



CEC Kazi Habibul Awal

FILE PHOTO

What message does the CEC’s comment on black money convey?



THE STREET VIEW

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Elections in Bangladesh come with two things attached: muscle power and vote-buying. Historically, these phenomena have been at the centre of discussions as major contenders accuse each other of committing either or both. And this is where the Election Commission is expected to step in as the custodian of the elections. As the custodian, every word, every action of the commission has a grave significance during an election. While the Election Commission is primarily tasked with holding free and fair elections, that task involves much effort on different fronts, the key among which is earning the trust of the political parties as well as the people of the country. So, people expect election commissioners to be mindful when they speak, when they act, and even when they react.

One recent comment by Chief Election Commissioner Kazi Habibul Awal caught the attention of many. At a discussion with candidates and other stakeholders of the impending

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Gazipur City Corporation election, the election chief on May 10 said, “Don’t worry too much about black money. If you think that you cannot contain the disbursement of black money, tell the recipients [of black money], ‘Even if you take black money, cast your vote independently. Vote for the person you believe in and consider good. Because when you cast your vote, the person who gave you black money will not stand beside you...’”

A video clip of his comment went viral on social media. Netizens have been asking whether it behoves the CEC to make such a comment. The remark is all the more significant since it comes at a time when the credibility of this Election Commission hangs in the balance and is being questioned by the opposition political parties. It sounds all the more ominous

in the context of the two previous parliamentary elections in 2014 and 2018, which seriously question the independence and neutrality of the election office. Predictably, and quite understandably, political parties have already started expressing their apprehension regarding the comment.

Hardly anyone will disagree that black money has an influence on any election, but a few questions arise from the CEC’s comment. First, if the candidates have to stop the disbursement of black money, then what is the role of the Election Commission or the returning officers or the law enforcement agencies? It falls upon them to create a congenial atmosphere for a free, fair and credible election. Obviously, black money is a barrier to that.

The second question that arises from the CEC’s comment is: would it instigate the contenders to distribute black money? If his remarks, which could be perceived as directives, are taken to heart, it would do precious little to deter the candidates from buying votes.

The third question is, does this mean that the Election Commission has expressed its helplessness in advance to stop vote-buying? If that is indeed the case, should the incumbent commission continue staying in office and proceed with conducting elections?

According to the city corporation election rules, no gift can be given to the voters and the commission can sentence violators up to six months in prison or charge them with Tk 50,000 fine or both. The rules also stipulate that monetary or any other reward to influence a person to contest as a candidate, not be a candidate, withdraw their candidature, vote, or keep them from voting will be considered as bribery. Both giving and taking bribes are punishable offences. The punishment for this offence is imprisonment from six months to two years or a fine.

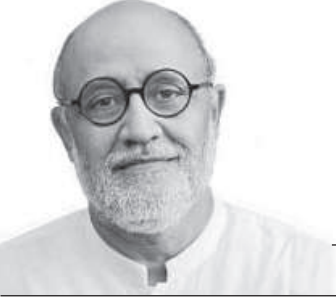
At the same meeting, the CEC emphasised the importance of the upcoming Gazipur City Corporation polls, saying that the election was crucial due to the attention it was receiving from the international community. In that case, his comment on black money will surely tarnish the commission’s image.

The Gazipur City Corporation election is among the five city polls that are going to be held before the upcoming 12th parliamentary polls. The CEC’s comments at such a juncture will certainly not help uphold the commission’s dignity, but question its intention and credibility instead.

Politicians can play with rhetoric and expect more latitude for their remarks and comments. The Election Commission cannot.

BOOK REVIEW

Understanding Dhaka’s urbanism



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Cities in South Asia are characterised by physical and visual contradictions that coalesce into a landscape of incredible pluralism. Spatial ambiguity perhaps forms the dominant image of the city in South Asia. These cities are made and remade every day. They are twitching organisms and are characterised by physical and visual contradictions that morph into a landscape of flux, charged with uncertainty but optimistic energy. In contradiction to this intrinsic character, architects, planners and politicians often bring other imaginations to bear on this landscape, perpetuated by a tyranny of external images from the “global city.” This is a notion of remaking the city in a singular image, using architecture as the spectacle to represent global aspirations. In fact, the radical transformation of the physical form of the city is seen as the most immediate method to make the city viable for integration into a global network of cities and economies. New highways, flyovers, airports, corporate hotels, and convention centres are followed by a secondary development of museums, galleries, parks, and progressive urban regulations. These infrastructures supposedly demonstrate

principle of the city, but in this seeming chaos are embedded aspiration to be global and impulses to use formally produced architecture as an organising instrument of the static city. Here, incredible examples of modernist architecture weather gracefully – exerting their presence, albeit as somewhat alien objects in the landscape. Where the logic of what drives, makes and remakes the city is not discernible. It is clearly a delirious condition. One can’t help but allude to Rem Koolhaas’ seminal work in *Delirious New York*. This book was a celebration and analysis of New York and depicted the city as a metaphor for the incredible variety of human behaviour. A city where at the end of the 19th century, population, information, and technology explosions made Manhattan a laboratory for the invention and testing of a metropolitan lifestyle – “the culture of congestion” – and its architecture.

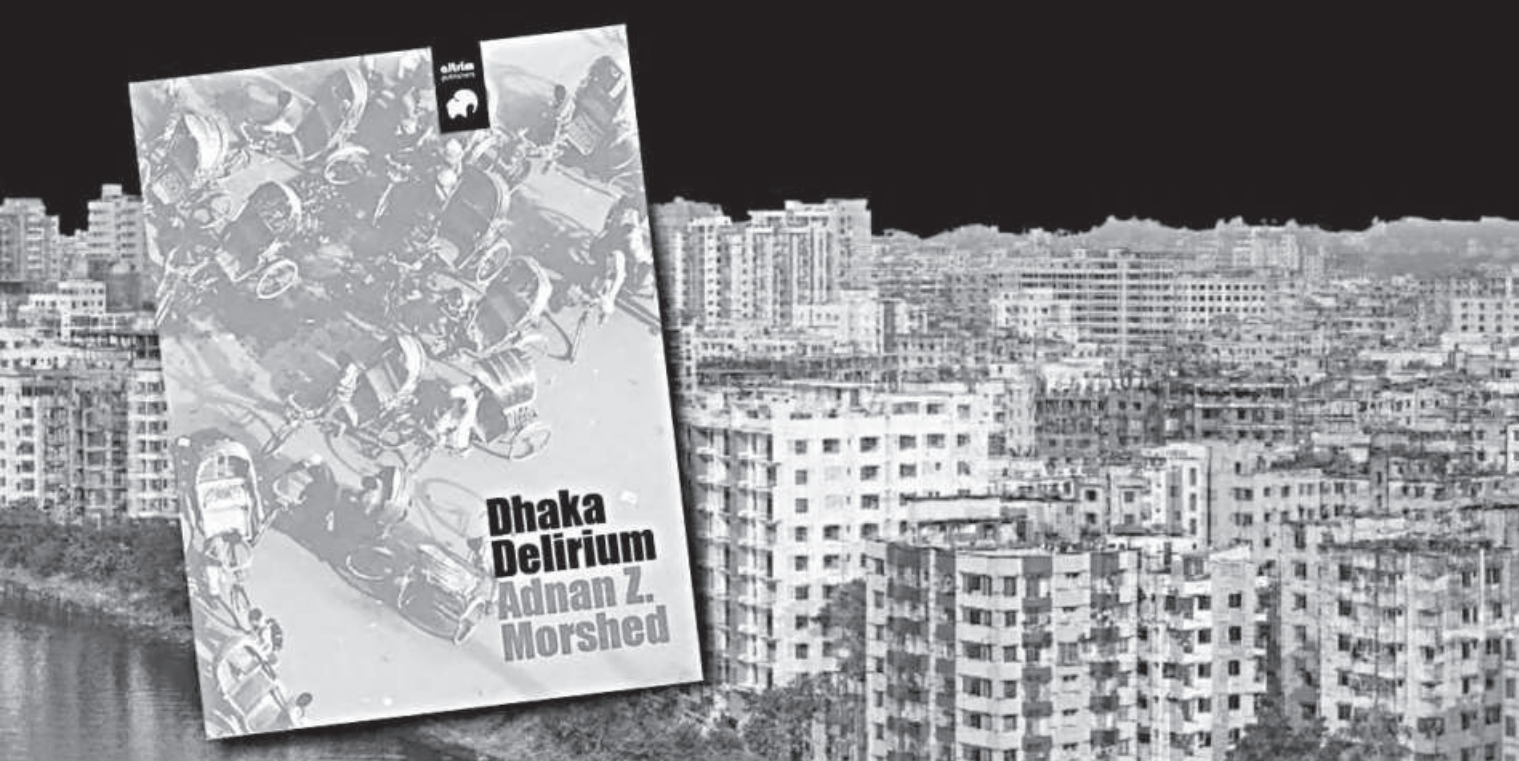
But this was clearly a condition in the Western world where architecture was the protagonist and depicted as the central spectacle of the city. How, then, do we capture and represent a city undergoing a similar metamorphosis in the “majority world”? I use this

to the citizen, yet articulate the issues in the city at a level of intellectual engagement that would rouse a debate among academics, professionals and policymakers alike. Some of the many themes he writes about are climate change, public spaces, transportation, heritage conservation, ecology, football culture, housing, terrorism in the city, as well as an absolutely fascinating fictional conversation between Louis Kahn and Le Corbusier on their fictional visit together to Dhaka! A range that gives us multiple perspectives in understanding the city of Dhaka through both its people and culture, as well as its architecture and urbanism.

Clearly, no single lens can discern the emergent patterns that we see in the South Asian city. Perhaps the effective way to look at urbanism in South Asia is by looking at it from different perspectives. Perhaps to look at it as though through a kaleidoscope; it’s not about a single view, but turning the kaleidoscope to see new patterns emerge. This requires one to practise the suspension of quick judgements and instead understand underlying protocols and procedures in a given context, before making any decision on the nature of the problem. This is necessarily a grounded activity; it is a form of reflexive practice where choices and judgements are seen as a reiterative process. This process oscillates between engaging with the on-the-ground reality and reflecting on the patterns one is observing and experiencing. Through this process, feedback loops for more effective action are established.

so we should feel compelled to act on these grounds. Architecture, planning and landscape architecture are deeply political professions. Avoiding political questions is actually absolving ourselves of that responsibility. Engaging with political questions can be done in many ways, ranging from advocacy and organising action to creating the tools or instruments for advocacy – they are equally important. The tools for advocacy include research, writing, and communication to inform public opinion. It is here that architecture, landscape and planning education becomes important in its broadest sense.

While it is the education of design professionals, it is also the education of the public in the understanding and cultivation of environmental values and the resulting cultural values. In countries like Bangladesh, South Asia and, the “majority world” more broadly, students move from architecture to urban design or planning while pursuing postgraduate studies. They often do this because they see architecture as serving only the indulgences of the rich, whereas in urban design or planning, they see an opportunity to serve society in the larger ambit. Adnan Morshed asks this question in a pointed way in one of the essays: “I have been thinking about the ‘fairness’ measure of cities in Bangladesh. As I go around in Dhaka, I keep wondering, is this city fair to all its people? Is this city guided by a basic philosophy of social justice? Again, fairness and social justice are abstract notions, and often ignored quietly and cleverly as left-leaning



VISUAL: STAR

The city is an ever-transforming landscape – a city in constant motion where the physical fabric is characterised by the kinetic. Architecture is not the “spectacle” of the city, nor does it even comprise the single dominant image of the city. In contrast, festivals and other spectacles of human occupation exert a presence on the everyday landscape and dominate the image of the city.

category specifically picking up on this description coined by the Bangladesh-based photographer Shahidul Alam to describe the part of the globe where a majority of the planetary population lives. This term is being increasingly used, to replace the terms “developing world” or “third world,” which most Southern practitioners consider derogatory. And the notion of the “majority world” is perhaps more accurate, because it refers to the metric of people in space, rather than other economic developmental metrics. For, finally how people organise themselves in space to dwell and live together to make the city becomes the critical question. And it is in this spirit that *Dhaka Delirium* begins to show us through confronting a range of questions and observations as to what might be the appropriate lenses to understand the megacity and political capital of Bangladesh, as well as by extension open up our understanding of urbanism in South Asia more broadly.

In the series of essays in this book, the subjects covered by Adnan Morshed are diverse. They are accessible as they originally were written largely for *The Daily Star* and a few for BDNews24.com, both widely accessed platforms in Bangladesh and internationally. Given this venue of a rather public platform, the essays are accessible

Kaleidoscopic thinking is about continuously including a broader constituency in the patterns one sees and imagines. This is a crucial first step for any form of public engagement. And it is here that *Dhaka Delirium* and Adnan Morshed’s contribution are significant. He is an academic and practitioner, and one rooted on the ground but also who can take a long view on his city. He uses various media, issues, and venues to share his ideas and observations. He engages with the public realm in an accessible and productive way. He communicates to the layperson through local newspapers while draws academics closer to the issues through more scholarly writing. And it is these disparate formats and experiences over two decades that seamlessly come together in *Dhaka Delirium*.

In *Dhaka Delirium*, Adnan Morshed speaks to us as a design professional, student, academic, public intellectual, activist, policymaker, and a concerned citizen. He provokes the professionals to play a greater role in the public sphere. As architects and practitioners of urban and landscape design, we have to build constituencies that engage in organising people to act. We are trained to see spatial possibilities in ways societies can be organised productively and equitably, and

obstacles to a neoliberal worldview, typically rigged to favour the privileged and the powerful. But we need to decide how we develop our cities and what kind of humanity we institute in them.” This is an underlying question that lingers through the book, and is perhaps the critical one for all of us as citizens and professionals to ask today.

However, we are not asking this question enough today as a profession – and when we are, we do it largely for circulation among our peers. We will be judged as a profession by the issues we engage with and where the public sees us collectively expending our energy. This is the range of challenges that *Dhaka Delirium* outlines for us through the different essays – issues that all need spatial practitioners to more actively engage with through speculative thinking as well as action. Our focus as a profession has been caught up in a landscape of indulgence, while the issues our societies face on the ground have to do with another reality: the lack of amenities for the poor, severe shortage of affordable housing, insensitivity towards the natural landscape and ecology, and so on. These issues should be where we expend our energy and focus.

If history has to judge our profession in the last three or four decades, it will be a judgement that will damn us for forgetting about a majority of the population and society we were supposed to serve. Instead, our profession has been completely seduced by the rich and, by extension, the global capital that is disrupting our society and the well-being of a majority. *Dhaka Delirium*, in the context of this megacity in South Asia, reminds us as professionals and citizens of our responsibilities and commitments to society at large.