

The anatomy of a 'viral' picture

THE GRUDGING URBANIST



ADNAN MORSHED

LAST month while in a car on Mohakhali Road, going toward Gulshan One, I was intrigued by a dramatic footpath display. It was a large board leaning against the boundary wall of a government research building. The slogan on the board said, “Somebody somewhere may need what you don’t.” There were about forty-four hooks for donated clothes. Not a single hook was empty. I have to confess that I hadn’t seen such a thing before on Dhaka streets. I was fascinated and stopped to take a picture.

I wondered who donated the clothes and why the poor on the street didn’t take them away. There was no chaos and greedy grabbing. Might it have been a symbolic clothing donation centre to encourage public charity?

It surely was a curious spectacle, a counterpoint to the hustle and bustle of the metropolis. Since I wanted to share the photo with my colleagues and friends, I posted it on Facebook. But I was not prepared for what happened next. It went “viral,” shared over 1,000 times by people known and unknown. Some commented that it was a great idea and that they felt inspired to do something similar in their own neighbourhood. Many asked about the exact address. Some just posted a pithy love emoji. All in all, goodness triumphed.

I wondered about the popular reception of the photo and the noble idea that it captured. What did people find interesting about it? Why did so many people share it? Was it the humanist appeal of the makeshift donation centre on the sidewalk that inspired Dhakaites, who are used to seeing only dysfunctions and chaos on city streets? Was it the novelty of the project? Was it the slogan that resonated with the people’s perception of the public good?

I thought that the popular appeal of the photo might have been the result of a serendipitous combination of “spread the good” ethos and youthful idealism to build a more caring society.

The more I thought about the photo and its popular appeal, the more convinced I became that the sidewalk donation centre was one of the most poignant symbols of a city in



A large board on the sidewalk near Mohakhali, inviting people to donate.

COURTESY: ADNAN MORSHED

transition. The city’s social life is no longer plagued by lopsided negative perceptions or the spectre of disaster or the fear of the infernal streets. Instead, Dhaka—despite its frequent billing as one of the least liveable cities in the world—is now a complex narrative of resilience, contradiction, and cohabitation. There are perils, there are promises, and there are social spaces for their mediation.

This is the quintessential modernity of the metropolis. If modernity is, as the American political scientist Marshall Berman articulated, “a paradoxical unity, a unity of disunity [that] pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal,” Dhaka appears to be a modernist narrative in which optimism and pessimism, resilience and dysfunction, and the spaces of affluence and poverty could not find a more fluid coexistence. Karl Marx’s observation that in a modern world “all that is solid melts into air”—that is, forces of global capitalism and

market leave everything in a perpetual state of transience—presents a prescient portrayal of contemporary Dhaka.

In many ways, the footpath donation centre appeared to be the symbol of a new type of cosmopolitanism, characterised by innovation and entrepreneurship, a bourgeois ethical desire to help society, and, most of all, the rise of a middle class. This cosmopolitanism signifies the country’s transition from an agro-pastoral society to one increasingly dominated by urban values. The old binary argument—that on the one hand, village life is virtuous, and agriculture is where Bangladesh’s soul is, and on the other hand, urban life is corrupt, and bloodsuckers roam city streets—no longer holds true. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina’s recent bold pronouncement about transforming all Bangladeshi villages into towns is one example of the power of this transition. This is a momentous (and prudent) shift in the political ideology of

Awami League, a party that has traditionally prided itself on its ability to connect with rural mores. Whether we yet fully understand the political and social significance of that transition, and the kind of policy response it requires, is another question.

This transition has been occurring since the late 1980s, with the rural-to-urban migration due to a host of push-and-pull factors: river erosion and the loss of homesteads, the advent of the readymade garments industry, industrialisation, improved access to information, enhanced road communication, and the lure of the city as a place of opportunities.

Yet, cosmopolitanism is a relatively new phenomenon. Difficult to explain, it is a complex and contradictory effect of an accelerated urban life. From the café culture to book fairs, from the charity culture to snobbery, from the ostentatious display of wealth to the endearing stories of urban

entrepreneurship, cosmopolitanism is a mysterious urban cocktail.

One of the primary reflections of cosmopolitanism is how city-dwellers become calm and unexcitable. To me, the most puzzling part of the footpath donation centre was how people passed by it nonchalantly, as if it were no big deal. Twenty years ago, this roadside “drama” would have attracted a sizable crowd of curious onlookers, a *jolla*. Instead, pedestrians and bikers simply passed by. The impression that I got was that people have very little time for things that are not directly related to their daily needs and routines. This nonchalant attitude forms the core of cosmopolitan values. It is increasingly harder to shock the city-dwellers in Dhaka.

One of the central issues of cosmopolitanism is the fast pace of urban life. Despite traffic congestion in Dhaka, the public, irrespective of their economic classes, valorises time and the need to maintain it in their daily lives. This pervasive phenomenon suggests the transcendence of agriculture- or season-based notion of time that has traditionally defined rural subsistence economies. We need to reach the office and other destinations on time. We must complete work before a given time. We need to send our children to school on time. We are clearly in an accelerated urban era. Consider, for example, how cosmopolitanism and faster urban life are rearranging traditional gender boundaries and social inhibitions. Solo female passengers ride with male Pathao motorists nonchalantly because they need to reach their destination quickly and affordably. It is about priorities. This “freedom” by no means implies that violence against women has gone away.

One way or the other, Dhaka, like many other metropolises in Asia and elsewhere, is an experiment in modernity, a case study of resilient adaptation to contradictory forces of modernity, and a dynamic representation of the Global South, predicted to be the battleground of the economic, political, and social forces of the future. To ensure Dhaka’s humane development, it is imperative that we understand the nature of this future.

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Mamata's return to the street

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

IN the run-up to India’s parliamentary elections in April-May, a big political drama is being played out in front of Central Kolkata’s impossible-to-miss landmark cinema hall Metro. Under a tent and perched over a makeshift dais is West Bengal Chief Minister and Trinamool Congress supremo Mamata Banerjee, who has been staging a sit-in since Sunday taking her years of battle with the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to an unprecedented height. The political turf war for dominance in Bengal has begun in right earnest.

The trigger for Mamata’s sit-in protest is the Central Bureau of Investigation’s bid to question Kolkata Police Commissioner Rajeev Kumar in connection with the multi-crore Rupee-chit fund scams in which some Trinamool Congress legislators and leaders were either questioned or arrested in the past.

The CBI was handed over the probe into the chit fund scams by the Supreme Court in 2014, following apprehensions and suspicion that the West Bengal police team that probed the scams was trying to allegedly dilute or remove evidence. The Special Investigation Team, set up by the state government, was headed by Rajeev Kumar.

While Mamata is projecting her sit-in as a fight against an alleged violation of norms of federalism by

the Modi government, the BJP is showcasing it as the proposed opposition coalition’s efforts to “shield the corrupt.”

By staging the sit-in, Mamata is back to the role she is best at doing—that of the feisty street fighter that she has always been known for. It was at the same spot 13 years ago that she had gone on a hunger strike for 26 days in protest against the then Left Front government’s decision to hand over fertile land to the Indian business conglomerate Tatas for a small car factory in Singur, in North 24 Parganas district close to Kolkata.

That event in Singur catapulted her to the status of a mass leader and eventually to power in West Bengal eight years down the line in May 2011, as Trinamool Congress decimated 34 years of Left Front rule in the state. This time, Mamata’s sights are on the throne in New Delhi, and the issue is the fight against the Modi government just two months before parliamentary polls.

Mamata’s sit-in came just two weeks after she successfully organised a mega rally of all the anti-BJP parties at the Brigade Parade Ground in Kolkata on January 19, when the contours of an opposition alliance emerged to take on the saffron party in the coming polls.

On the other hand, the BJP too has scaled up its efforts to make further inroads into West Bengal by deploying its top leaders—PM Narendra Modi, party chief Amit



PHOTO: MONEYCONTROL

West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee is staging a dharna (sit-in protest) over the Central Bureau of Investigation’s (CBI) attempt to question Kolkata Police chief Rajeev Kumar in connection with various chit fund scams.

Shah, Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, Textile Minister Smriti Irani, among others—for campaigning. Shah has more than once made it clear that his party wants to win at least 23 of the 42 parliamentary seats up for grabs in West Bengal—a Herculean task for the BJP.

If the January 19 rally of anti-BJP forces cemented her place as the main anchor of an opposition alliance, the sit-in protest starting

Sunday has elevated—by quite a few notches—her position as the pivot of that alliance, as support and solidarity poured in from all parties opposed to the Modi dispensation.

Politically significant is the issue Mamata has flagged in staging her sit-in—of alleged “constitutional coup” against her government and “destruction” of institutional bodies by the Modi government by using the Central Bureau of Investigation against political rivals. This is an issue

that Mamata knows has the potential of uniting all opposition parties, which have from time to time made similar allegations.

In short, Mamata, faced with an aggressive BJP in West Bengal, has tried to give the anti-BJP fight an all-India character by presenting the whole issue as just not her own but also that of other anti-BJP parties—an opposition party-ruled state versus the federal government. At the same time, she is hoping to carve out for herself the image of a “political victim” at the hands of a more powerful force.

Mamata has repeatedly accused the Centre of misusing its security and anti-graft agencies against political rivals. The recent storm in the CBI over an internecine feud between two top officers over their alleged involvement in graft did not show the agency in good light.

For its part, the BJP is trying to showcase the battle as its larger campaign against corruption by accusing the opponents of “shielding the tainted persons.”

The Trinamool Congress-BJP face-off has escalated in recent months. The Mamata government has withdrawn from the Modi government’s ambitious pan-Indian health insurance scheme, decided to go ahead on its own with a plan to build a deep sea port in the Bay of Bengal in Tajpur, and allegedly denied permission for landing of helicopters carrying Shah and

Adityanath who wanted to campaign in West Bengal. While Shah’s copter landed in a BSF helipad, Adityanath had to be content by addressing a rally over telephone from his home state Uttar Pradesh.

Another question is, why did Mamata stage the sit-in when the CBI wanted to interrogate Rajeev Kumar but did not do so when the agency had quizzed a number of Trinamool Congress leaders in the last few years—and more recently, her close aide Manik Majumdar—in connection with the chit fund scams?

The answer is: the timing of Mamata’s sit-in just two months before polls. It is unusual for a chief minister to visit the house of a senior police officer (she visited Rajeev Kumar’s official residence in Park Street on Sunday). Also, present on Mamata’s sit-in site on Sunday were a number of top police officers.

If Mamata wanted to send a message of solidarity with the police apparatus, which would be on poll duty in the state, the Modi government too sent its cautionary signal against any partisan role by West Bengal police when Solicitor General of India Tushar Mehta, representing the central government, told the Supreme Court on Monday that Rajeev Kumar was a “potential accused” in the ponzi scams.

Pallab Bhattacharya is a special correspondent at The Daily Star.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Theater fixture

6 Showy flowers, for short

10 Caesar’s language

11 Without break

13 Last Greek letter

14 Kuwaiti coin

15 Relaxing resort

16 “The Simpsons” bartender

18 Top card

19 Wrestling holds

22 Pub pint

23 Last letters

24 Takes steps

27 Rice field

28 Out of the wind

29 For each

30 Sunshine State

vacation area

35 Great weight

36 Lynx or panther

37 “Very funny!” in a text

38 Musical set in Argentina

40 “I do” utterer

42 Jeans material

43 Seeped

44 Painter Magritte

45 Targets

DOWN

1 Spill over

2 Lightning home

3 Top players

4 Jazz job

5 Some paints

6 Runway worker

7 Numerical prefix

8 Threatened

9 Had a bite

12 Formal

17 Metal source

20 Productive sort

21 Plateau of Arkansas

24 Floated on the breeze

25 Everywhere

26 Like Simba

27 Sphagnum source

29 Smartphone forerunner

31 Start of a Caesar quote

32 “My Fair Lady” role

33 Swiss trill

34 Luges

39 Light metal

41 Aussie hopper

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