

After billions spent, still gridlocked

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six companies, as seen in developed cities and neighbouring countries. This is not a technical challenge—it is a political one. We are investing Tk 3-3.5 lakh crore in a metro system that carries only about 20 percent of passengers, while a dysfunctional bus system already carries around 40 percent. Our research shows that with just Tk 5,000 crore, we could introduce a fleet of modern double-decker, low-floor, air-conditioned buses like those in London.

If we had 40-42 rationalised routes operated by five to six companies, Dhaka could have an excellent bus network. Once road transport is properly functional, metro expansion can ensure seamless connectivity. Fragmented projects without a network concept will never deliver efficiency.

Regulation must also distinguish between mobility and accessibility. Some roads are high-speed mobility corridors and should not allow slow or unfit vehicles, while others serve accessibility. Vehicle types, routes, and numbers must be regulated accordingly.

Our research suggests that if public transport truly becomes the

backbone, it could carry 50-60 percent of passengers, reducing reliance on private vehicles. Combined with MRT, this would create a smooth network—something currently missing.

Finally, coordination with regulatory bodies is crucial. Roads are built by City Corporations or RAJUK in the case of Dhaka, while vehicle registration is handled by BRTA, often without much idea of road capacity. Anyone with money can buy a car, but this cannot continue. Numbers of registered vehicles must be proportionate to our road capacity.

Additionally, traffic management through hand signals is outdated for a city with metros and expressways. We must move towards digital signalling, but that will only work after regulating vehicle types, numbers, and routes. Digital signals are not a magic solution—they require prerequisites and time. People have almost forgotten that they should be mindful of signals while driving, and that behaviour change will not happen overnight.

TDS: Is widening existing highways an effective strategy for long-term mobility, or should Bangladesh invest in a separate, access-controlled mobility network, and how realistic is this for Bangladesh right now in your opinion?

MH: Our existing highway network is primarily designed for accessibility, and in my view, we cannot simply widen highways from two lanes to four or six and expect them to function as mobility networks. Take the Dhaka-Chittagong Highway, for example. It is now being planned as an eight-lane road, but widening alone cannot transform an accessibility network into a high-speed mobility corridor.

Whenever we widen roads, we create development-induced displacement, which has serious social and economic consequences—business losses, joblessness, land loss, and social marginalisation. We have already seen this with the Dhaka-Mawa-Bhanga Expressway. Despite being an expensive project, it gained a poor reputation due to frequent accidents. In trying to convert existing roads by breaking and rebuilding them, we are destroying

valuable assets, yet they are still not working as intended.

If we want to develop controlled-access mobility networks, challenges are inevitable, especially land constraints. However, we must carefully assess the costs of widening or dismantling existing roads—particularly the displacement they cause—and compare them with the land acquisition, capital costs, and investments required to build a new network. This feasibility analysis must begin now.

All our national highways are Dhaka-bound, following a radial pattern. While this provides accessibility, it does not create a true mobility network. If we want to accelerate economic and GDP growth, we must think beyond passenger movement. Where are our freight corridors? Currently, passengers and freight share the same routes, which is highly inefficient. Without dedicated freight corridors, mobility and economic efficiency suffer.

Most developed countries have separate economic or freight corridors. Although the Dhaka-Chittagong Highway has been widened to four lanes, it has not become an economic corridor. Simply widening an accessibility road does not achieve that—and widening it further is unlikely to change the outcome. If freight cannot move efficiently, passenger transport alone will not drive economic growth.

It is time to seriously weigh the costs and benefits of creating dedicated mobility and freight networks instead of repeatedly widening existing roads. This requires feasibility studies, land acquisition planning, and long-term investment—but continuing the current approach is already causing displacement without delivering efficiency. The new government must begin this planning now; delaying it will only make future implementation more difficult.

Finally, true mobility networks must be controlled-access corridors. Markets, schools, and other roadside developments cannot coexist along such routes. Otherwise, accidents and congestion are inevitable—as we are already witnessing today.

TDS: What reforms are needed within institutions like the Planning Commission to ensure communication projects are professionally evaluated, policy-driven, and aligned with long-term mobility goals rather than short-term political considerations?

MH: The Planning Commission has a wide mandate, but the way it currently functions lacks efficiency. At present, project implementing authorities approach the Planning Commission only at the final stage for approval, which reduces the process to a formality. However, the Planning Commission's role should go far beyond approval. It should prioritise projects based on actual needs, especially since it has a comprehensive view of who is doing what across sectors.

While different authorities may propose projects, the Planning Commission should have the ultimate decision-making power. I believe there should also be periodic reviews even after approval. Currently, projects return to the Commission only when there is a request for time extension or cost escalation. Instead, the Commission must have the authority to oversee, monitor, and hold implementing agencies accountable throughout implementation to prevent the overruns we see so often. Project initiation, approval, and monitoring should be led by the Planning Commission—because planning is its core responsibility, not just approval.

A major challenge is the lack of professional planners and technical capacity within the Planning Commission. It oversees projects nationwide, but without sufficient technical expertise, it cannot properly evaluate feasibility studies or hold implementing agencies accountable. Often, one authority plans a project without knowing another authority is planning something nearby, leading to conflicts during implementation. This is precisely why project initiation must come from the Planning Commission, which has a holistic view of water, rail, and road projects across the country. Strengthening technical and professional capacity within the

Commission is essential.

Post-evaluation of projects is also critical. Many projects have failed to meet their financial or economic expectations, and without learning why, we risk repeating the same mistakes. There is also a misconception about "mega projects." A project is not mega because of the size of investment, but because of its impact—it improves living standards of thousands of people, creates jobs, and accelerates economic growth.

Additionally, I want to emphasise that the new government must urgently work towards capital relocation or administrative decentralisation. Dhaka occupies just 0.2 percent of the country's land but accommodates 15 percent of its population. This imbalance cannot be fixed by more projects in Dhaka. Claims that projects will "reduce traffic congestion" in the city are misleading, because new projects in the city only attract more people.

Many countries have taken bold steps. India has shifted its capital three times, while Pakistan, Malaysia, and Indonesia have also relocated their capitals. Indonesia's capital is twice the size of Dhaka but has half the population. It has already passed legislation to move its capital from Jakarta to Borneo. That is forward-looking policy, and our policymakers must think the same way.

We cannot continue concentrating investment in Dhaka, which already generates 40 percent of GDP. Demand and supply will never balance this way. The new government must prioritise job creation in other districts and economic zones so people do not need to migrate to Dhaka. Even if capital relocation is not immediately possible, administrative decentralisation—relocating institutions that do not need to be in the capital—must begin now. Redirecting population flow away from Dhaka is no longer optional; it is urgent.

The interview was taken by Miftahul Jannat and transcribed by Ystiaque Ahmed.



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