#PERSPECTIVE



DHAKA'S FLOODS SAY MORE ABOUT US THAN THE RAIN

Every monsoon, Dhaka performs the same tired theatre. The sky opens, the roads vanish, and by mid-morning a rickshaw-puller is wading through water the colour of weak tea, his passenger's feet drawn up onto the seat. We stand under awnings and shake our heads at the clouds, as though the clouds alone were to blame.

They are not!

We are a city that litters. The habit is so ordinary we no longer notice it. The commuter drops a chips packet from a moving bus. The shopkeeper sweeps his day's rubbish into the roadside channel and considers the job done.

Walk past any drain in this city on a dry afternoon and look down. The truth of our floods is sitting there in plain sight: a bloated polythene bag, a crushed water bottle, the Styrofoam box that carried someone's food, a slipper, a length of rope, and the grey sludge of everything we could not be bothered to carry to a bin. The rain does not create the flood. It merely reveals what we have been feeding the drains all year.

None of us imagines that our single bag matters. Multiplied by millions of hands, it becomes a wall, and water refuses to be polite about walls. It simply climbs.

The larger cruelty is quieter, and it happens where nobody is watching.

Dhaka once breathed through its wetlands and canals. The khals of the east and the low, marshy edges of the city were the places our excess water went to rest. One by one, they have been filled and sold.

A canal becomes a drain, then a lane



and finally a plot with a sign promising a modern flat. A wetland that soaked up a hundred monsoons is transformed into a housing project with a hopeful name. We build on the very ground that once saved us, then act surprised when the water, finding its old room occupied, seeks ours.

This is what makes our flooding a civic problem rather than a natural one. A natural disaster arrives from outside. Ours is manufactured, slowly and together, by people who are otherwise decent, who would never dream of harming a neighbour yet cheerfully hand the whole neighbourhood over to the next downpour.

The remedy is not glamorous. It will not come from a grand project or a visiting consultant. It begins with the least dramatic acts imaginable: keeping the bag in your hand until you find a bin; refusing to fill the pond behind your house; treating a canal as something worth defending rather than something in the way of a foundation.

We made this flood. That is the uncomfortable part. It is also the hopeful one, because anything we made, we can also unmake.

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