



An aerial map showing encroachment on Dhaka's wetlands.

PHOTO: STAR

# A CRY FOR A LIVABLE CITY

In conversation with Adnan Morshed



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**The Daily Star (TDS):** How do you evaluate the development of Dhaka over the centuries, particularly after independence? Since the 2000s, with massive expansion, how would you describe the city's character in comparison to neighbouring cities such as Kolkata, Delhi, or Karachi?

**Adnan Morshed (AM):** Dhaka's urban history over the centuries has been complex. There is a curious dearth of authoritative, peer-reviewed histories of pre-Mughal Dhaka. As I argued in an article in *Places Journal*, this lack of research limits our understanding of the city's historical evolution. The Mughals were great monument builders but not great city planners. They did not create a good urban template on which Dhaka could develop into what we might recognise as a functioning city. However, we should remind ourselves that Mughal rule in India ended before industrial cities emerged in the 19th century in Europe and elsewhere in response to the environmental challenges posed by the Industrial Revolution.

The modern growth of cities in non-western territories was deeply intertwined with both colonialism and the impacts of the Industrial Revolution. The British colonial administration created some effective urban institutions and infrastructures in Dhaka. Examples include the establishment of the municipality (1864) and the construction of the Buckland Embankment (1860s), which both helped prevent flooding and created a riverfront promenade for the city's residents.

The trajectories of Delhi and Kolkata are unique in their own ways. Delhi has a well documented history as a political and administrative centre since the Mauryan, Kushan, and Gupta empires, continuing through the Sultanate, Mughal, and colonial eras, and into its post-independence emergence

retains the urban footprint—and the nostalgia—of an imperial city, dotted with iconic neoclassical buildings that embodied the British Raj's "civilising mission." In the final decades of colonial India, Delhi replaced Kolkata as the imperial capital, with the Viceroy's House—designed by British architect Edwin Lutyens—at its centre.

By comparison, Dhaka's Mughal and colonial footprints are modest. Until Bangladesh's independence in 1971, Dhaka remained a quaint city with a rural ambience and little more than two million people. Things began to change with the country's "industrial revolution" in the late 1980s. As the Berlin Wall fell and the neoliberal world order loosened trade barriers, encouraging global capital to flow more freely than ever, urbanisation arrived with force in a society that had been largely agrarian. For Dhaka it was almost a kind of "reluctant urbanisation," one in which the capital was ill prepared and lacked adequate policy instruments to absorb the massive influx of rural migrants flooding the city in search of factory jobs—particularly in the garment industry.

Dhaka's population grew by nearly ten per cent in the following decades. Unfortunately, there were neither effective housing policies nor coordinated urban transport planning. Urban expansion has been ad hoc and laissez-faire. By 2020, Dhaka had joined New York City, Tokyo, Shanghai, Beijing, Mexico City, São Paulo, Lagos, Cairo, Delhi, and a handful of others on the list of global megacities. The "rural city" remade itself into a cacophonous megalopolis. Its haphazard growth reflected the country's fractious political culture. One of the most glaring failures has been the inability to manage the city's exploding population density.

**TDS:** You emphasise the idea of "good density," which contrasts with the common perception of Dhaka's overwhelming overpopulation as a barrier to modern amenities and the main cause of the city's chaotic nature. Could you elaborate on this perspective?

**AM:** Conventional wisdom holds that high population density is a burden and the root cause of many social, economic, and political problems. I argue that density becomes a burden and a paralysing problem only if it is not managed well or distributed equitably with a fair allocation of resources. Walking around Dhaka, density surely feels overwhelming, maddening, and claustrophobic—and this is because we have not been proactive or creative in managing it. What we face is not "density," but rather gadagadi—a phenomenon of people living in extreme congestion which poses a threat to public health.

In contrast, "good density" is a form of tactical urbanism that addresses the problem of overcrowding. In other words, good density presents a mixed-



An aerial view of Dhaka city.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

use urban lifestyle, one that ensures people live in compact and affordable housing units with easy, walkable access to the basic services they need, such as schools, healthcare, work, markets, outdoor public spaces, and parks—all within comfortable walking distance. When I say, "good density," I actually mean "good society density." Managing population density well presents the opportunities for creating a good society.

It is a given that our cities will always be high density because of our country's land-to-population ratio. We simply have too many people on a relatively small piece of land. For context, about 70 million people live in the UK's total area of 250,000 km<sup>2</sup>, whereas 180 million live in Bangladesh's 150,000 km<sup>2</sup>. In Thailand, 72 million people occupy over 500,000 km<sup>2</sup>. Bangladesh's density is comparable to half the U.S. population living in just the state of Iowa. Our cities will always be dense, so imagining low- or mid-density cities with picturesque parks will remain a perpetual false dream.

The question we must ask is: why have we not been able to harness our density dividend? Several policy failures are to blame. One of them is both philosophical and tactical: the uncritical acceptance of a historical Western fear of population density, rooted in the urban pathologies of 19th-century industrial cities such as London, Manchester, and New York. Describing the wretched urban conditions in mid-19th-century Manchester—nicknamed

"Cottonpolis"—in *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1845), Friedrich Engels portrayed the modern fear of unhygienic urban density. Modern urban planning as a discipline internalised this 19th-century fear, which we inherited when planning our own cities at the tail end of the 20th century.

What we failed to account for are the late 20th-century South Asian urban realities: the inevitability of rural-to-urban migration, ultra-dense conurbations, the informal economy and settlements, and the looming threat of climate change. Urban policymakers, planning communities, and local governments have generally treated population density as a burden—a problem to be solved—rather than as an opportunity to create a new type of urban lifestyle marked by compact living, economic dynamism, a low-carbon footprint, resilient environmental adaptation, and walkable neighbourhoods.

**TDS:** Instead of pursuing democratic and inclusive development across the city, we increasingly see fortification through gated communities, while private enterprises and government facilities remain concentrated in affluent areas. Yet Dhaka still struggles to become a truly livable city. Why is that?

**AM:** In an ideal world, good urban planning promotes democratic growth and inclusive development, meaning the interests of all city

dwellers are prioritised as part of a general social contract, which is then spatialised through land-use instruments such as the Detailed Area Plan (DAP). Unfortunately, however, we have knowingly or unknowingly accepted planning as an elitist tool to produce cities "of the privileged, by the privileged, for the privileged."

One way to understand this discriminatory practice is through our approach to footpaths. We are reluctant to invest in them as soft infrastructure that benefits the majority of daily commuters. Yet we are often eager to invest in flyovers, whether or not they are the best and most affordable mobility option for the city. Flyovers are costly and serve only a small portion of daily motorised movements, yet they are celebrated as triumphant political symbols that drive our vision of development.

The sad truth is that our urban development model presents a highly pixelated landscape of unevenly distributed privilege. While the parks in Gulshan boast walkways, cafés, libraries, and basketball courts, 37 of Dhaka's 129 wards have neither a park nor a playground. So, when you say, "we increasingly see fortification through gated communities, while private enterprises and government facilities remain concentrated in affluent areas," we should not be surprised. The problem is that we fail to recognise how misguided we are in packaging this gross spatial injustice as progress.

## KEY POINTS

1. Dhaka's rapid, unplanned urbanisation reflects weak governance and inadequate planning.
2. "Good density" promotes compact, walkable, mixed-use neighbourhoods rather than overcrowding.
3. Urban justice requires equitable access to parks, transport, and services.
4. Decentralisation and protection of rivers/wetlands are essential for sustainability.
5. Lessons from Seoul and Tokyo show how planning, mobility, and civic culture shape livable, resilient cities.

as a metropolis. From 1772 to 1911, Kolkata served as the capital of British India, growing into a robust political, commercial, and cultural hub of the empire, second only to London. Kolkata