

Predictable winter woes for the homeless

Why are we so slow to take action to address them?

A heart-breaking account by *The Daily Star Bangla*, of the misery that homeless people in Dhaka's streets have been facing during this winter, should be a wakeup call for the government and society in general. It gives a glimpse of how these individuals – who, it bears repeating, are citizens of this country – are deprived of such basic amenities as a roof over their heads, adequate food, warm clothes and blankets. Attached with the report is a photograph of a person literally sleeping inside a thin plastic bag to stave off the cold, epitomising the level of deprivation that certain sections of the population face.

Those interviewed revealed that they simply could not afford any kind of housing; they often went to bed hungry and could not sleep because they did not have warm blankets. A mother and daughter shivering in the cold said that they sold flowers and lived on the streets, saving money to send back to a son who stays at a madrasa. Caught in the cold embrace of winter was also a teenage boy who ran away from home after his father had remarried, and now has no one to call family in this unkind city.

Temperatures in Dhaka have fallen as low as 11.5 degrees Celsius, with winds making it seem even colder. Outside the city, temperatures drop even further making life hard for poor people, especially infants and the elderly. On Saturday, Chuadanga recorded the lowest temperature in the country at 8.4 degrees Celsius. Other northern districts have been facing a similar situation over the past few days.

Meanwhile, cold-related diseases such as flu, bronchitis, pneumonia and diarrhoea have seen a sharp rise. For those on the streets, exposed to the elements, the chances of getting seriously ill are very high, especially in major cities swathed in constant dust from the many construction projects, big or small.

All these scenarios have been predictable, however. With proper planning by the authorities, cold-related effects on the poor could be reduced. Unfortunately, there has been hardly any meaningful action. Why haven't we, for instance, seen the usual drives to distribute warm clothes and blankets to the needy? Special funds must be allocated to help the homeless, who are most vulnerable and concentrated in the cities. Organisations and individuals should make a coordinated effort to initiate such drives. Along with warm clothes, these people need nutritious food. Soup kitchens should be set up by the city corporations to provide free meals to the homeless. The state cannot only depend on private initiatives to help the urban poor; it must have a comprehensive plan that will meet their immediate needs, while addressing the more long-term issue of homelessness through low-cost housing, employment, and accessible health care.

As a society, each one of us has a responsibility to those less fortunate, who live without even the bare minimum of needs met. Right now, the government and public must join hands in making sure these people stay warm and don't go to bed hungry.

Preserve historic shrine properly

600-year-old structure in Dinajpur yet to be recognised as a heritage site

Another day, another painful reminder of the poor state of historic sites in Bangladesh – this time, it is a shrine dating back nearly six centuries. The site, locally known as the shrine of Chehel Gazi Pir, is located in Dinajpur, about three kilometres off the district city. According to a report by *Prothom Alo*, it is at the risk of being destroyed and thus forever lost to history because of the lack of renovation efforts. What's worse, it is not even recognised as a heritage site by the Department of Archaeology.

The shrine is believed to contain the remains of 40 Islamic preachers – hence Chehel, which is Persian for forty – who once came to this land. The construction of the surrounding mosque was traced to December 1, 1460, based on a reading of one of the three inscriptions recovered from the mosque in 1847 by the then deputy commissioner of Dinajpur. One of those inscriptions is now at the district museum. Today, the site, decayed through the years and lack of care, remains in a precarious state, with about 80 percent of it estimated to have been damaged.

It's shocking to think that a site of such historical and religious importance would be left to the elements. According to law, any ancient monument or place of historical, ethnological, anthropological, military or scientific value that dates back at least a hundred years should be considered within the ambit of antiquities. But those at the Department of Archaeology are yet to recognise the shrine, let alone extend institutional protection to it, nor do they have, strange as it may seem, any information about it.

What could be the reason for such inaction and negligence? We know the answer. We have seen this happen too many times to discount the latest incident as an isolated one. We have seen how even heritage sites that are officially recognised have been falling into ruins or getting occupied/damaged because of neglect by the state. Only last week, we commented on the recovery of Brajo Niketan, a palatial residence of a British-era zamindar, from the clutches of local influentials in Nawabganj, Dhaka. The week before, we had a report about some 300-year-old temples on the bank of the Bhairab River in Jashore that are at the risk of being ruined because of lack of initiatives by the government. Despite having laws, court directives and separate state bodies in charge of such sites, lack of accountability and mismanagement have frequently come in the way of the all-too-important task of preserving history for posterity.

This is really disturbing. We urge the government to take steps to properly protect and preserve all historic sites in the country, including the 600-year-old shrine in Dinajpur. We need these sites to keep reminding us of our roots. A nation without a consciousness of its past cannot fare well in the future.

Survival of the Noisiest

A not-so-quiet rant about Dhaka's noise pollution



OF MAGIC & MADNESS

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Everyone – and everything – talks in Dhaka, and given the chance, most will talk rather loudly than quietly.

Some are loud publicly but quiet privately, some quiet publicly but loud privately. Some are loud only institutionally. Some are unhesitant to spread their sonic blessing everywhere they are, even when they are asleep – for what is snoring if not a loud, synchronised but still-undeciphered form of communication, right?

Jokes apart, if making noises was a sin, most of us would be sinners. There is something about this city that makes you – that is, your vocal cords – tick. You live long enough here, you find yourself in a Sisyphean cycle of creating noise or reacting to it, as I am doing now.

But we cannot talk about people's penchant for loudness without talking about what might be causing it in the first place. The main accused, in my view, is noise pollution, of which this city is now a world champion. Imagine all the noise and chaos that butt in round the clock – the ceaseless clamour of horns and revving of engines, the constant pounding and buzzing from construction sites, blasting music from weddings, blaring sirens, swearing and sloganeering, random announcements coming through randomly placed street loudspeakers.

Horns, without a doubt, take the cake. I remember reading an analysis of the *restriction* of horn language that, at absolute most, can say five things: double beep (“Hello”), single beep (“Excuse me, the light is now green”), longer single beep (“I said the light is green. I will stab you in the heart with a screwdriver if you don't move this second, you twat!”)... In Dhaka, in the absence of any functional traffic light or traffic management system, horns are certainly much more expressive.

I know this only too well. True, bikers are a horn-y bunch, as in they use horns the most. But the other day, while biking my way home, I got a test of our own medicine after a particularly expressive SUV driver behind me honked repeatedly, forcing me into a corner and marginally hitting the



PHOTO: PROTHOM ALO

back of another car. It was the most harmless of accidents I've ever had, but also the weirdest, where it wasn't reckless driving that was to blame – it was reckless honking. How I wished cars would come fitted with a beep just for apologies for such nuisance.

Living with Dhaka's noise pollution is a gruelling endurance test. It makes you feel irritable, on edge, frustrated. The toxic, deeply polarised environment in which we live also has the same effect. But I reckon, as a side effect, all this eventually equips you with not only an inexhaustible tolerance for noise, but also an irresistible itch to speak loudly, even if merely to be heard over louder voices.

You are no longer just a noise survivor then; you are a noise warrior, whether by choice or by circumstance.

As a journalist, I'm no stranger to screaming headlines. We often say “a headline screams” when it contains scathing, passionate or boastful content. Just as intangibly, something is screaming inside all of us, too: a

deep, guttural noise that you can hear if you listen closely enough. You see the manifestations of this inner noise everywhere you look.

You see boastful political claims without any truth or substance. You see self-righteous ideologues basking in their “woke” or “cancel” moments. You see street scuffles break out for silly reasons. You see pent-up emotions

Quiet Place, but they had to present it in a post-apocalyptic setting to make it relatable for today's audience.

Yes, like cities, offices make noises, too. In my office, the decibel level is usually high when it is low everywhere else. But on the off chance that you consider journalists a worthy representative sample of humans,

getting unedited release all over the Internet: anger, hate, vanity, pain. Justified or not, artfully expressed or not, noise thus created is eventually contributing to a culture in which the noisiest have the best chance of survival in the socio-political food chain.

In case it's not still clear, noise is not just heard but felt, too. In other words, it can be both audible and inaudible. In fact, if we broaden the definition of noise/decibels, we can assign a decibel count to everything that is expressed – through sounds or through written words. The further it is to the right or left of your emotional spectrum, the higher or lower the decibel count. Like the post you just shared on Facebook blasting politicians, or decrying rich-poor divide, or airing some other grievances, personal or collective. Like this accident-induced rant about noise pollution.

Books and poems are getting noisier, too. There was a time when movies had long stretches of time just filled with silence, or light music. These days, it's all boom-boom, except movies like A

the description below of some of my colleagues will illustrate the various types of people using various vocal pitches.

For example, one colleague once admitted to *habitually* talking loudly but only sparingly. God bless her heart. Another is proudly loud but has the gift of the gab to soften any blow to the ear. Yet another is compulsively soft-spoken, so much so that you doubt if 42 percent of urban rickshaw drivers – who, in a recent survey, were found to be suffering from hearing loss because of noise pollution – will at all hear her. I am more on the quiet-but-not-soft spectrum, not for lack of words but for lack of things important enough to say.

But frankly, this is a very small sample size, but you get the point. As Dhaka natives, we have somehow found a way to match our city's insane noise level, and we're making the most of it in everyday interactions.

Sacrificing healing silence for murderous noise – how far can we go along this line?

How easy is it to be a startup in Bangladesh?



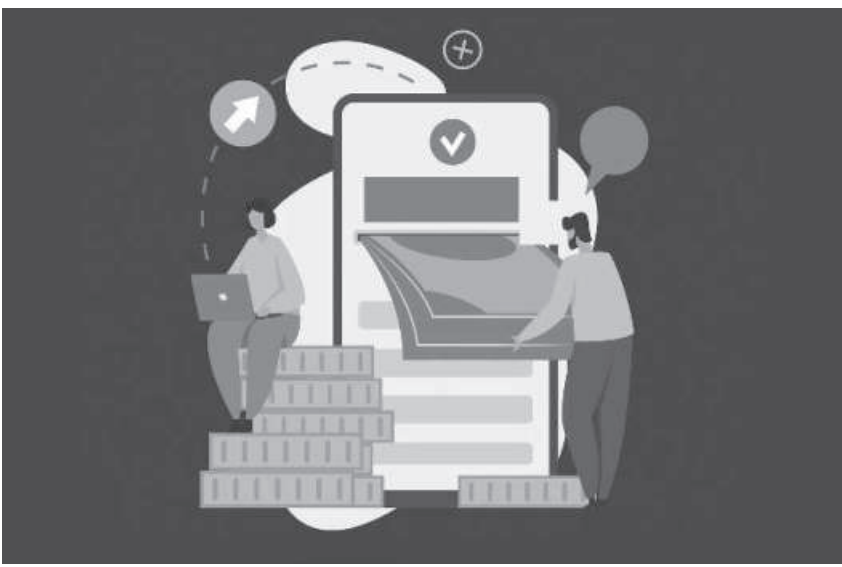
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Over the past decade, Bangladesh's startup culture has grown in prominence, with an increasing number of founders and investors actively contributing to the ecosystem. The country's rapid economic growth, combined with a low median age demographic, has resulted in a significant transition in this industry in recent years. The country has the ninth highest mobile penetration and fifth highest internet user base in the world. Its growing middle class is projected to reach 34 million people in the next three years, making their purchasing habits and behaviour the primary focus for most startups. According to Lightcastle Partners, the country has over 1,000 active startups, with approximately 200 new ones being added each year.

As part of a Bangladesh-based venture capital firm dedicated to accelerating the growth of this industry, we've seen the government take a more proactive role in supporting this ecosystem in recent years. The most notable contribution was the establishment of Startup Bangladesh Limited, a venture capital firm with Tk 100 crore in funding. Furthermore, in the national budget for 2022-23, they introduced tax breaks for startups while also investing in high-tech parks across the country to attract more foreign investors.

However, there is still room for growth. In the Ease of Doing Business Index, Bangladesh ranks 168th out of



190. Despite the fact that the World Bank has discontinued its use of this index, it is critical for understanding the lack of foreign investment in the startup ecosystem. Bureaucratic issues, infrastructure shortfalls, high tax rates, and difficulty accessing finances all impede the ease of doing business in the country. With the government's emphasis on digital Bangladesh, it is critical to develop a startup-oriented framework that offers numerous incentives to ecosystem actors and startups to simplify their operations, lower operational costs, and streamline

access to debt financing.

These issues arise in the context of startups due to a disorganised policy framework across various ministries. As a result, startups may fail to gain approval from certain ministries because they lack an adequate pre-existing structure to grant approval to such needs. Furthermore, the protection of intellectual property is

collateral-free digital loans, allowing users to request up to Tk 10,000 immediately through the app and repay it using their BKash account. This exemplifies how financial institutions can work with startups to improve the lives of the general public, particularly marginalised communities and small enterprises. Existing healthcare service providers have benefitted from the proliferation of information technology provided by startups in areas such as pharmacy delivery, telemedicine, and preventative healthcare. However, experienced healthcare professionals are still needed to collaborate with health-tech startups and providers to create more opportunities, redefining the industry and increasing efficiency.

Collaboration with national and international incubators, innovation hubs and accelerators around the world can also help improve the ecosystem as it develops, and strengthen strategies to address any operational difficulties a startup could face. Connecting with global investor networks and venture capital firms will also significantly contribute to the democratisation of industry expertise and knowledge.

Overall, our findings indicate that there is still a significant need for local angel investors and venture capitalists. Pakistan and Vietnam have capitalised on investors maximising their role in the early growth of startups. It is also difficult for founders to rely on traditional sources of funding such as loans due to the added risk. Founders should provide impact-driven solutions to penetrate and disrupt, which then creates additional spill-overs for the ecosystem to benefit from. Because capital is globally competitive, it is critical for our ecosystem actors to take such steps in order to successfully leapfrog our neighbours.