

# Planning for Dhaka’s new night



## THE GRUDGING URBANIST

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As the rain keeps coming down intermittently, the heatwave has lost its brutal bite. A couple of days ago, I went to Mirpur around 9:30 pm to feel the social and economic pulse of nighttime Dhaka. On the way, I was intrigued by the brightly illuminated shrine of the 15th-century Sufi saint Shah Ali Baghdadi on Mazar Road. After that, near Mirpur 10 *Gol Chattar*, I had coffee at Coco Café, full of snazzy young people even at these late hours. Pumped up by an espresso, I embarked on a “casual” stroll, even though it was challenging to navigate the Mirpur streets swarming with pedestrians, shoppers, sidewalk vendors, and cantankerous vehicles. The place’s boisterous “happy hour” mood belied the prevailing anxieties over inflation, the Gaza genocide, and the spectre of a looming collapse of the liberal international order. Eateries, with fancy names, were everywhere: The Eatalia; Yellowknife; Supreme Diners; California Fried Chicken; Titanic Rooftop; Roadside Kitchen Rooftop; Kachchi Mahal; and Barcelos, to name a few. Men, women, young, old, different economic classes—all urban constituencies were present and active. Mirpur at night felt like an alternative world, more like a neon utopia.

I experienced similar revelry in front of Mohammadpur Town Hall at night the other day. A vibrant nightlife of street food, informal shopping from roadside pushcarts, and social camaraderie unfolded. Phuchka, chotpoti, khichuri with beef, and firmi seemed to be key culinary attractions. The mobile food carts were flanked by benches that encroached deep into the streets. It was almost 10 pm, and the impression I got from overhearing people’s conversation was that night had just begun!

Old Dhaka’s street markets have traditionally been known as places where night never ends! Foodies and shoppers gravitate to Chawkbazar, Nazirabazar, and Alauddin Road until the wee hours. But this scene of the night is no longer limited to the old city. I have seen intense night activities at Farmgate, Mouchak, Moghbazar, and Uttara. The culinary culture of bhuna khichuri, beef bhuna, biryani and jhalmuri, among other gastronomical attractions, draws people to these thriving places not just from local neighbourhoods, but from across the city.

The cafes in the affluent sections of the metropolis—Gulshan, Banani, and Dhanmondi—are typically abuzz with people until 2 am in the morning. The city’s growing number of social clubs and nightclubs attract an incessant flow of *nouveau riche* flaunting expensive cars and well-dressed companions. In Hatirjheel during the night, people are seen enjoying the water’s edge, the breeze, and the promenade of well-lit bridges.

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in *adda*, or simply enjoying themselves with friends and family at different urban venues. Urbanites are comfortable seeking entertainment of different kinds after work at night. Over the past two decades or so, this nighttime culture has become a popular city-wide phenomenon as the city offers a potpourri of entertainment options to people of all economic strata.

So, this is the point. Dhaka has become a nocturnal city, as much as it is a daytime city of grinding work, survival stories, exhaustion, traffic, mobilities, and entrepreneurship. Not the city of the 1990s, the nighttime Dhaka is awash with artificial light, conquering the dark and dangerous night of yore. The South Asian megapolis now boasts a new generation of urban illumination—some super bright, some garish, some artistic—creating new types of after-work spaces for people of all classes to enjoy themselves. What it showcases is a socially liberal night and its metropolitan modernity that our parents may not have seen or experienced.

This is Dhaka’s quintessential nighttime geography—a New Night—characterised by

the liberalisation of social mores, shifting gender dynamics, growing economy, neon signs, and a new cultural attitude towards life after sunset. The New Night is a time to escape from the harsh realities of daily lives, indulge in cappuccino and dum biryani fantasies, and fade into the momentary comfort of a silhouette city and its pixilated illumination. This night helps hide many of our anxieties, flaws, and failures, as we revel during its

*Raater Kolkata (Calcutta Nights)* explores this theme. So does Ritwik Ghatak’s *Bari Theke Paliye* (1958). Rabindranath Tagore’s poem “The Night has Ended” (1932) encapsulates the night’s dread and despair, and the morning’s optimism: “The night has ended, Put out the light of the lamp ... The great morning which if for all, Appears in the East.” Bangalee ghosts or *bhoot* always appear at night to torment people.

clubs, shopping malls, and cineplexes are now an integral part of a booming nighttime economy as the erstwhile religious and social codes have become flexible.

The night is a new cultural frontier and a robust economic opportunity. How ready are our cities to harness this prospect? How adequate are our urban policies and planning to cultivate this nighttime ecosystem? Are the local governments, city corporations, and municipalities aware of the need to plan and manage nighttime activities? Have the city’s public agencies been able to provide safe and well-lit streets for all, fire safety and adequate support staff to night venues, safe night transportation, and inclusive after-sunset entertainment options for the city people? The great cities of the future must thrive at night. And, as global trends show, the thriving city needs 24-hours-a-day management.

Nighttime planning of cities is an emerging field of urban governance. More than 50 cities around the world—including London, New York, Berlin, Paris, Manchester, and Zurich—have appointed night mayors and managers since Amsterdam pioneered the idea in 2014. One in eight jobs in London is at night. In 2016, London Mayor Sadiq Khan appointed Amy Lamé as London’s first “night czar” to facilitate the city’s night and its £26 billion economy. The following year, London’s independent Nighttime Commission was established. Sadiq Khan wrote, “I want London to be a global leader in the way we plan for life at night. But we face tough competition, with Paris, New York, Berlin, Tokyo, and San Francisco all looking to grow their nighttime offers. Building a vibrant nightscape is a mark of cultural status for a global city. It is also what keeps visitors, workers, students, and businesses flocking to our city ... This isn’t just about pubs and clubs. It’s about a whole range of activities and services, from museums and theatres opening later ... We need positive planning for our nighttime economy.”

How ready are Dhaka and other cities in Bangladesh to be safe and inclusive at night? According to the Road Safety Foundation in Bangladesh, about 40 percent of road accidents in Dhaka occur at night, mainly due to reckless driving by goods-laden heavy vehicles through the city’s main thoroughfares. Speeding in poor visibility, lack of policing and traffic regulations, lack of adequate street lighting, and lack of pedestrian street crossing signals result in high fatalities during the night. Fire tragedies in Dhaka—including those at Bailey Road (2024), Churihatta (2019) of Chawkbazar, and Nimtoli (2010) in Old Dhaka—are often nighttime disasters warranting special planning adaptable to conditions at night. Visibility at night must be seen as a public health infrastructure.

The Bangalee cultural and religious fear of the night as a time of unacceptable, sinful behaviour has been permeated with a new appreciation of nocturnal cosmopolitanism. Although much research is needed to explain this phenomenon, a robust nighttime economy has taken root in Dhaka and other cities. When we talk about planning in Bangladesh, we are generally thinking about the daytime. There must be a paradigm shift. The readiness for cities to be safe, healthy, vibrant, and inclusive at night should be a policy priority.

# Will we finally take student suicides seriously?

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Comb through the news after SSC results are published, and you may find amid the pictures of celebrations the reports of students who have died by suicide for not achieving their desired results. This tragic phenomenon, though shocking each time, is unfortunately not new.

Last year saw the much discussed report by the Aachol Foundation, which stated that 513 students had died by suicide in 2023. Out of them, 227 students were school students, meaning that this extremely young demographic accounted for approximately 44 percent of all student suicides.

This warrants our attention, not just in the predictable times for these suicides to occur, such as with SSC results, but in general considering how shockingly high the number is. In addition, there is still a heavy stigma attached to suicides, making discussions a difficult matter. Bangladesh’s own unique kaleidoscope of problematic beliefs regarding suicide involves superstition, religion, education, class positions, lack of support, fear of shunning, and stereotypes about mental illness. Moreover, mental health services and hospitals to assist people who are struggling or have made an attempt are dismal. All these not only prevent one from reaching out for help, but also delays their recognition of their own suffering.

What we seem to be failing to understand repeatedly is just how vulnerable young people are. In a culture that is so hierarchical, speaking up poses more challenges than it may in other countries of the world. Respect towards parents is heavily emphasised. While

this typically includes paying heed to the parent’s words and wishes, it may also mean that making parents uncomfortable with what they may be unfamiliar with evokes sharp reactions. For older generations, this realm of unfamiliarity often involves struggles with mental health, sometimes in association with exams.

Overreactions from parents are a running theme in South Asian social media, one which often portrays the parents as becoming extremely angry at criticism and reacting in such a manner as to make their children silent. While these are played for comedic effect and the situation is not always serious, high expectations along with anger at not performing as expected makes students disinclined from talking freely with parents and other adults. One particularly stressful account mentioned by a student choosing to go anonymous goes like this: following her failure to obtain enough A+ in her JSC exams, her parents refused to speak to her for three months. All this was worsened with the onset of the Covid pandemic, which made matters more difficult. She shared that the pressure became so immense that she might have done “something harsh” had she missed GPA 5 in her SSC results, following which it seemed that her mother embraced her after ages. Now, with the HSC exams, she is experiencing a similar kind of pressure once again.

Such accounts can often be heard of parents withdrawing from their children, giving the silent treatment for extended periods of time, and dismissing the students’ mental health concerns, such as an unhealthy amount of stress or fixation when it comes to exams.

Furthermore, as a recent article discussed, corporal punishment continues to be a severe issue in Bangladesh. A study jointly conducted by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) and Unicef titled Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey 2019 found that for children aged from 1 to 14 years, 89 percent suffered corporal



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punishment. The extremely detrimental effects of such punishments seem to be unknown to many parents even today. Considering this, we can see why for SSC candidates, the stress of board exams may be an especially sensitive time as it may reopen wounds from negative experiences of the past.

Exacerbating the situation is our culture’s repeated failure to understand how perceptive young people can be. Young students are frequently aware of the sacrifices made by their parents. The effects of inflation, increasing

competition in public universities, and eventually the difficulties of getting a stable, decently paying job are not lost on them. They also know that should they not gain admission to public universities, private university tuition can be exorbitant, and the thought of burdening their parents weighs heavily on them. At the age of 15-17, this stage of life may seem monumental.

Unintentionally, we often engage in behaviour that adds pressure. For instance, there is a deep-rooted societal insensitivity

to the way we talk about students and their grades. Whether it be grade inflation or auto pass, the manner in which we speak about these often has a tone which implies that students who are taking exams have it easy. This may have a compounding effect on the stress experienced by students who do not perform well. Moreover, the many reasons for why a student may have poor performances is often not explored, further humiliating the students who may in fact just require tailored attention and time.

Looking at the Aachol Foundation study, it may seem as if more intricate trends exist between certain conditions and student suicides. However, the lack of follow-ups along with the scant amount of details in existing reports on them makes it a complicated task to draw conclusions. It is abysmal that to this day, despite so many repeated incidents of student suicides, we remain lacking in many sectors, and a national suicide prevention strategy is still not in place.

We need to recognise that the time of public exam results is an especially sensitive time. The case of Sarbajit Ghosh Ridoy, who took his own life after hearing his results that later turned out to be incorrect, should be seen as a stark reminder of how needless student suicides are.

To the young who may be experiencing a difficult situation for the first time in their lives, it may seem insurmountable, and the lack of experience can prevent them from seeing the possibilities that may come their way in the future. In a state of desperation, death may seem like the sole path left. Students, especially ones who are this young, may lack the capacity to understand that obstacles no matter how massive they seem, can be overcome. That almost half of the students who died suicide last year were school students should alarm us, and it might be time for us to recognise that this may in fact be a public health emergency.