



DHAKA METRO: ON TIME, IN DHAKA

“A comprehensive and well-planned metro network will help to improve mobility and access to transportation”

In conversation with Dr. Md. Shamsul Hoque, Professor at the Department of Civil Engineering, BUET.



Prof. Dr. Md. Shamsul Hoque

The Daily Star (TDS): Will the Dhaka Metro Rail bring a significant, qualitative change to the city's traffic system?

Shamsul Hoque (SH): The MRT Line 6 is being built in a single corridor, so its visible impact on Dhaka is uncertain, as there are other corridors where many people live. While those living near this corridor may experience some relief from the current congested traffic system if they become accustomed to using the metro after the inauguration of Line 6, the inconsistent placement of metro stations may create bottlenecks and hinder passengers' movement unless the enforcement system is implemented correctly. To ensure smooth travel for passengers, it is important to carefully plan the placement and operation of metro stations.

Achieving visible progress in terms of managing the traffic system in Dhaka city is not possible with only one MRT line. This is because a single line does not have the capacity to transform the disorganized traffic system of this mega city into a controlled network that is necessary for a diverse, metro-based development. I believe that the most likely beneficiaries of the Dhaka Metro project will be women, elderly people, and persons with disabilities, who have been suffering for many years. A comprehensive and well-planned metro network will help to improve their mobility and access to transportation.

I have researched the experiences of women in the transport sector of Dhaka, and I have observed that they frequently face issues of privacy invasion, mental and physical harassment. These women have had to endure these

difficulties because they did not have any other options for getting to their places of work. In addition, they are often treated as “slow” by the public transportation system and are denied entry into vehicles. For these reasons, I am hopeful that the metro will ease the daily struggles and hardships faced by women in the capital city, providing them with a safer and more dignified means of transportation.

The future of Dhaka will not be reliant on metro rail alone. In Dhaka, about 20-28% of daily travelers walk. If we cannot create pedestrian-friendly footpaths and remove obstacles to walking, the traffic system will not function properly. In this case, relying

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solely on metro rail will not be effective in addressing the large volume of traffic.

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However, I believe that the investment in a metro rail system in our case would not provide comprehensive benefits because much of the foundational work remains incomplete. It seems that none of the authorities are concerned about completing this necessary preparatory work before proceeding with construction.

TDS: The Dhaka Metro Rail project has been a significant investment, but what about other reforms to Dhaka's transportation system?

SH: Metro rail was first mentioned in the Strategic Transport Plan (STP) in 2005 as a way to address Dhaka's large and complex transportation system, which is currently controlled by many individual owners with political support. The STP suggested that the system should be systematically developed through a speedy public bus system under a single authority, and a broad network of rail transportation should be developed to provide people with comfortable and safe transportation options. However, this capital-intensive investment in the metro rail project may not bring comprehensive change to the traffic system in Dhaka city.

The original STP and its revised version in 2015 did not suggest that the metro alone could bring control to Dhaka's chaotic transportation system. Instead, it was stated that if all six proposed metro lines were built by 2035, they would only alleviate 20% of the traffic demand at that time, with the remainder being carried by other vehicles, including buses which would still be responsible for 40% of the demand. Therefore, it was suggested that before investing in large, capital-

intensive projects, a low-cost or no-cost, but effective system should be developed at the foundational level as a prerequisite for heavier development.

Currently, buses contribute significantly to the chaos on the roads due to the thoughtless competition among them. To address this issue, it would be necessary to consolidate and rationalize bus routes, similar to the Hatirheel circular bus system or the 'Dhaka Chaka' in Gulshan, under a single authorized bus company. The government does not need to invest in this effort, as private capital would be eager to invest with the right political commitment to improve the current situation.

To attract investors and create a business-friendly climate, the government should prioritize the development of a public-oriented transportation system as the backbone of the entire system. This will require the establishment of a system-driven approach to development, including the creation of clear and safe footpaths for pedestrians. While BRT or MRT systems can provide some level of door-to-door service, they cannot fully replace the need for well-designed stations and the surrounding areas. If these factors are not taken into consideration, heavy, intensive development projects may create further problems and result in higher fares for the metro, which may not be acceptable to many people for various reasons.

Despite serving their full terms, the two mayors have not been able to make significant progress in this regard. Instead of being dependent on the decision of any one mayor, the process should be guided by political direction

that reflects the interests of the people.

The implementation of BRTA should not be a slow process and should not be subject to the personal will of any one person, as it is a system. Failing to complete the necessary foundational work before focusing solely on the metro will not yield the expected return on investment. Unfortunately, those responsible for managing this project have not considered the necessary preparatory steps from a system-driven perspective and have treated it solely as a capital-intensive investment project.

TDS: What steps should be taken to ensure the maintenance and safety of the metro rail?

SH: The government is creating a separate police force to maintain the metro. However, in the developed world, governments usually build metro rail systems, but the private sector operates them. This is because there are often opportunists within government agencies, and the use of public-private partnerships can help to ensure that services are provided properly. Metro rail systems are in operation in around 170 countries worldwide, including in our neighboring countries. However, in our case, no one wants to take responsibility for ensuring proper service provision because government employees often do not work effectively. There is no accountability and the job becomes permanent, as there is no system for hiring and firing in place. To avoid similar issues in the future, we should learn from the experience of MRT Line 6 and consider alternative approaches for the rest of the MRT lines.

Interviewed by Priyam Paul, The Daily Star

CONGRATULATIONS

from Japan Tobacco International to all involved in the Metro Rail Project, a true testament of the unwavering friendship between Japan and Bangladesh

