

Traffic solution vs. class oppression

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AS Dhaka struggles to cope with its traffic congestion, many economists, city planners, urban transportation experts, and political leaders have offered different ideas from time to time. Some of the initiatives have worked (for example, banning rickshaws from certain thoroughfares) while others have not -- usually because of lack of enforcement (e.g. traffic rules). What have we learned from the successes and failures of other cities around the globe? To answer this question, let us consider the three following conclusions found across the globe:

- Easing of traffic problems requires political will, long-term commitment, and the buy-in of the city dwellers;
- Given that there is no single solution, or "silver bullet," for this multi-headed problem, assessment and evaluation of ideas and lessons from experiments are an important part of the process;
- Successful programmes generally adopt a multi-pronged approach following rigorous identification and valuation of benefits and costs.

Solving Dhaka's traffic problems is now of the highest priority for this government. Various estimates show that Dhaka's population is expected to grow at a rate of 4.2% per annum, and the growth rate of motorised vehicles is currently 10%. It will not be too far-fetched to stress that we need to manage both growth rates as part of a policy package to control traffic problems of the city.

Moreover, a recently published scientific paper on the composition of Dhaka traffic shows growing complexity, as well as the influence of absence of "lane marking or lane restriction, no phase in the traffic signal for right turning vehicles, inadequate pedestrian facilities,

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poor parking facilities, poor road surface conditions" that make Dhaka's traffic congestion a nightmare to solve.

At this juncture, as we review and debate the various proposals currently on the table to fix Dhaka's traffic problem and provide affordable means of transportation for the masses, one cannot overemphasise the need to balance our need for quick action with the time-honoured practice of sound project analysis. For our planners, a sense of level-headedness is all the more important since compounding our timeframe is the projection that the traffic situation will get worse before it gets better.

I would like to also bring in the concept of "universal access." Increasingly, we notice an awareness of the need of the slum dwellers and the poorest segment of Dhaka's population. According to a World Bank supported study of Dhaka's urban poor, there is ample evidence



that the need of the slum dwellers and its low-income inhabitants have not been given the weight they deserve. In two recent papers (one in *The Daily Star*) Garga Chatterjee of Harvard University raised an important issue relating to our approach to solving the traffic problems: equity. As he says in the *Daily Star* article: "A Matter of Roads -- Elite Panaceas and Encroached Commons" (DS, Dec.4, 2010), in reference to the offered solutions.

"... the nature of the voice solutions should be predictable -- widening of roads, getting people off the streets by tightening and enforcing traffic rules and, possibly, keeping rickshaws and bicycles off the busier areas. As a counter-force to this restrictive idea of urban citizenship one might ask, who really does the city belong to? And whether one likes it, cringes at it, celebrates it or wants them gone -- some facts are worth mentioning. At least 30% of the popu-

lation of Dhaka and Kolkata live in slums. Slums are not only the underbelly of a city, they are also a living critique of the dominant socio-political order of the sunlit city."

Chatterjee makes a passionate plea for the rights of jaywalker, bicyclists, and pedestrians. After all, if you live in Mirpur and ride a bicycle to work in Shyamoli, banning bicycles from the major thoroughfares would pose a major problem.

Equity in the context of urban planning and traffic congestions manifests in many different forms. Garga Chatterjee cites the case of road widening, which often happens by elimination of footpaths and expulsion of slum dwellers. In that case, human suffering and cost of resettlement need to be factored in during the process of project evaluation. One of the major flaws of the recently approved Dhaka Elevated Expressway (DEE) project was a lack of proper assessment of the impact

on the dwellers along the old railway line. I will mention four of the possible ways the poor may be impacted by the DEE: displacement during construction, employment opportunities, compensation offered to business and households affected, and the distribution of benefits after project completion.

The issue of equity and concern for the poor arise from other studies conducted in the developing countries. In a recent seminar at Buet, Prof. Stephen Ison of Loughborough University in UK said: "Transferability of policy focus should be on urban poor, access to employment opportunities, walking of pedestrians and non-motorised vehicles and highlighted on cycling provision, improving pedestrian facilities." (*Financial Express*, July 31, 2009).

Let us consider four proposals that are currently being evaluated: improvement in bus services, underground subway system (MRT), DEE,

and enhanced traffic restrictions. Each of these projects has a different impact on the city's population, in terms of job creation, noise and traffic, benefits and costs, as well as human dislocation, to mention a few. They also impact the urban environment, particularly air pollution and the ecology.

Finally, as we weigh the pros and cons of various projects, there is a need for open discussion and a commitment from our civic leaders. In a paper in a local newspaper, entitled "Dhaka City's Traffic Jam and Planned Solutions," Sultana argues that experts who have studied traffic management identify three "E"s for achieving results: enforcement, engineering, and education. Another study funded by JICA suggests two more "E"s: environment and economy. Our point is, these five "E"s need to be supplemented by another "E": equity.

In conclusion, I argue that while the nature of the political system in Bangladesh requires instant action and a short gestation period (to complete a project before the next elections), some of the impact are very long-term. Planners can ignore the long-term impact only at their own peril. An example is the rush to build dams in the '60s, when environmental and equity considerations were given less importance than immediate economic gains. Subsequently, the tides turned against this approach and many major projects were challenged in courts. All traffic projects initiated, including flyovers, elevated expressways and subways systems, are likely to bypass the poor or have a major impact on them. My schema is an attempt to place all the issues on the table.

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Socio-cultural equity for informal sector

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IN Bangladesh, the largest employment sector is agriculture, which accounts for about 48% of the total labour force (aged 15 years and above) of 49.5 million.

The informal sector is an important addition to development economy, especially in Third World countries like Bangladesh. The International Labour Organization (ILO) identified the following characteristics of informal sectors:

- Ease of entry;
- Lack of formal educational qualification;
- Low wages;
- Forced overtime;
- Denial of basic rights;
- Little job security;
- Short-term work contract;
- Very little capital;
- Family ownership of enterprises;
- Enterprises distribute products directly to consumers;
- No fixed hours of operation.

According to the ILO definition: "The informal sector consists of small-scale, self-employed activities typically at a low level of organisation and technology, with the primary objective of generating employment and income. The activities are usually conducted without proper recognition from the authorities and escape the attention of the administrative machinery responsible for enforcing laws and regulations."

The ILO introduced the concept of the informal sector more than 25 years ago. When the formal sector does not provide enough job opportunities, rural migrant and urban dwellers alike find employment in micro-level production and distribution of goods and services. These largely unorganised, unrecorded and unregulated small-scale activities constitute the informal sector.

Bangladesh is one of the most densely populated countries of the world.

The rate of population increase is 2.4% per year, which aggravates the already scanty man-land ratio.

Since the economy is mainly agricultural, with 85% people living in rural areas and more than 60% of the labour force employed in agricultural activities, the most distressing situation is the increasing landlessness (about 60% of the households are landless or near landless).

Reasons for entering informal sector

The family environment influences women participation in the informal labour market:

- Meager income of the households influences women to work as paid labour in the informal sectors;
- Landless rural women work with male workers in agriculture to

problems because employers tend to retrain workers if they find any claim against them.

Workers in the agriculture sector are paid a very low wage, usually Tk.200 per day. Women get half of what males get, which is not enough to meet their daily needs.

This sector never follows the labour code. Most of the workers of the informal sector are obliged to work more than 8 hours a day. Sometimes they have to work late hours, but never get any remuneration for excess work. If workers are not able to complete their duty, their wages are deducted.

Recognition as labour

Labour recognition is the prime issue of the informal sector workers.



- increase their family income;
- Women in paid sector are engaged in construction, brick-field work or brick-breaking.

Working conditions

There is a tremendous need of employment for the rural poor, who migrate to urban areas for livelihood. They are engaged in the informal sector without formal appointment. As a result, they face

They want identity card in order to prove that they are workers.

Workers in the informal sector aspire for decent and secure lives, increased income and access to basic social services. The persistence and expansion of informal employment pose both a challenge and an opportunity to the local, national and international labour markets.

In order to recognise workers as labourers, the government should provide them with identity cards, both to the paid and the self-employed workers in the informal sector.

Informal sector workers have to face numerous occupational problems, which need to be solved so that their rights can be established. A more intensive and pragmatic policy should be adopted for the development of workers, particularly for women workers working in the informal sector.

The minimum daily wage should be fixed so that a labourer can meet the minimum needs of his/her family for 7 days with the income of 6 days. Equal wages for male and female labourers must be insured to

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remove the long-standing discrimination against women.

In 1984, an ordinance named "The Agricultural Labour (Minimum Wage) Ordinance" was formulated for agricultural labourers, but has not been put in practice due to lack of necessary rules and government initiative.

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How to hack a sleb phone



THE UK's biggest newspaper is in deep trouble. The News of the World has an amazingly long record of hot celebrity scoops. But staff got them by illegally hacking the phone accounts of actors, singers and politicians, police say. Newspaper executives deny it, claiming that 99 percent of their staff, angels in human form, would NEVER do such wicked things.

Yeah right. Well, I can give you the real story. You see, I used to work for that newspaper. Indeed, I was once in charge of the whole newspaper. (For 17 minutes on a public holiday when everyone went out except for me and my boss, who fell asleep in the toilet, and I don't mean "on the toilet)."

Getting scoops using sneaky means was not an occasional mistake by rogue reporters. It was what we did. It was our job. We'd sit around every day thinking up new tricky, underhand methods to trick slebs (our word for "celebrities") into revealing stuff.

We weren't evil: quite the opposite. We were noble defenders of free speech. We would put our hands on our hearts and declare that the public had a right to know every truth, especially if it involved slebs' unacknowledged breast enhancements.

There was also an element of jealousy, I'll admit. Slebs were stupid-but-pretty people with undeserved fame and fortune, while reporters were clever-but-ugly people who would have liked a bit of undeserved fame or fortune.

We felt we had to trick them to reset the balance of the universe. Can't get nobler than that.

Hacking a sleb phone is easy. (This still works.)

1) You call the slebs' assistant and talk very fast: "Hi, it's Dave from the studio."

Madonna/Angelina/ Nicole gave me her mobile and told me to call but I lost the bit of paper. It's urgent, can you give me the number?" The assistant will refuse.

2) So you shout: "Look, we're supposed to be doing a live phone-in on cable after the three o'clock news -- that's in two minutes!" The assistant gives you the number.

3) Then you call the telecom companies' remote message service and type in the phone number as if it was your own. For the password, you type 0000. If this doesn't work, you type 1234. (The prettier the star, the more you can be sure that they were too dumb to change the default password.)

Click. You're in. "You have 14 new messages," says the automatic voice. It doesn't matter how mundane the messages are, they can always be turned into gossip column news stories.

"[Star name] is in hot water at the local library -- his books are six weeks overdue!"

"[Star name]'s only calls yesterday were two wrong numbers and a telemarketing call -- nobody loves him!" Etc, etc.

One particularly dumb sleb (a blonde) called herself and was surprised and annoyed to find herself engaged.

Hmm. I should add that it is not just rich, attractive stars who are too stupid to change their default phone passwords. I just checked my own. Yep, it was 0000.

For more tele-messages, visit our columnist at: www.vittachi.com