

Overcrowded Dhaka casts a cloud

by Abdul Bayes

IN A reflection on 'Dhaka in the 70s', Afsan Chowdhury makes us nostalgic on many fronts. But a few lines from his memory lane would possibly be worthy of notes: 'In Dhaka a university student could survive on Tk 5 per day. A bus ticket was Tk 1 for most places. A packet of 10 Star cigarettes, the cheapest in the market, cost Tk 1.50. A plate of oily rice with tiny scraps of meaty rubber was Tk 1. And a cup of tea was Tk 0.50. And with the leftover Tk 1, catch a ride home. By that time, tea, literature, politics and dreams would have filled most bellies....'

The writer goes on with humours: 'Leftists, Communists, Marxists, I didn't know anyone who was not one. There was a bit of fashion but even unfashionable ones became Lefties. The old Left, still secretive and more rigid than ever before, felt very let down by all this....'

That Dhaka of the 1970s, with hardly two million people as residents, covered with green trees, embracing a few canals, rickshaws not so rampant and clean water flowing in the Buriganga, is now 50 years old as the capital of independent Bangladesh. It has been growing as the fastest megacity in the world with a population of about 20 million, density at 50 thousand per square kilometre and riding on developmental highway dazzling with neon lights. But nothing came free, everything at the cost of culture, cleanliness, equality, environment, perilous politics. There is possibly a very few in Dhaka now who is leaned to the 'left', contrarily everyone seems to be aligned to the 'right', even old comrades. Surely, it is a sad scenario.

Forget it for now. A research by Ahmad Ahsan of the Policy Research Institute reveals other realities on the ground to argue that Dhaka's 'overgrowth' is a curse in disguise — that the cost of the overcrowded Dhaka is huge in terms of socio-economic parameters used to measure people's well-being. An extreme concentration of population and economic activities in the capital — getting a job, in fact, means going to Dhaka — is impinging negative impacts on the national economy as a whole — a pale outcome often overlooked by our learned planners.

Ahsan's estimates show that nearly a third of Bangladesh's urban population lives in Dhaka and during the past decade, Dhaka's population has in-



A view of Dhaka of the 1970s.

— YouTube screen grab

creased by more than 50 per cent. The largest city in Bangladesh is home to a third of urban population compared with 3 per cent in China, 6 per cent in India, 7 per cent in Indonesia, 22 per cent in Pakistan and 23 per cent in Vietnam. Again, the share of the biggest cities in population is 11, 2, 2, 4, 9 and 8 per cent. More worrisome, there are only about four cities in the country that accommodate more than one million people against 102 in China, 54 in India, 14 in Indonesia, 10 in Pakistan, and 7 in Vietnam.

While aeroplanes enter the Bangladesh boundary at night, darkness prevails all the way till Dhaka shows some dim light through the window just before landing. But comparable countries are different as more cities grow with more demand for electricity and a balanced urbanisation. In Bangladesh, development is indicated by Dhaka — a fallacy of composition that Tagore once criticised saying that the face does not constitute the whole body.

While agglomeration and concentration have economic virtues given the optimum size of the cities, any attempt to cross the limit of the optimum size could bounce back with weaker 'spread' effects and stronger 'backwash' effects. For example, in 2017, Ahsan argues, per capita income and the gross domestic product was 11 per cent lower than the potential because of an excessive concentration

of resources and activities in Dhaka; in 2019, the gross domestic product loss was to the tune of \$35 billion dollars and Bangladesh is losing a tenth of its gross domestic product on the heels of Dhaka's growth outstripping its optimum size.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, Dhaka's overgrowth has woefully weakened the pace of poverty reduction in urban areas. Added to this is the traffic congestion costing about 3 per cent of the gross domestic product. When compared with other cities, Dhaka's share in national gross domestic product is among the highest in the world, indicating a tremendous pressure on existing resources and inviting the law of diminishing return to work well. More investments in Dhaka would bring less and less incremental output by lowering the marginal productivity of the factors of production.

By and large, 'Dhaka's overgrowth (by about 50 per cent) is costly in terms of adverse impact on urban development at 6–10 per cent of GDP. Combined with direct costs of traffic congestions (2.9 per cent of GDP), the costs are significantly higher.'

What is to be done so that Dhaka does not deter the overall growth and development?

First, there is the need to focus on developing other cities and regions, especially making Chattogram the main commercial city. But other cities need to be developed also with an appro-

priate mix of politics and policies to reap home the returns from balanced regional development. Second, public services and investment climate need to be improved for the whole country so that investments in far and wide become economically worthy. Third, local governance needs to be empowered with an eye on implementing the laws on decentralisation as it is difficult and impossible for 35 development-related ministries headquartered in Dhaka to ensure a well-coordinated town planning and management for 340 city and municipal corporations.

These government agencies must be de-concentrated and decentralised, which means locating them outside Dhaka and making quality services of these offices available in towns and other cities. And, finally, there is a need for more investments in data and research. The current Economic Census is outdated by eight years. Vietnam provides the gross domestic product and detailed provincial data every year. So do other large Asian countries.

In conclusion, the dominance of Dhaka deters urban growth outside Dhaka and, thus, adversely affects a balanced development. A sustainable urban development will be critical for the national growth.

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