

The anatomy of a 'viral' picture

A large board on the sidewalk near Mohakhali, inviting people to donate. COURTESY: ADNAN MORSHED

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Last month while in a car on Mohakhali Road, going toward Gulshan One, I was intrigued by a dramatic footpath display. It was a large board leaning against the boundary wall of a government research building. The slogan on the board said, “Somebody somewhere may need what you don't.” There were about forty-four hooks for donated clothes. Not a single hook was empty. I have to confess that I hadn't seen such a thing before on Dhaka streets. I was fascinated and stopped to take a picture.

I wondered who donated the clothes and why the poor on the street didn't take them away. There was no chaos and greedy grabbing. Might it have been a symbolic clothing donation centre to encourage public charity?

It surely was a curious spectacle, a counterpoint to the hustle and bustle of the metropolis. Since I wanted to share the photo with my colleagues and friends, I posted it on Facebook. But I was not prepared for what happened next. It went “viral,” shared over 1,000 times by people known and unknown. Some commented that it was a great idea and that they felt inspired to do something similar in their own neighbourhood. Many asked about the exact address. Some just posted a pithy love emoji. All in all, goodness triumphed.

I wondered about the popular reception of the photo and the noble idea that it captured. What did people find interesting about it? Why did so many people share it? Was it the humanist appeal of the makeshift donation centre on the sidewalk that inspired Dhakaites, who are used to seeing only dysfunctions and chaos on city streets? Was it the novelty of the project? Was it the slogan that resonated with the people's perception of the public good?

I thought that the popular appeal of the photo might have been the result of a serendipitous combination of “spread the good” ethos and youthful idealism to build a more caring society.

The more I thought about the photo and its popular appeal, the more convinced I became that the sidewalk donation centre was one of the most poignant symbols of a city in transition. The city's social life is no longer plagued by lopsided negative perceptions or the spectre of disaster or the fear of the infernal streets. Instead, Dhaka—despite its frequent billing as one of the least liveable cities in the world—is now a complex narrative of resilience, contradiction, and cohabitation. There are perils, there are promises, and there are social spaces for their mediation.

This is the quintessential modernity of the metropolis. If modernity is, as the American political scientist Marshall Berman articulated, “a paradoxical unity, a unity of disunity [that] pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal,” Dhaka appears to be a modernist narrative in which optimism and pessimism, resilience and dysfunction, and the spaces of affluence and poverty could not find a more fluid coexistence. Karl Marx's observation that in a modern world “all that is solid melts into air”—that is, forces of global capitalism and market leave everything in a perpetual state of transience—presents a prescient portrayal of contemporary Dhaka.

In many ways, the footpath donation centre appeared to be the symbol of a new type of cosmopolitanism, characterised by innovation and entrepreneurship, a bourgeois ethical desire to help society, and, most of all, the rise of a middle class. This cosmopolitanism signifies the country's transition from an agro-pastoral society to one increasingly dominated by urban values. The old binary argument—that on the one hand, village life is virtuous, and agriculture is where Bangladesh's soul is, and on the other hand, urban life is corrupt, and bloodsuckers roam city streets—no longer holds true. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's recent bold pronouncement about transforming all Bangladeshi villages into towns is one example of the power of this transition. This is a momentous (and prudent) shift in the political ideology of Awami League, a party that has traditionally prided itself on its ability to connect with rural mores. Whether we yet fully understand the political and social significance of that transition, and the kind of policy response it requires, is another question.

This transition has been occurring since the late 1980s, with the rural-to-urban migration due to a host of push-and-pull factors: river erosion and the loss of homesteads, the advent of the readymade garments industry, industrialisation, improved access to information, enhanced road communication, and the lure of the city as a place of opportunities.

Yet, cosmopolitanism is a relatively new phenomenon. Difficult to explain, it is a complex and contradictory effect of an accelerated urban life. From the café culture to book fairs, from the

charity culture to snobbery, from the ostentatious display of wealth to the endearing stories of urban entrepreneurship, cosmopolitanism is a mysterious urban cocktail.

One of the primary reflections of cosmopolitanism is how city-dwellers become calm and unexcitable. To me, the most puzzling part of the footpath donation centre was how people passed by it nonchalantly, as if it were no big deal. Twenty years ago, this roadside “drama” would have attracted a sizable crowd of curious onlookers, a jotla. Instead, pedestrians and bikers simply passed by. The impression that I got was that people have very little time for things that are not directly related to their daily needs and routines. This nonchalant attitude forms the core of cosmopolitan values. It is increasingly harder to shock the city-dwellers in Dhaka.

One of the central issues of cosmopolitanism is the fast pace of urban life. Despite traffic congestion in Dhaka, the public, irrespective of their economic classes, valorises time and the need to maintain it in their daily lives. This pervasive phenomenon suggests the transcendence of agriculture- or season-based notion of time that has traditionally defined rural subsistence economies. We need to reach the office and other destinations on time. We must complete work before a given time. We need to send our children to school on time. We are clearly in an accelerated urban era. Consider, for example, how cosmopolitanism and faster urban life are rearranging traditional gender boundaries and social inhibitions. Solo female passengers ride with male Pathao motorists nonchalantly because they need to reach their destination quickly and affordably. It is about priorities. This “freedom” by no means implies that violence against women has gone away.

One way or the other, Dhaka, like many other metropolises in Asia and elsewhere, is an experiment in modernity, a case study of resilient adaptation to contradictory forces of modernity, and a dynamic representation of the Global South, predicted to be the battleground of the economic, political, and social forces of the future. To ensure Dhaka's humane development, it is imperative that we understand the nature of this future.