

How's the climate?

In an exclusive interview with The Daily Star, Myles Allen, Professor of Geosystem Science at the Environmental Change Institute, University of Oxford, talks to Amitava Kar about Bangladesh's success in addressing climate change, smart ways of reducing emissions and what the Trump administration's climate change policies might look like. Professor Allen was in Dhaka recently to give a talk at the Gobeshona Conference for a Climate-resilient Bangladesh at the Independent University, Bangladesh.

What do you want us to know about the impacts of climate change on Bangladesh that we already don't?

Bangladesh is really a pioneer in thinking about how to address damage due to climate change. We recognise that we are not reducing emissions—global emissions have perhaps started to stabilise, but they are long way off being reduced to zero which is what we need to do to stop climate change. So as long as climate change continues, there will be a need for countries like Bangladesh to adapt, but there will also be some impacts that are beyond the capacity of people to adapt. Bangladesh has created an internal mechanism for addressing such losses due to climate change and that's something I am very interested in because it poses an interesting challenge for the world academic community. You have decided to do something that everybody is eventually going to need to do.

You mentioned the academic community. Do you follow what kind of research is being carried out in this area in Bangladesh?

I have worked for many years on the meteorological problem of quantifying the role of human influence on climate in extreme weather events. But the actual challenge is not just in the meteorology but in understanding how meteorology translates into impact. For example, in 2015, there was a heavy rainfall event in

Chittagong that triggered a landslide costing some lives. That's an example of a situation where we have a number of risks working together. Maybe some buildings were built where they should not have been built, the ground was destabilised, and then there was the heavy rainfall event that caused the landslide. So we can ask: how is climate change going to contribute to the risk of that extreme rainfall event? But that's only part of the question. All these other aspects need to be thought about as well if you are going to ask what's actually driving the actual risk of impact which is what people care about.

We want to work with partners in Bangladesh on translating this into understanding the impacts. We are already working with Saiful Islam of BUET and Saleemul Huq who are key to this discussion about loss and damage. That's the collaboration we are interested in because I have been working on this science from the theoretical point of view for many years but now that Bangladesh has created this loss and damage mechanism, suddenly there's an application and there is a need for the science.

What are the biggest challenges for countries in reducing emissions?

The Paris agreement last year represented for the first time all countries that gathered together and decided that they were actually going to address the problem. Perhaps



Professor Myles Allen

because in part of the efforts in particular made by China we have actually seen global emissions stabilise -- not fall but at least not rise over the past three years. The big concern is what's going to happen next to Chinese emissions. Are they going to genuinely come down or are they going to be exported to other countries the way Europe exported its emissions to China? Chinese emissions went up in the past twenty years because a lot of manufacturing that was done in Europe was moved to China.

Now that puts Bangladesh in a very interesting position because Bangladesh has a very clear

development agenda, to transition rapidly to middle-income country status. It is industrialising rapidly and the plan is to use coal-fired energy generation as the backbone of that transition. That's going to be very difficult to combine with the long-term goal of a stable climate because people need to recognise that to stabilise the climate you need to reduce CO2 emissions into the atmosphere to zero.

Is that possible with coal?

Yes, if you capture the CO2 from the power station and dispose of it. This is the technology Bangladesh is going to need in the long-term to

exploit Bangladesh's coal reserves without putting the CO2 into the atmosphere. That means a technology called carbon capture and sequestration which everybody knows about. It works. It just costs money. That's something that the global community and the countries that are hoping to supply Bangladesh with coal in the future could participate in developing for Bangladesh. If there was a small idea that came out of my trip that would be one.

What's your take on the proposed coal-powered Rampal plant which is a major concern among environmentalists and activists?

I am not aware of the details but I am obviously aware that coal is a big component of Bangladesh's proposed energy mix in the future. If Bangladesh's plans are to be consistent with a world stabilising temperature well below two degrees you have to be ready to make sure that your emissions are not just stable but zero by not long after the middle of this century. If you build a coal-powered power plant today, it will still be operating at that time. So you need a plan about the CO2 coming out that plant in the world in 50 years' time. There are ways to extract energy from coal without putting the CO2 into the atmosphere. You need to think this through in the positioning of the power plant, in the design of the power plant. You wouldn't want to re-inject the CO2 underground in a seismically active

region because if there is an earthquake, the CO2 might leak out again. There can be an alternate disposal mechanism under seabed. There are all sorts of ideas out there.

Do you foresee a change in US policy towards climate change when Mr. Trump takes office?

There will clearly be a change in policy but whether there will be a change in practices will be interesting to watch. Before the election, Rex Tillerson, the ex-CEO of Exxon, coming in as the next Secretary of State, was calling for the US to support the Paris Agreement. In fact he is calling for a carbon tax. So we actually have higher level of consensus than some people would like to make out. If the rest of the world does not take the election of Donald Trump as a reason to abandon the rest of the world's efforts on climate change, I don't think it will do that much damage.

If other countries decide that well, if the Americans are not taking this very seriously then we won't bother either, then I think it's a real problem. Because the longer we put off reducing emissions, the more expensive it becomes to deal with the problem when we actually get around to it. The reason is very simple. CO2 accumulates in the atmosphere. It's like driving toward a cliff. The longer you put off slowing down, the faster you have to decelerate in the end, and the risk of going over cliff becomes that much higher.

Dhaka's vanishing public spaces



NAHELA NOWSHIN

WITH uncontrolled urbanisation (which essentially refers to a "population shift from rural to urban areas enabling cities and towns to grow") innumerable issues related to the very liveability of Dhaka city have occupied the imagination of activists, journalists and academics for quite some time. For the past few years, Dhaka has consistently ranked as one of the most unliveable cities in the world as per global indices. This resonates with many of us residing in the capital for whom the state of liveability is obvious to the naked eye—from the unavoidable and unbearable traffic congestion to the homeless sleeping on footbridges and sidewalks. We, the residents of the city, don't need a global liveability survey to tell us just how horrible the situation is; it is but a mere reinforcement of the reality that we live with everyday.

In the broad context of urbanisation and the concomitant woes, the alarming decline in public space (in the literal sense) and the lack of attention on the issue is particularly disturbing. I understand that it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to comprehensively address the byproducts of urbanisation, especially that of a city like Dhaka. But with the uninhibited boom in population of Dhaka—which is set to be the third most populous city in 2050 with about 35.2 million residents—and its ill-conceived urban planning, the dearth of public space and its social implications are a serious concern for people in this growing urban sprawl.

Public spaces breathe life into the social fibre of a community. It is the open markets, plazas, parks and squares, and high streets that give respite to city dwellers from the daily hustle and bustle of city life. Children chasing one another across a field. The elderly taking a stroll in a neighbourhood park. People

gathering to watch a street magician. Women socialising at the local fruit market. Men sipping tea by a small lake. Such are the scenes of a city that nurtures and values its urban environment, and makes the public space accessible to city dwellers.

But in Dhaka, such glimpses of free contact and spontaneous movement of people are rare in the public space which in reality has become somewhat of an eyesore: roads choked with traffic, piles of garbage discarded

and a glaring paucity of areas designated for public use.

The need to save our existing valuable public spaces is heightened in light of unbridled urban expansion. Urban public spaces enhance human happiness and empathy as they are the locus of human interaction. They serve as an outlet for experiencing human contact. They are the locale of the most important subject in life: people.



A man rests under the shades of a tree in Ramna Park, one of the few public spaces available to Dhaka residents.

in the open, streetsides occupied by hawkers, poorly maintained (and ugly) buildings, etc. (It should be kept in mind however that urbanisation of Dhaka is a phenomenon of the post-independence period and the concept of 'urban planning' is relatively new in a country where more than half its population still reside in rural areas.) Post-1971 the city's design and planning has not matched up to its accelerated growth leading to the loss of land

Michael Douglass, a liveable city expert, contends that there are two competing models of cities: one is based on economic growth and the other on satisfying the basic needs of people in the context of limited natural resources. The former is focused on consumption of products that people believe will bring them pleasure which is (artificially) measured through GDP or growth rate of the national economy, whereas the latter is based

on human connection—networking with family, friends, neighbours. While in one model, happiness is up for sale and is intricately linked to the purchase of big houses and expensive cars, in the other happiness is freely available in the form of relationships with people.

As per Douglass' characterisation of city models, it becomes clear what trajectory Dhaka's growth model is on. It only takes a five-minute walk in the unforgiving streets of Dhaka to see just how strangled its environment has become—devoid of public space. In the modernist view, parks and plazas are considered a waste of space that could otherwise be utilised for economic purposes. Thanks to Dhaka's rapid commercialisation we now have an array of shopping malls and restaurants which are mostly frequented by the well-off—an unholy mixture of classism and consumerism on stark display.

The notion of a 'public space' is perhaps alien to most youngsters in Dhaka who have spent their childhoods glued to computer screens. Whereas children in the era preceding the peak of

urbanisation relished outdoor sports and activities, where they had an active role, children (and adults) today have become passive spectators due to an overreliance on technology and the rapid erosion of available public space due to the latter's unabated private appropriation.

These discordant surroundings are anathema to human beings because we are inherently social animals that crave human contact. The preservation of public space—the connective tissue in an increasingly isolating atmosphere of urban life—seems to be missing in the model of Dhaka's progress and development. All that is labelled as progress is not always a sign of improvement and a consumption-led mass behaviour isn't a sign of happiness. In a society where the private realm is fast encroaching upon people's lives—private homes, private cars, private workplaces, privatised multiplexes—the role of the 'public space' is all the more instrumental in shaping urban life.

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A WORD A DAY ARGUS-EYED adjective Vigilant, referring to Argos, a Greek mythological watchman with a hundred eyes.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH ACROSS: 1 Lace loop, 6 Not so many, 11 Greatly impressed, 12 Dunne or Papas, 13 Circus star, 14 Talks crazily, 15 Prospector's find, 16 Shearling's dad, 18 Frat letter, 19 Squirrel's treat, 20 "- gratia artis", 21 TV's Allen, 22 "Shut your trap!", 24 Foot feature, 25 Sawbuck, 27 Arthur of the courts, 29 Discusses thoroughly, 32 Drone, e.g., 33 "Very funny!" online, 34 Building extension, 35 Bumbling fellow, 36 Shearling's mom, 37 Fadeout, 38 Island sendoff, 40 Yonder things. DOWN: 1 Climber's spikes, 2 Needing a life change, 3 Made oneself prominent, 4 Have debts, 5 Topography, 6 Companies, 7 Stretch of years, 8 Deteriorated, 9 Involve, 10 Start anew, 17 Gallery event, 23 Miniature, 24 Sinking call, 26 Choice of colors, 27 On the liner, 28 Paint undercoat, 30 Inventor Otis, 31 Like some winter days, 33 Is inclined, 39 Embrace, 41 Towel word.

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