

Global media and Dhaka's urbanisation

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their skulls and ate up their brains and imagination? Robot apartments! Invisible suburbs! Skeleton treasures! Blind capitals! Demonic industries! Spectral nations! Invincible mad-houses!" Ginsberg's modern metropolis was hardly a wasteland, but rather an epic battlefield where the social, cultural, and economic forces of modernity engaged in a perpetual struggle. Take a stroll around Farmgate or Gulistan and hear Ginsberg's Howl!

The capital city works like an urban maze that provokes some observers to dismiss the city as an irredeemable wasteland and some as a resilient urban zone that could be transformed into a liveable metropolis by a happy marriage of political goodwill and sustainable planning. Fortunately, there is also somewhat of a "middle path" in the vein of the Dutch architect and urban theorist Rem Koolhaas, who found in the Nigerian city of Lagos "a protean organism that creatively defies constrictive Western ideas of urban order." Koolhaas found in the urbanism of developing economies not the predictable western fear of a forthcoming apocalypse, but a realistic image of what to expect in the megacities of the future. Koolhaas is perhaps not off base. By 2050, three-quarters of the world's population will live in urban areas and most future megacities will be located in developing countries. Many urban theorists now believe that the great urban experiments that were undertaken in the western metropolises of the late 19th and early 20th centuries have shifted to the developing world, particularly Asia.

Dhaka's urban growth in the past forty years or so validates this observation. Bangladesh's urban population was only 8 percent at independence, meaning that the country was still an agrarian delta punctuated by a few cities, most prominently Dhaka and at a distant second, Chittagong. Dhaka's

population grew at more than 6 percent per year in the 1970s and at nearly 10 percent in the early 1980s. By the early 1990s, the capital's population was more than 6 million. Today, Dhaka's population, nearing 18 million according to some estimates, competes with those of other megacities of the world, such as, New York, Mexico City, Sao Paulo, Karachi, and Mumbai. The migration of impoverished rural population to the city in search of a better life has been the mainstay of this population boom.

A varied combination of push and pull factors brings over half a million people from the villages to Dhaka city every year. This population surge results in a liquid-like filling of all "available" spaces in the city. The poor rural migrants often find refuge in what the journalist Doug Saunders called "arrival city," the urban fringe, sustained by the everyday entrepreneurship of the underclass. There have been other crucial factors for the city's growth. Territorial expansion, natural growth, concentration of key educational institutions and health care facilities, both formal and informal sector job opportunities, industrialisation, and manufacturing, particularly readymade garments, have made Dhaka into a primate city. Contributing nearly 40 percent of the national GDP, Dhaka is disproportionately larger than other cities in the country. Besides, in the popular perception, the capital is where one needs to be to pursue big dreams. Dhaka is what London was to England in the late 19th century or New York to America in the early 20th century.

The urbanistic implications of Dhaka's population growth have been manifold. The first and foremost effect has been an unsustainable demand on urban land, leading to a staggering population density and sending urban land value to an economic stratosphere. The pressure on land rapidly altered the city's traditional urban fabric, particu-



larly low-rise residential areas. Consider Dhanmondi, a gridiron patterned low-density residential neighbourhood planned during the East Pakistan era. Back then, generously sized and serviced plots contained mostly 2 or 3 storied buildings. They occupied about 50 percent of the plot and left the remaining area as green front and backyard. The overall impression was that of an urban pastoral. Even until the early 1980s, Dhanmondi was a quiet, self-sufficient residential neighbourhood with independent homes, a few corner shops catering to the locals, and a lake that wrapped the area with a feeling of ecological bliss. But from the late 1980s the pressure of urbanisation catalysed the replacement of Dhanmondi's low-

rise single-family houses with rent-worthy multi-storied apartment buildings and profitable commercial structures. The area's urban character changed from residential to semi-commercial.

The demand on urban land also gave rise to a senseless culture of land-grabbing, wetland-filling, and river encroachment that increased Dhaka's ecological risks manifold. The land-water hydrological character that in the early 17th century inspired Islam Khan Chishti (the grandson of Emperor Akbar's spiritual mentor Sheikh Selim Chishti) to come to Dhaka has all but disappeared. For the Mughals, Dhaka's hydro-geography promised both a strategic stronghold to protect the

south-eastern frontier of the empire and many commercial advantages by virtue of the city's easy accessibility. In modern times, Dhaka needed to retain its land-water geography for its ecological survival. But a soaring land price made legal and illegal occupation of wetlands, river banks, or government lands a profitable business. Many political honchos and people with economic muscle occupy lands with a sense of entitlement and impunity.

Although a civil society-initiated culture of environmental activism began to take shape from the early 1990s, Dhaka continues to face a steep environmental battle. Frenzied gentrification, exacerbated by the epidemic of

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পার্টনার

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পছন্দ ও প্রয়োজন অনুযায়ী বেছে নিব
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