

## Global media and Dhaka's urbanisation

ADNAN MORSHED



It is no longer news that Dhaka has earned the infamy of being one of the world's most unliveable cities and "worst vacation spots." We have become accustomed to hearing Dhaka's moniker, the "traffic capital of the world," in different global media. Every time the city's alleged urban dysfunction is in the news, local social-media reactions are typically three-pronged. The first group retorts that the western media don't understand how this metropolis functions with its own organic cultural paradigms and carry-on-no-matter-what ethos. Because the western (journalistic) eye judges the city with western living standards, this type of labelling is fundamentally flawed and deceitful. The second group is nihilist, conceding, yes, it is an unliveable city and we have become frogs in the proverbial well. Members of this group are likely to retreat into their private worlds, rather than engaging with the broader city life. The third group includes the uber-fatalists, who ask: "What can you do about it? It is too unsolvable a problem and let's just go on with our lives."

It is important to get out of these thought blocks once in a while and reflect on how and why the city functions the way it does. It is also important to remember that growth of cities everywhere has always been a complicated process. Cities defy singular narratives. A city has multiple personalities, conflicting histories, and shifting growth mantras. Thus, the making of a "liveable city" begins with coming to terms with its messy histories and divergent urban tendencies, and then being prudent about what the city is and should be for its people. In one way or the other, this has been the oft-



repeated message of Jane Jacobs, the activist author of *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), an essential reading for anybody interested in urban affairs.

Consider Dhaka once again. The city has been growing exponentially, particularly since it became the capital of the independent nation of Bangladesh in 1971. This urban growth transpired with both promises and perils, introducing contentious debates not only on urbanisation, but also on questions of

modernity and progress. If modernity is, as Marshall Berman articulated, "a paradoxical unity, a unity of disunity [that] pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal," Dhaka city appears to be a quintessential modernist narrative in which optimism and pessimism, resilience and dysfunction, the spaces of affluence and poverty could not find a more fluid coexistence. Karl Marx's observation that in a modern world "all that is solid melts into air"—that is, forces of global

capitalism and market push everything into a perpetual state of transience—presents a prescient portrayal of contemporary Dhaka.

When Dhaka is called one of the worst cities in the world, the sweeping label actually simplifies a robust urban problem by isolating the city from its larger social, political, and economic contexts. The abstraction indeed has a ring of truth, as the city feels infernal—an urban tornado sucking everything into a dizzying vortex of traffic

congestion, wild land speculation, economic disparities, and environmental challenges. Yet, neither despair nor hope alone can account for the city's exhilarating urbanity. "Howl," the American poet Allen Ginsberg's existential angst over the hyper-modernity of 1950s New York City, could be an apt description of present-day Dhaka. "What sphinx of cement and aluminium hacked open

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