

A cry for a livable city

FROM PAGE 38

TDS: Could you elaborate on the idea of urban justice in the context of Dhaka, especially considering the decline of parks, footpaths, and public spaces for walking, playing, and recreation — and, most importantly, the lack of adequate public transport?

AM: While “justice” is a complex political concept—whose justice or injustice we are talking about, or what the ultimate goal of justice is, as Aristotle would demand—we can narrow it down to a working model for our cities. By urban justice, I mean several things: using resources at our disposal in ways that benefit the majority of the city’s population; managing population density to democratise access to services such as healthcare, education, and transportation; protecting the city’s environmental DNA to ensure long-term sustainability, particularly in the era of climate change, for the benefit of present and future generations; and creating urban spatialities that nurture democratic values, civic awareness, and respect for the rule of law among city dwellers. Achieving these goals will, of course, require sincere collaboration among all stakeholders.

TDS: Given that much of the city’s infrastructure — both planned and largely unplanned — has become deeply entrenched and may seem irreversible, how can we prevent tragedies such as the recent Milestone School fire or building collapses or fire incidents, and mitigate such massive losses?

AM: The Milestone School tragedy was heartbreaking. Even though it felt like a bolt from the blue, it was, unfortunately, inevitable. It resulted



ILLUSTRATION: **BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY**

like this by holding those in charge accountable, enforcing safe land-use policies, and depoliticising the enforcement of law.

TDS: Decentralisation has long been discussed but rarely implemented effectively to ease the burden on Dhaka. With the added challenges of climate change, how can Dhaka maintain its surrounding rivers sustainably and ensure the capital remains liveable in the future?

AM: Decentralisation has become a political problem with no immediate or formulaic solutions. It is a policy challenge for both the executive and legislative branches of government, as well as for local governments and planning communities. We have reduced “decentralisation” to a feel-good slogan, while Dhaka has grown into a colossal primate city, disproportionately larger than the next three major cities combined. By allowing Dhaka’s unchecked expansion to consume the rivers and wetlands that sustain it, we are not only damaging Dhaka itself but also diminishing the potential of other cities across the country.

To decentralise the capital, we must first recognise that mid-sized cities represent our new urban frontier. A resilient and adaptable urban development policy for these cities is not only essential to reducing pressure on Dhaka but also offers an effective and equitable model of economic growth for the entire nation. Several incentives support this approach. First, high living costs are encouraging residents of the capital to relocate to smaller cities in search of a more affordable lifestyle. Second, the growing economies of mid-sized cities are fostering opportunity-rich start-up ecosystems. Third, these cities help narrow the urban-rural and agriculture-industry divides, creating a range of hybrid forms of work for their labour force. Fourth, because mid-sized cities have not yet reached a frenzied stage of development, their entrepreneurial

classes have the opportunity to shape climate-resilient, human-centric, economically vibrant, and inclusive cities.

It is time to be proactive. Safeguarding Dhaka’s rivers and wetlands will require a new generation of context-specific urban policies, greater environmental literacy, depoliticised enforcement of environmental laws, and, ultimately, a degree of soul-searching about the kinds of cities we aspire to build for the greater good of society.

TDS: Could you share examples of locally developed solutions, or lessons from other cities around the world, that might help address Dhaka’s urban problems?

AM: The best solution to Dhaka’s problems is to cure ourselves of excessive Dhaka-centrism in our national thinking. We need to start imagining a future beyond Dhaka.

One of the most instructive cases for Dhaka is Seoul, a city I have had the opportunity to visit and study. Like Dhaka, it is a primate city, but since the 1970s the South Korean government has developed satellite towns around it to ease population pressure on the capital. These new towns, located 20–30 miles from Seoul, are connected by highways, subway extensions, and later by high-speed rail. Regional development policies also prohibited the excessive concentration of industry in Seoul. Furthermore, the establishment of Sejong Administrative City, 120 kilometres south of Seoul and home to many government ministries and agencies, as an ambitious decentralisation project has eased pressure on the capital and spurred growth in the Chungcheong region.

Why can’t we pursue commonsense solutions, such as relocating several government ministries to other cities and reducing the burden on the capital? What is stopping us?

There is another city from which we can learn much: Tokyo. If you are there, the first thing you notice

is that public transport is everywhere and widely used. The system crisscrosses the city so thoroughly that owning a car becomes unnecessary. This culture of devaluing car ownership helps make dense cities like Tokyo both sustainable and livable. Some of Tokyo’s 23 wards—Shinjuku and Toshima, for example—have a population density of more than 20,000 people per square kilometre. Despite this, they offer a vibrant mix of housing, shopping, restaurants, businesses, parks, and culture.

Tokyo’s streets and subways are always full of people. While riding the subway in Tokyo, I recalled the words of Gustavo Petro, president of Colombia since 2022: “A developed country is not a place where the poor have cars. It’s where the rich use public transportation.” Despite its enormous population, Tokyo doesn’t feel claustrophobic. The reasons are population management, efficient mobility options, equitable distribution of amenities, and a culture of self-discipline as a philosophy of urban life. This last point is the most important. For a city to function well, its people must believe in the collective good. Good cities and good people shape each other.

The interview was taken by **Priyam Paul**.



PHOTO: **SAURAV DEY**

A man rests under the shades of a tree in Ramna Park, one of the few public spaces available to Dhaka residents.

from unchecked greed to extract profit from every square inch of city land, a blatant failure to adhere to commonsense land-use policy (why place a school in the flight path zone, knowing well the danger of crashes and the air pollution from jet fuel emissions?), and the air force’s disregard for public safety. Someone in the administration should have anticipated this tragedy and acted to prevent it. That didn’t happen. Planning should be pre-emptive rather than reactive. We keep repeating mistakes that cost lives. We can begin to prevent tragedies

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