transport. During this period, over \$40 billion has been invested in the transport sector. The energy-intensive road sector, in particular, has attracted the lion's share of the

allocation, far exceeding investments in other modes.

Currently, about 90 percent of transport sector budgetary allocation is for road sector development. Consequently, roadway inventory and number of vehicles has been registering a very high growth rate. During 1985-1993, the volume of road traffic increased by 88 percent whereas the volume of water and rail traffic declined in almost equal proportion.

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Md. Saidur Rahman is a Deputy Project Director, World Bank Funded TA Project, Bangladesh Railway, Rail Bhaban, Dhaka.

# A sustainable Dhaka

ADNAN MORSHED

**D**OES Dhaka have a sustainable urban future? The key challenge toward this goal seems to be in finding a comprehensive solution to the city's crippling traffic congestion. These days, the most common of the common grievances in the capital oozes from what is locally known as jaanjot.

In fact jaanjot, or Dhaka's traffic quagmire, offers a window into the complex web of interrelated urban dysfunctions, political mismanagement, and administrative failures.

In a 2008 Forbes list of 25 dirtiest cities of the world Dhaka was a close second behind Baku, Azerbaijan, the former Soviet manufacturing backwater with a life-threatening air pollution level. The report's dismal assessment of Dhaka was right on target reflecting what lakhs of Dhakaites experience everyday: "Traffic congestion in the capital continues to worsen with vehicles emitting fatal amounts of air pollutants daily, including lead."



office or the "plot" --is negative. Thus the public places have become the dreaded realm where the middleclass feels besieged by the threat of physical violence, corruption, and extortion.

The result of this sorry perception is twofold. First, the middle-class will unfortunately avoid public places and streets that are -- from an urban-planning point of view --considered the vital "organs" of a healthy city. I can foresee people going out of their homes only out of necessity and never for recreation.

So what is going wrong in Dhaka? Why can't we fix the traffic problem?

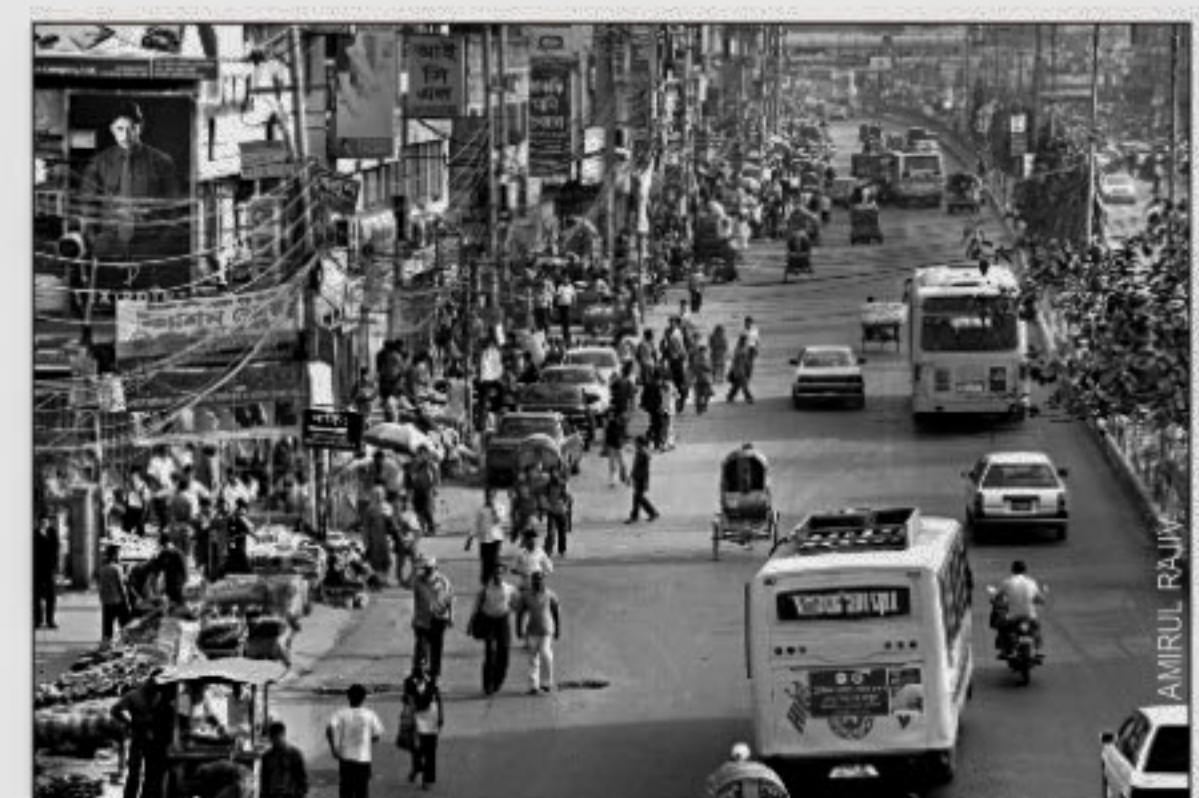
Traffic congestion, which chokes the natural urban mobility that sustains a city socially and economically, vastly compromises Dhaka's overall livability index and ability to attract foreign investors. Economists and the development community in general often ignore that unhealthy urban environments deter prospective foreign investors. Policy incentives are just not enough.

So what is going wrong in Dhaka? Why can't we fix the traffic problem? To think that this is merely a question of urban planning or transportation engineering is to grossly misconceptualise the widespread political, social, and cultural failures that result in the current urban chaos. In fact any sustainable solutions for Dhaka's traffic woes require us to take a 360-degree look at our society.

First of all simply going out of our homes has meant facing a plethora of threats: menacing muggers, reckless trucks, and health hazards of all kinds including air, noise, and visual pollution. Any space beyond the private domain -- home,

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Dr. Adnan Morshed is Assistant Professor, School of Architecture and Planning, The Catholic University of America, Washington, DC.



and law and order problems. It is obvious that actions to ease the traffic congestion, to ensure an adequate supply of basic services, and to tackle corruption and wastage are needed immediately to avoid a choking of the city's well being.

Importantly, the growing disparity in living standards in Dhaka between the surging slum dwellers and the conspicuously consuming well-to-do urban elite may lead to increased social and political instability. Evidence from around the world has shown that cities that are unable to address such large inequalities in living standards are more likely to face violent events than those that are less polarised.

## Main Constraints

International experience shows that the performance of a city is strongly correlated with the underlying city governance. This is hardly surprising. A city's governance essentially involves a sound legal framework assigning rules of business, responsibilities and accountability; a well-defined management structure; clear assignment of responsibility and accountability, and adequate coordination among concerned agencies; financial autonomy; and voice and participation by beneficiaries.

Legal framework: Dhaka is governed by a city government known as the Dhaka City Corporation (DCC). The legal framework for Dhaka city has evolved in an ad-hoc manner rather than through a systematic approach based on a careful assessment of the effectiveness of the city government in providing required services. This lack of a vision and a road map are major weaknesses of the legal framework. Consequently, the functions of the DCC are not clearly defined; the enabling environment for implementing these functions is weak; and a multiplicity of service agencies often with overlapping mandates have emerged.

Management structure: The DCC suffers from the same centralised management structure as the national government. All authority is vested with the mayor, who in turn is heavily dependent on the government for rules of engagement, and most importantly for finances. The remainder of DCC members, especially the ward commissioners, have little authority and consequently have limited effectiveness. Inevitably, this has led to heavy politicisation of the mayor position, which basically tends to function as an agent of the government in power.

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Sadiq Ahmed is Vice Chairman of the Policy Research Institute of Bangladesh. The article draws heavily on the book "Making Dhaka Livable" which he co-authored with Junaid Ahmad and Adebek Mahmud. The book was published by UPL, Dhaka in 2007.