

| STORIES FROM THE STREETS |

SURVIVING DHAKA: A MONOLOGUE

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Regular visits to the village home were mandatory, on our annual summer trips from the Middle East to Chittagong. The whole family – grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, nephews, nieces, house-helpers, babies and pets – would set out for Maduna Ghaat. The only car owner in the family, a bidesh-ferot uncle, could drive only 4-5 people at a time to the Ghaat, from where we would have to take boats and set out for our village home in Madarsha, Hathazari. Hence, many of us would take baby taxis, rickshaws and tempos to reach the Ghaat faster. To visit many of the villages in Chittagong, boats were the only means of transport back then, and I am talking about the late 80s till the mid-90s. It was probably slightly more than a decade ago that proper roads were built. My father and uncles would proudly talk about how just about anybody could reach the doorstep of our ancestral home now, within an hour or less by an auto rickshaw or a car – indeed a mark of modern times.

Fast forward a few decades – as I wade through the streets of Banani, making my way to the empty CNG run auto rickshaw parked by the tea stall, where throngs of people try their best to take shelter under the tiny make shift shop ceiling. I wonder if my father, if he were alive, would ever speak of us living in 'modern times'. Today we have cars, hummers, cycles and

expensive running shoes – but we have no roads, proper walk ways, cycle lanes or safe footpaths. As I make my way through the roads of Dhanmondi, trying to make a meeting on time, I think back to my childhood, suppressing my urges to go back to the good-old boat days.

As I type this on my laptop, inside a CNG run auto rickshaw, I have already spent 2 hours and 15 minutes on the road, and by the look of it, will require at least 2 more hours to reach The Daily Star. I think of solutions but can come up with none that will take me to my office and help me meet deadlines. The young colleagues of the *Star Weekend* suggest that we master

the art of paragliding, which I began to seriously consider for a minute. Such is the crazy situation.

Recently, I read an article where two urban planning experts, after a thorough research, say that the city of Dhaka is dead. The flyovers and metro rails that are being built will offer solace to the people for sure, but just for a little while, until the city is destroyed completely. Moreover, these flyovers and metro rails in Dhaka city have also been compared to a lifeless human being, connected to a life support inside a cold and icy hospital ICU. The support might snap any time now.

Dhaka that used to be famous for being a majestic and grand location by the beautiful river Buriganga, is now officially the worst city to live in. Instead of pointing out and writing posts on why despite the flaws, the capital is still our beloved home and how enlightening it is to drink tea in the middle of the night in the streets of Dhaka, I believe it is time we took matters into our hands and think of solutions – FAST! It is high time that we stop getting used to the worst and actually start making this place livable. It is high time for everyone to get together and push the government to make city friendly policies – not covering up all the water bodies to build high rises and colonies of community halls could be a great start! ■



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