

Why Dhaka is not a walkable city, yet!



I have been walking around Dhaka, kind of randomly, for the past few months. It was not for health reasons. I was mostly interested in doing a personal assessment of the capital city's walkability. Lately urban planning conversations across the country—from municipalities to city corporations—emphasised "walkability" as one of the key criteria for making a city liveable, environment-friendly, community-oriented, and less dependent on motorised transportation. It is heartening that under-construction footpaths are now a common sight in many Bangladeshi cities, small and big.

If you can walk to your workplace and neighbourhood shops or walk your children to school, you have a well-organised city because you are not dependent on environment-polluting and gas-guzzling personal automobiles to reach your destination. You are living a healthy lifestyle. Studies in the USA show that the typical resident of a walkable urban area weighs 6-10 pounds less than the person living in a sprawling suburb where car-based lifestyle demands less physical activities.

Studies also show that if you walk as part of your daily travel need, you are very likely to develop an empathy for your city which may then inspire you to keep your neighbourhood clean or protest when a historic building faces the prospect of demolition due to profit-motivated real estate development. Walking is one of the most effective ways of knowing a city and its communities from an intimate distance. Walkability is a good measure of a city's liveability.

Dhaka is not a walkable city—not yet. Why? Let me share my experience.

Firstly, the city's footpaths are often discontinuous. You cannot go from point A to point B by using one continuous loop of footpath. Footpaths are often interrupted by vendors, *cha-wallas*, illegally stowed building construction materials, overflowing dumpsters, and abrupt open drains. Walking is difficult.

Secondly, the city's polluted air, rancid smell, and a pervasive lack of cleanliness discourage one to walk on city streets. The low-income population which makes up Dhaka's 60-70 percent share of daily commuters don't really have a choice. Walking is part of their daily survival strategies in an inhospitable city. And, then there is the tyranny of spitting. How would you walk on footpaths while you have to survey the ground so intensely to avoid stepping on spit? Somebody needs to do an anthropological study on why city people in Bangladesh spit on the street so routinely!

Thirdly, the overcrowded footpaths make it virtually impossible to walk without bumping into a fellow pedestrian. Footpaths in Dhaka are an infernal urban drama, played by a host of urban characters, such as pedestrians, hawkers, shoppers, transit passengers, beggars, street urchins, pickpockets, and the police. It is difficult to pass through. "Sidewalk ballet," as famous urban critic Jane Jacobs called life on the sidewalk, is the proof of a city's people-centric urban culture. But as it turns out, walking on a sidewalk is an exciting urban experience only when there is some organisation and civic order to it.

Fourthly, an extremely stressful street life—marked by an unending stream of people, unexpected closure of streets, speeding cars, menacing buses, and their deafening honking—does not create a vibrant pedestrian environment. The lack

block or two to go to the neighbourhood market or the doctor's chamber. Why? First the obvious reason: lack of street safety and pedestrian-friendliness discourages many to walk. But there is more. The secretly detested idea of being seen on the street as a pedestrian (an unglamorous urban character?) is deeply embedded in our peculiar South Asian sense of social prestige. Colonial administrators and zamindars always mounted the horse or the elephant to showcase their power and elevated social rank. Repurposing these relics of the past has served well in the present-day climate of social mobility and class identity.

Another major obstacle to walkability is the male gaze. Dhaka's street life is inhospitable to women. Plagued by a paradoxical combination of patriarchal understanding of *pardah* and gender

had time to explore the city. Rome's winding streets could be precarious sometimes—missing sidewalks, absent crosswalks, uneven pavements, speeding smart cars, etc. Yet Rome is also a pedestrian's paradise because you can walk from monument to monument, walkable itineraries facilitated by a well-coordinated mass transit. Not only did Rome offer a clean and fascinating walking experience, my wife explained to me, it also transformed the pedestrian into an urban historian because around the next corner you were likely to find a Roman temple or a Renaissance palazzo or a historic piazza. It is not surprising that in the late afternoon the most popular footpath in Dhaka is along Manik Mia Avenue, offering a majestic view of the Parliament building.

What can we do to make Dhaka and other cities of Bangladesh walkable? We



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of road safety deters pedestrians. Parents are reluctant to let their children venture out of home.

These observations are quite obvious, as we experience these phenomena everyday in this crowded city. But there are other reasons and experiences that are rarely discussed when it comes to walkability.

There seems to be a strong anti-walking bias among the middle class. Walking on the street is covertly viewed as lowly and unsophisticated. Car ownership is socially glamorised, while walking is seen as an act beneath the middle-class social status. I have actually never run into any of my colleagues or friends on the street while going around Dhaka.

Yes, morning walkers populate the parks to fight diabetes and obesity or simply to stay fit, but the "middle-class" people are generally reluctant to walk a

insensitivity, the male gaze often commodifies the female pedestrian. As my wife and I roamed the streets of Dhaka, it seemed impossible for a woman to walk on the sidewalk without being stared at by males all around. Street life in Dhaka is spectacularly male-centric. A walkable city must include both men and women. How to make streets gender friendly would require long-term policies aimed at a cultural transformation.

The absence of a vision of the footpath as part of an enjoyable urban narrative diminishes walkability. Walkable places don't rely on footpaths alone. Walking becomes an attractive urban experience when footpaths offer views of monuments, historic and inspiring buildings, engaging shops, green and water, and dynamic public places.

Last year I was teaching at a university in Rome. I was busy all day but my wife

must first dispel the myth that walkability is all about footpaths. As much as it is about safe, comfortable, interesting, and pedestrian-friendly sidewalks, walkability is also about cultural attitudes toward the environment, urban life, class structure, gender, and social identity. To make a city walkable we urgently need the combined efforts of the traffic engineer, the architect-planner, the mayor, the policy maker, the urban anthropologist and, finally, the good citizen. Toward this end, we should begin with a national footpath policy and a social campaign to champion it as the right choice.

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Fighting malnutrition in Cox's Bazar

A timely intervention by WFP

ONE of the biggest problems facing the stranded Rohingya populace and the locals in Cox's Bazar is malnutrition. Although the World Food Programme (WFP) has been providing 50 kilos of rice, 9 kilos of lentils, yellow split peas, and 4 litres of edible oil every month to 100,000 households that constitute 700,000 Rohingyas, the problems associated with malnutrition dictate that a more balanced diet be in place. As it is impossible for WFP to supply all that is required, it now intends to introduce an e-voucher programme for 1.2 million people that would include 1 million Rohingyas and 200,000 Bangladeshi nationals.

Each debit card would be loaded with Tk 750 per month and the card holder would be able to purchase 19 different food items from select shops, which would ultimately complement what is already being distributed, in the hope that the daily diet of the target populace becomes more diversified and healthy. It is a timely effort by the UN body and certainly will go a long way in alleviating the pressure our authorities have been facing in feeding such a huge population of people who are here, not by choice, but they are here nonetheless and they need to be fed. While the world has been busy condemning the atrocities committed against the Rohingya, their concerns have not been matched by aid to these people. In this scenario, WFP coming forward to aid our authorities in dealing with this humanitarian crisis is much welcome news.

Turning marshlands into farmlands

Replicate "kandi" in other districts

IT is good to see that an Indonesian technique known as "sorjan" cropping has long been successfully implemented in the marshlands of Nazripur upazila in Pirojpur. The area in question has large tracts of marshlands that are under eight feet of water most of the year. The method in question is locally known as "kandi" and using it, local farmers have been using marshlands to produce vegetables. It is good to see that proven agricultural techniques from a foreign country that suffers from less than ideal weather conditions is being successfully implemented to change the lot of farmers in an upazila that suffers from such high levels of water inundation. What we learn from the experience is that the "kandi" technique allows farmers to make ridges that rise above the water level and once the beds clear the water, winter crop of vegetables are planted and harvested and this has dramatically changed the fortunes of the farming community over there.

There is great demand for winter vegetables, particularly in the capital city. If the "kandi" system can be scaled-up or replicated in other districts that have significant marshlands, we could be looking at a much greater supply chain for the city centres, but also at opening up a new stream of income for farming communities in such areas. The department of agriculture extension should look into this farming technique and take steps to introduce it to other districts with similar topography and weather conditions.



office as US president, the White House was occupied by arguably one of the most vacuous leaders in recent history. On December 22, Trump signed into a law a tax "reform," a shameless giveaway to corporations and the uber rich, while saddling future generations with a mammoth USD 1.5 trillion deficit over the next 10 years.

Almost immediately after inauguration, Trump removed any doubt to an appalled world about his disregard for fact. His administration made demonstrably false claims that attendance to his inauguration was the largest ever. Within a few days, Trump claimed that he had lost the popular vote due to millions of fake votes—again a demonstrably false claim.

It's been downhill ever since, and what a breathtakingly steep incline it has been!

The limited scope of this article is barely enough to scratch the surface of the horrors visited upon a country I now call home. I will just make a few points to help readers draw a broad impressionistic picture of the crisis of governance in the world's most powerful nation.

Only the most indefatigable optimists had hoped that Trump would surround himself with competent people who would protect him from his worst impulses.

Alas, Trump's administration has been a bizarre parade of appointees coming and going.

White House press secretary Sean Spicer, saddled with the unenviable job of defending the most flagrant lies, could not handle the heat (who could?) and quit. National Security Adviser Michael Flynn quit after he admitted to lying to

the vice president. White House Chief of Staff Reince Priebus left after being called a "paranoid schizophrenic" by newly appointed communications director Anthony Scaramucci. Then Scaramucci got fired even before officially starting his new job after an interview to *The New Yorker* magazine during which he aimed colourful epithets at his enemies, suggesting anatomically impossible carnal acts.

Then there was the high drama of the exit of Trump's *eminence grise* Stephen Bannon, a rabble-rousing bomb-thrower from the nutty right-wing fringe. Bannon, Trump's campaign manager and

flagrantly, that it's become simply impossible to do serious, meaningful reporting without facing up to the fact.

A whopping 700 employees, including 200 scientists, have left the Environmental Protection Agency. *The New York Times* wrote in a scathing editorial: "From Day 1, the White House and its lackeys in certain federal agencies have been waging what amounts to a war on science, appointing people with few scientific credentials to key positions, defunding programs that could lead to a cleaner and safer environment and a healthier population, and, most ominously, censoring scientific inquiry

supremacists and their critics. After a white supremacist rammed his vehicle into a crowd and killed a woman, Trump's egregious remark that there were good people on both sides scandalised the nation. Yet Republican protests was remarkably muted. Trump's sharpest Republican critics include Arizona Sen. Jeff Flake and Tennessee Sen. Bob Corker. It's not coincidental that both have chosen not to run for office.

The unsavoury fact is that the brutal electoral math precludes any confrontation with Trump. Republican office holders can ill-afford to antagonise Trump supporters.

Critics of the Republican Party—and not all of them are partisan critics—are not unjustified in a bit of *schadenfreude*. This is what happens when a party indulges in decades of thinly-veiled nativism and prejudice. When you're quite happy to harvest votes by riling your supporters with scorched-earth polemics, when you cut a devil's bargain with a rabid, talk-show culture devoid of civil debate and oozing with bigotry and animus, you end up with Trump.

So where do we go from here? There are increasing signs that a huge wave of Democratic support is rising in the US. This is evident in the spate of retiring Republican lawmakers. Alabama, a deeply Republican state, elected its first Democratic US senator in a quarter century. Virginia, a Southern state with a lopsided Republican majority in its state legislature, was swept by Democrats who have almost achieved parity. With Trump's approval stuck in the high 30s, there is a strong possibility that the House may flip to Democrats come November.

The deeper malaise in politics, however, remains. A toxic culture of conspiracy, outright racist animus is thriving in a rural hinterland in deep economic distress. Trump has poisoned the well so badly that it is not clear how sanity in governance can be restored during a time when America faces its most serious socio-economic crisis in generations.

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LOOKING BACK AT 2017

For the US, a year that will live in infamy



Trump has one remarkable if dubious accomplishment: The US media has been forced to break out of its traditional deference of the office of the presidency and call the current president a liar.

PHOTO: AP

chief strategist, was unceremoniously thrown out after one bitter internecine fight too many.

Health Secretary Tom Price left because he was jettisoned about on charter planes on the government's dime; former reality star Omarosa Manigault reportedly had to be escorted out of the White House after being fired.

Meanwhile, Trump has one remarkable if dubious accomplishment: The US media has been forced to break out of its traditional deference of the office of the presidency and call the current president a liar. Trump misrepresents the facts so often, and so

that could inform the public and government policy. Even allowing for justifiable budgetary reasons, in nearly every case the principal motive seemed the same: to serve commercial interests whose profitability could be affected by health and safety rules."

Those who point the finger at Trump alone miss the broader point. Trump is awful enough, but what's more ominous is a complete failure of the Republican Party to stand up to him. The signs of the deep rot are all over the place.

Take Trump's remarks following a confrontation in August in Charlottesville, Va., between white

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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How did the killers escape?

The four convicted killers of Zubair Ahmed are reportedly roaming freely. The killers were members of Chhatra League at Jahangirnagar University and had killed Zubair because he was an activist of a rival faction. Two years after the incident, the four convicts have fled from the court's dock and somehow escaped the country. How could four convicted killers, one wonders, obtain visas? After they fled from the dock, why did the police not raise alarms at airports or file a case?

Much to the frustrations of the victim's family, these killers are now leading a comfortable life in a foreign country, with regular glossy posts in their social media accounts. What message does this incident send to those who seek justice? I urge the government to investigate how this was allowed to happen and take necessary steps to bring the convicts back.

Suman Kumar Paul, By e-mail

Healthcare services for the poor

There is a serious shortage of healthcare facilities in the public hospitals, while for poor people, private medical facilities are inaccessible. Barring a few private healthcare providers, namely Gono Shastho Kendra and some charity organisations, there are not enough affordable private medical facilities to support healthcare services for the commoners.

The government should allocate more money in the budget for the health sector. The current budget allocation (around 5 percent) is not adequate and needs to be substantially increased. Secondly, the government should make a provision for private hospitals that they must provide free or low-cost medical facilities to a certain number of poor people.

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