



Dhaka is a city for the rich, built on the backs of the working class.

PHOTO: ALIM AL RAZI

How this city kills its people

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I've been living away from my family for the past 10 years, and just like many migrants in the Bangladeshi diaspora, one of the largest in the world, I have borne the brunt of living away in search of a sustainable livelihood. When I arrived in Dhaka on July 7 of this year, I was still unaware of the fact that my little brother, Roycellus Arya Shafat Rahman, had passed away a week before my landing. He died on the Friday after Eid-ul-Azha at the tender age of 26. There are no words I can use to eulogise my brother, because the sufferings he endured, and the love and lessons he has left behind for us, are immeasurable.

During his lifetime, Shafat carried the many burdens of our dysfunctional families and societies, two vital elements that have the power to perpetuate systemic injustices. Loneliness, anxiety, depression – these have all intricately seeped into the very core of how we live in this city. And so Shafat wanted to leave Dhaka and go to a place where he could breathe in fresh air, eat unadulterated fruits, enjoy clean lakesides, where the sunlight would pour through his window, where he would receive proper medical care, a city where he could live with dignity. I have to call all these "amenities," because to access these basic elements for



Shafat in Chicago during his time as a Kennedy-Lugar Youth Exchange and Study (YES).

PHOTO: COURTESY

mind. Many youths survive in Dhaka just like this, with the patience to achieve their dreams, just like my brother.

When our system fails to nurture and accommodate us, we look for a way out. The love for this city is related to how much social capital we have to navigate the hurdles. And so, Dhaka's lower-middle-class families have no escape. This is a scathing remark for the place where my life began, the city whose foul air filled my growing lungs, where my brother suffered. Many of our parents grew up with much less in the countryside. But they had clean air, lakes to swim and catch fish in, and open green fields that stretched through horizons.

Shafat and I grew up in a flat in Dhanmondi, where we could barely see the sun, where evenings were full of the odour of insecticides. Every road in the area was dotted with restaurants and shopping malls, serving those with the means to pay up. But how would we burn those extra calories? Where could we walk? Today, we struggle to find an open space to breathe in fresh air, while children now flock to apartment-turned schools. We have increasingly become a society dependent on cars, because of the dilapidated and often overlooked public transit system. Along with that, we have an abundance of corruption booty leading to skyrocketing purchasing power of the top echelon. We have taken

all this for granted for so long that they have become Dhaka's character traits.

Research after research has

shown that if you are born rich, you will probably end your life as a richer person. Not only that, if you are wealthy, you have a higher life expectancy and better access to institutions that help in preserving the status quo. The reason why lower-middle-class families move to Dhaka is because mobility and development are selective, exclusionary and city-centric. Meanwhile, youngsters from

these families get pulled into a wave of toxic number-based meritocracy as we continue to venerate educational institutions that are merely churning out machines. We pay with our lives for the ambitions we harbour.

Why don't we point our fingers at these institutions? We cannot talk about mental health, addictive inclinations, and weakening familial ties without pointing out how our societal, educational and economic systems are leading to this crisis. While I hold a grave sense of personal responsibility for my brother's passing, something I will be reckoning with for the rest of my life, Shafat's death is revealing of a larger story of struggle and injustice that cannot be ignored.

While my brother's dreams had been shattered, he was the best of dreamers. Shafat was extraordinarily brilliant and futuristic. He loved to break and build things from scratch and knew the ins and outs of what he studied. My brother was analytical, thoughtful, kind, giving, patient and organised to perfection. The world will never come to know of the inventions that Shafat would have made, or the discoveries he would stumble upon, or the grand journeys he would embark on. So now, I'm doing what I can, speaking about the systems of inequality that cut his journey short. Unfortunately, this is not going to be the last time someone loses their brother to this city.

Los Alamos during and after the Manhattan Project



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Anyone who has watched Christopher Nolan's epic *Oppenheimer* has gotten a glimpse of the life, legacy, rise and subsequent fall of the "American Prometheus" J Robert Oppenheimer, leader of the Manhattan Project – the code name of the top-secret atomic-bomb-making effort at Los Alamos Scientific Laboratory in New Mexico, U.S. While the film captured the involvement of many famous scientists who changed the course of the world's history, the role of some prominent female scientists, particularly Maria Goeppert Mayer, was conspicuously absent. Moreover, except for Oppenheimer's house, outdoor scenes

protected the perimeter of the lab. To access the classified areas of the lab, employees had to go through multiple security checkpoints.

Employees were sequestered away from the outside world. They were not allowed to tell their spouses and children what they were working on. Any chance encounter with people not working at the lab had to be reported to the security office. The security team warned the residents to cancel all magazine subscriptions and cautioned the scientists to never use their real names. Accordingly, Enrico Fermi was "Henry Farmer" and Neils Bohr was "Nicholas Baker." The

degrees cluster in such high numbers that anyone with a master's degree can feel like a second-class citizen of Los Alamos.

During my stint at the lab, we had to go through most of the security protocols of the Manhattan Project days. We were fingerprinted, photographed and told that the "security badge" cannot be used as an identification card outside the lab. For our safety, we were advised not to display anything in public, especially outside New Mexico, that would indicate that we work at the lab. In case of foreign travel, we were required to submit a copy of the itinerary to the DOE at least a week before departure.

As for life in the 1980s, it was decidedly predictable; imagination and zest were overcome by boring routine. Diversity in life was essentially nonexistent and the pace of change was snail-like. The town's character and conservative nature was accentuated by the bunker mentality among the population. So deeply



Los Alamos Scientific Laboratory in 1944.

PHOTO: LANL ATOMIC HERITAGE

were shot at Ghost Ranch in the nearby village of Abiquiu. Hence, the movie did not show what life in Los Alamos was like in those days.

I lived in Los Alamos and worked at the lab in the mid 1980s and was a visiting scientist during the summer months between 1990 and 2006. Los Alamos is located in an obscure corner at the southwestern edge of the Rocky Mountains atop the 2,250 metre high Pajarito Plateau, a volcanic region of mesas and canyons. Before 1943, it was unknown to the world. Between 1943 and the end of World War II, one mailbox – PO Box 1663 in Santa Fe – was the mailing address for the entire town. Its existence, nevertheless, remained secret.

During the Manhattan Project, Los Alamos was a ramshackle town of temporary buildings housing thousands of scientists, engineers, technicians, military personnel and their families. Faculty quarters of the Los Alamos Ranch School on The Bathtub Row, aptly named as they had bathtubs instead of showers, were allocated to the senior scientists, including Oppenheimer. The school was converted into the research centre of the lab. It is now a museum, containing, among other historical exhibits, unclassified documents and pictures that bring to life the thought process behind fabricating a world-changing weapon of mass destruction.

Secrecy was paramount at the lab. Everyone living in Los Alamos – children aged six and above, too – needed security clearance. Along with barbed wire fences, armed guards were shot at Ghost Ranch in the nearby village of Abiquiu. Hence, the movie did not show what life in Los Alamos was like in those days.

Recreational facilities were few and far between. Until 1945, there was only one telephone line, one radio station and one commissary (a military-operated supermarket) where residents did their grocery shopping.

In those days, Los Alamos could only be accessed by narrow, twisty, dirt roads that turned into a muddy mess during the rainy season. Now, roads are paved and have multiple lanes, but there are no commercial flights or train service. For employees of the lab, the US Department of Energy (DOE) operates flights to and from Albuquerque.

After the war ended, the word "Scientific" in the name of the lab was changed to "National." Also, the town's shroud of secrecy was lifted. However, the Manhattan Project sites are still off-limits to the public. They can see references to the project everywhere though, with names such as "Atomic City" Transit, "Oppenheimer" Drive and "Trinity" Street.

Although developing and maintaining the nuclear weapons arsenal of the US remains the lab's primary mission, it is now one of the world's premier institutes for doing cutting-edge research at the frontier of science and engineering, as well as finding innovative solutions to fight climate change. More than 6,000 of the world's leading scientists with the highest level of education presently work in the lab. People with doctorate

entrenched were the residents in their status as a protected community that they feared that people from the outside world would bring a crime wave.

Social life was rather tame. There was only one movie house, a golf course, limited shopping, a few restaurants and a couple of bars. By 8pm, even on a weekend, the town became deserted.

Today, Los Alamos is a quaint tight-knit community with the best education system in the state. Part of the town is toxic because of the "legacy waste" and carcinogenic remnants of chromium that were flushed into a nearby canyon between 1956 and 1972.

With high-paying research jobs, Los Alamos has more millionaires per capita than any other town in the US. Their playground is the culturally and gastronomically alluring Santa Fe – the capital city.

Outdoor recreation in Los Alamos is available beyond everyone's doorstep. The Jemez Mountains, with an average elevation of 3,500 metres, offer a fantastic base for hiking, camping, rafting, skiing, and many more. Besides, the beauty of the landscape, enhanced by dramatic changes in terrain and elevation, is a treat for nature lovers. Compared to a comfortable yet mundane life in Los Alamos today, during the Manhattan Project years, it was chaotic, penal-like, and marked by hardships. As noted by Oppenheimer, despite leading a Spartan life, these "heroes of today will be criticised for what you have done here."

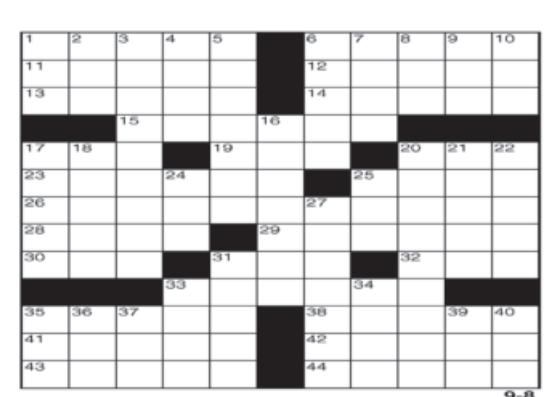
CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 African nation
- 6 Singer Nick
- 11 City on the Mohawk River
- 12 Rust, for one
- 13 Intended
- 14 Train stop
- 15 Prologue
- 17 Crude abode
- 19 Sheltered side
- 20 Contrived
- 23 Perfect place
- 25 Royal address
- 26 Phalanges
- 28 Pooch pest
- 29 Mum
- 30 "For sure!"
- 31 Service reward
- 32 Coral island
- 33 City on the Rio Grande

DOWN

- 35 Take it easy
- 38 Twist, e.g.
- 41 Blow away
- 42 Group of top players
- 43 Some sculptures
- 44 Endures
- 16 Old letter opener
- 17 Peeved and showing it
- 18 Practical
- 20 They're found among needles
- 21 Game spot
- 22 Irritable
- 24 Links org.
- 25 Musical note
- 27 Like humans
- 31 Government income
- 33 Take it easy
- 34 Poll numbers
- 35 Galloped
- 36 Down Under bird
- 37 Young fellow
- 39 Manx, e.g.
- 40 Print units



YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS



a healthy life, Dhaka's middle and lower middle classes have to pay a hefty price.

Dhaka, in every sense of the phrase, is a concrete jungle. It's a city for the rich, built on the backs of the working class. It's not a place where a family of average means can raise their children and guarantee a healthy, unscarred life for them. It's so unlivable that my brother stayed in isolation for the last years of his life. There are many youths with endless potential like Shafat – whose acumen, grit, and

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