

# AVOIDING AN URBAN NIGHTMARE: TIME TO GET PLANNING RIGHT

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## 'Existing policies cover most issues related to transportation, but very few of them have been implemented'

National Professor Dr Jamilur Reza Choudhury talks to Maisha Zaman of The Daily Star about the implementation status of the Strategic Transport Plan, the challenges along the way, and how the STP can be made more effective

How did the Strategic Transport Plan (STP) come into formulation? Give us a brief history.

Dhaka Urban Transportation Project was launched in 1999 with financial assistance from World Bank to address traffic problems in Dhaka city. In 2004, another study was launched with support from World Bank to prepare Strategic Transport Plan (STP) for Dhaka city with a timeframe of 20 years. The work was awarded to an American consulting firm, Louis Berger Inc., with Bangladesh Consultants Limited (BCL) as its local associate. The study was overseen by a government agency called Dhaka Transportation Co-ordination Board (DTCB - now renamed DTCA). As the study was progressing, I was requested by the Executive Director of DTCB to be the head of an advisory committee consisting of representatives from relevant government agencies, professional bodies (Institutions of Engineers, Institute of Architects, Bangladesh Institute of Planners), retired senior government officials, heads of relevant government agencies and representatives of related national level trade bodies. As the consultants were carrying out data collection and analysis, they used to submit progress reports and interim reports outlining some of the recommendations. A computer model was developed by the consultants with

advice from faculty members of Civil Engineering Department through BRTC, BUET. The advisory committee used to review the reports and give its comments. The initial recommendations of the consultants included six Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) routes and the improvement of the existing road network.

The advisory committee opined that with the limited capacity of BRT (maximum 20,000 passengers per hour), it would not be possible to handle the large number of passengers using public transport for a city with a likely population of about 25 million in the year 2025. Consequently, the Committee recommended that instead of BRT, all the six routes should have Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) lines. This was incorporated in the final report of the consultants, with three MRT lines with a capacity of about 65,000 passengers per hour, and three BRT lines, which could be converted to MRT lines in future.

There were a number of transport policy guidelines, one of which was to make the footpaths user-friendly for pedestrians. The other major recommendation was to introduce route franchising for bus routes so that buses operating in the same route do not compete with each other for attracting passengers, leading to traffic congestion and accidents. Another recommendation was to strengthen the regulatory body (DTCB) so as to enable it to elim-



Dr Jamilur Reza Choudhury

inate the conflicts among some of the projects initiated and implemented by a large number of government agencies. The STP reports were submitted by the consultants to the government in 2005. The advisory committee also submitted a separate report which included observations and recommendations, some of which differed with those of the consultants. It also suggested that any project taken up in future, which is not conforming to the STP recommendations, should be analysed with great care. Unfortunately, the government was

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indecisive as to whether the recommendations of the STP should be accepted or not.

I remember attending a number of meetings convened by the Ministry of Communications in 2006-07 which ended without any decision. It was in February 2008, when in a meeting of the advisory council of the caretaker government, the STP reports were given the seal of approval and the ball started rolling. The government of Japan came forward with financial assistance through JICA and carried out a follow-up study, Dhaka Urban Transport

Network Development Study (DHUTS), which reviewed the STP reports and suggested some modifications. The Japanese consultants tried to determine the priorities among the MRT lines and concluded that the first line to be constructed would be MRT-6, starting from Uttara in the north going through the city (Mirpur, Agargaon, Shahbagh) and ending in Jatrabari. Unfortunately, by that time the government had gone ahead with the construction of a flyover along parts of the route (from Chankharpu to Jatrabari). The alignment of MRT-6 was revised to go through Topkhana Road and end in Shapla Chottor in front of Bangladesh Bank in Motijheel. The Japanese consultants also recommended that MRT-6 should be elevated throughout its whole alignment; this was done to reduce the cost of construction and operation, although elevated structures along the whole route would obstruct the views of the buildings along the route.

Further complications arose when in 2011 the Bangladesh Air Force objected to the alignment going through Bijoy Sharani to the south of Tejgaon Airport, which had been handed over earlier to the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh, to be operated as a STOL (short take-off landing) airport. However, later the government changed its decision and it was handed back to the Air Force.

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Metro rail construction in Kazi Nazrul Islam Avenue.

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