

## The Daily Star

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### Dhaka's future rests on decentralisation

Authorities must listen to experts to ensure sustainable development

Bangladesh's urbanisation policies have historically been centred on Dhaka, and this will likely remain true in the future as well. But the ongoing trend of rapid, unplanned urbanisation in the city has also underscored another truth: that without effective decentralisation, Dhaka's future will likely be doomed. This is a message that urban experts have been trying to impress upon our policymakers for long, to little effect so far. Experts, at a recent event, have again stressed the need for decentralisation, creating more opportunities outside Dhaka, improving rural living conditions, and strengthening local government bodies so that they have enough discretionary powers to function without needing central supervision.

Some of the statistics that emerged from the conference highlight the urgency of such interventions. For example, Dhaka is now home to nearly 39 percent of the country's urban population, which indicates how unbalanced its transformation has been. Moreover, over 60 percent of its households are led by individuals who have migrated from other districts, primarily driven by rural poverty, landlessness, river erosion, and climate-induced disasters. Dhaka's allure also lies in its economic opportunities, superior education, healthcare, and cultural facilities. The highly centralised character of governance in Bangladesh also makes the capital a must-visit destination. However, this concentration of resources, opportunities, and powers in one megacity has led to not just disparities in other districts, especially rural areas, but also a decline in its own liveability standard.

This last feature of present-day Dhaka is one that we have repeatedly talked about in recent years. The quality of life in Dhaka is directly affected by its rapid population growth. That the basic needs of the majority of its residents are not being met is evident among different socioeconomic groups. Moreover, heavy traffic congestion compared to its insufficient road infrastructure is greatly inconveniencing commuters. There is also the abysmal quality of air endangering people's health. In fact, pollutants of all kinds are prevalent across the megacity. So, we need to decentralise Dhaka for the sake of both its residents and other districts where people are struggling due to inadequate infrastructure and services.

Experts have made various suggestions about how to go about decentralisation—administratively, economically, educationally, culturally, etc.—which the government should take note of. Strengthening other regional urban centres can also take some of the pressure off Dhaka, making other districts more attractive for residence, investment and, of course, migration. To achieve these goals, local government bodies also must be empowered. These efforts are vital for the future of Dhaka and, by extension, the country as well.

### We need more parks, not more malls

Metro authorities have no right to commercialise Anwara Park

It is heartening to see conscious citizens take a strong stance against the Dhaka Mass Transit Company Ltd (DMTCL)'s continued occupation of the Anwara Park near the Farmgate area. Their demand for the park to be returned to the people within 30 days is completely justified. Not long ago, Anwara Park used to provide breathing space to visitors and local residents. Today, it lies comatose, with the only sign of its existence being on paper. The metro rail authorities have been occupying the space since 2018 for storage and other purposes. But as the construction of the rail line through the Farmgate area has been over for some time, it is only right that they free up the space and return it as it was.

Unfortunately, the DMTCL, despite having promised to do that originally, reportedly wants to turn the space into a plaza or shopping complex. This is not what the people want or even need. The question is, who gave DMTCL the authority to take such decisions? Even the Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC), to its credit, fought back against the DMTCL's ludicrous proposal, with the mayor making it clear that the park must be returned to serve its original purpose.

What Dhaka needs most now are more open spaces such as parks and playgrounds, not more shopping malls—which it already has plenty of. The implications of destroying what little open space is left in the city should not be lost on anyone. Unfortunately, government agencies often seem to be oblivious to this fact. Even the DNCC itself set a bad example when it recently allowed the Gulshan Youth Club to construct a football turf and other structures at the Shaheed Tajuddin Ahmad Park, restricting access for the general public. The result of such activities is that people have increasingly less and less access to open areas which are essential for their physical, mental and social well-being.

This trend must end. We urge the DMTCL to take immediate steps to hand over the Anwara Park after necessary renovations. Moreover, all such parks similarly at risk of destruction or alternation—in Dhaka and other cities—need to be protected.

### THIS DAY IN HISTORY

#### Vasco da Gama arrives at Calicut, India

On May 20, 1498, two years after he set sail from Lisbon, Portugal, Vasco da Gama arrived on the Western Sea coast of India at Kozhikode (Calicut), Kerala. This was the first time that a European had arrived in India via the sea.



# Banning rickshaws may not be the big traffic solution



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AZMIN AZRAN

It is the number one complaint among social media users in Dhaka's traffic forums, and also one of the first solutions suggested by the masses when asked what could fix the anarchy on our roads. Going by internet discourse, it seems that rickshaws—Dhaka's trusty old three-wheeled friend—have lost the love of its citizens, at least those in cars.

By itself, this brewing sentiment would have been meaningless. But last week, Road Transport and Bridges Minister Obaidul Quader directed the authorities concerned to take steps to stop battery-run rickshaws from operating in the capital, lending credence to the view that rickshaws must go if the roads are to get safer and more efficient.

But how true is that? There must be a reason why rickshaws exist today and have existed for so many years.

While battery-run rickshaws present more extreme versions of the same problems thrown up by an abundance of their pedal-run brethren in Dhaka, it's useful to consider them together when trying to understand what purpose they serve. The reason a rickshaw ban on the main roads imposed in 2019 didn't survive post-pandemic and two bans on battery-run rickshaws in 2014 and 2021 were never really implemented is because, at the end of the day, rickshaws form a crucial link in the transportation hierarchy of Dhaka.

The transportation system in a busy metropolis like our capital is supposed to be made up of various parts, with public transportation like the metro system serving long-distance commutes, buses serving medium-distance travel or low-cost alternatives for long-distance travel, and walking and cycling being the medium of last mile delivery, taking people to and from their homes and destinations. If all of these components worked like they were supposed to, the roads would be empty enough for those in private cars and motorcycles to travel—with relative ease—distances that demand motor vehicles. However, this is not even close to the ground reality.

The metro system in Dhaka is in its early days. Buses here are dysfunctional

and extremely uncomfortable; they don't go everywhere, and when they do go somewhere, they go very slow. Cycling on major roads is risky given the lack of cycling lanes and other cycling infrastructure, and walking is difficult due to the dilapidated state of footpaths. People have reacted to this status quo in whichever way possible for them: those who can afford motor vehicles buy cars and motorcycles (or use ride-sharing services), and those who can't afford them are left to fight it out with the options remaining to them. Rickshaws are one of these options, and a particularly popular one at that.



FILE PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

If rickshaws are to be banned anywhere, they must be replaced with cheap, environment-friendly public transport alternatives.

A significant segment of Dhaka residents are people who can't afford cars, but for whom cheap bus travel is not appealing either. These are people who typically travel shorter distances, and they would rather spend some extra money on a rickshaw than expose themselves to the horrors of Dhaka's public transportation. If our footpaths were wide and flat, shaded and clean, then maybe these trips would be made on foot. If wide footpaths were paired with safe cycling lanes, walking and cycling could replace Dhaka's rickshaws altogether.

The problem with banning a mode of transportation without creating suitable alternatives is that the demand for transportation isn't

something that just goes away. People need to get places, and when their preferred, or in many cases, only mode of transportation is taken away from them, whether or not it is banned or illegal does not matter. Rickshaw owners know this well, which is why when the previous bans were announced, they did not shy away from flouting the rules. The number of rickshaws in Dhaka's roads may go up or down, but there is hardly a place in our city where rickshaws are never seen.

So, what is the outlook for the future? Will Dhaka be forever inundated with rickshaws? Are motorists in this city bound for eternity to match the speed of a rickshaw blocking an exit?

The answer is yes, if rickshaws are forever viewed as a problem in isolation and not as a part of a problem-stricken transportation ecosystem. If rickshaws must go, something must come and replace them. This something needs to be better in terms of speed, comfort, and cost. Considering the fact that Dhaka's neighbourhoods are anything but homogenous, these solutions must

challenges, there is an economic challenge to banning rickshaws in Dhaka as well. According to a report in this daily, there are over 11 lakh pedal rickshaws in Dhaka, registered and unregistered. These rickshaws sustain the livelihoods of millions of rickshaw pullers and rickshaw mechanics, who in turn contribute over Tk 30,000 crore to the rural economy of Bangladesh every year. The prospective unemployment of such a large number of individuals cannot be taken lightly, and if any rickshaw bans are enacted, the gradual rehabilitation of rickshaw pullers into productive and long-term employment must be a part of the process.

**Banning rickshaws in Dhaka is an easy solution to a difficult problem, but Dhaka's traffic is a complicated problem that needs multifaceted efforts to combat it.**

Banning rickshaws in Dhaka is an easy solution to a difficult problem, but Dhaka's traffic is a complicated problem that needs multifaceted efforts to combat it. Rickshaws have been around for nearly a century, thus trying to get rid of them overnight is a rash and unwise course of action. Battery-run rickshaws pose a significant safety threat, so standardising these vehicles to make them safer and issuing licences for rickshaw pullers can be a more deliberative first step, until viable alternatives are presented. The illegal power consumption by battery-run rickshaws must be curbed—not by cutting them off from electricity, but by creating legal options for charging, and making sure that only registered rickshaws and licensed rickshaw pullers can access these legal, possibly cheap, charging options. Enforcement of traffic rules on the roads is paramount, not just for rickshaws, but for cars, buses, trucks, and all other forms of transportation.

If rickshaws are to be banned anywhere, analysing the routes where they are most common and deploying cheap, environment-friendly alternatives are a must-do. If a functional transportation hierarchy is established, demand for rickshaws within that system will slowly shrink anyway. But forcefully creating a vacuum in the amount of transportation options available to the public will only invite more anarchy, something that is in ample supply on Dhaka's roads already.

## How fashion is future-proofing by investing in technology



RMG NOTES

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MOSTAFIZ UDDIN

Are fashion brands becoming more than retailers of clothing? Many are focusing on technology. For instance, Shein has claimed it is not a fast fashion brand but a technology business.

I would however argue that Shein's core business remains fashion and clothing. Yet, there are also grounds for suggesting Shein is changing the way that clothing is accessed, by disrupting the rules of the game and other brands are having to respond accordingly.

Many brands in the fashion industry are moving beyond their core proposition and delving deep into their supply chains. In recent years, many brands invested in recycling technology companies, becoming shareholders in outfits such as Renewcell and Infinited Fibre Company.

H&M has recently gone one step further. H&M Group and Vargas Holding recently announced the launch of Syre. Backed by TPG Rise Climate, Syre aims to rapidly scale textile-to-textile recycling of polyester and "contribute to a more sustainable textile industry."

In many ways, this is H&M Group attempting to future-proof its operations. The company has secured an offtake agreement with Syre worth a total of US\$600 million over seven

years, covering a significant share of H&M Group's long-term need for recycled polyester, which is currently primarily sourced from rPET bottle-to-textile.

Through Syre, H&M Group said it wants to contribute to a meaningful shift in the industry by moving away from virgin polyester.

This is laudable. Another factor at play here is that H&M, like many other fashion brands, sees a potentially huge and lucrative market in textile recycling. Why depend on third parties for recycled materials when it can invest in them itself? This could be a massive growth industry over the next two decades. It also gives H&M a degree of vertical supply chain integration and places it in a powerful position. Could this one day see H&M supplying other brands with their recycled polyester needs? Don't bet against it.

US brand Lululemon has made similar moves in the past 12 months. The company partnered with Australian enviro-tech startup Samsara Eco on a multi-year collaboration to scale textile-to-textile recycling, and see Samsara Eco create the world's first infinitely recycled nylon 6,6 and polyester. The goal is to create new recycled nylon and polyester made

from apparel waste.

Nylon and polyester make up roughly 60 percent of clothing produced today. Globally, around 87 percent of discarded textiles either end up in landfill, incinerated or leak into the environment. Until now, no business has managed to scale the recycling of polyester.

Samsara Eco's innovation could be viewed as an important milestone in tackling plastic pollution and carbon emissions caused by textiles. By investing in it, Lululemon takes leadership role in this area, by future-proofing the company and generating huge amounts of positive PR. It's an obvious win-win.

Likewise, Spanish fast fashion group Inditex this year launched a partnership with chemicals giant BASF to create a new nylon called "Loopamid", a polyamide 6 (PA6, also known as nylon 6). BASF and Inditex claim it is made from 100 percent waste nylon. Inditex brand Zara has produced a jacket made entirely from Loopamid and made it available globally.

BASF has said it plans to scale this technology and is considering building a PA6 recycling plant. Prior to this in 2022, Inditex had already signed a €100m deal with textile recycler Infinited Fiber Company committing to purchase 30 percent of Infinited Fiber's annual future production of Infinnia, a fibre created from textile waste.

This suggests that like H&M, Inditex sees vertical integration and strategic collaborations with technology companies as the way forward.

It's not just in recycling where brands

are investing in non-core areas. In 2022, H&M signed a multi-year carbon removal agreement with Climeworks, a carbon capture technology business, which covers the removal of 10,000 tonnes of CO2. Besides, enabling H&M Group to access capacity and establish long-term relations in the sector, the investment supported Climeworks' capacity scale-up. Investment in carbon removal will potentially help H&M to meet its carbon emission reduction targets.

Brands are also investing in renewable energy projects. In late 2023, BESTSELLER and H&M Group pledged to invest in the first utility-scale offshore wind project off the coast of Bangladesh. Copenhagen Infrastructure Partners (CIP) and local partner Summit Power are developing the project.

The 500 MW offshore wind project, which is in early-stage development, could significantly increase the availability of renewable energy in Bangladesh—one of the fashion industry's most important manufacturing countries.

Notably, only large multi-nationals are in a position to invest in this level of vertical integration and such moves are viewed by many as a way to future-proof enterprises, protecting issues such as supply chain volatility and impending climate targets (and associated regulatory scrutiny) further down the line.

Whether small and medium sized fashion brands could afford such investments is debatable. This potentially leaves them extremely vulnerable in a sector where size and scale are more important than ever.