

# Prioritise fire management in Dhaka city

DHIMAN RANJAN MONDAL

I had taught at a College in New York City for six years—which used to administer fire drills every month. During the drills, each person was required to leave and evacuate the building. No exception—even if someone was taking an exam, running an analysis in the lab or in an important meeting, he/she was required to evacuate the building by law. A safety officer would check to see if each room was empty. The building was three storeyed and had labs, classrooms and offices for five departments. During office hours, there were at least 1,000 occupants in that building. Surprisingly, everyone followed the posted instructions, exit signs and completed the evacuation within 1 to 2 minutes.

One day, we evacuated the building and saw a few fire trucks arriving at the scene. We realised that it was not a drill. Later, we learned that there was a fire in one of the labs. What surprised me during the real fire incident was that no one had panicked. Everyone reacted the way they were supposed to. Regular fire drills helped everyone prepare mentally and logically. It also increased their confidence and ability to handle a real emergency situation.

The Banani blaze showed us how unprepared we were at handling that fire incident. In every aspect, high-rise buildings like that are becoming death traps with no fire alarms, sprinklers, planned exits, and thus no evacuation plan in case of emergencies. After every incident, we blame each other endlessly.

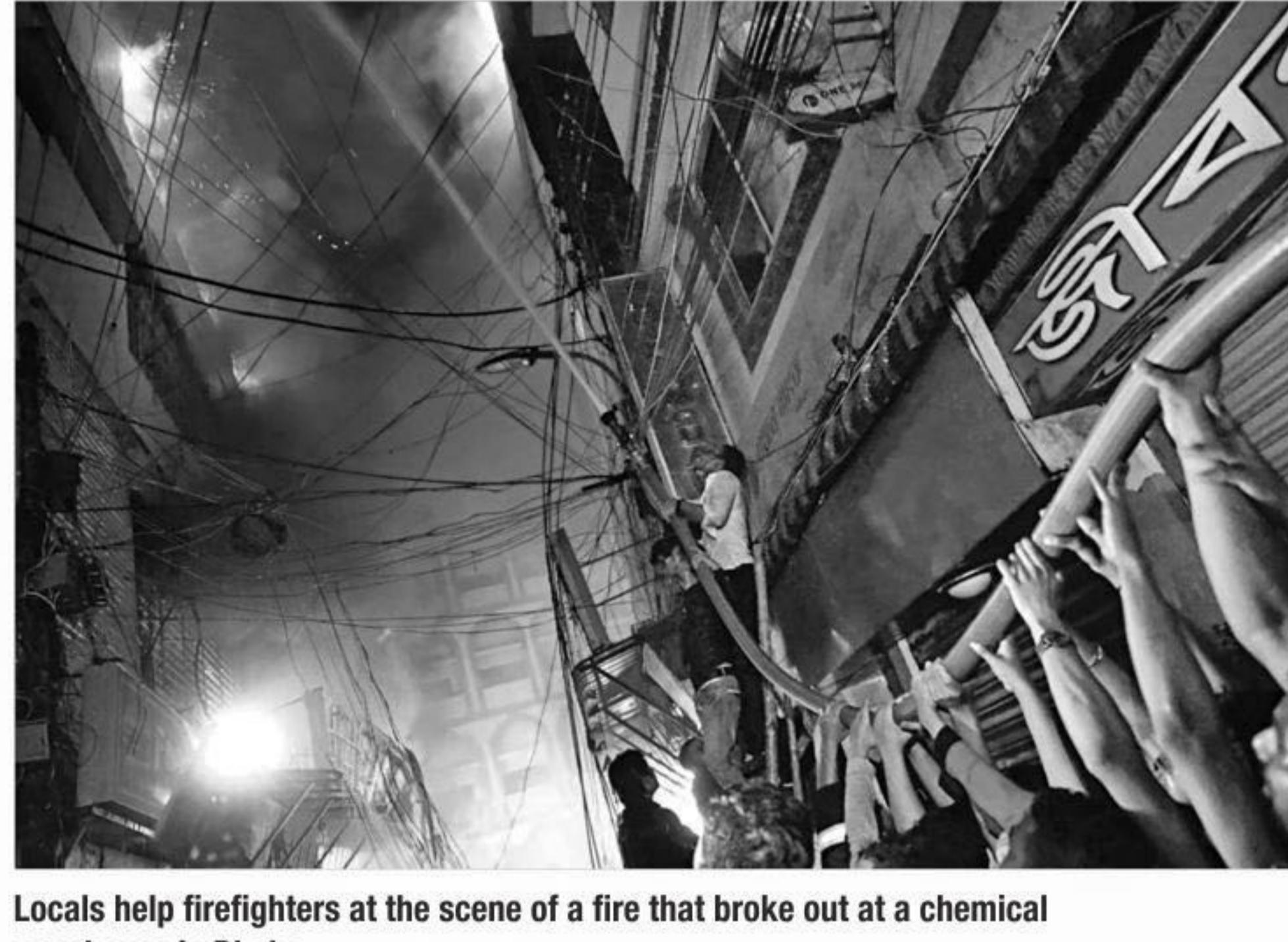
Instead, we should learn from each case and take proper action. Failure to do so will not help advance our understanding—to make intelligent, resilient and sustainable decisions.

But the question is, did we actually learn from past mistakes? The repetition of similar accidents, sometimes in the same building, tells us how much we did learn after the first incident. A few notable fire incidences are: the Bashundhara incident, BSCE building fire (2007, 2014, and 2015), Nimtoli (2010), Churihatta (this year), Banani (this year) and DSCC market Gulshan (2017 and this year).

The Banani FR tower incident was no different from the 2007 BSCE incident. The BSCE building had no planned evacuation route or proper fire detection equipment. The building's occupants did not know how to react during the emergency. According to a fire service official, a few building occupants saw fire extinguishers but did not know how to use them. The horrific fire panicked occupants and some of them manoeuvred dangerously using a cable that goes to another building across the road. Some occupants jumped from the building and lost their lives. The building authority installed a fire exit on the north side of the building after 2007—although how much work they did to install fire alarms and fireproof exits is unknown. And the building has caught fire at least three times since then.

During the Banani incident, the reaction of the occupants was no different from the 2007 incident—they seemed to not know what to do. Some of the occupants tried to escape from the building taking huge risks and eventually lost their lives. They did not know how to use fire extinguishers and there was no way to escape using the stairs.

There were too many design flaws and irregularities in that building that are being documented now by various government agencies. We are all looking forward to those



Locals help firefighters at the scene of a fire that broke out at a chemical warehouse in Dhaka.

PHOTO: REUTERS

reports, and their recommendations to solving those problems. But there is no easy solution to the overall problem nor can it be implemented overnight since it requires huge engineering and financial effort and sustainable reformation of policies—including making the fire department more robust, better equipped and trained. But that is an easy start.

We could start conducting fire drills on a regular basis. It helps one to be prepared. Being prepared can reduce fear, anxiety, and losses incurred during disasters such as fire

emergencies. In private and government institutions, HR or admin officials can ensure that new employees are given this training when they are being hired. Many countries, in fact, require their employees to be trained and many organisations require employees to complete online training programmes before receiving their first pay-check. The advantage of this is that employees become well educated about how to fight fires and react rationally to emergency situations. Educational institutions can also conduct fire drills on a regular basis. That way, students

can carry this practice onto their professional lives. Fire alarms should be made mandatory in residential areas.

All agencies responsible for handling emergencies should also have regular drills. An emergency is not the time for a dry run. Therefore, fire fighters and others should make sure that their response is flawless upon arriving at the scene.

Last but not least, government agencies should be documenting each and every crisis event with as much details as possible and regularly make even the most insensitive data public. If the data is publicly made available, anyone can use it to conduct their own analysis and share their own ideas or results. The Fire Department of New York, for example, has responded to 2.27 million fire emergencies in the last 6 years. The information they have made public includes incident time, response time, number of units, number of injuries, fire incident description, dispatch time, building description, source of fire and so on.

Interestingly, the data shows how to predict for cooking fires occurring between a certain time of day, and which precautionary steps would help to reduce fire damage. It also helps the fire department plan for forthcoming incidences with more efficacy. Therefore, when they arrive at the scene, their reactions are based on experience and not assumptions.

One can always argue that the infrastructure in Dhaka is very different from other megacities. But it is high time for us to learn from other megacities and to modify and make Dhaka more sustainable.

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## 'Civilising' Dhaka

CIVIL society cannot be built this way, upon the salacious preferences of home-builders, bus-drivers/conductors, and environment abusers. As one of the world's largest, most congested, and least liveable

metropolitans, Dhaka may still be retrieved the way New York City was from robber-barons by the turn of the 19th Century. Against fleeting time and diminishing remedial options, substituting the gilded approach for planned management may be the way to go.

What exactly must Dhaka, upon which the country revolves, do to be cleansed of these bugs and instil harmony? Redefining "civil" is a start. It is intimately related with the notion of the "state of nature": the original habitat we *homo sapiens* left to build "civilisations" thousands of years ago. How "law" was instituted to produce "order" becomes the name of the game.

History is replete with debate on that "how." Though they were not the only ones, English Enlightenment philosophers influenced modern interpretations. Accordingly, we have the anarchic view posited by Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), in which the "survival of the fittest" instinct determines both order and the legal framework. John Locke's (1632-1704) idealised "political contract" alternative provided a similar and stable outcome, but from *negotiations* (think of the US Founding Fathers writing the independence declaration). Another was from the Swiss-French prodigy, Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-78), mixed the above two. A witness to both Hobbesian anarchy in pre-revolution Paris and Lockean negotiations (to get out of the wars France was littered with), Rousseau proposed a "social contract" (based on his 1762 book).

In his "Leviathan" (literally, "a monster," written in 1651), Hobbes painted the archetypal authoritarians of today. We have seen them, heard about them, and talked about them, but how they imposed rules upon civilians in an obviously uneven playing-field never fails to rattle our mind. These often take the *sine qua non* form ("do this, or else," crudely), which contrasts the Lockean *quid pro quo* ("this-for-that") alternative. Locke's "Two Treatises" (1689) introduced what today's parliamentary/legislative exchanges and deliberations are all about. He loosens

Hobbes's "top-down" approach, which Rousseau would later eliminate. Europe's enlightened monarchs before, and military dictators/enlightened despots today, illustrate Hobbes's thinking, while British and original US democracy-advocates represent Locke's. Neither are perfect pictures. Since original democracies were not only male dominated, but also only for white males, laws reflected biases. As society became more gender and racially sensitive, those legislations were modified, albeit glacially, but it hints at what we need to do in Dhaka today to our laws. Similarly, leviathans may be on everyone's hit-list for being so

His "social contract" might do for Dhaka

Hobbesian instinct intervenes and trumps our larger goals for pocket-driven desires. In short, we may be too civilised to produce a leviathan, but if flagrant rules-violations drown us out of the picture, we may have no choice but to open our arms to embrace a leviathan. We remain precariously poised, at the tipping point, unless rules and codes begin to function.

Lockean negotiations have only grown as an industry for us. Yet, they can camouflage reality: should those negotiations keep going round-and-round the same circle too many times without game-changing results, we slide back to square-one. For example, if a stop-gap

local problems. Not only did this lay the pillars of one of the largest future world cities, block by block (given Manhattan's symmetric and sequential roads), but also how the "top-down" decision-making template was recognised "bottom-up" suggestions, recommendations, and other inputs.

Our Manhattan counterpart, Purbachal (proposed no less by the World Bank's *Towards Greater Dhaka*, 2018 report), exemplifies how microscopic management helps skirt loopholes resulting in fire deaths, traffic-pedestrian collisions, and rampant pollution. Even more, these codes, regulations, and rules may then be extended, block by block, across Dhaka where previous start-ups, as in Dhanmondi, Gulshan, Banani, and Uttara (sequentially), began, with a "survival of the fittest" attitude, that is, with little or no rules and collective decision-making only at the top, evident in leaving no footpath space (the root of traffic-pedestrian fatalities). This gap has never been remedied. Fire-escapes received no attention when the apartment culture began in the late 1980s; and construction companies faced few or no regulations. One loophole bred another, until the inevitable mayhem: promises of instant wealth from high-rise construction attracted more people than rules/regulations adopted by policymakers. Dismissing "rules" when "cash" was king became the mindset, diffusing elsewhere, to bus-drivers and the like.

Purbachal managers could begin with building codes on limits and safety, requiring every land-owner to spare space for footpaths, creating cycling lanes, separating motorcycle lanes from automobiles, prohibiting trucks beyond a certain weight/size and hours, creating public parking spaces, safeguarding school zones from traffic, and using videos to retrospectively identify and fine violators of "stop" or traffic-light signs. Most importantly, to pre-empt circumstantial hijackers, that is, profit-seeking rule-breakers shielding behind notables, licensing authorities could be distributed across multiple agencies, imposing checks and balances on who precisely does what to impede a rule, then punish those profiting from the exchanges.

We've come too long a way to not have more civility. If the home cannot become our castle, the office our global showcase, and the Dhaka air as free as the land won in 1971, then our anarchic instincts may be too dear to us for us to deserve anything better.

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power-hungry or profit-minded, but without them, many countries may not have become more civil: Argentina, Brazil, and Chile depended upon military generals, Mexico the "perfect dictatorship," while Indonesia, the Philippines, South Korea, and Thailand, among many others, would not be "emerging" countries today without their dictators.

Today's realities may still be better encapsulated by Rousseau's "social contract." Like those charcoal-scarred human skeletons we retrieve from buildings burned across Dhaka, or the bone-crushed corpses we remove from under

what reams of building ordinances and traffic codes have thus far not done. We have some rules at hand, but apprehensions from a leviathan-like intervention stultifies every implementation effort; we have the parliamentarians discussing a wide-range of issues, including building and traffic codes, but when *push* turns to *shove*, we stop at the water's edge. Like Locke, we all idolise the order that collective action brings (otherwise, why do we raise children, or educate students, even dream of building our own "castle," no matter how tiny that apartment?), but somehow the

measure remedies fires, traffic fatalities, and flagrant pollution, we get lulled into complacency to actually notice how expedient that measure was. A more frightful nightmare becomes our destiny.

Though not fool-proof, a "social contract" prolongs the lull because the concern is both common and locally addressed. Again, we can learn from New York, this time not how it trimmed the gilded and Gatsby 19th Century lifestyles, but how its uptown Manhattan expansion established more local governments, thereby opened windows, to handle recurring

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