

Why Dhaka may disappear one day, like Mohenjo Daro

THE GRUDGING URBANIST



ADNAN MORSHED

THIS was Samayeen Cooper's maiden visit to the country of his grandparents, from his mother's side. He quickly glanced at his watch: 5:37 PM local time, December 14, 2044! His stratospheric air shuttle began approaching Trishal International Airport near Mymensingh, the capital of Bangladesh, a small but hyper-populous South Asian nation with nearly 300 million people. Seated next to Samayeen was his mother, Aisha Cooper, a 46-year-old Harvard professor of urban anthropology, who was born in Boston to Bangladeshi parents. The mother promised her son that one day she would take him to the country where his grandparents had once spent their youth. Professor Aisha Cooper was particularly proud that her only son Samayeen was one of the five selected American middle-school students who had designed the most innovative Mars habitats for their school's science project earlier this year. Samayeen gawked through the window and examined the fleeting geography below, as the aerial behemoth with 931 passengers slowly descended toward its landing dock. The pilot announced in baritone: "We will be landing in Trishal soon. In 16 minutes." "Mom, what is that vast ruinous area south of the capital?" Samayeen asked, puzzled. "That used to be the capital of the country about 25 years or so ago. It was called Dhaka. No historian could say definitively why it perished and why it was never rehabilitated." "So, it's something like the ancient city of Mohenjo Daro, which disappeared suddenly from history?" "Yes, perhaps like those cities of the Indus Valley in the 3rd millennium B.C. There are many plausible theories of Dhaka's mysterious fall, some of which I have actually studied." "What are the theories?" Samayeen sounded impatient as he surveyed the desolate landscape of the former capital from the window of his air shuttle. "First, the city used to have a unique

geography, surrounded by four rivers. The ruling oligarchy had no control over sprouting industries that poured poisonous waste into these rivers. They were more like drains to flush out the city's filth and immorality. The city was so polluted and congested that everybody, rich and poor, became neurotic and paranoid. By the time the city's population reached 32 million, sometime around 2028, there was a bloody revolution.

"Wow, that's a lot of people in a city of that size! Weren't there any environmental laws?"

"Sure, there were about 185 laws that had

social breakdown that actually killed the city. The moral decay was matched only by a morbid race to accumulate wealth at any cost. Greed, selfishness, and a consumerist frenzy drove the life of the city."

"Mom, how do you know all this?"

Samayeen queried, impatiently.

"Well, when I was researching early-twenty-first-century Dhaka for my Master's degree, I found that streets in Dhaka were completely lawless. The rising middle-class sought personal cars in the name of social mobility. Over 200 registered private cars entered city

operating licenses, ruled the roads! Over 87 percent public transports violated traffic rules in Dhaka, according to a 2018 report."

"How did western cities handle the crisis of the road at that time?" Samayeen asked.

"When, in 2018, 13 major cities around the world, including Stuttgart, Düsseldorf, Hamburg, Copenhagen, Oslo, Madrid, Paris, and Chengdu (China), started a car-free movement with a view to improving city air quality and public health, Dhaka witnessed an epic growth of car dealerships across the city! An environmental suicide seemed inevitable!"

the orphanage didn't have anyone else anymore to visit them and to take them out to have ice cream."

"That sounds horrible. But, mom, how could all of this destroy a city?"

"Some social theorists speculated that all facets of life were so caught up in a vortex of downward spiral that the city was burnt down in the wake of a violent mass uprising. It was like Pompeii, except that the city was destroyed not by volcanic lava but by an absence—the rule of law. A rotting environment—both social and physical—pushed the city to its precipitous fall."

"Mom, I am sad to hear this. What an ominous beginning of my trip! How is the country now, in 2044?"

"Well, the population is extremely large, and the country lost about 15 percent of its southern landmass because of the sea-level rise. Climate change battered the country. Yet, Bangladesh is now doing fairly well as a middle-income country. It was a remarkable turnaround."

"How did that happen, mom? Sounds like utopia to me!"

"Sometime after the collapse of Dhaka, people finally came to their senses and followed a path of restraint and discipline. A new crop of sincere political leaders with global vision and knowledge emerged. Even when they disagreed with each other, they treated each other with civility and respect. They planned for the future with new technologies in mind and developed an economy that benefited everybody, not just a few. They robustly resisted an economy for the top 1 percent. I would think they had read a very important book—French economist Thomas Picketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (2013)! I think they tried to understand global economic inequality as the problem."

Samayeen didn't even notice that the jumbo air shuttle had quietly docked at the terminal. It had taken a full threehours and 44 minutes to fly from Boston to Mymensingh! He was exhausted and wished that someday soon this journey would take less than an hour!



PHOTO: STAR

direct or indirect bearing on the environment, but no one cared about the laws. They couldn't be enforced because there was no genuine desire to create the rule of law. One theory of Dhaka's demise focused on these rivers of hell, suggesting that a massive plague broke out, killing nearly the entire population of the capital.

"Something like the Black Death in medieval Europe in the 14th century, the plague that killed more than half of Europe's population?" Samayeen asked, appalled.

"Yes, something like that. But there is another intriguing theory that it was the

streets every day in the year 2020. Imagine what that rate would do to the 'traffic capital of the world,' as Dhaka was infamously called around the world then! In the absence of strong public policies private banks would happily offer up to 90 percent personal auto loans, without considering how their action would create a monstrous urban carbon footprint and the irreversible environmental damage it would eventually cause. Even the lower middle class was brainwashed by the market to think that it wasn't prestigious to use the public transportation. And then under-aged, untrained bus drivers, without

"Where were the traffic police? The political leaders? Urban administrators? The government?"

"They were all there, but everybody had his or her own interests. And, laws existed in theory, but they were trashed, right and left. Roads were hell. The poor and the downtrodden suffered the most in a lawless society. There was a bunch of heart-breaking road accidents in 2018, for example. A 21-year-old orphan and college student named Rajib Hossain died after his hand was severed completely when it got stuck between two speeding buses. His two younger brothers at

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INTERNATIONAL DAY OF UN PEACEKEEPERS

Bangladesh in peacekeeping: 30 years of service and sacrifice

ILYAS IFTKHAR RASUL

THE first United Nations (UN) peacekeepers were deployed in the Middle East on May 29, 1948 and since then, more than a million peacekeepers have been deployed in 71 missions across the globe to guarantee peace to billions of people. Though a late entry in 1988, through the United Nations Iran-Iraq Military Observer Group (UNIIMOG), Bangladesh has deployed more than 0.15 million of its peacekeepers in 54 missions spread across 40 different countries. In discharging their solemn duties under the UN flag, a total of 139 Bangladeshi peacekeepers have made the ultimate sacrifice among a total of 3,700 UN peacekeepers killed in peacekeeping duty. The theme of the International Day of UN Peacekeepers 2018 has rightly been chosen as, "UN Peacekeepers: 70 Years of Service and Sacrifice". Likewise, Bangladesh is also celebrating her 30 years of service and sacrifice in UN peacekeeping role.

Looking back on the seven decades of service and sacrifice by the UN peacekeepers, it is observed that a huge transformation has occurred in UN peacekeeping, i.e. from the traditional peacekeeping to a complex and multidimensional peace enforcement extending to peace building. When the UN Charter was formed in 1945, it did not include any explicit provision of UN peacekeeping which emerged subsequently. Some argue that UN peacekeeping is an improvisational outcome of the Cold War and decolonisation. However, in the process, the elements of UN Charter's Chapters VI, VII and VIII have been inducted in the peacekeeping operations. UN peacekeeping operations (UNPKO) have earned due credibility and is widely recognised as a universal feature of multilateral crisis management. In the last 70 years of UNPKO, it had its ups and downs for which they are usually praised but also maligned sometimes. Though there are missions mired in prolonged stalemate like Middle East and Cyprus, there are also successes that brought smiles to millions of people in Liberia, Mozambique, Cambodia, Sierra Leone, Namibia, Timor-Leste, etc.

To make it a global partnership, the UN has been able to mobilise more than 120 member-states to provide troops to

the missions though all contribute financially. Because of its involvement, commitment, partnership and services provided, UNPKO is the frontrunner of all UN activities and the most important one. However, UN being a deeply political organisation, the national/group interests at times affect the selection process, autonomy, and transparency of various missions. For example, the situation in the Middle East, especially in Palestine, warrants a large and robust peace enforcement force instead of the existing dormant mission (UNTSO). In spite of its cost effectiveness (incurring only 0.5 percent of the global military spending), UN finds it difficult to mobilise adequate funds for various

when the UN calls for it. Since its induction to UNPKO in 1988, the number of Bangladesh forces have kept on increasing. Bangladesh became a top troop-contributing country (TCC) by early 2000, which has been maintained till date. This is a clear manifestation of Bangladesh peacekeepers' impartial commitment, professionalism, dedication and adaptability. The deployments had been in the far-flung areas stretching from Cambodia, Haiti, Congo, West Africa, Sudan, Middle East and Bosnia and Herzegovina, etc. However, most of the deployments were, and are, in Africa.

Bangladesh's quick rise in the UN peacekeeping role is often discussed in the international media and academic

It is believed that the UN peace operations will continue in the years to come as conflicts are continuing across the world. However, the nature of the conflicts and the evolving strategic scenario are likely to create new dimensions and more demand for robust peacekeeping operations. Moreover, in the process of increasing global partnership and regional influence, the large contribution of forces by Bangladesh may face challenges. Hence, Bangladesh needs to remain focused to meet these challenges. These can be met with quality representations, i.e. high professionalism and competency over other TCCs. Thus, it is imperative to have an integrated approach for all of its forces with a clear National Policy and this has already been raised by a few scholars. This policy can also be an extension of the foreign policy to enhance national interests in the countries where peace has been restored with the help of our forces.

Bangladesh also needs a dedicated centre to study and research on the strategic issues of global peacekeeping and advise the stakeholders concerned on appropriate responses. It is to be noted that Bangladesh Institute of Peace Support Operation Training (BIPSOT) primarily provides excellent training on tactical and operational issues of peacekeeping. Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BISS) occasionally organises seminars on UN peacekeeping operations which are considered inadequate to formalise any policy. Bangladesh Peacebuilding Centre (BPC), formed in 2016, has yet to deliver its full potentials. As regards peacekeeping and peacebuilding studies and training, the roles of these institutes/think tanks should be well-defined and properly demarcated to avoid duplicity of efforts.

Through these institutes, Bangladesh should engage academics to carry out research on UNPKO and, in particular, Bangladesh's roles. The participating forces should also preserve records and maintain archives of all activities of various contingents and observers. In essence, it can be argued that Bangladesh is well-poised to continue her contributions to UNPKO.

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COURTESY: AUTHOR

Bangladesh's consistent participation in UN peacekeeping originates from her constitutional obligations to maintain peace, freedom and justice across the world.

missions that affect its mandates and resources.

Our peacekeepers have played a key role in UNPKO successes. Bangladesh joined the second generation of UN peacekeeping and has coped with its growing transformation with its professional élan. Bangladesh Army took the pioneering role and subsequently the sister services, i.e. Bangladesh Navy (BN) and Bangladesh Air Force (BAF) as well as Bangladesh Police, reinforced the peacekeeping forces. Over the last three decades, these forces have developed an efficient standing operating procedures (SOPs), established institutional framework to mobilise for peacekeeping operations, and are in a position to train and deploy effective and adequate forces

circle. Bangladesh's consistent participation originates from her constitutional obligations to maintain peace, freedom and justice across the world. It also stems from her sacrifice in the War of Liberation 1971. Hence, there is a strong political and national will to participate in peacekeeping. A question that is often raised is: "Is Bangladesh's leading troops contribution status proportionately represented in the policy making and leadership role in the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations?" The answer is clearly negative. Therefore, it demands a forceful diplomatic manoeuvre to ensure proportionate representation and the said provision is also stated in UN Charter and various resolutions passed later.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS	36 Have dinner	12 Rude looks
1 Postworkout woes	37 Bullfight cry	17 Obtain
6 Brad of "Fight Club"	38 Japanese port	20 Fencing swords
10 Want badly	40 Districts	21 Sunday entree
11 Smells	42 Famous	24 Like loafers
13 Like horses	43 Put up	25 Umbrella look-alike
14 Gold purity unit	44 Camera part	26 Copy
15 Finish	45 Survives	27 Twisted snack
16 Grow older		29 "This -- test"
18 Relaxing resort	DOWN	31 Coin call
19 Small dog	1 High points	32 Phone sounds
22 Dog, e.g.	2 Old car starter	33 Put in office
23 Seep	3 Convenient	34 Takes a break
24 Secret agents	4 Night before	39 Writer Follett
27 Window sections	5 Calms down	41 Man-mouse link
28 Like bad excuses	6 Game of hands	
29 Tax org.	7 Lupino of films	
30 Big dog	8 Mechanical	
35 Light touch	twisting	
	9 Bar for swingers	

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

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