

Commuting woes

BITTER TRUTH



Md. ASADULLAH KHAN

THE main reason for road congestion, other than the huge number of rickshaws in most roads, is the number of motorised vehicles - about 7.5 lakhs - plying on the road. Dhaka is now one of the most densely populated cities of the world with a population density of nearly 31,000 per sq km covering 300 sq km of the DCC area. Many of these slow moving, non-mechanised vehicles contributed to the problem of traffic jam and congestion.



PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

With vehicle population booming every year, the roads have become pulverised, cratered and potholed, and for long stretches have been reduced to mere dirt tracks. A survey conducted in the recent past on vehicle movement, mostly cars and buses revealed that the average speed of a car or passenger bus was just 20 kmph. All the past governments took up ambitious plans such as construction of elevated expressways, flyovers and metro-rails in and around Dhaka. Dhaka dwellers are weary of such grandiose pledges because nothing has actually materialised so far.

Given the unplanned growth of the city during the last 44 years, there is hardly any scope to improve the surface communication. In the present cataclysmic situation, efforts must be taken to introduce mass transportation systems through withdrawal of taxicabs, tempos and minibuses carrying fewer than 30 passengers on the main roads. Adoption of such measures could substantially reduce or ease up traffic congestion.

A stretch in one location and then consider the time lost for 74 trains leaving and entering Kamalapur rail station daily. The newly elected mayors of the two city corporations are frantically trying to solve Dhaka city's traffic congestion. Even switching on the electronic signal system a few days ago on a trial basis didn't yield the desired result because of technical glitches in the system, as reports revealed.

Other than the influx of new cars that are hitting the city roads, there is huge increase in the number of rickshaws, most of which are allegedly unlicensed and covering 22 sq ft per person compared to 8.7 sq ft occupied by a bus passenger. Private cars cover 160 sq ft and carry at best four passengers. On busier intersections and at 10 rail crossings in the city, vehicles are caught in traffic snarls that often last about five to ten minutes at

The major cause of congestions and road jams can be attributed to a lack of judicious land use or scarce road space of the city. The minimum road requirement for a standard city is 25 percent, whereas Dhaka city roads constitute 7.5 percent of its total area. On the other hand, hawkers create a lot of road congestion and road hazards in all parts of the busy city areas by encroaching not only pavements but also parts of the road. This has resulted

from DCC's failure to rehabilitate these hawkers in a business-friendly area. On the other hand, a large part of the road space on both sides remains occupied by parked vehicles, creating a gridlock of cars, buses and rickshaws on the road. It has been revealed in a study done by Buet that about 12 to 20 lakh garment workers go to work on foot in the central part of the city. That emphasizes the fact that overcrowding on the road only increases evacuation time and exposes pedestrians to greater risk of accidents and injuries. With about 2000 km of road extending in and around the Dhaka city, the length of the sidewalk or pavement is only 390 km and more than 70 percent of the side walks can't be used by pedestrians in they are in possession of hawkers and other shop owners.

Transportation plans in big cities are done through the appraisal of TDM or travel demand management that aims at reducing trips in congested parts of the city. Short term measures include management of traffic that discourages small vehicles with few passengers clogging the road. In Dhaka, there is no parking policy in force. With road space blocked by a fleet of cars on both sides along commercial buildings and shopping malls in major city areas, traffic movement comes to a grinding halt causing unceasing congestion.

Roads in Dhaka constitute less than 10 per cent of the country's road network but carry as much as 50 percent of the vehicular traffic. With such a big overload, maintenance is a big problem and must get priority over anything else. With advancement in technology, road engineers are looking for economic ways of road repairing, but Dhaka city corporations or RHD are yet to take up those measures.

The progress or development of the country, especially Dhaka, has suffered because we could not build proper roads linking the nooks and corners of the country. Leaving aside the expressway or modern roads, we should give immediate attention to the maintenance of existing roads. For industries to grow and business to flourish, smooth communication is a must.

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The delusion of Bangladesh's cheap labour

Invest in human capital, promote high-skilled employment



NAHELA NOWSHIN

IN Bangladesh, the proportion of the population at or below working age is among the highest in the world and almost a third of the population is between ages 15-30. A young population means a young workforce full of innovation and productivity. However, youth unemployment in Bangladesh remains a festering wound to the economy -- the primary factors behind it being poverty, lack of education and skills.

It is problematic to equate cheap labour with competitiveness. When are we going to free ourselves of this delusion? As if competitiveness equates to an equal distribution of wealth the industry is raking in and the development of high skills among our workers, which is what we actually need?

Are the skills of our country's young men and women forever going to be limited to menial tasks such as sewing, knitting, fishing, farming, selling tea, cleaning toilets, scrubbing floors and driving buses? Within no time, this demographic dividend may spell a demographic disaster with teeming multitudes of disillusioned, jobless men and women devoid of high skills needed to survive in an environment of cut-throat competition.

At a press conference in his Secretariat office, Commerce Minister Tofail Ahmed proclaimed that "the dream will come true with the signing of the MoU" between BGMEA and China's Orient International with regard to setting up of manufacturing units in the largest RMG industrial park to be established in Gazaria of Munshiganj district. This grand 'RMG city' will consist of around 300 to 500 plots for RMG units.

If I may ask, Honourable Minister, what exactly is this 'dream' you speak of and more importantly, whose dream is it? Given that our beloved RMG sector has given us wonderful memories to cherish like the Rana Plaza disaster and the Tazreen fire that have claimed thousands of "cheap" lives, can it be that the RMG city is what Bangladeshi workers have been "dreaming" of all these years?

While Bangladesh remains the second-largest RMG hub after China, neighbouring India and the Philippines are dominating the world rankings of information technology outsourcing (ITO) by yielding high-skilled employment. So how is it that Bangladesh and India, with so much in common, -- cultural, religious, and linguistic ties, demographic dividends and liberalisation policies -- have gone down such different paths in terms of high-skilled employment generation?

According to a survey conducted by Capgemini, the top three factors listed by executives in choosing an outsourcing destination are labour costs, technology/infrastructure capabilities, and skilled

labour. Both India and the Philippines offer low cost IT solutions that boost both high-skilled and low-wage labour in the respective countries.

Bangalore has earned itself the sobriquet "The Silicon Valley of India" as a major global tech hub. The city consists of more than 35 percent of IT companies and is the largest IT contributor in the country. Chennai, Hyderabad, Delhi and Pune too are software development hotspots and house some of the

these schemes and brought about a revolutionary change to India's economy.

India's secret weapon has been its young population which has been the main driver of technological growth. With a population of 430 million in 2011 in the age group 15-34, India has a huge young English-speaking pool which is expected to expand over the coming years. Foreign companies, global investment banks and businessmen are scrambling to get a piece of India's booming

and too blinded to understand its underlying meaning. We are bombarded with optimistic headlines like "China to become one of Bangladesh's largest garments importers" and "Bangladesh, a hub for non-traditional garment products." But really, we have churned out a labour force of which the biggest comparative advantage is its cheapness due to its low skills.

Investment in human capital to promote

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PHOTO: SK ENAMUL HAQ

biggest IT exporters in the country. The IT sector has transformed India's stature and enabled the country to form close ties with the US and the EU.

The growth of Bangalore's IT industry can be traced back to the 70s when the visionary R.K. Baliga, the brainchild of Silicon Valley, proposed building an 'electronic city'. The 'city' was eventually built in an industrial park in Bangalore with the help of the Indian government. Under an industrial policy declared in 1996 (shortly before the dotcom boom) consisting of incentives and concessions, hardware and software companies swooped in on the golden opportunity of

technology sector.

Back home in Bangladesh, a poor education system, weak R&D sector, lack of collaboration between universities and industries, absence of government agencies promoting growth of sectors geared towards generating high-skilled labour, lack of allocation of funds, institutional inefficiencies and a general substandard infrastructure are slowly killing an economy largely dependent on low-end manufacturing--cutting off any means of high skill development of the youth, especially those belonging to the lower and lower middle class.

What's worse is that we have become

high-skilled labour remains missing from MDG goals of Bangladesh, and that says a lot about the vision, or a lack thereof, of our future labour composition. Behind "success stories" of RMG and MDG is the failure to invest in our demographic dividend. Perhaps twenty or thirty years from now, when we will have lost our share in the RMG industry to some country with cheaper labour and with an aging population only equipped to knit sweaters, we'll regret not having read between the lines of the glorified "cheapness" and "competitiveness" of our labour.

The writer is a journalist at The Daily Star.

QUOTABLE Quote

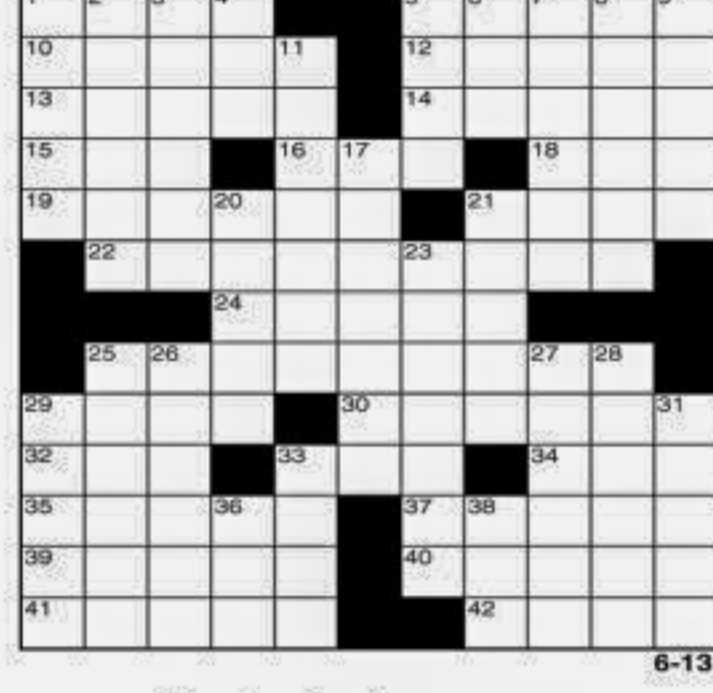


WINSTON CHURCHILL

ATTITUDE IS A LITTLE THING THAT MAKES A BIG DIFFERENCE

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
 - 1 Calls on
 - 5 Newscast feature
 - 10 Airs
 - 12 Uniform color
 - 13 Dupe
 - 14 Print units
 - 15 Faberge creation
 - 16 Mamie's mate
 - 18 Yellowstone grazer
 - 19 Filmed again
 - 21 Hector's home
 - 22 Yellow flower
 - 24 Home of the Masai
 - 25 Yellow flower
 - 29 Can't stomach
 - 30 Justice Antonin
 - 32 Swelled head
 - 33 Ultimate
 - 34 Singer Shannon
 - 35 Unescorted
 - 37 Make blank
 - 39 Some surreal art
 - 40 Rocker Bob
 - 41 Won all the games
 - 42 Shoulder muscle, for short
- DOWN**
 - 1 Say
 - 2 Swelled
 - 3 Puzzle
 - 4 Min. part
 - 5 Tug-of war need
 - 6 Peyton's brother
 - 7 Roman orator
 - 8 Arthurian island
 - 9 Annoying
 - 11 Spun out
 - 17 Most intense
 - 20 Tibia's end
 - 21 Pageant topper
 - 23 Acts like a mob in a Western
 - 25 Free speech curtailer
 - 26 "Becket" actor
 - 27 Geriatrics topic
 - 28 Engine type
 - 29 Flip call
 - 31 Vigilant
 - 33 Comfy place
 - 36 Quick bite
 - 38 Roulette bet



Yesterday's answer

S K I P S C R I S P
T I D A L R I D E R
A M O R E A T O N E
R O N D E F E N S E
T N T S A T T E N
S O B S T E R N S
L A S D U E
F A C E T B E G S
T I M C A P D O T
O N E H O U R T W O
M A Y A N O C H E R
B L A N D W H I S K
S E U S L I S T S

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker



7-18

BABY BLUES by Rick Kirkman & Jerry Scott

