



Hawkers gather in front of Dhaka South City Corporation to demand formalisation. There were so many protesters that it impeded traffic. MONON MUNTAKA

City hawkers and the Public space challenge

ZYMA ISLAM Everything is going as is at the traffic signal beside Dhanmondi road number 32, when all of a sudden, the jhalmur-walah hoists up his heavy wash-bowl full of ingredients onto his head, tucks his rickety stool under his arms, and makes a dash down the street. His swift motions set off a chain reaction across the area. The man with a wooden wheelbarrow full of sour mangoes lifts up the handles and tries to waddle away as fast as he can. The ice-cream man tries to do the same, but he isn't fast enough. A baton-wielding sergeant catches up with him, lands the baton squarely on his back, ducks to release the air from the cart's tyres, and then moves on to the next vendor, leaving the ice-cream man stranded with an immobile cart full of melting popsicles.

These cat-and-mouse chases are com-

mon sights on my way to work, occurring once every few weeks. In a city whose streets are governed by hot-headed ruthlessness, these scenes don't make a dent in anybody's mind.

Neither do the union protests being staged day after day in front of Press Club since mid-January this year.

"There needs to be some kind of end to all this. We need to come up with systems to incorporate hawker markets into the city," says the general secretary of Bangladesh Hawkers' Union Sekandar Hayat.

"We have been carrying out protests since 2008 demanding the rehabilitation of hawkers but there have been no results yet." This week, hawkers surrounded the Nagar Bhaban, the office that houses Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC), only to be chased out by the police.

"Hawkers don't want to constantly live in a fear of arrest. Picking up hawkers from the street and booking them into custody for a day has become the norm. Every time they are picked up, their goods are confiscated, so they suffer huge losses," says Hayat.

He is not wrong. Walk down the footpath leading from Paltan traffic signal, and every other vendor claims to have been picked up. As a result, many old faces are gone. A book seller who helped me find rare documents last year is nowhere to be seen.

Mohammed Mainuddin was picked up the day before Shab-e-barat, and spent six days in prison, before getting out on bail. "I sell guavas. How is this a crime? I had to spend Tk 14,000 to get out of jail," he says.

Sumon, a book seller, says he was picked up around the same time, and spent a night at the police station. "They beat me up badly," he claims. One vendor away, herbal medicine peddler Uttam

Kumar was also arrested.

"I am 53 years old now. I have been sitting at this spot since the age of 10. I started off by selling books. My son is in high school, and my daughter is a second-year college student at Eden College. I cannot give up my livelihood now," he says.

"Our new decision is that hawkers should not be allowed on the streets," says DSCC's chief estate office Mohammed Asaduzzaman, "Why do they have to take up public space?" When asked about the ongoing protests, he says, "We shouldn't pay attention to their demands. That way they can be diverted to other vocations."

On January 12, 2017 the DSCC Mayor Sayeed Khokon announced the idea of "Holiday Markets". He said that certain spots would be designated for hawkers, who can keep shop there all day long there on Fridays, and in certain areas, on Saturdays as well.

"These holiday markets turn out to be places controlled by powerful local goons. Those who can pander to them, or pay the bribes, get a spot, while others don't," says Hayat.

As it turns out, only two such spots are currently operational, informs Asaduzzaman. "There is one in Segunbagicha and one in Motijheel, but the police are not letting anyone sit in the latter right now."

The government also took upon a project to relocate all the hawkers to a large multi-storied building. All five lakh of them. On April 19, 2016, the Executive Committee of the National Economic Council (ECNEC), which is headed by the Prime Minister, took the decision to build a multistoried hawker market for permanent settlement and rehabilitation of street hawkers. A year later on March 14, 2017 the High Court gave a directive

Continued to page 7



Bulldozers razing the Gulistan sidewalks in 2017

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN