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## WORLD CITIES DAY

# The death and life of

# GREAT GLOBAL CITIES

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As his airplane approached the sprawling international airport in Mymensingh, the capital of the South Asian country of Bangladesh, Kareem Sebastian surveyed the deltaic Bengal geography below and wondered about what was going on during the final years of the country's lost megapolis Dhaka. Located to the south of the current capital, this once-upon-a-time-city occupied more or less the epicentre of an intricate riverine system. It was a sunny October morning with great visibility, allowing him a clear view of a vast urban ruin. The year was 2044.

Was there a Pompeii moment for Dhaka or was it a slow disintegration? An urban anthropologist and a professor at Harvard, Kareem Sebastian was commissioned by the *New York Global* to retrace the triumphant and tragic histories of two South Asian cities: Mohenjo-daro and Dhaka.

The goal was to shed some new light on why and how cities rise and fall. The occasion for Sebastian's assignment was the World Cities Day, established over three decades ago on October 27, 2013, by the United Nations General Assembly, with the mission of raising international community's awareness of cities as an effective platform for good governance, social inclusion and interaction, environmental stewardship, and sustainable economic development.

Since 2013, the United Nations has designated October 31 as the World Cities Day. Each year, the day is celebrated on the basis of a given theme. For example, the theme for 2016 was "Inclusive Cities, Shared Development" and, for 2017, it was "Innovative Governance, Open Cities."

The impetus for establishing the World Cities Day is understandable. The year 2007 witnessed a major demographic milestone in human history. That year the earth's urban population crossed the 50 percent threshold and the "Urban Millennium" in human history began.

The end of the last millennium was marked by a rapidly urbanising world and a corresponding surge in global urban population, which rose from 13 percent (220 million) in 1900 to 29 percent (732 million) in 1950 to 51.3 percent (3.5 billion) in 2010. According to some estimates, 75 percent of humanity, that is over 6 billion people, will be living in cities and towns by 2050.

Designating a World Cities Day in 2013 not only made sense, but was also necessary. While cities could be a great economic boon and provide greater access to opportunities, cities—if not planned and managed with effective environmental policies and a sense of social justice—could also be a devastating threat to human existence. The historic relationship between the concept of *civitas* (a popular Latin term during the Roman Empire, denoting a social body of citizens) and the resilience of the city needed to be reimagined at the beginning of the Urban Millennium.

Sebastian understood his South Asian assignment in the political context of the emerging Urban Millennium. His mission was to compare and contrast the rise and fall of two cities: one on the bank of the Indus River, well known for its spectacular development as one of the first cities in human history over four millennia ago, and the other on the bank of Buriganga River, known during its heyday as the densest city in the world. Even though the two cities represent two radically different historic eras, they are linked by the common theme of water management as the very basis of their existence. Sebastian was asked by the editors of the *New York Global* to reflect on the promises and perils of 21st-century urbanisation by learning the lessons of history.

His experience in Mohenjo-daro, the 4500-year-old Indus Valley city located on high grounds in the modern-day Larkana district of Sindh province in Pakistan, was intriguing. Not known to modern archaeologists until the 1920s, the city profited from the fertile lands of the Indus River floodplain and the hydraulic knowledge of the mysterious Indus Valley people. In an ancient form of "globalisation," the people of Mohenjo-daro traded with the civilisations of Mesopotamia, going north-west by both land and sea routes.

As he walked inside the archaeological sites of Mohenjo-daro, Sebastian grasped the urban nature of the city. He had studied its glorious history, dramatised by a Bollywood film in 2016. During its peak from about 2500 to 1900 BCE, Mohenjo-daro, spreading out over 250 acres on elevated grounds, was one of the largest and most prosperous among the cities of early civilisations in Egypt, Mesopotamia, and China. It was not a city of kings, queens or high priests, as no trace of any major citadel, palace or temple has been found.

As Sebastian strolled around the city's central focus, the Great Bath, a massive community pool, Mohenjo-daro's forte in urban water management became clear to him. The city's hydraulic engineering—from over 700 cylindrical wells serving water to urban households to elaborate water delivery and sewage systems by means of brick pipes—was the most advanced at the time.

The city's planners and engineers were experts at harnessing the river water not only for irrigation agriculture, but also for everyday use by means of an elaborate distribution system built under brick platforms and orthogonal urban streets. The hydraulic management system suggested that the city's administrators were more intent on serving the city people on an egalitarian basis rather than creating monumental, politically convenient architecture to glorify a ruling elite.

Why Mohenjo-daro perished sometime around 1800 BCE remains a mystery. No one knows for sure. While he learned a lot from his visit, Sebastian left Pakistan with an array of unanswered or unanswerable questions. And, that is the mystery of the city.

Three days after he arrived in Mymensingh,



ILLUSTRATION: EHSANUR RAZA RONNY

Sebastian took a road trip to the ruins of Dhaka. Guided by a local urban planner and historian named Rimon Haider, he first went to Old Dhaka, most of which now rots under Buriganga's contaminated water.

He asked his guide, "What happened?"

Haider sighed, "Well, despite the then Prime Minister's sincere directives, the political and business mafia kept on encroaching on the Buriganga River to build their factories, warehouses, residential complexes, and markets. Narrowed each year, the river could carry less and less water. This happened to other rivers surrounding Dhaka and beyond. The Bengal delta's natural and necessary water drainage system was drastically reduced. Rivers started dying but the monsoon water kept rushing down from the Himalayan plateau. Then there was another problem. Despite a national ban on dumping untreated industrial effluent into the river, the industrialists and their cohorts hardly felt any ethical qualms about treating the rivers as drains. The city's destruction was a matter of time."

"Weren't there any environmental laws?"

"There were, but most people didn't care about laws or the environment. People broke the law with impunity. There was this corrosive culture of illegal wealth accumulation at any cost. The environment suffered irreparably."

"What about architects and planners? What were they doing?"

"Well, their feeble environmental activism was often sentimental, sporadic, and not research-based. Their half-hearted activism was not enough to save the city and its environment. Besides, architects knowingly and unknowingly played along the dominant official development narrative that took precedence over the natural environment. I suspect that their professional education did not prepare them adequately to be self-critical citizens. There was a glaring hole in pedagogy."

"Who framed the country's mainstream development narrative? Where were such

"My research tells me that Dhaka's traffic congestion was so notorious that the city's annual loss due to traffic jam was nearly USD 4 billion! Was the World Bank wrong to promote infrastructures like flyovers?"

"The World Bank mostly sold an elitist vision of the city, one in which pro-market social mobility was the key mantra. That vision hardly benefited the 85 percent of daily commuters, who used rickety, congested public transportation or walked to work. Instead of focusing on reducing the public demand for cars, they wanted to make the car supply chain more efficient. In other words, there was a rising middle class and make personal automobiles affordable for them and provide them with more four-lane highways, flyovers, and gated communities along the river."

"So, what did it all mean?"

"Buy more cars and consume more gas and be proud members of an uber-consumerist society. It was a mercantile vision that was also hyped up by the country's bureaucratic regime. Why didn't the World Bank invest in a robust footpath plan across the country and bike-sharing programmes? Alas, these zero-carbon developments were not market-friendly. They make urban dwellers healthier but don't necessarily advance market interests."

As they trekked the ruinous streets of this ghost city in their Jeep, Sebastian and Haider reached where Dhaka's Karail slum used to be. They paused for some time to visualise what was going on in this part of the city.

Sebastian asked, "How did the ruling class frame the development narrative?"

Haider was on target. "The ruling elite was interested in the city's symbol-centric and GDP-centric development. Development was viewed exclusively as a challenge of economic growth. The ideas of social justice and equality were often left out of the development discourse. The economic growth didn't trickle down to the bottom of the food chain, inevitably spawning crime-prone and malnourished low-income communities.

global actors as the World Bank in this narrative?"

"Well, the big guys of the World Bank often flew in and saw the city mostly as a huge market. How would urbanisation increase economic productivity? The World Bank's 2017 Dhaka East vision was the epitome of anti-environment, neoliberal urban policies that have largely been rejected in the developed world. The Bank wouldn't dare present such ideas to cities like London, Paris, New York or Vienna. Why were they experimenting with pro-market, pro-elite urban policies in developing countries? Because they could, without much local intellectual, research-based resistance. While New York City was increasingly pedestrianising city streets to recreate a people-centric city and Copenhagen was envisioning a city core completely devoid of cars, the World Bank gurus were lamenting the loss of vehicular speed in Dhaka. Their planning vision revolved around mega infrastructure projects, blatantly denying the interests of the majority of urban dwellers."

There was a lot of buzz about slum improvement, but the poor was seen as sub-human and dispensable Other. An all-out civil war between haves and have-nots became ominously real."

"Yes, in *An Uncertain Glory: India and Its Contradictions*—published in the same year that the World Cities Day was established—the economists Jean Dreze and Amartya Sen talked about how a country couldn't expect to move forward simply riding on a glitzy consumerist economy, while the lowest rungs of society didn't have access to quality healthcare, education, and other basic needs. A good city must offer a sense of social justice not only through its public and private institutions, but also through its spatial and urban organisation. One can't ghettoise the poor with very few opportunities available to them and expect to become a liveable, humane city. Aesthetic gymnastics alone won't do it. A few very modern-looking buildings and wavy concrete bridges over lakes don't make a city great. Was this the feeling one would get on the

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streets of Dhaka then?"

"You could argue that. Dhaka was frequently decorated with flyovers, expensive roadside beautification projects including bonsai galleries, and water fountains, while ordinary city people struggled hard to eke out a minimal existence. There was a lot of anger on the street. There was no basic sense of fairness in society. Anarchy and debauchery ate away the soul of the society."

"Well, listening to you I can visualise the urban politics of Dhaka during its final years. As one would imagine, a city thrives when it treats all its citizens fairly. It is not just the individual's material prosperity, but the social advancement of the larger community that the city needs. Greek thinkers called it the health of the *Koinonia*, or community. A city becomes liveable when all its citizens share a common vision of peaceful coexistence. This vision slowly but steadily transforms into a social contract that all citizens learn to abide by. Over two millennia ago Aristotle compared the city, the polis, with a ship and the duty of all city people was to assure 'the preservation of the ship in its voyage.'"

"Yes, I was trying to bring up the issue of

fairness in our conversation. Consider Purbachal, a 6000-acre-plus floodplain on the eastern frontier of Dhaka, transformed into a mammoth real-estate development that only the rich could afford. Many members of the wealthy class brought investment properties there, meaning that the plot they purchased would not be used for their primary homes. Not only did Purbachal not meet the city's vast housing needs, but it also contributed to the city's paralysing waterlogging problems. Because its fancy single-family plots sat squarely on an intricate network of natural drains. Even moderate rain began to flood city streets. Water-borne diseases began to spread. Real-estate developments like Purbachal mushroomed all across the city, causing irredeemable damage to the hydro-geography of the city."

"So, what was the general mood like in the city then?"

"Well, Dhaka was a primate city, meaning that it was disproportionately larger than other cities in the country. Impoverished people from rural hinterlands kept on flocking to the capital in search of better lives. There was a lot of buzz about decentralisation among the policymakers, but Dhaka kept on growing in all directions, shouldering an unsustainable national burden. Its national GDP share was nearly 40 percent around 2015. By 2030, Dhaka had nearly 40 million people within its metropolitan area, the densest concentration of humanity on the face of the earth. The impossible equation of a lot of needy people and limited resources gave rise to a stressed-out, burnt-out society."

"A collective neurosis of society?"

"Yes, a study undertaken by Zipjet sometime around 2017 revealed that most Asian cities were stressful places to live in. The study ranked cities' stress level based on 'air pollution, gender equality, unemployment, mental health and even the amount of sun that a city gets.' In that study, Dhaka ranked the seventh most stressed city in the world. With a global ranking of 144, Dhaka's social stress level was skyrocketing. Densely populated and having the worst traffic congestion in the world, the city's mental and physical health was on the verge of collapse. Yes, there were a few pockets of magic in the city—Louis Kahn's parliament complex, wooded areas on the Dhaka University campus, many cool eateries here and there, some art galleries and museums, and a burgeoning café culture. But the city's infernal, unmanaged growth, combined with the city administration's inability to understand what a city is and should be, as well as the city people's general apathy toward their city, led to a point of no return."

"So, what happened to Dhaka at the end?"

"Well, no one knows for sure. Was it like Mohenjo-daro? I don't know. Historians offered a host of possible reasons for the demise of the Indus Valley civilisation. Such as: the Indus River drastically changed its course; Aryans invaded the Indus region and destroyed the settlements; dissatisfaction brought on by a change of climate; the exhaustion of timber resources in the mass production of baked bricks; the salting of arable soil by floods and irrigation; and the Indus Valley population civilisation reached its uttermost economic limit."

"So, do you think Dhaka will rise again one day?"

May be.

Sebastian and Haider called it a day and prepared to return to Mymensingh.

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