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Chattagram, an orphaned city

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I went to Chattagram to celebrate Eid with my family. It took me two hours and a half to reach home from the city's Shah Amanat International Airport. The distance was about 10 miles. I was jubilant to reach home quicker than what I was anticipating. My sister-in-law took over four hours the previous day. This is the state of affairs in Chattagram.



large part of Chittagong city is seen flooded after consecutive days of rain. Photo: COLLECTED

While a lot of road “beautification” goes on in the city—for instance, a bizarre heat-producing concrete wave near the airport on the road median—the road itself is literally hell. People pray for enduring the punishing traffic congestion near the Export Processing Zone!

The journey from the airport to the city is one example of why Chattagram today seems like an orphaned city. Going around Porto Grande—as the Portuguese once called it for its strategic maritime location—one feels that nobody cares one bit about this city, neither the central government, nor the local. The city has no “parents” to take care of it, no guardians to champion its promises. The city seems hopelessly abandoned. Is it destined to die a slow, painful death?

Here is an example from the orphaned city. The mayor recently said: It is not the responsibility of the Chittagong City Corporation (CCC) to fix the city's waterlogging problem, but we would be happy to help out whoever tries to solve the crisis. How benevolent! When the mayor makes such a statement, it should raise a huge red flag. The city's real crisis is the lack of leadership, exacerbated by a weak civil society.

Consider the city's perennial waterlogging problem. Nobody seems to have a genuine desire to solve it. The most devastating waterlogging in Chittagong of recent times, in June 2014, should have been a wake-up call. The submerged areas of Bakalia, Chawkbazar, Agrabad, Halishahar, Kapasgola, Chandgaon, Shulakbahar, Bahaddarhat and Probartak intersection became a climate-change icon around the world.

But we know that we can't blame it on global warming and excessive rain alone. It is also a spectacular failure of the city's urban administration, or rather its absence. Four thousand years ago, the Indus Valley Civilisation probably had a better water management system!

Chattagram continues to go underwater even after moderate rain. And, the authorities in charge of the city's water management—CWASA, CCC, Bangladesh Water Development Board, Chittagong Port Authority, and Chittagong Development Authority—blame each other and shirk their responsibilities. Despite the five-stage Chittagong Storm Water Drainage and Flood Control Master Plan 1995, proposed for the period 1995–2015, the city today appears to have no plan whatsoever. Even if there is one, there is no real change on the ground.

The problem is that we don't think holistically and proactively. We just don't do it as a nation. We do reactive planning. There is a problem, and we try to come up with a solution. Rearguard planning often fails because the problematic urban DNA has already been set. For instance, in 1961, the first master plan for Chattagram was proposed with emphasis mostly on zoning maps for housing and industries, with very little consideration for drainage planning. And, since then, drainage planning has been developed, without any integration with ongoing land-use planning, and often as a reactive solution when waterlogging started to become Chattagram's constant

urban problem. Politically-driven ad hoc planning made the city into a permanent band-aid urban agglomeration.

Blaming budget constraints is a popular excuse. But the real problem is nobody is owning up to the city's problems. Let's again use the “parent” metaphor. Would a parent wait to see who put his or her child in danger? The fact is that if the child is in danger he/she must be saved and protected before anything else. The self-proclaimed nagar pitas seem more eager to transform the city into a giant supermarket—market, market everywhere!

While visiting the old town recently, I wondered: What does it take to restore the Chaktai canal, the backbone of the port city's drainage system? While the city fails to revive its life-sustaining canal network, Chittagong City Corporation is happily building a mega-swimming pool (with paid membership?), sacrificing the once-picturesque outer stadium in Kajir Dewri, next to MA Aziz Stadium.

The green outer stadium used to be Chittagong's identity-shaping maidan, a sort of city centre where generations of kids played football and cricket. Thus, memories abound here. Like many other kids, I, too, learned how to play cricket in the outer stadium. Once Chattagram's famous outdoor eatery, Darul Kabab used to be located in the adjacent green patch in front of the Circuit House. That green disappeared too, because nagar pitas decided that a kitschy shishu park was the most urgent necessity for the city!

If you visit the area today, it feels like a war zone: the battle to occupy every square inch of land with buildings, shops, dumpsters, noise, and greed. There is no polis, only people, chaos, congestion, and the spectre of disaster.

What did this city of rich history, unique geography, and immense tourism potentials do to deserve this state of despair?

The uniqueness of its land-water topography, its historic origin, its local dialect, its multi-faith social amalgamation, its history of anti-British movement, its Porto Grande global attraction through the ages—all remind us today how we have failed this city. Would we think for a second how the Chinese traveller poet Hsuan Tsang's 7th-century depiction of the city as “a sleeping beauty emerging from mists and water” was a reference to Chittagong's hilly idyll? Where are the hills today? These days we learn about the city's hills only when landslide kills the urban poor living in shacks at their foot or when the powerful land-mafia flatten them.

What went wrong? What did Chattagram do to deserve this? With a population of about eight million, Chattagram is Bangladesh's second largest city, and the main sea port of Bangladesh. The city hosts about 9.4 percent of the country's urban population and nine percent of urban economic establishments. The port city enables about 75 percent of the country's total exports and 80 percent of total imports. Its GDP contribution is about 12 percent.

Yet, about 30 percent waste in the city remains uncollected. Streets stink and the city quite literally becomes a “smellscape.” We can't expect to attract foreign investment in a city where garbage rots on streets for days. CWASA supplies only about 40 percent of the city's water need. Only about two percent of waste is recycled. Have you seen a functional traffic light in Chattagram recently? I haven't. Does this sound like the “financial capital” of the country?

The problem is not that we don't have technical solutions or financial means. We do. We have technical examples from other countries that worked. Let's not forget that we are now building a tunnel under the Buriganga River. The real problem is leadership. Chattagram lacks city leaders who would go to bed at night thinking about a problem and wake up thinking about the same problem. This is the type of passionate ownership of a problem that leads to solutions. Unless somebody owns up to the problem, the city will continue to degenerate. This is where Anisul Haque seemed like a new type of urban leader in Bangladesh. We need serious city leadership in Chattagram and a vocal civil society.

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