

BRTA: By design doomed to fail?

195 people check vehicle "fitness"

OVER the last seven years, the number of registered vehicles has risen from 18.5 lakh (in 2013) to 42 lakh (in 2019), but Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) only managed to recruit a paltry 19 people, including one vehicle inspector. So, in 2019, a mere 195 people (including 109 inspectors and 86 mechanical assistants) are responsible for checking the mechanical fitness of all registered vehicles. Anyone can see that it is humanly impossible for these few people to physically check so many vehicles. It would require this small team to check approximately 11,500 cars a day, provided they worked 365 days a year.

Hence, we are forced to ask the question, why has this impossible, herculean task been left to so few? It is an ideal situation to breed corruption and the sad part of this whole scenario is that it has precipitated the severe breakdown in safety in the roads, since unscrupulous owners can, and do, manage to get papers for unfit vehicles. Reportedly, some 200 vehicles hit the roads on a daily basis and that explains the more than doubling of the registered vehicle number in six years. BRTA officials agree that at least 1,000 inspectors are needed to complete the job properly.

Obviously, the wrongs of so many years cannot be fixed in a day or a year. Yet, for reasons unknown, authorities have not prioritised the mandatory recruiting of technical personnel to address this dire situation for so many years. There is no lack of funds, since BRTA earns a huge sum for registering vehicles (which has increased exponentially) every year. Rather, it is the lack of political will that is to blame. It is now up to policymakers to expedite the recruitment of an adequate number of vehicle inspectors, so that BRTA can properly scrutinise automobiles and heavier transports before issuing and renewing driving licenses, fitness of vehicles, and route permits. The other change that must be initiated, is the mechanisation of the fitness-checking process because, transport experts tell us that there are about 59 elements that require checking in each vehicle. A mechanised system would significantly increase the efficiency of these inspections. Unless BRTA is equipped with more Vehicle Inspection Centres (currently there is only one in Mirpur), merely appointing more personnel will not have the desired effect and unfit vehicles and untrained drivers will keep getting the papers fixed without proper scrutiny.

Disposal of medical waste remains a big concern

It's time we developed a proper management system

WE are quite horrified to learn from a *Daily Star* report published on October 28 that untreated medical wastes are accumulating in the landfills of the country's seven divisional cities—Chattogram, Rajshahi, Barishal, Khulna, Rangpur, Sylhet and Mymensingh—posing serious threat to public health. Upon investigation, our correspondents have found a shocking picture of medical waste mismanagement, from collecting and sorting wastes at hospitals and clinics to dumping at the designated landfills, in all the cities. What is most shocking is that even healthcare professionals have been found to be not following the proper medical waste disposal procedure in the hospitals and clinics.

Although according to the Medical Waste (Management and Processing) Rules 2008, a divisional authority, comprising the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), the city corporations and the Department of Environment, should be there to take care of the issue of medical waste management, no such committee exists in any of the divisional headquarters. And in the absence of such a committee, waste collectors from city corporations or a third party carry the medical waste into the landfills and dump the waste without sterilising it, which is clearly a violation of the rules of 2008, "medical waste cannot be mixed with any other wastes at any stage—while inside hospitals, while being collected, while transporting."

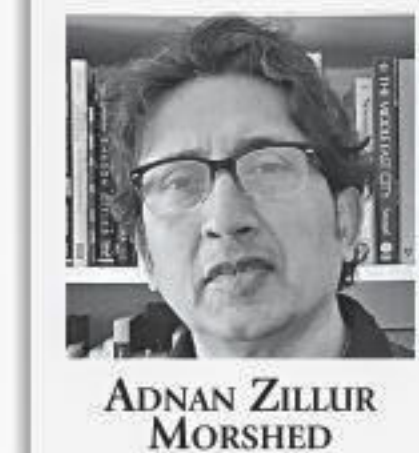
It is common knowledge that such practices are extremely hazardous because when untreated waste mixes with the water, the germs easily spread through waterbodies, eventually contaminating the soil as well as the drinking water supplies. We have all the more reason to worry since all of these landfills in our seven city corporations are situated either on low-lying wetlands or on the banks of rivers, khals and haors. Moreover, since medical wastes can infect through contact with the skin and through inhalation or ingestion, those who collect and sort out the waste are in extreme risk of getting infected with various life-threatening diseases.

Amid such a situation, it is extremely disappointing to learn that the country has only one medical waste treatment plant located in Dhaka. And at a time when safe disposal of medical waste has become a nationwide concern, another *Daily Star* report reveals that two waste treatment devices imported from Canada at a cost of nearly Tk 17 crore have been sitting idle since 2015 because of bureaucratic tangles and a lack of skilled operators.

Clearly, the mismanagement in medical waste management is huge and it needs to be addressed with due urgency. In addition, the existing law needs to be enforced and, if needed, amended to develop a proper medical waste management system in the country.

The democracy of public squares

THE GRUDGING URBANIST



ADNAN ZILLUR MORSHED

I have long wondered why cities in Bangladesh don't have vibrant, dedicated public places or squares, in the sense of Taksim Square in Istanbul, Trafalgar Square in London, Las Ramblas in Barcelona, or Zocalo in Mexico City. *Gono Jargon Mancha* needed to occupy a busy and bustling street intersection in Dhaka, paralysing the capital city's already notorious traffic. If one day Bangladesh clinch the world cup cricket championship, where would the people of Chattogram gather to celebrate this national glory? GEC's Mor or Lal Dighi? There is no genuine people-friendly and purpose-built public place in Chattogram. It is the same for Khulna, Rajshahi, Barishal, and Sylhet. There are roads, there are intersections, but not public squares.

But what is a public square? In the classic European context, the original public square or the marketplace grew out of the main street, by an organic widening process. Over time, the square attained autonomous, if not necessarily uniform, spatial definition, accommodating a host of diverse urban activities, such as trading, information dissemination, civic gathering, recreation, piety, celebratory parade, and political demonstration.

One of the earliest examples of a public square is, of course, the Greek agora, where traders brought their merchandise, philosophers discussed their worldviews, and gymnasts showed off their acrobatic skills. Anybody visiting a European city today would notice the historical legacy of the agora in its public squares, thriving on a rich, organic, and chaotic tapestry of urban functions. There is minimal disagreement that public squares are an embodiment of a nation's civic values, democratic aspirations, and, in many ways, the "national character."

In ideal conditions, public squares have an intrinsic ability to attract people of all walks of life, all economic classes, creating conditions for greater social harmony and meaningful public life. This is where people can express their political views without the fear of persecution. Dictatorial regimes have always looked at public places with suspicion and fear. The Tiananmen Square at the heart of Beijing is beautiful, but it has an uncomfortable level of police presence and CCTV security cameras.

One can feel the social and political pulse of a city by visiting its public square. Two weeks ago, research took me to Turkey and Armenia. In the Armenian capital of Yerevan, the Republic Square (formerly Lenin Square during the Soviet era) is axially connected with the 24-hour Cascade complex, a giant set of open-air steps, cascading down the slope of a hill. The combination of these two squares provides Yerevan with a robust civic character. People flock to these places to relax, enjoy, wander around, listen to music, and watch others. From the giant steps of the Cascade, one can view the

much-fabled Mount Ararat.

Istanbul's political heart is located at Taksim Square, and its social spine is Istiklal Caddesi, a pedestrianised street that radiates out from Taksim. People walk along Istiklal until the wee hours. This is where people taste, for example, Istanbul's acclaimed Turkish delight at Hafiz Mustafa's iconic shop, established in 1864. This crowded street is lined with many well-known shops.

And, then, there is Gezi Park, adjacent to Taksim Square, and the site of a popular civic unrest in 2013. When the government sought to replace this historic park, filled with trees, with a shopping mall, people resisted. The environmental movement that started to save the trees of Gezi Park would soon snowball into a much larger protest against unilateralism in political decision-making.

Public squares are a necessary tool

The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1706 (1993), from the power centres located in the north of the Indian subcontinent, East Bengal has long been considered a remote, agrarian frontier. In 1579, emperor Akbar's chief advisor, Abu'l-fazl called Bengal "Bulghakhana" (house of turbulence), a treacherous place of corrupt morality and geographic perils.

From the north, Bengal's image as a remote estuary, an alluvium delta crisscrossed by rivers, rivulets, canals, and low-lying lands, on the one hand, and a tropical climate with a prolonged monsoon period that rendered the delta inaccessible, on the other hand, gave rise to a host of fantastic and derogatory geographical imaginations. These images entrenched in the socio-political thinking of two South Asian empires—Mughal and British India—have discouraged from investing systematically in the

ambiance of this delta, even in the early 1970s, was mostly rural. Classic Bangla literature had a deep anti-urban bias; the city was often portrayed as a difficult, ruthless place, one that perennially corrupts the rural youth who had arrived there in search of a better life.

Urbanisation in Bangladesh since the middle of the 20th century has been mostly accidental, rural in mind set, compounded by a lack of policy preparation for adapting to urban transformation, despite different iterations of "master planning" of cities with foreign and local experts. What we have today in Bangladesh is a culture of what I would call "subsistent urbanism," an amalgamation of local- and national-level efforts to provide basic urban mobility and services. Beyond that, there is hardly any conversation about the city's power to shape the humanity of new generations of



Is Shahbagh Dhaka's square?

PHOTO: STAR

for the political evolution of a people and a nation. Democracy needs public places. Free access to public squares has the opportunity and power to reinforce democratic norms and ensure check-and-balance political processes. The protagonist of the public square is of course the pedestrian, a symbol of urban freedom. Even if there is no political subtext, public places and their pedestrian visitors are a ubiquitous expression of a liveable city.

Why don't Bangladeshi cities have a legacy of public squares (although villages have their *haat*)? It is a complex question that prods a network of historical and religio-agrarian issues. First and foremost, the agro-pastoral social evolution of the people of the Bengal delta didn't create many opportunities for the development of an urban society. Furthermore, as historian Richard Eaton explained in

urban development of their eastern frontier. Eaton wrote: "In the minds of Mughal officers from North India this view persisted for centuries, adding to the profound sense of alienation from the delta province that subsequent generations of *ashraf* Muslims would nurture down to modern times."

The public life of the agro-Islamic communities of East Bengal revolved around the mosque and its courtyard, which served as the premier civic space, a sort of small-scale rural equivalent of the Greek Agora or the public square in the medieval European city. Neither the British during the colonial period nor the local urban administration in postcolonial times fully understood the complexities of translating the public life of East Bengal's agro-religious communities into a secularised urban context. The social

urban citizens.

The deliverance of urban services and the greater urban good ought to go hand in hand. From the utilitarian position of subsistence urbanism, the long-term value of public squares is either misunderstood or seen tangential. Understanding the social and political benefits of public squares and their power to create robust civic life is to transcend the parochialism of subsistence urbanism. As we graduate to a middle-income country, we need to imagine cities as a frontier for creating a just, entrepreneurial, and democratic society.

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Developing more towns Key to climate resilience

POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE



SALEEMUL HUQ

BANGLADESH is facing two global megatrends with significant national repercussions. The first is the rapidly urbanising world we live in, where half the global population is already living in cities and towns and Bangladesh will soon cross that threshold as well. The government of Bangladesh under the direction of the prime minister has taken up the policy to enable every village to avail the services of a town so that people no longer feel that they have to move.

Laudable as this policy is, at best it will delay and decrease the rate of urbanisation in Bangladesh so we have to be better prepared with what kind of urbanisation we want to encourage and plan for.

At the moment a very large proportion of the rural to urban migration is coming to Dhaka which has become the fastest growing mega city in the world. There is hence a dire need to redirect this movement to other cities and towns.

This megatrend of urbanisation has also affected the second megatrend of climate change which is likely to cause significant adverse effects on Bangladesh, with particularly severe impacts on the low lying coastal areas of the country as it will mean significant numbers (possibly around ten million over the next two decades) of climate migrants moving from rural to urban areas.

The latest climate change scenarios with regard to potential sea level rise have enhanced the calculations of sea level rise to double, and in some case even triple, the earlier IPCC scenarios. This is quite alarming for the people living in the low lying coastal areas of Bangladesh.

The answer to this second megatrend of climate change impacts on coastal areas must rely on a twin track strategy with two distinct time lines and target populations.

The first time line is the "short to medium term" and the target population are the adults living in the climate affected areas; to help them to adapt to the changing scenarios. This is now already happening at scale with provision of rainwater harvesting for drinking water and saline tolerant crops in the coastal areas.

The second timeline and target population are the adults of tomorrow, namely young girls and boys of today, who should be given education and skills training to enable them to not have to become fishers and farmers like their parents, but be able to get better paying

potential migrants choose to go elsewhere rather than come to Dhaka. As we cannot force anyone to not come to Dhaka we need to create incentives for them to go to other towns.

This entails investing in other towns to make them both climate resilient and migrant friendly over time.

In climate change jargon, helping the population to cope with ongoing climate change impacts is known as incremental adaptation; whereas educating and enabling the children to move to better paying jobs in towns would be transformational adaptation to climate



PHOTO: REUTERS/ANDREW BIRAJ

Bangladesh is among countries that are highly vulnerable to climate change. The picture was taken in June 2009 in Satkhira, when cyclone Aila hit the coastal region.

jobs in towns and cities.

There is an extra dimension to the interaction of these two megatrends in Bangladesh in that the accelerated rural to urban migration, if left to happen on its own, is likely to make Dhaka even bigger and perhaps take it beyond its carrying capacity.

Hence we need to try to ensure that

change, as they would no longer be facing the same problems and would be economically better off as well.

The International Centre for Climate Change and Development (ICCCAD) together with a number of partner organisations working on urban issues in Bangladesh has held annual conferences on Urban Resilience for the last four years

where the concept of climate resilient migrant friendly towns was first introduced last year. Since then a number of mayors of smaller towns, starting with Mongla have already embarked on trying to explore and embrace the concept. This is not a government or even NGO project or programme; rather a concept that anyone, including individual citizens, can embrace and explore.

The fourth annual Urban Resilience Conference was held in Dhaka last week where over twenty mayors of Pourashavas have expressed keen interest in exploring the concept in their own towns. This will entail examining the job creation opportunity in each town based on its geography and proximity to one of the hundred economic zones that the government is planning to set up (as jobs are still the major magnet for migrants). It also entails looking at opportunities to enhance education at high school and college and vocational level in order to attract young girls and boys from the coastal zone to come and study (and potentially settle) in those towns; perhaps by offering scholarships for them.

At a macro level, the idea is to identify around twenty towns which can attract and help settle around half a million migrants, each over the next ten to twenty years to ensure that ten million potential climate migrants do not end up in Dhaka city over that time.

It is indeed a great challenge which will require not just new kinds of urban planning, but also redistribution of private sector investment towards these smaller towns.

The two megatrends of urbanisation and climate change are being perceived as big problems both globally and nationally. But we have the opportunity in Bangladesh to be proactive in anticipating possible solutions to the two megatrends and finding ways to minimise their negative aspects and maximise the positive opportunities that they present.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Are graduates endowed with the required skills?

The number of students who graduate from tertiary education account for 38.6 percent of total unemployment in Bangladesh. More often than not, students after graduation, find themselves joining a jobless queue, and claims by employers that potential employees do not have the right set of skills are worth taking note of.

Graduates often fail to live up to the expectations of employers mainly because the skills they acquire from universities do not match with industry demands. The growing mismatch begs the question: when and how will we reform the system?

Abu Hasnat Evna Mostafa, Corporate HR Executive