

How do we save Dhaka streets from apocalypse?

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As the Ramadan market heats up, Dhaka streets are more infernal than ever! Many have asked what would happen to the city's notorious traffic congestion after the JICA-funded metro rail begins operation (Line-6; Uttara to Bangladesh Bank; 16 stops; 20.10 km; 60,000 people/hour). Would it improve Dhaka's road scenario, or be the same old same old?

I would like to think that, alas, the metro rail may help a bit but, overall, Dhaka streets are likely to remain congested or may even get worse (there are some remedies, fortunately!). Why?

Allow me to explain my thoughts. Dhaka's absurd traffic congestion is, paradoxically, also a reflection of Bangladesh's booming “tiger” economy. As Kaushik Basu recently wrote, “Bangladesh has become one of Asia's most remarkable and unexpected success stories in recent years.” A dynamic economic engine means increasing movement of people, goods and, ultimately, very chaotic roads, if traffic is not managed well. A rising annual growth rate also means that a rapidly growing number of people with deeper pockets would begin to influence or even transform the affairs of the city.

For instance, there is a direct correlation between economic growth and private car ownership. In the absence of an efficient public transportation system, a general sense of public safety, and the rule of law on city streets, the rising middle class is expected to flock to car dealerships, now mushrooming all across the capital city. Whoever can afford would like to buy a car to achieve personal mobility, security, and, of course, social prestige.

And, obviously, the fear is this: what would happen to Dhaka streets, if everybody starts buying personal cars, available at cheaper prices and low interest rate in auto loans?

Recently, at the Centre for Inclusive Architecture and Urbanism, BRAC University, we have undertaken a research project to study the impact of personal automobiles on Dhaka streets (report forthcoming.) According to a 2017 Bangladesh Road Transportation Authority estimate, the capital city now has nearly 1.2 million registered motor vehicles, 22 percent of which are registered private cars (there are unregistered cars too!). Occupying 76 percent of road space, the estimated number of 2,58,260 private cars in Dhaka serve only six percent of daily commuters. This gross asymmetry on city streets is one of the reasons why Dhaka streets feel apocalyptic!

Why are Dhaka streets choking? Among other reasons, 78.9 percent of all registered private cars in Bangladesh (3,27,487) are in Dhaka! And, 50-plus newly registered cars are added to Dhaka streets every day. Let's look at the banking side of personal car ownership. Nowadays banks offer auto loans up to 50 percent of the car price and then personal loan up to 20-30 percent, depending on the loan applicant's credit worthiness. The interest rate on auto loan has been steadily decreasing, from 19.5 percent in 2014 to 11.25 percent in 2017. As it seems, policies toward personal car ownership have been rather liberal.

But, of course, we can't blame anybody for wanting to buy a personal car because Dhaka streets are typically viewed as spaces of extreme congestion, chaos, and danger. What we can do, though, is develop a comprehensive public transit system, while de-glamorising personal car

ownership. Car-free movements are getting a lot of momentum in cities across the world. Less vehicles mean less carbon emission and more pedestrian- and environment-friendly streets.

So, the crucial question is: Would the infusion of private cars into Dhaka streets slow down with the introduction of the metro rail?

Before we address this question, let's look at Delhi. The Indian capital's ultramodern Delhi Metro serves, on average, three million people every day and 1 billion annually. According to a 2017 report, there are more than three million registered personal cars in Delhi. On average 1,400 cars were added to Delhi streets each day in 2014. The Indian capital has not evolved historically as a public transit-oriented city. This lacking may explain why the capital city's total number of cars is more than the combined number of cars in Mumbai, Chennai, and Kolkata.

The Delhi story suggests that the introduction of metro rail may not necessarily reduce the middle-class hunger for private cars, especially when the private car has traditionally been valorised as the most visible symbol of social prestige and, nowadays, a safe personal shelter on a dangerous street. If gold is the epicentre of the middle-class interior world, the car is the epicentre of its exterior world.

The question, then, is: will the middle class sacrifice the entrenched desire to showcase its social mobility and achieve personal safety by means of car ownership? In our survey questionnaire we had this question: "In the near future, if efficient, tasteful, and modern public transportation is introduced, will you use it?" Eighty percent of the respondents said "yes," while 11 percent "may be," and nine percent "no."

Will the 80 percent keep their promise? A more pertinent question is: Should Dhaka just wait and see what happens in the future or should Dhaka's urban stakeholders be proactive about reducing the number of private cars on the street?

Many countries have been trying to discourage personal car ownership for a variety of reasons. If you want to buy a car in Tokyo you will have to prove that you have access to a parking space which is prohibitively expensive in a land-scarce country like Japan. In India, cities like Aizawl in Mizoram and Jaipur in Rajasthan have tried reducing cars on the street with similar strategies.

In Dhaka, we should pursue a robust social campaign to reduce the demand for private car ownership. And, this should happen simultaneously with our efforts to create a smart land-water-

based public transit and walkable footpaths, and improved law and order and safety in the public sphere. Social investments should be made to champion an “urban ethic” that it is cool to walk and ride bikes to commute.

In many western countries, where public transportation is an integral part of city life, the very premise of car ownership has been called into question. Recent studies show that America's love affair with personal cars is waning. The urban young demography is now less interested in driving or owning a car. Among the young, driving decreased 23 percent between 2001 and 2009. A report stated: “The millennials don't value cars and car ownership, they value technology. Why spend an hour driving to work when you could take the bus or train and be online?”

It is time to rethink traffic congestion not just as a problem of reduced car speed, but as an anthropological crisis of public approach to what a city should or could be. In our study, we had a question for all respondents: why is a personal car important for you? Twenty-four-percent (highest) identified safety as their main reason for car ownership, while 22 percent chose mobility and seven percent social prestige.

The pursuit of safety on Dhaka streets is both predictable and understandable. Yet, I felt that people would not be so open to admit the “social prestige” value of car ownership. In a less known poem, “Of Nineteen Thirty Four,” Jibanananda Das called the personal car the first item of “the sons of light,” a poignant metaphor for the list of prized middle-class possessions. It is time to think about liveability, not (social) mobility.

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