

The Daily Star

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Take the pressure off Dhaka and Chattogram

Time to develop secondary cities across Bangladesh

AS buildings soar higher and higher, traffic congestions get worse, air more suffocating, and public amenities spread thinner and thinner to accommodate an ever-increasing number of people, at what point do we say, enough is enough? Despite frequent discussions around the urgency of decentralisation, we have unfortunately done little to address the pressing challenges of unplanned, uncontrolled urbanisation, which poses a major threat to the citizens' standard of living, as well as to the country's GDP growth and sustainable development.

Over the last decade, Dhaka's population has grown by 50 percent, and it has come at a huge cost—between 6 and 10 percent of Bangladesh's GDP, according to a recent study. Experts warn that it will harm the country's future prospects further if measures are not taken to "get urbanisation right."

Dhaka is currently generating one-fifth of the country's GDP and almost half of its formal employment. Such unbalanced growth is simply not sustainable. We wholeheartedly agree with the experts that we must focus on developing secondary, medium-sized cities for balanced structural transformation. We need to move populations away from Dhaka and Chattogram, and create jobs, infrastructures, investment opportunities, public amenities and recreational facilities, and strengthen urban local government institutions to lead that process of change. The government must engage relevant stakeholders and come up with a workable yet ambitious plan to develop these cities and empower the city government accordingly.

As of now, local governments have little fiscal and administrative autonomy, and people's participation in the decision-making process of local governments is severely limited. There is no doubt that we need political commitment to change the status quo. But the question is: Is the government ready to make such a commitment?

It needs to, for its own sake, if not for the sake of its citizens. As economists and urban planners have been pointing out for years, failure to decentralise will have devastating impacts on economic growth in the near future, particularly as more people migrate to the major cities due to climate change. As the pandemic has exposed, unbalanced and intense concentration of the population in the cities can expose the citizens to higher risks of disease, climate impacts and natural shocks. The government needs to focus on developing urban centres in the country's northern part as part of its strategies on climate change litigation and adaptation. Infrastructures and road connectivity need to be improved in the region to bring a balance in urbanisation and trade diversification.

The promise of a playground

DSCC mayor must deliver on his pledge

WE welcome Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC) Mayor Sheikh Fazle Noor Taposh's recent announcement that he would build a playground in every ward. Mayor Taposh has, no doubt, touched a very sensitive chord, as the residents of DSCC have been demanding open space for their children for a long time now. The need for children to go out in the sun and play with their peers was felt by parents even more intensely during the Covid-induced lockdowns. Doctors suggested sunlight and exercise for the young and old alike, but there are hardly any open spaces for either to walk or to play within the city. We appreciate that the DSCC mayor has put due emphasis on this significant aspect, and hope he is committed to going ahead with his plan.

With rapid, and often unplanned, urbanisation sprawling across our cities, open spaces where children could play freely have slowly been consumed by concrete structures or they have just been encroached by local influentials. While children do enjoy staying indoors and playing on digital devices instead, this is far from a healthy practice to encourage. Affluent neighbourhoods of the capital, barred off from the rest of it and much better organised, often have multiple playgrounds and parks dedicated to people of all ages. But this needs to be translated across Dhaka city, and eventually across all major cities in Bangladesh. Children need to be physically active and engage in play with their peers from different socio-economic backgrounds if they are to develop properly throughout the crucial few years of childhood.

Of course, we know of similar projects being delayed beyond comprehension. One such project is the five-acre land in the western corner of the National Parliament building, adjacent to the Mirpur Road, which, as this daily reported in December 2021, was supposed to be turned into a playground for children with special needs in 2011 as per the prime minister's announcement, but is still sitting idle. Thus, we urge the mayor to stick to his words and build a playing field in every ward, setting up playgrounds by recovering the corporation's land in Wards 42, 26 and 13, which have been under illegal occupation for years.

Powerful quarters who encroach on land meant for playgrounds must also be identified and held accountable by the authorities. These connected people often thwart every attempt of city corporation officials to recover the lands from their grip. The city corporation must not bow to such attempts anymore. Our children deserve to play freely under open skies—for their health and their future.

Book Fair: An Affair to Remember



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND

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SHAMSAD MORTUZA

"THE Book (*Le Livre*)" was an ambitious project of the 19th century French poet Stephane Mallarme. He thought of an extremely flexible structure for his "ideal book" that would both contain and reveal "all existing relations between everything." Simply put, he intended his book to be the sum of all other books and experiences. Hence, his project included the details of printing and production, presented as a spectacle. I think the same can be said of a book fair—particularly of *Amar Ekushey Boi Mela*.

A book fair is a happy meeting ground for writers, readers and book lovers, where they all come together to celebrate the written and published words. It offers a wonderful opportunity to discover new writers while acknowledging the old. The new experimental writers poke daringly like wild orchids through the foliage of the tree trunk of writers who define the orchard of classics. But what distinguishes Ekushey book fair from other international or regional book fairs is its sentimental attachments, its cultural heritage.

For the Bengalis, the site of the book fair lends itself to genuine nostalgia. Visiting the fairground after laying floral wreaths at the Central Shaheed Minar on the Ekushey (February 21) morning is a ritual with which I grew up in Dhaka. The feeling of being with a crowd of shared interest was emotionally fulfilling and intellectually satisfying. As visitors, we were keen on listening to the intellectuals sharing their thoughts at the Nazrul *Mancha* under the famous banyan tree. During the anti-Ershad movement, there were many street performances and distribution of free chapbooks and lampoons that would spice up our jhalmuri or fuchka. The fair was a ground in which you either longed for or tried to avoid meeting familiar faces, depending on your companions. Displaying the books that I bought after an immense survey of the discounts available was a source of guilty pleasure, notwithstanding the scolding that awaited me from my mother, who would be worried about the accommodation of the new purchase.

Starting in 1972, in the last 50 years, the fair has become a habitus of our cultural marker. It had a modest start with the proprietor of Muktohdara publishing house, Chittaranjan Saha, taking the initiative. The Bangla Academy started formally hosting the fair from 1978, and in 1984 it was named after the martyrs of the Language Movement. The inauguration of the fair by the prime minister, and the conferral of Bangla Academy award for literature have added

further weights to this event.

In retrospect, it is hard to believe that the new variants of the coronavirus almost dampened this year's celebration. Last year, publishers incurred financial losses due to restricted mobility at the height of the pandemic. Casting all doubts aside, the fair has once again become a successful affair. If Facebook is any indicator, there are many new writers who have had their

the international literary fest in the Bangla Academy premises has introduced a different economic class to the fairground. The nature of the fair management has changed due to the osmosis process that took place between the national and the international events.

One focus of the fair should be in encouraging and enhancing visits by children to the event. Visiting the book fair



▲ **For the Bengalis, the site of Ekushey book fair lends itself to genuine nostalgia.**

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

first publications this year. It would be interesting to have academic research to find out how these pandemic-ridden closures have contributed to creativity and creation of new writers. Relatedly, one can also explore how the "what's on your mind" mode of social media has created a writerly space with a "friendly" audience. Normally, publishers or book/literary editors are the gatekeepers of any culture—they decide who is in and who is not. But on a digital platform, anyone can gauge the interest of their intended audience in their writings. I am not surprised that many of my Facebook friends have compiled their daily compositions to compose their creativity. The endorsements of their "friends" have emboldened them to publish. The hypertext is becoming a text, and eventually shoring up at the fairground. They are the wild orchids who do not need to be rooted in the soil of the old publication houses; they can find their sustenance from the air shared by their virtual readers.

The nature of the festival is, therefore, changing. It is much more democratic and participatory. For a long time, it was dominated by the middle-class civic society in general. To be particular, by the cultural middle class who buy books to read and preserve them at home. This group consisted of the writers, readers and publishers. The dynamics are changing. We have already seen that the holding of

gives children the opportunity to develop their reading preferences. This year, the fair will end on National Children's Day, the birthday of the father of the nation. Can we not have one day dedicated only to children or those accompanying children during the book fair? Different schools can be asked to arrange field trips on that given day.

At a book fair, we are spared the task of looking into every book shop in the city, or browsing through endless online catalogues to find the book that we do not know that we need or want. However, with the growing popularity of e-books and online portals, there could be a day when physical book fairs lose their current appeal. We might lose the chance of going to a fair to find all the bookstores in one place, and the people behind them.

The fear of losing touch with the physical fairground is not without any suspicion. The publishers wait throughout the year for Ekushey book fair. They hope that their investments will pay off during the month-long event. The survival of the publishers and authors depend largely on this fair. To minimise the investment risks, the fair should be spread all across the country; it should not be Dhaka-centric. A coordination at a national level is required to integrate the fair as part of our annual calendar. More importantly, steps are needed to find the right balance between the virtual and the physical.

Can we beat dysfunctional capitalism?



Eahsan Abedin is a student.

EAHSAN ABEDIN

WHOM should I blame when I see the rich and influential speed their expensive cars down the street, as if everything's perfectly fine, while my father, who has been working as an unpaid journalist for the past several months, struggles every day? Dysfunctional capitalism and unrepresentative democracy.

It's clear that capitalism has seen enormous progress over the last few decades. Although it has seen its fair share of positives, it also has major drawbacks. According to the Edelman Trust Barometer, in 2020, 56 percent of people globally believed capitalism is doing more harm than good while a record 83 percent of employees stated that they were fearful of losing their jobs. Capitalism has left numerous people behind, and political institutions have ignored them too. Distrust is fuelled by an increasing sense of systematic inequality and discrimination. The perception is that institutions and the global economy are serving the interests of the few over those of the majority.

Democracy remains an important political ideology designed to protect individual freedom, speech and choice. But the problem lies with the current "delivery system," which is still organised around age-old democratic elements. When political power is captured by the wealthy, the masses begin to distrust the government. Around the globe, voter engagement has declined over the past

decade. There is a growing "representative gap" in politics, with major parties becoming organised around heavily ideology-based policies and biased cultural debates. And while politicians continue to play this sort of identity politics globally, the age-old construct of democracy—one of the founding principles through which modern society was created—becomes "poisoned." While democracy fails to keep checks and balances, people's belief in the systems slowly diminishes, causing the rise of intense nationalism and, ultimately, making way for authoritarian-styled governance in power as people start to believe that is the only solution to real-world problems.

As public participation wanes, the democratic arena is further dominated by external groups with outlandish views, leading to the capture of more democratic processes. Funded by the wealthy minority, the ideas of a few try to engulf the many through their mandates. Politicians play a tug of war with the state itself, not caring about its economy, resources and most importantly, the people. Threatening free press, politicians resorting to the culture of lying with incentivised radical supporters pose a hazard to the face of democracy and capitalism. Research says that nearly half the population worldwide view government and media as divisive forces in society, completely contradictory to the noble cause for which these concepts originated and spread throughout modern humanity. Through disinformation and division, these two institutions continue to feed the cycle and exploit it for commercial and political gains.

Politicians say they spend billions behind infrastructure, security and development projects while they transfer millions of people's taxes to their own pockets. And while the economy plunges with high inequality, we continue the push for weapons and violence. In certain

circumstances, blaming everything on other countries, ethnicities and minorities is a petty way of knowingly fuelling conflict. Personally, it feels awful and extremely unhuman to see our species—soon to become inter-planetary—resort to such means for so-called happiness, growth and development, taking lives and destroying what humanity stands for.

Linking peace and security to sustainable and inclusive development is the way to go at this point. Levelling the playing field, empowering the youth, balancing competence with ethical behaviour can go a long way by spreading capital, creating start-ups and jobs. Business itself has to do enough to address societal problems. More importantly, business leadership must be handed to the people. It's high time we started to encourage an innovative and flexible outlook on policy-making instead of a strict, confining and even violent one. Showing the people that the system works, and giving them credible and honest information, is absolutely critical to breaking this system of distrust. Solutions over divisiveness, honesty and partnership can take us far in terms of building trust. It is not about the voices of the many over the few, because the few are not just wealthy elites running society or a tiny ethnicity fighting hard to keep their language alive, it is about everyone's inclusion in modern-day society. Otherwise, who knows what circumstances the tens of billions of human and other lives will have to go through a hundred years later.

Even though the middle-class is being thumbed down while the wealthy are getting wealthier each day, I wish to believe this planet can still become a better home for its inhabitants. Inequality, crony capitalism and flaws in governing systems will always persist, but without the will to be better, how can we ever change?

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