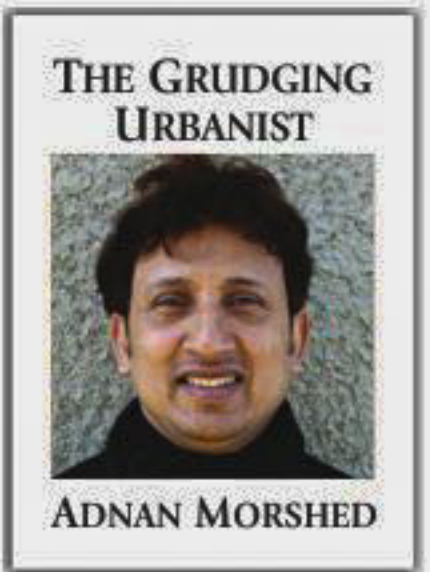




A large part of Chittagong city is seen flooded after consecutive days of rain.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

Chattagram, an orphaned city



ADNAN MORSHED

THE GRUDGING URBANIST

I went to Chattagram to celebrate Eid with my family. It took me two hours and a half to reach home from the city's Shah Amanat International Airport. The distance was about 10 miles. I was jubilant to reach home quicker than what I was anticipating. My sister-in-law took over four hours the previous day. This is the state of affairs in Chattagram.

While a lot of road "beautification" goes on in the city—for instance, a bizarre heat-producing concrete wave near the airport on the road median—the road itself is literally hell. People pray for enduring the punishing traffic congestion near the Export Processing Zone!

The journey from the airport to the city is one example of why Chattagram today seems like an orphaned city. Going around *Porto Grande*—as the Portuguese once called it for its strategic maritime location—one feels that nobody cares one bit about this city, neither the central government, nor the local. The city has no "parents" to take care of it, no guardians to champion its promises. The city seems hopelessly abandoned. Is it destined to die a slow, painful death?

Here is an example from the orphaned city. The mayor recently said: It is not the responsibility of the Chattagram City Corporation (CCC) to fix the city's waterlogging problem, but we would be happy to help out whoever tries to solve the crisis. How benevolent! When the mayor makes such a statement, it should raise a huge red flag. The city's real crisis is the lack of leadership, exacerbated by a weak civil society.

Consider the city's perennial waterlogging problem. Nobody seems to have a genuine desire to solve it. The most devastating waterlogging in Chattagong of recent times, in June 2014, should have been a wake-up call. The submerged areas of Bakalia, Chawkbar, Agrabad, Halishahar, Kapasgola, Chandgaon, Shulakbahar, Bahaddarhat and Probartak intersection became a climate-change icon around the world.

But we know that we can't blame it on global warming and excessive rain alone. It is also a spectacular failure of the city's urban administration, or rather its absence. Four thousand years ago, the Indus Valley Civilisation probably had a better water management system!

Chattagram continues to get underwater even after moderate rain. And, the authorities in charge of the city's water management—CWASA, CCC, Bangladesh Water Development Board, Chattagong Port

Authority, and Chattagong Development Authority—blame each other and shirk their responsibilities. Despite the five-stage Chattagong Storm Water Drainage and Flood Control Master Plan 1995, proposed for the period 1995–2015, the city today appears to have no plan whatsoever. Even if there is one, there is no real change on the ground.

The problem is that we don't think holistically and proactively. We just don't do it as a nation. We do reactive planning. There is a problem, and we try to come up with a solution. Rearguard planning often fails because the problematic urban DNA has already been set. For instance, in 1961, the first master plan for Chattagram was proposed with emphasis mostly on zoning maps for housing and industries, with very little consideration for drainage planning. And, since then, drainage planning has been developed, without any integration with ongoing land-use planning, and often as a reactive solution when waterlogging started to become Chattagram's constant urban problem. Politically-driven ad hoc planning made the city into a permanent band-aid urban agglomeration.

Blaming budget constraints is a popular excuse. But the real problem is nobody is owning up to the city's problems. Let's again use the "parent" metaphor. Would a parent wait to see who put his or her child in danger? The fact is that if the child is in danger he/she must be saved and protected before anything else. The self-proclaimed *nagar pitas* seem more eager to transform the city into a giant supermarket—market, market everywhere!

While visiting the old town recently, I wondered: What does it take to restore the Chaktai canal, the backbone of the port city's drainage system? While the city fails to revive its life-sustaining canal network, Chattagong City Corporation is happily building a mega-swimming pool (with paid membership!), sacrificing the once-picturesque outer stadium in Kajir Dewri, next to MA Aziz Stadium.

The green outer stadium used to be Chattagong's identity-shaping *maidan*, a sort of city centre where generations of kids played football and cricket. Thus, memories abound here. Like many other kids, I, too, learned how to play cricket in the outer stadium. Once Chattagram's famous outdoor eatery, Darul Kabab used to be located in the adjacent green patch in front of the Circuit House. That green disappeared too, because *nagar pitas* decided that a kitschy shishu park was the most urgent necessity for the city!

If you visit the area today, it feels like a war zone: the battle to occupy every square inch of land with buildings, shops, dumpsters, noise, and greed. There is no

polis, only people, chaos, congestion, and the spectre of disaster.

What did this city of rich history, unique geography, and immense tourism potentials do to deserve this state of despair?

The uniqueness of its land-water topography, its historic origin, its local dialect, its multi-faith social amalgamation, its history of anti-British movement, its *Porto Grande* global attraction through the ages—all remind us today how we have failed this city. Would we think for a second how the Chinese traveller poet Hsuan Tsang's 7th-century depiction of the city as "a sleeping beauty emerging from mists and water" was a reference to Chattagong's hilly idyll? Where are the hills today? These days we learn about the city's hills only when landslide kills the urban poor living in shacks at their foot or when the powerful land-mafia flatten them.

What went wrong? What did Chattagram do to deserve this? With a population of about eight million, Chattagram is Bangladesh's second largest city, and the main sea port of Bangladesh. The city hosts about 9.4 percent of the country's urban population and nine percent of urban economic establishments. The port city enables about 75 percent of the country's total exports and 80 percent of total imports. Its GDP contribution is about 12 percent.

Yet, about 30 percent waste in the city remains uncollected. Streets stink and the city quite literally becomes a "smellscape." We can't expect to attract foreign investment in a city where garbage rots on streets for days. CWASA supplies only about 40 percent of the city's water need. Only about two percent of waste is recycled. Have you seen a functional traffic light in Chattagram recently? I haven't. Does this sound like the "financial capital" of the country?

The problem is not that we don't have technical solutions or financial means. We do. We have technical examples from other countries that worked. Let's not forget that we are now building a tunnel under the Buriganga River. The real problem is leadership. Chattagram lacks city leaders who would go to bed at night thinking about a problem and wake up thinking about the same problem. This is the type of passionate ownership of a problem that leads to solutions. Unless somebody owns up to the problem, the city will continue to degenerate. This is where Anisul Haque seemed like a new type of urban leader in Bangladesh. We need serious city leadership in Chattagram and a vocal civil society.

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A lament for lost space



REBECCA HAQUE

LAST week, *The Daily Star's* investigative reportage exposed the work of criminal gangs and henchmen stealing rich top soil from precious arable land to sell to powerful, profiteering brickfield owners. Accompanying photographs of eerie craters and pock-marked surfaces became the stuff of feverish dreams that particular night. I had visions of the geographical space of my motherland—her fragile body—raped and cannibalised by sick, amoral marauders frenziedly gorging on the blood and bones of my Matri Bhumi.

The muezzin's call woke me on the morrow before first light. I sat in my veranda, awaiting dawn's red ray with an aching heart and a dull pain at the back of my head. I looked at the spot in the sky on the east where the burgeoning glow would flare to warm and balm my drooping heart. Once, not too long ago, the horizon before me was open and limitless, and I could commune with the morning star and the evening star from my veranda. I had the infinite grace bestowed upon me of waxing and waning with magnetic Luna, to let my spirit ebb and flow with the tidal surge of the full moon, the half-moon, the odd-shaped gibbous, and the new crescent moon. I would sit with my face to the silver disc and be transformed by its magic at night, and find a propitious omen for the new day in

and haystacks, cattle and homesteads. Tonight, I lament for all that is lost. I mourn the forced dislocation of large swatches of the rural population. I mourn the myopic, heedless, satanic destruction of the magnificence and munificence of this fertile delta, which once tethered each living being to its charmed triangular geometry of free-flowing rivers and countless snaky tributaries. The annual natural strife with Nature's floods and cyclones made us stronger, more resilient, with the simple folk renewing their vows of loyalty to the soil at each Pahela Baishakh.

The adage, "as you sow, so shall you reap" has its equivalent in every language, culture, and community. It is a warning: cautionary words ignored at one's peril, sage advice often bolstered with archetypal tales of ruin and death. It is morally repugnant that the governing body of my nation is not apprehending the top-soil poachers and their well-heeled cohorts. It is an insult to the memory of the millions martyred in the Liberation War if the ferocious denudation and deforestation is not vigorously policed and punished by stringently enforced laws. We have to weed through the tiered infrastructure to wipe out corrupt culprits if we are to save our native geographical space of East Bengal. Insatiable greed has led to reckless urban development and dangerous ecological imbalance. Fish and fowl are dying, the trees are dying, the children are leaving. Soon, this will be a country of old folk, with rural spaces empty of the young and the brave. The young ones will be gone, some to



PHOTO: FAHIM MOHAMMAD SHEIKH

the interrupted glimpse of the grey fading moon at dawn. Even the blue moon and the blood moon were within my complete visual grasp from my rooted spot at home.

Now, with menacing tower blocks encroaching upon the horizon, my view is cut off and I am trapped in claustrophobic space. I can no longer see the stars or the moon unless I climb the two flights of stairs to the roof. On this particular pre-dawn moment of solitary suffering, I looked up at the paltry patch of sky visible between the verdant mango tree and the tall jackfruit tree (with the two score and six bloated fruit hanging from its limbs in staggered design). The foregrounded scene—tactile, pleasant to the olfactory sense, with the wet top soil harbouring rustling evergreens and ferns, and ripe old trees with thick trunks and gnarled embedded roots enclosed within my own walled, protected little space—gave me some solace, yet my body shivered in shock at the recollected background image of present violent, unchecked, unabated ravishment of alluvial mud in large areas of the countryside. Words of anger were on the tip of my tongue. A silent scream made my eyes smart with hot tears. I wanted to voice my pain. I wanted to write.

Writing is self-therapy. Sharing grief is therapeutic. Tonight, after gloomy nights of suppressed rage and hurt, my mind unlocks the channels of free-flowing expression. Words ooze from the cerebrum, and my fingers are suddenly restless. The laptop beckons, and I quietly tap out an elegy on the loss of clay, of earth, of grass and grain, farm

settle and thrive with diasporic multi-ethnic identities in distant lands, singing songs of the motherland, cooking the food and celebrating the culture of the homeland space they chose to repudiate. Others, in all likelihood, the dispossessed and the unlettered and the economically deprived—the marginalised proletariat—will tragically be lost in boatloads of illegal immigrants. Refugees forever—lost, naked, hungry, floating or drowning, nameless, stateless.

In this context of the looming fear of the obliteration of the essential Bangladeshi space and spatial identities, I finally seek comfort in a more detached intellectual analysis. I conclude with a quote from Ato Quayson, the renowned Ghanaian literary critic: "In diasporic studies, the question 'Where do you come from?' cannot be answered simply with a location. The question implicates family histories and genealogies in the most startling of ways. Diasporic studies have taught me that the question 'Where do you come from?', if posed correctly, can open up a window on a variety of trajectories. The objective of the diasporic imaginary is not to ask and answer, 'Where do you come from?' or 'Where are you going?', but 'Where are you between?'" Because the between-ness, where you think you are between, is highly productive actually in how you relate to the kind of futures you take up.

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QUOTABLE Quote

THEODORE ROOSEVELT

It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Less hackneyed
- 6 Some agents
- 11 Wed in haste
- 12 Tennis star
- Rafael
- 13 Ready for bed
- 14 Tusk material
- 15 Make fun of
- 17 Decline
- 19 Count starter
- 20 All the rage
- 23 "Rebel Without—"
- 25 Get by
- 26 Rio event of 2016
- 28 Choreography bit
- 29 Burns or Browning
- 30 Today's answer

DOWN

- 1 Court divider
- 2 Bulldog backer
- 3 Jotto and Ghost
- 4 Foil's kin
- 5 Token of love
- 6 Sarcastic
- 7 Cover with asphalt
- 8 Ceremony words
- 9 Corn helping
- 10 Devious

31 Write hastily

- 16 Wrong
- 17 Fresh
- 18 Biting
- 20 Half of a team's schedule
- 21 Met work
- 22 Grade determiners
- 24 Game caller
- 25 Truck part
- 27 Set sail
- 31 Of little value
- 33 Pull in
- 34 Future paper
- 35 Nile slitherer
- 36 That lady
- 37 Pale
- 39 Great service
- 40 Cozy sts.

Write for us. Send us your opinion pieces to dsopinion@gmail.com.

BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

M A P L E F R A T
 A P R O N S E A M Y
 S P E N D P E T A L
 S A F E B E L I Z E
 E R A A I L O E R
 D E C K S O U T
 L E I S N I C K
 D U C K S O U T
 L A D M O S O W E
 O R I G I N C L A N
 C O V E N P L A I D
 A M O N G R A N T O
 L A T E O P T I N

BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

YOU'D GET ALONG BETTER WITH SARGE IF YOU STAYED ON HIS SOFTER SIDE. I CAN'T, SIR... HE'S ALWAYS SITTING ON HIS SOFT SIDE.

GIDDYAP! WHOA! MY BIKE IS NOTHING LIKE A PONY! WHAT IF YOU TAUGHT IT TO POOP?