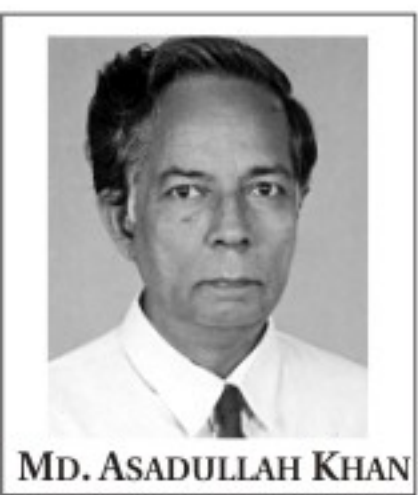


BITTER TRUTH

Rapid urbanisation overpowers civic amenities



Md. Asadullah Khan

OVER the last two decades the country has experienced phenomenal urban growth. With rapid growth compounded by high concentration of population, the capital city has now become an epitome

of urban squalour, poverty and environmental abyss. Despite the trauma, exhaustion and rigours, people are endlessly attracted to the city; for it seems to have work, livelihood and even prosperity on offer. At the same time, the quality of housing, health and hygiene has gone down.

Experts in urban planning have in the meantime voiced their concern over the way urbanisation was taking place in and around the city. In absence of clear-cut policies, they complained, shopping malls, hospitals, clinics, schools and coaching centres have mushroomed in the residential areas in total disregard for healthy living. Most shockingly, greedy people have even encroached on the river Buriganga.

After 40 years of independence, the rural areas are as bad as they could be. Things are so bad in the countryside that hundreds and thousands of people pour into Dhaka everyday because life on the pavements of Dhaka city is somewhat better than it is in those villages that we once admired so much. Dhaka is now a human sea that moves in tidal surges. The city is suffering serious growing pains.

The city's skyline thrusts aggressively towards the heavens. It now embodies the idea of innovation and achievement in a dazzling range of human endeavours. People from all around the country are streaming into this only city of activity and business to test themselves against the toughest competition and to reinvent lives that seem so hard, so stale and unrewarding in any other setting.

As population has swelled, there has been a surge of drugs and violent crimes that the administration seems utterly incapable of combatting. Visitors from abroad will see Dhaka as a city that defies conventional notions of urban planning, human behaviour and environmental awareness. In the past fifteen years Dhaka has disappeared beneath a vast terrifyingly crowded urban settlement which seems to rise out of a sea of uncollected garbage.

Reports from population census council says that population density in the country is now on average 2,000 persons per sq mile whereas in Dhaka it is a staggering 100,000 per sq mile. To meet the housing needs there has been a boom in the construction of high-rise apartment buildings. But many apartment blocks are not accessible to motorised vehicles like ambulances or fire brigade vans.

Some of these apartment blocks have been raised on hidden sewer lines or gas pipelines. Rajuk, Wasa, Titas Gas or even the City Corporation intervened or made any mandatory checks when they were raised in flagrant violation of building code. Such flouting of rules and regulations and mandatory safety norms invites disasters of unimaginable proportions, as it did during a gas leakage underneath a building complex in the Rampura TV centre and collapse of several under-construction buildings.

President Md. Zillur Rahman, while inaugurating the newly constituted Bangladesh Urban Forum, stressed the need for making

The message is clear: cities that get a grip on the problems of traffic congestion and environment are most likely to reap benefits in the quality of life.

villages the centre for development activities to keep people there, but this has not happened during the last 40 years. Even a relatively prosperous life on farms and a somewhat half-hearted effort to keep people in villages have not muted the siren lure of the cities. Many young men, failing to get a job, take up criminal activities. Like the new comers who descended on the 19th century America, many new immigrants to Dhaka city strongly believe that their children will succeed even if they themselves could not.

The unprecedented boom in high-rise building since 1990 reflects, other than awesome development, the economic power, urbanisation and fast lifestyle in the country. Tall buildings are no longer a luxury in a country crisscrossed by rivers and with limited land space and facilities but faced with the problem of population explosion. No doubt the changes within the cities have come with an awesome swiftness that has often caught the governments unaware. Despite the phenomenal growth in tall

building, there is much left to be desired in respect of meeting the environmental needs and management of electricity, water, gas, and sewerage problems. Experts apprehend that in absence of proper sewerage lines with manageable discharge capacity of the household effluents, the existing sewer lines might break down after a few years, posing a serious threat to health and sanitation of the people.

Rajuk and the utility organisations have been totally oblivious about meeting the needs of a fast growing city with expanding population. Rajuk should build high-rise buildings with provision of schools, hospitals, market places and green spaces around and sell those to the needy. More satellite towns and growth centres away from Dhaka are needed.

Four million people commute every day, mostly by motorised transport, in an area of about 150 sq.miles. But bereft of any fast moving transport system, like subways or mass transit, Dhaka till now is a harrowing labyrinth of narrow streets and alleys that make no

geometrical sense in these days of technological innovation and fast movement. On the other hand, unbridled construction in every vacant place ate away Dhaka's past charm and blanketed it in a layer of blue haze.

True, tall buildings have turned out to be a necessity to meet the growing needs of an expanding population, but it can't be at the expense of human comfort and safety measures.

This city of gardens has become a victim of neglect and policy myopia. Developer-built housing has gone apace, with little attention to creation of greenery and elimination of pollution, traffic congestion and drainage problems. The government can't abandon its programme of high-rise buildings but it has to be pursued with a vision and planning that ensures the quality of life. Undeniably true, ensuring quality of life in a city should be high on the agenda of the policy planners. If you are adding population in the city, you are also adding pollution, congestion, garbage, and water scarcity. And the message is clear: cities that get a grip on the problems of traffic congestion and environment are most likely to reap benefits in the quality of life.

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DCC needs to be decentralised

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THE slum dwelling population in urban areas of the country will reach the staggering figure of more than three crore. With Dhaka being the capital city and the hub of all developmental activities, it is most likely that the number of slum dwellers will swell beyond comprehension. Dhaka and the peripheries are burdened with most of the slums where living conditions are extremely unhealthy and unsafe.

Dhaka is already faced with numerous problems with a population of about one and half crore. Further rise in number of people, especially in the slums, will create severe health, water, transportation and law and order problems. With poverty and unemployment in the rural areas rising in tandem, more and more people are drifting towards Dhaka in search of work. This can be faced by creating jobs and generating income for the rural population and ensuring more public and private investments in the rural areas.

Dhaka has been experiencing rapid urbanisation since independence. Most of the wetlands have become terribly polluted. Increasing air, water and sound pollution is a significant threat to public health. Losses from floods and water-logging have increased due to rapid growth of impervious surfaces. There are limited facilities to minimise huge flood flows during the rainy season.

The growth has been phenomenal because Dhaka is the hub of administrative, cultural and commercial activities. Because of the build-up of urban areas there has been a decline in use of land for other purposes. It may be mentioned that Bangladesh is losing 220 hac of agricultural land per day, which has an effect on food security, and the situation may exacerbate in the context of climate change that would bring changes in agricultural production.

Dhaka's expansion cannot be explained by the traditional growth theories such as concentric, leapfrog, linear and multi-nuclei expansion or by their hybrids. Inadequate housing, haphazard development, ubiquitous urban poverty, absence

of proper land use policy, inequality of lands, pitiable coordination among responsible agencies and absence of reliable information on current land use practices are contributing to the city sprawling, which is leading to inconceivable emergence of slums and squatters.

Apart from population growth, increasing rural-urban migration, industrial growth and economic development of Dhaka are believed to be the major factors contributing to rapid urbanisation. Since wetlands and fertile agricultural lands are being encroached upon without considering environmental consequences, unplanned urban expansion is creating tremendous pressure on the limited resources in Dhaka.

Dhaka faces the problems that accompany lighted areas, substandard housing, drainage facilities, increasing crime rates and juvenile delinquency and the economic decay of business

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and industrial areas. The transportation of millions of men and women from houses to jobs and back is the number one problem. Migration creates a lot of problems in Dhaka. As the migrated people are newcomers they cannot adjust with city life. They should be provided water supply, health services, protection etc., which will multiply the functions of Dhaka City Corporation (DCC).

Probable climate change may intensify flooding of the city if necessary steps are not taken to stop urbanisation on precious wetlands and cultivated lands. The DCC, with the help of the government, has to introduce land-use zoning so that natural lands can be saved, otherwise environmental degradation will make the city inhabitable at the end of the day.

The government has divided DCC into two to take improved civic services to the doorstep of city dwellers, but half the city has yet to come under

its authority. DCC has links with 22 ministries/agencies and all the public utilities should be brought under two city corporations (which is not easy), otherwise civic services cannot be improved. The government could take steps to create the position of deputy mayor. The power should be decentralised to the deputy mayor to provide improved civic services. Election can be held for mayor and deputy mayor, so that people's representation can be ensured.

What DCC needs is an efficient, loyal and committed bureaucracy. Shortage of manpower is one of the main reasons for not achieving the targets of DCC. DCC is facing administrative problems due to lack of experience and weakness in coordination. This needs careful handling by the bureaucracy until the new mayor becomes more conversant with policies and their implementation.

The city dwellers are dissatisfied with the speed of work of DCC and, in turn, DCC could not work effectively due to non-cooperation of Rajuk, Wasa, DMP, DTCB, T&T, Desco etc. It is true that DCC does not have adequate number of efficient officers, but the available officers must be utilised properly. The functions of the DCC may be decentralised to four zones, each headed by an elected deputy mayor, and the mayor could act as coordinator among the zones. Lack of cooperation and coordination among responsible organisations is hindering the dynamic of urban growth, which should be taking into account.

It is true that all the governments have failed to provide even basic infrastructure to the citizens. The problem of Dhaka city is not high population density, rather it is the sheer failure of governance. The performance of DCC with regard to maintenance and construction of roads, tax collection, solid and medical waste collection and disposal, birth registration, construction and maintenance of foot overbridges or surface/underground drains, construction of markets, street lighting, issuing licenses/certificates can be improved by recruiting manpower and intensive monitoring.

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SHIFTING IMAGES

Private lives of public figures



MILIA ALI

ARE public figures entitled to the same degree of privacy as ordinary citizens? In an era where a simple Google search can reveal the minutiae of the life of anyone worth his weight in salt, it is unrealistic to expect that public personalities can maintain their private space, even on matters related to their intimate personal life.

The problem, however, tends to be that, oftentimes, details rolled out by the media about public figures are exaggerated and irrelevant. An example is the press coverage of Pakistani Foreign Minister Hina Rabbani Khar's visit to India in July, 2011. More news space was devoted to her looks and apparel than on the substantive issue of Hina Khar's impact on the bilateral relations between the two countries, which fought three wars and have been sparring for more than 50 years over Kashmir.

The hype created by the press about Hina Khar's Roberto Cavalli sunglasses, Birkin bag, pearl necklace and diamond bracelet triggered serious debates on the role of the media in constructing as well as distorting the persona of public figures. A number of blogs and articles pointed out that sexist comments referring to Khar as a "weapon of mass distraction" derailed the true objective of her trip, which was to promote a healthy dialogue between two troubled neighboring countries. On the other hand, many critics objected to Hina Khar's expensive attire on the grounds that she was representing an impoverished nation. Some even went as far as to hint that she should donate her expensive handbags to help the poor in Pakistan.

While I tend to disagree with the latter line of argument, there is something to be said about public personalities conforming to certain norms of decorum. What one does in one's private life is a personal choice. But once people opt for public office, they almost voluntarily open up large chunks of their private lives to media scrutiny. Public perception seems to be that the choices politicians make in their private lives, in some ways, mirror the choices they are likely to make in positions of authority. And, ordinary citizens depend on the media to keep them informed.

Where does one draw the line between the people's right to know and the individual's right to privacy? I presume, in the current environment of open and readily available information, the best one can hope for is a constructive relationship between the politicians, the press and the public.

In the United States, however, there seems to be no limits to which the media can invade the privacy of politicians and celebrities. Many of us remember the no-holds barred reporting of the President Clinton - Monica Lewinsky sex scandal. Websites and voyeuristic tabloids provided salacious details of the liaison, feeding the public's curiosity endlessly. However, most Americans were unconvinced that Bill Clinton's personal weaknesses impacted his ability to function as president; and he was voted into a second term.

The more recent storm that raged through the American political scene pertains to Herman Caine, the Republican candidate vying for the 2012 presidential nomination. Several women claimed that they were sexually harassed by Caine while he was the head of the National Restaurant Association. One woman even alleged that she had a 13-year relationship with Caine, who is "happily" married. After facing weeks of criticism and questioning about the allegations, Caine finally "suspended" his candidacy saying that the "false accusations" and negative media attention had "hurt" his family life and "sidetracked" his campaign from the substantive issues that he wanted to highlight.

I am not qualified to pronounce a judgment on Herman Caine's character -- neither do I wish to. However, I would like to underscore an important point in this context. Caine's contention that the negative media focus diverted the attention from the challenges facing the country and steered the campaign toward the wrong track is not totally unfounded. With the US fighting two wars, struggling to create employment for the jobless and battling a debt crisis, common people are interested to know how these issues will be addressed by the future president. Should the media keep citizens informed about substantive issues or should it provide details of politicians' sexual liaisons or the price of their handbags?

Yes, people have a right to know how their leaders conduct themselves in their personal lives in order to better understand what choices they might make in public office. But, the question is where does one draw the line between the people's right to know and the individual's right to privacy? I presume, in the current environment of open and readily available information, the best one can hope for is a constructive relationship between the politicians, the press and the public.

The writer is a renowned Rabindra Sangeet exponent and a former employee of the World Bank.