



PHOTO: STAR

UNLOCKING DHAKA'S GRIDLOCK

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Can we change the kind of thinking that created it?

IT seems a measure of how badly things have gone out of hand that Montu Sardar peddles lemonade beneath a foot bridge, 5 Taka a glass, amid the piercing horns of the line of traffic he is blocking. "The people are hot, and they want something to drink," Sardar, 45, says from behind his stand.

The people are hot, in part, because of the traffic, and the traffic is bad, in part, because of Sardar.

It has gotten so bad lately that the 'butterfly effect' of a single car parking where it isn't supposed to can trickle down to side roads and alleys shutting down an entire area for a couple of hours. It's not only frustrating, there's a rise in hypertension and decline in tolerance among Dhaka dwellers, according to a leading mental health expert. How much does it add to the annual public health costs?

Authorities come, sometimes, to clear out the street vendors—no one knows how many, in this mega city's vast informal economy—and to ease the flow of traffic which, according to Gabor Orosz of Department of Mechanical Engineering at University of Michigan, "flows like no other flow in the Newtonian universe."

The vendors, with nowhere else to go, return and, so does the congestion. Chaos is the master of the situation.

Commuters flow out into the road here, between cars, CNGs, cycle vans, 'legunas', motorcycles, rickshaws, bicycles and the battered buses that crawl around the pilings of the bridge overhead. "We're causing a problem, yes," he says, "but we're not the main reason for it."

Driving habits are infamously problematic, too. People often shrug off stoplights—there are few that actually work—and traffic rules. A lot of them learn how to drive from friends or family, not in classes while licences sometimes can allegedly be obtained without taking a road test.

Many blame the traffic police for the mess. But how logical is it to expect a guy with a stick standing on a busy intersection uphold the law with everyone else including 'really important people' hell-bent on breaking it?

"We have a shortage of traffic sergeants," says Abu Yosouf, Assistant Commissioner, Traffic, Industrial Zone. "We need bus bays, or at least, marked spaces where buses will stop. We should have quick response teams that can and repair small ditches and holes on short notice. We have to make sure that people do not cross the road wherever they want to. Markets must have parking spaces." What are the circumstances that impel



citizens to develop a total disregard for law? Dr Zia Uddin Ahmed, socio-biologist and author says, "Many social scientists and biologists believe that increased density of population is likely to create an increased level of social entropy particularly in a situation where resource scarcity is the survival-limiting factor and also where resource symbolises power."

A lot of people argue that cars—usually called 'private cars' here—are the main culprits. But is that so? "It is said that there are 10-12 lakh transports of different kinds in Dhaka," says Professor Nazrul Islam, honorary chairman, Centre for Urban Studies. "With a same population Delhi has 60 lakhs. Bangkok has even more. They are being able to manage it because they have an efficient system."

And since we are on the subject of cars, what about the 'official' ones? "In every government project, a number of cars are purchased," says Transportation and Safety Expert Dr Md Shamsul Hoque. "Parking spaces need to be created and made expensive. Only then will people start using alternatives like carpooling or public transports." Dr Hoque is also a Professor of civil engineering at BUET.

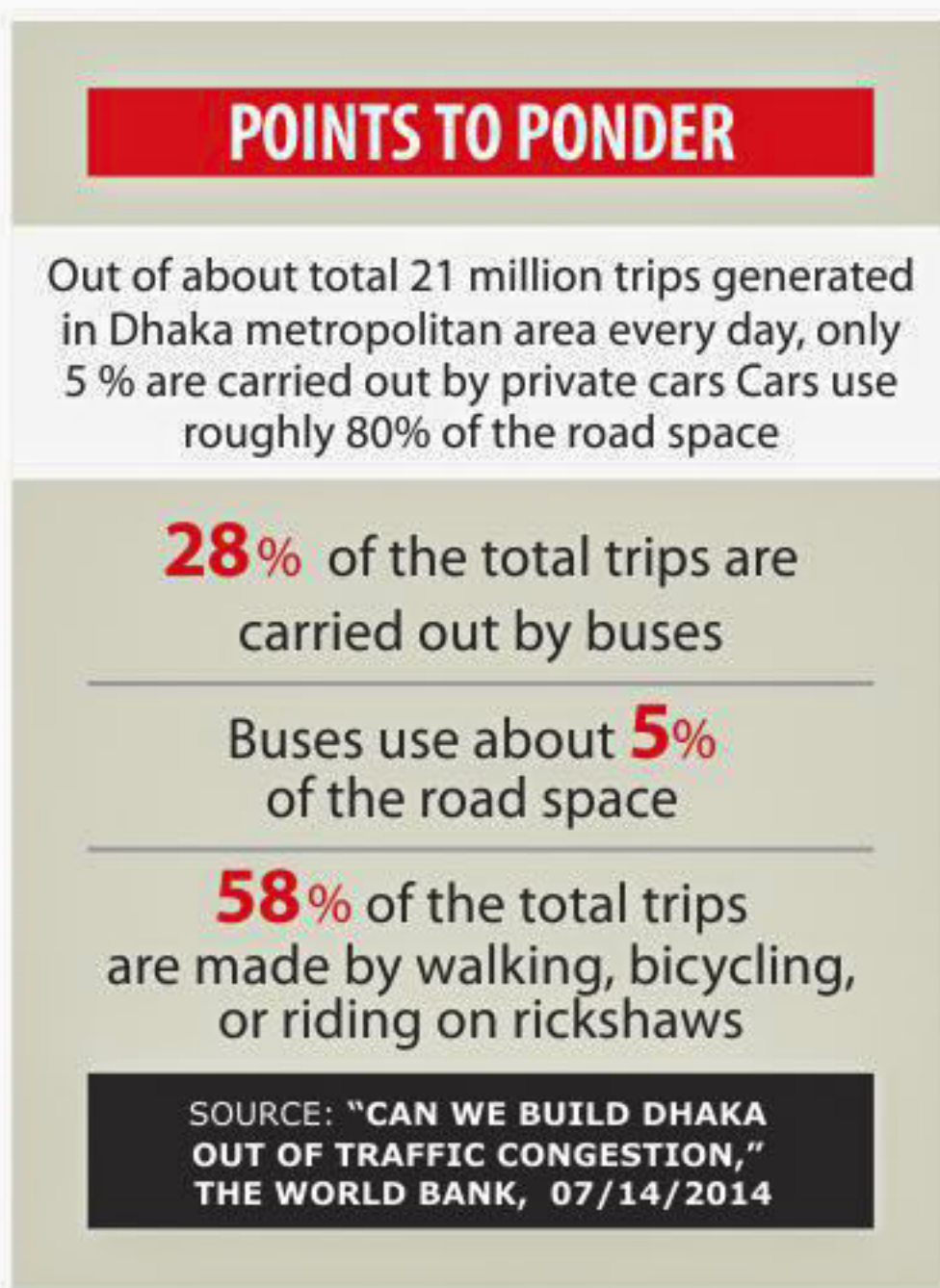
The sorry state of the city's public transportation hardly needs description. The infrastructure was simply never meant to handle so many vehicles or people. Only 7-8 percent of the city's surface is covered by roads. Many plans for accommodations remain unimplemented.

For instance, The Strategic Transport Plan (STP) for Dhaka—prepared by the BNP government in 2006, approved by the caretaker government and then endorsed by the AL government in 2009 is now in the process of implementation. The plan includes, among other things, Metro Rail, Bus Rapid Transit (BRT), traffic management, widening and building new roads and clearing the pavements.

"Nine years have been wasted," says

Professor Nazrul Islam. "Six metro lines were supposed to be set up. Only one has been approved. About four BRTs were supposed to be established but only one was approved. Some flyovers have been built. An elevated expressway is under construction."

In any megacity we see transportation at three levels: on the surface, underground and over the ground. But here it is mostly surface-based. "In London, at least 5-6 million people use the underground," Professor Nazrul says. "Over ground, you may have light over ground rail as in Singapore, Manila or Bangkok. We need to build MRT (Mass Rapid Transit) MRT—metro rail and commuter train. We also need BRT (Bus Rapid Transit)."



BRT will have designated lanes. That will encourage the private sector to invest in the development of roads. Professor Shamsul says, "More double-deckers or articulated buses will have to be introduced. There may be a time when buses will have no seats. We must start building ring roads— a series of connected roads encircling a city."

ALL these are necessary but will take time for implementation. Traffic congestion is choking Dhaka and we need relief NOW. Is there a single grand engineering solution?

"When there are constraints in the capacity we have to focus on demand-driven solutions," Professor Shamsul Hoque says, "We have to take some unpopular decisions. Singapore gives registration to a very limited number of cars every year."

Several cities in other countries have resorted to methods like banning cars from

driving on certain days, alternating between cars with licence plates that end in, for instance, even or uneven numbers. Singapore, London and Stockholm charge motorists extra if they drive during congestion, cutting the traffic during peak hours.

"The biggest challenge is the collective failure to understand what it means to be an urban society and the rule of law that supports it," says Adnan Morshed, an associate professor of Architecture at the Catholic University of America. "Small, exemplary steps can be taken such as investment in public buses, few select roads with 100 percent traffic law enforcement, footpaths, and dedicated lanes; social campaign to inspire the city-dwellers to walk and use public transportation and, have a group of researchers measure the effect of these interventions."

Shouldn't we be more concerned about the congestion of people's movement than by the congestion of car's movements? The well-made pavement is a memory in Dhaka. Many parts of the city never had the luxury of them in the first place; where they did exist, they have become an irregular procession of broken slabs and fetid little holes. Your eyes must always search out your feet's next destination. And then there are vendors like Sardar all over the pavements.

"Footpaths have to be built on raised grounds," Professor Hoque says. "In Kolkata, hawkers and vendors were given a deadline within which they had to vacate. And this was done by a pro-poor, leftist government. Rickshaws will be in the alleys and side roads, like in Kolkata or Delhi. They will bring passengers to public transports on the main roads. There should be separate lanes for bicycles."

These are tools that can be implemented without putting in significant amounts of resources. "The conditions of intersections will have to be improved," Dr Hoque says. "Some roads can be one-way to ensure tidal flow of traffic. Offices, banks and schools could open at different hours. School zoning will have to be established. For example, residents of Dhanmondi will have to send their children to school in Dhanmondi."

Dhaka is expanding and the rate of expansion is increasing. "About 30-40 percent of the national GDP comes from Dhaka," Professor Nazrul Islam says. "The per capita GDP of Dhaka is more than 10,000 USD while the national average is 1200 to 1400 USD."

Everyone wants a piece of the pie. "Each year an additional 4-5 lakhs people come to the city to stay. That means, population wise,

a country of the size of Maldives is added to Dhaka every year," Professor Nazrul says.

For how long is this sustainable? Professor Nazrul says, "As recommended in the 7th 5-year-plan, political, economic and administrative decentralisation will have to take place."

Do we have an exit strategy? "In India, the capital was shifted from Old Delhi to New Delhi; in Pakistan from Karachi to Islamabad and in Myanmar, from Yangon to Naypyidaw," Dr Hoque says. "There are about 20 lakh garment workers in approximately 3000 garment factories in Dhaka. Factories have to be shifted to industrial zones. An economic corridor may be built alongside the Dhaka-Chittagong highway with a service road on its side."

Could building small, smart cities be an option—cities that use ICT based services to reduce costs and resource consumption, and engage more effectively with their citizens? Cities where businesses give their employees more flexibility in where, when and how they work, so workers can adjust their commuting patterns?

Envisioned by Mahathir Mohamad, Malaysia has built many. Some are less than just 8000 acres. "Twenty five years later, Modi is replicating the model in India. Our Purbachal is 6000 acres." Professor Shamsul Hoque says. "What have we done with it except build apartments?"

It is said that there are more than 54 departments (now 54 × 2=108) for the planning, development and management of the roads in Dhaka. "Dhaka should not be split," Professor Shamsul says, "There should be a unified authority recommended by the STP. An Urban Development Authority under a Ministry of Urban Development is necessary. There must also be an integrated approach to maintain and improve the drainage system in Dhaka."

How is the government planning to meet all these future challenges? Professor Nazrul says, "A plan has been drafted by RAJUK called Dhaka Structure plan (2016-2035) which covers 15 important aspects including transportation. There is another long-term plan called the Delta Development Plan with financial and technical support of the Dutch."

It is, however, not enough to know what needs to be done; it is also important to know who will do what. It's a complex problem. But it has to be solved. We must know *why* we should do it. Then we can figure out the *how*.

"Bangladesh has to sustain herself and so does her capital," Professor Nazrul says.