

# What not to learn from Dhaka City

MAMNOON MURSHED CHOWDHURY

"A city is the place of availabilities. It is the place where a small boy, as he walks through it, may see something that will tell him what he wants to do his whole life."

— Louis Kahn

THE other day my seven-year-old niece learnt about bribes. Not in school, but while on the way to school. Her dad had parked the car on Mirpur Road so she and her mom could get down and walk their way into the inner Dhanmondi streets. A policeman appeared in no time and informed that since the car was parked in the wrong place at the wrong time, it is to be towed away by a "wrecker" vehicle and a "wrecker charge" is to be paid. The dad, a lawyer and with full knowledge of Article 66 Chapter 7 of Dhaka Metropolitan Police Ordinance 1976, sensed that towing away can lead to more complexities and quickly offered an amount little lesser than the "wrecker charge". There was no necessity for a money receipt, he said, since "we are all in a hurry". The case had a happy ending and my niece learnt her first lesson in Dhaka 101—you can get away without punishment if you spend money.

Dhaka city, to a child, is like an open book. It speaks volumes about the people who live in it and the people who design or decide how we live. Unfortunately, due to many elements contained in it, the book, like a movie, requires at least a PG 13 rating. Corruption in city governance comes in many layers—some discreet, some rampantly visible even to the disinterested. With more than a third of Dhaka's 15 million inhabitants under the age of 18, the daily dose of lapses in city governance has resulted in irreversible damages in the collective conscience of young minds. A lack of faith in the system and in institutions that create the systems leads individuals to behave recklessly as citizens and to justify it. Children grow up in Dhaka city watch their elders break the law, benefit from it and get away without punishment. The perception of the city, therefore, is a space where boundaries between right and wrong are ruinously blurred.

As my niece walks to her school, she finds motorcyclists on footpaths desperate to avoid the gridlocked street. She learns that it is alright not to respect the rights of others in order to get somewhere fast. On the streets, it

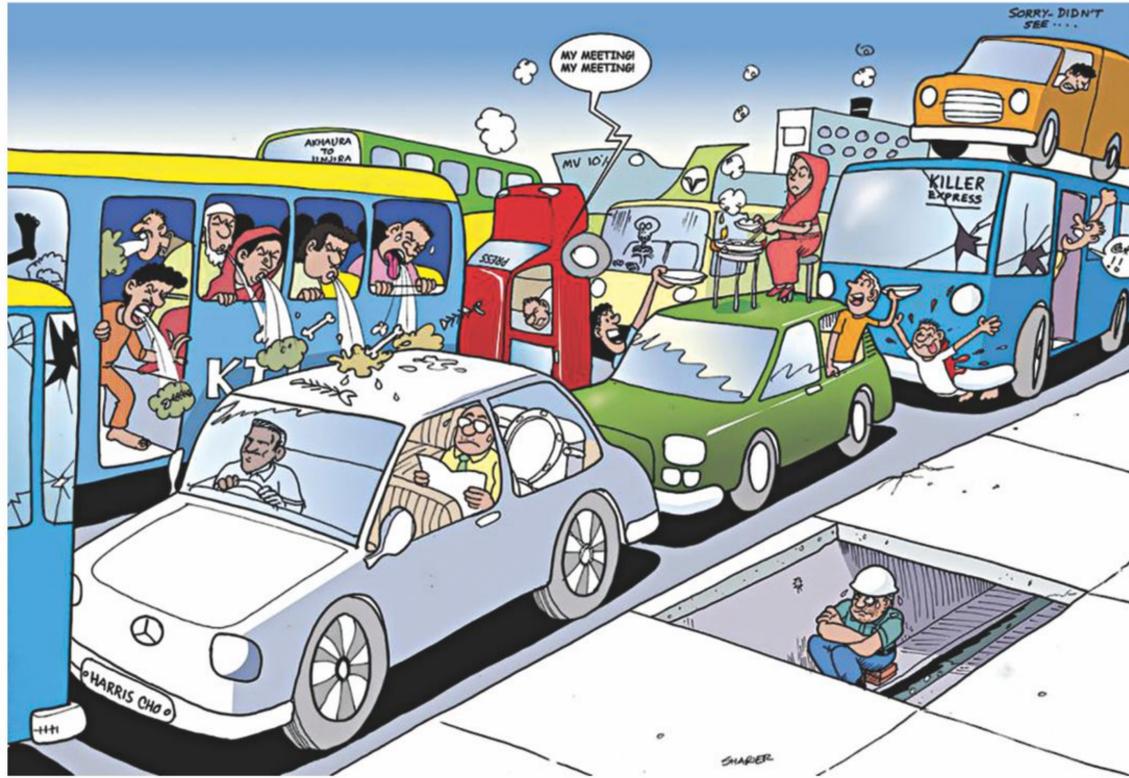


ILLUSTRATION: SHARIER KHAN

is the VIP vehicle or a Dhaka University student bus on the wrong side of the road that reinforces the lesson—something that stays on and will be repeated when her time comes. What is alarming is that this stimulation by preceding acts often appears normal in the contemporary narrative of a competitive society. It is tempting to take totally out of context Danish architect and urban designer Jan Gehl's famous quote, "something happens because something happens," and use it in a negative way. The child will flout the law because she saw someone else do it because someone also saw someone else do it.

It is important that we realise the need to have a short-term objective to eradicate the visible elements of Dhaka city's mismanagement and corruption. These elements are numerous and the long-term impacts are too

huge to be overlooked by any sensitive person in charge of city governance.

For instance, our traffic police, instead of having that desperate stick on his stretched-out-and-gesturing hands, may well have a remote control device to switch the green light off and turn the red on. Let it be entirely his call to decide the duration of each, but let the people know that a red light is the scientific, graphical and unambiguous signal to indicate it is time to put on the brakes—instantly. The most important factor that drives a city smoothly is discipline and in spaces that people use collectively, order has no alternatives. It is an irony, however, that in Dhaka while the police is responsible for managing traffic, the lights are managed by the City Corporations.

Let there be no underage drivers steering those scarred and dented behemoths called

mini-buses and "lagunas". In the first place, let there be no bus allowed on the streets having a single scratch—an act that may prevent the driving lunacy witnessed in Dhaka streets causing accidents leading to prolonged or permanent disabilities. These accidents are frequent and, unless fatal, go unreported in the press. The faith in the regulatory authorities like DMP Traffic and BRTA has eroded so much that after any incident people tend to take upon themselves the task of punishing the offending driver or vehicle. Lesson for a child: Take the law into your own hands because law enforcers are hopeless.

Let the impossibility of politeness as a word synonymous with police be reduced. It is common in Dhaka to see policemen beating up errant rickshaw drivers. Tempers can flare in a tropical city where about 4,000 traffic police are tasked with the daily drudge-

ery of managing 900,000 vehicles. But men in uniform out on the streets are the ones children should admire and idolise, not fear or loathe. It takes a superman to be a traffic controller in the lawless Dhaka roads and an errant superman can be more dangerous than the criminal in ways more than one.

Let good taste and good sense get some priority in the visual elements of traffic management. Let us not instil in a child's mind that it is alright to tie bamboos with dirty concrete posts with galvanised wires to create a barrier in front of an architectural masterpiece like the National Assembly building in Manik Mia Avenue or to divert traffic in Mohakhali rail gate. In a country that has graduated to the middle income segment, it is only logical to expect that urban elements are designed and installed in a manner that reflects such status. In designing pavements, police boxes, planters, roundabouts, dividers, metal frames and street furniture as a whole, a freshness in approach is required. The best cities of the world put great emphasis on urban design. As recently as last year, the prestigious Red Dot Design Award went to architect Alec Tzannes for his street furniture design for Sydney. The ludicrous acts of putting in sculptures that reflect abysmal artistic quality and animal figures not even fit for amusement parks are an embarrassment to any culturally sensitive city. Visuals are important as they create a benchmark of urban aesthetic. Visuals are important because seeing leads to believing in the strengths of our rich history in arts and culture.

Let us ban the obscenities called posters, vinyl banners, billboards and the so-called welcome gates from the city. When political, these are often unashamed displays of sycophancy and arrogance to a young citizen, abhorrent to the idea of a democratic space.

Cities are landscapes of learning. If Louis Kahn's small boy does not learn anything from Dhaka that will tell him what he wants to do his whole life, it gives the message that something is rotting here. The number of educated young people leaving Bangladesh each year in search of permanent addresses in cities ranked best in the world is huge and unhealthy. We cannot afford a sick city transmitting incurably disruptive ideas to its young population who willingly choose to stay back.

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# Zahir Raihan and the making of Jibon Thekey Neyya

NAZNIN TITHI

BEING someone who is keen on watching films that were made on our Liberation War in the early seventies and the films that made an impact on our nation's movement for freedom, for me, Zahir Raihan is a legend. And whenever there is any discussion on Zahir Raihan—who had an unparalleled passion for films, feature films and documentaries alike—I make it a point to talk about *Jibon Thekey Neyya*. As an ordinary viewer, I think this particular film was meant for all the people of Bangladesh. Such is this film's speciality.

When *Jibon Thekey Neyya*, the last feature film directed by this legendary filmmaker was released on April 10, 1970, it took the whole of East Pakistan by storm. The people of East Pakistan knew beforehand that a film was being made which spoke of their story... their struggles... their dreams. They had a feeling that the film might not get clearance from the censor board and so they brought out a procession protesting any such move. Finally, the film was released. But on the day the film was released, the then military government banned it. The next day the censor board again arranged for the film's screening, where Major general Rao Forman Ali himself was present and watched the whole film.



Zahir Raihan

Although the film got clearance from the censor board after the screening, Rao Forman Ali warned Zahir Raihan, "... I will see you."

Why this warning? The film narrates the story of a middle class family headed by an autocratic elder sister. Other members include her two younger brothers and her husband. But nobody in the family has a say in any matter of the household and everything is decided by the elder sister. Her husband is not even allowed to sing inside the house. In such a suffocating environment, to end her autocratic rule, the two brothers get married hoping that their

elder sister would not be able to dictate everything in the family anymore. The members of the family paste posters on the wall against her dictatorship. In the end, the oppressed members win and the autocratic elder sister lands in jail.

Although it seems like an ordinary story of a family, it symbolises the dictatorial regimes of Ayub Khan and Yahya Khan. The whole family's struggle against one woman symbolises the struggle of the people of then East Pakistan. The film drew inspiration from the Language Movement of 1952 and the mass uprising of 1969. Our Language

Movement had always been a source of inspiration for Zahir Raihan. He was among the first ten students of Dhaka University to break Section 144 on February 21, 1952 and was jailed for his role in the Language Movement. Zahir Raihan planned to make a film on our Language movement but could not get the government's approval. In *Jibon Thekey Neyya*, Zahir Raihan kept scenes of *Prokhat Pheri* on February 21; the protagonists of the film were seen observing *Ekushey February*. The political consciousness of the characters in the film encouraged and added to the ongoing nationalist

movement of that time. I still find it hard to believe that this film, which challenged the state power and echoed the hopes and aspirations of the people of then East Pakistan, was actually made in 1969, the year of the mass uprising. During the shooting of the film in FDC, some army men came to the spot. They said they heard an anti-Pakistan film was being made by Zahir Raihan and Actor Razzak for interrogation and only let them go after Zahir Raihan signed a bond which said if the law and order situation in the country deteriorates after the film's release, Zahir Raihan would be held accountable.

A film like *Jibon Thekey Neyya* was a big challenge for Zahir Raihan in every aspect of its making. Prior to this, he made quite a number of feature films among which were *Kokhono Asheni*, *Kacher Deyal*, *Behula*, *Anowara*, etc. All of these were much acclaimed by film critics. *Kacher Deyal* was a huge success and got Zahir international recognition. But he wanted to move away from making popular and commercially successful films and wished to make political films instead. This came about with *Jibon Thekey Neyya*.

He made it in a way so that ordinary people could easily relate to the story. Amzad Hossain and Zahir Raihan jointly wrote the screenplay. Afzal Chowdhury did the

cinematography, while Khan Ataur Rahman gave the music direction. The combination of the four was extraordinary and thus we got an extraordinary film. During our Liberation War this film was a hit in Kolkata and earned a lot of money, all of which Zahir Raihan donated to the Liberation War fund.

Ask any ordinary person to name a film from the '70s that they remember watching; the answer would definitely be *Jibon Thekey Neyya*. I remember watching this film with my parents when I was a child. I particularly loved the song *E khacha bhangbo ami kemon korey*, which Khan Ataur Rahman sings a number of times in the film but can never finish singing. Khan Ataur Rahman later said that the song was never finished in the film because people's struggle to break free from the shackles of oppression never ends... it's a continuous process.

This is also true for Zahir Raihan, who in his short lifetime struggled continuously for realising his ideals. He struggled through his films and writings. He struggled for a country where there would be no place for war criminals—he was the first person after our independence to form a commission to investigate the killings of intellectuals. His lifelong struggle ended with his disappearance on January 30, 1972.

Naaznin Tithi is a member of the editorial team at *The Daily Star*.



### A WORD A DAY

**BLOBITECHTURE**  
noun

A movement in architecture in which buildings have an organic, amoeba-shaped building form.

### CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

**ACROSS**

- 1 Hotel workers
- 6 It changes hands all the time
- 11 Let on
- 12 Asian capital
- 13 African capital
- 14 Bumbling
- 15 Place of worship
- 17 Can. neighbour
- 19 Cacao container
- 20 Calculate a total
- 23 Casino patron
- 25 Taj Mahal city
- 26 Program for
- 28 Stratford's river
- 29 Response to a joke
- 30 Great weight
- 31 Perfect serve
- 32 Sports drink

**DOWN**

- 1 Buddy
- 2 Oklahoma city
- 3 Knockoff
- 4 Dreaded
- 5 Squash underfoot
- 6 Youngster
- 7 Highway division
- 8 Wallet bill
- 9 Member of the force
- 10 Model buy
- 16 Column-supported roof
- 17 Lusitania sinker
- 18 Power relay
- 20 Turmoil
- 21 R2-D2 for one
- 22 "Divine Comedy" author
- 24 Wallet bill
- 25 Had brunch
- 27 Itineraries
- 31 Pretentious
- 33 Wheedle
- 34 Spur on
- 35 Drake's music
- 36 Bruins legend
- 37 Life story, for short
- 39 USN rank
- 40 Reuben bread

### YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

LUMPY FLAP  
ON AIR CAIRO  
GAITS HIKES  
OWLS SERENE  
FAB SKY SAD  
FROSTIER  
EXPO NULL  
FRONTIER  
SON MAE BOO  
CLAMOR LEND  
ADIEU DARIN  
RIVET INAN  
FEET DALEY

### BEETLE BAILEY

SARGE GOT THE MOTOR RUNNING, BUT THE JEEP WOULDN'T MOVE

BUT WHEN HE GOT OUT TO PUSH IT, IT TOOK OFF

HE CALLS IT HIS 'BEETLE JEEP'

DJ GARAGE

GREG + MORT WALKER

### BABY BLUES

DAD CAN I GET A NEW BIKE?

YOU DON'T NEED A NEW BIKE.

BUT KEESHA IS GETTING A NEW BIKE!

IF KEESHA GOT A PET CROCODILE, WOULD YOU WANT ONE, TOO?

IF KEESHA GOT A PET CROCODILE, I'D ASK IF I COULD HAVE HER NEW BIKE.

KIRKMAN & SCOTT