Social characteristics of a megacity: a case of Dhaka City, Bangladesh

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Abstract:
The paper aims to explore the social characteristics of Dhaka City, Bangladesh. The city has experienced a higher rate of urban growth in recent decades and it has transformed into a megacity. This rapid mass urban transformation of Dhaka City is not commensurate with its overall development. As such, the city is characterised by the high level of poverty and social vulnerability, shortage of housing, infrastructure and social services, poor quality of physical and social environment and inefficient urban management. Archival/textual research has been employed as the central research method for exploring the features of this city. This paper, however, argues that rapid mass urban transformation of Dhaka City has caused serious challenges in equity and justice, social stability as well as infrastructure management.

Introduction

With the arrival of the new millennium, humanity is rapidly approaching a significant but insufficiently acknowledged milestone: by 2007, more than half the world’s population will live in cities (UN 2004). About 95% of humanity will live in the urban areas of the ‘South’, whose population will double to nearly 4 billion over the next generation (Davis 2004a). The most dramatic result will be the growth of new megacities with populations in excess of 10 million. In these cities hundreds of millions of new urbanites will be involved in the peripheral economic activities of personal service, casual labour, street vending, rag picking, begging and crime (Davis 2004b). Terms in which the megacities are often discussed such as urban ‘explosion’ and ‘catastrophe’ – tend to associate them with natural disaster, with problems crying out first for relief, and then for a solution (Seabrok 1996).
Dhaka City has emerged as a fast growing megacity in recent times. It began with a manageable population of 2.2 million in 1975 which reached the threshold of 10 million in 2000. The growth rate of the population during 1974-2000 was 6.9% (UN 1998). There is no city in the world, which has experienced such a high growth rate in population during this period. The United Nations (1999) describes the rapid population growth of this city as ‘exceptional’. The growth rate of Dhaka City’s population will also continue to remain high. During 2000-2015 it is expected to grow at a 3.6% annual growth rate and reach a total population of 21.1 million in 2015. This will put it in 4th position on the list of the world’s megacities (UN 1999). As this rapid growth of Dhaka is not commensurate with its industrial development, the city is characterised by poverty and social vulnerability, shortage of housing, infrastructure and social services, poor quality of physical and social environment and inefficient urban management. This paper has focused on these characteristics of the megacity of Dhaka. Archival/textual research has been employed as the central research method for this study.

Demographic, economic and social characteristics of Dhaka City

The distinctive feature of Dhaka City is revealed through its population structure. According to the adjusted population of the 2001 Census the size of Dhaka’s population is 10712206 of which 5978482 are male and 4733724 are female (BBS 2003). This makes Dhaka a ‘megacity.’ The sex ratio of the population is calculated as 123.4 based on the current population census (BBS 2001). Moreover, the sex ratio of Dhaka City has decreased over the years due mainly to the reunion of females to their male partners living in the city and the increase in the number of single females in the urban work force (Siddiqui et al. 1993). The number of the Dhaka City’s young population is relatively high due to age selective rural-urban migration (Afsar 2000). About 40% of the total city’s population is in the unproductive age groups of 0-14 and 60 and over, which indicates a high dependency burden on the working age population (BBS 1997). The high dependency ratio among the city’s population causes poverty, especially among the low income groups in the city.

In this section it is argued that Dhaka is a city characterised by extreme inequality and poverty. Though poverty in Dhaka City has somewhat declined over time, the magnitude
of poverty in Dhaka City, in terms of both the percentage and absolute number of people below the poverty line still remains quite staggering. According to Islam et al. (1997) about 55% and 32% of the city’s population are absolute poor (2112 k. calorie per day per person) and hardcore poor (1805k. calorie per day per person) respectively. CUS (1990) shows the per capita annual income in Dhaka City as only US$327, which is perhaps the lowest among the world’s megacities. Significant portions of the city’s population are living in slums and squatter settlements. The adverse surroundings of low income settlements, coupled with a highly dense population, gives rise to a myriad of social, health and environmental problems (Siddiqui et al. 2000; Hossain 2004). In contrast, in the areas inhabited and frequented by the rich there are extremely high standards of living. Only 3% of the total city’s population fall into this category. It may well be the one megacity in the world where the inequality between the rich and the poor is so high (Islam1996a).

Dhaka City is noted for a serious shortage of housing facilities. The private sector provides 90% of the housing in the city while the government provides 10% of the housing for government employees (Siddiqui et al. 2000). Land is a scarce commodity in the city. More than 70% of the city’s population have no access to land. The distribution of land among the remaining 30% is also highly unequal (Stubbs and Clarke 1996). Willcox (1979) shows that due to physiographic factors such as low-lying agricultural lands and natural barriers such as rivers, canals, depressions, the expansion of Dhaka City has been seriously contained. There is thus a scarcity of land for development in the city, and the price of land is increasing at a very rapid rate. This explains why the ‘common people’ are unable to purchase land and build homes in the city. Siddiqui et al. (2000) show that the housing problem has been made particularly acute by the alarming rise in the value of land, the high cost and shortage of modern building materials as well as indigenous construction materials, such as bamboo and timber to name a few, complicated land acquisition procedures (for government housing schemes), disorganised and inadequate housing finance and so on.

Dhaka City faces serious problems in almost all areas of its infrastructure, in its electricity supply, gas and fuel supply, water supply, sewerage and excreta management, solid waste management. Among all of these facilities electricity is possibly the best
provided, yet there are areas of the city experiencing problems of inadequate supply, and most areas experience frequent breakdowns (Hossain 2001). Overall, the electricity system of the city is very poorly managed and there is a systematic loss of up to 30% mainly through illegal connections (Siddiqui et al. 1993). The higher and middle income groups of the city have access to gas but except for a few, most of the poor people (90%) do not have access to the urban gas supply. They use electricity and various traditional forms of fuel like kerosene, wood, straw, cow-dung and waste-paper for cooking (Islam 1996b). Currently 60% of the residents of metropolitan Dhaka have access to the municipal piped water, 15% have indirect supply while the remaining population relies on water from private wells and surface water. According to Islam (1996b) the quality of water supplied by the Dhaka Water & Sewerage Authority (DWASA) is poor and the people need to boil it to make it safe for drinking. The sanitary situation of the city is highly unsatisfactory. Louis Berger International (1991) shows that about 15% to 20% of the city’s population is serviced by the DWASA sewer and sewage treatment system, about 25% have septic tanks on site, 15% use sanitary pit latrines and about 5% bucket latrines. It also reveals that another 35% to 40% of people rely on unsanitary systems notably of kutchha (temporary made of bamboo and straw) latrine and defecation in the open, which deposit human waste directly into the living environment.

Limited access of the urban poor to social services like health, education and recreation is characteristic of Dhaka City. The existing health care centres of the city have failed to cope with the rapid growth of the city’s population, and during the last decade, there has been no significant increase in the number of beds or hospitals in the city (Siddiqui et al. 2000). A number of private hospitals and clinics have increased in the last decade but these provide medical services to only 30% (the upper class and upper middle class) of the city’s population (Siddiqui et al. 2000). Moreover, the quality of treatment by hospitals, especially public hospitals is not satisfactory. Similarly existing educational institutions have also failed to meet the demands of city dwellers. Though the number of private schools, colleges and universities has significantly increased in the last decade, they are meeting demands of only an insignificant portion of the city’s population belonging to the upper class (Siddiqui et al. 1993). In Dhaka megacity about 45% of the school age children (7 years and above) are not attending schools (BBS 1997). Also
Dhaka City is noted for a serious lack of outdoor sports and recreational facilities. Although no comparative statistics are available, it is certain that among the world’s metropolises, Dhaka has one of the lowest per capita numbers of playgrounds, stadiums, parks, woods, swimming pools, public libraries, theatres, art galleries, exhibition halls, museums and so on. The urban environment of Dhaka City is physically and socially lacking because an adequate proportion of its land has not been put aside as ‘open space’. Some of the open space (such as parks) is being constantly taken by ‘land grabbers’ with the support of those in power. Also, the presence of antisocial elements in these places - particularly in parks and cinema halls - poses a serious threat to their proper use by city residents (Siddiqui et al. 2000).

The frequency and severity of floods and of poor drainage is on the increase, causing heavy financial losses during the rainy season through property damage and interferes with commercial activities as well as aggravates health and sanitation problems in the city (JICA 1991). Because of the topographic condition of Dhaka City, most areas are vulnerable to annual flooding during the monsoon season. And during abnormal floods nearly 75% of Dhaka City is under water. In such situations, the settlements of the poor are the worst affected although other areas are not necessarily spared (Siddiqui et al. 2000). Aside from the topographic situation of the city, unplanned and unregulated urban expansions also enhance the severity of floods and rainwater stagnation. According to Islam (1998) the ‘unwise’ closure of natural and old artificial drainage and navigational cannels has aggravated the situation of floods and rainwater stagnation in Dhaka City. Moreover, the flood protection embankment that is being constructed around the city (at a huge cost) may negatively affect the drainage of rain water because pumps alone may not serve the purpose.

Dhaka City has emerged as a city of crime, insecurity and political violence. Due to the inadequacy of the law enforcement agencies (especially the police) social unrest, violence, theft, robbery, looting, murder, hijacking, arson, acid throwing on innocent females, the rape of young girls, possession and use of illegal fire arms, illegal rent/toll collection and so on have phenomenally increased over the years and have now become a way of life in Dhaka City (Siddiqui et al. 2000). According to Ahmed and Baqee (1996) nearly 61% of the country’s crime occurs in Dhaka City where less than 10% of
country’s total population live. There has been a rise in ‘muscleman’ or thugs who terrorise city dwellers and collect protection money from business centres, bus terminals, construction work sites and slums. In addition, drug addiction, the torture of women and female human trafficking are on the rise in Dhaka City. Many women and children get trapped into human trafficking and prostitution because of their poverty and social vulnerability. Political violence generally takes the form of clashes between the police and opposition political groups or between supporters of the government and opposition political parties. This is particularly noted during processions, demonstrations and political meetings. Other political crimes are secret killings, looting and the destruction of property, arson and rioting (Siddiqui et al. 2000).

Dhaka City is one of the most ‘rural’ megacities in the world in terms of both physical appearance and socio-cultural characteristics. Religiosity, ‘folk’ music and drama, rural accents and expressions, country food and dress are an integral part of Dhaka City’s culture. In addition, ‘civic sense’ is generally lacking among a large segment of the city’s population. According to Siddiqui et al. (2000) a lack of civic sense is clearly reflected through the indiscriminate honking, jay walking, violation of traffic signals, defecation and disposing of garbage in public places. Due to a disproportionately large concentration of administrative, industrial, educational and cultural activities Dhaka City is not only the permanent destination of rural migrants but also it attracts hundred and thousands of daily commuters and ‘circular’ migrants from neighbouring rural districts which has indeed rendered the social environment of metropolitan Dhaka with a peculiar mix of rural-urban traits (Islam 1996a).

Unlike some other megacities of the world, Dhaka City faces the extreme problem of inefficiency and corruption in urban government. The urban development authorities of Dhaka City have failed to play their role in planning, implementation, administration and management of the various types of urban development activities and infrastructure services of the city mainly due to their lack of coordination (Khan 1997). Multiplicity of institutions and the overlapping nature of their jurisdictions have created major problems in terms of coordination. The extensive and rigid control of the central government over the elected urban councils has to some extent made them inefficient. Khan (1997) shows that due to inadequate funds of their own the urban development authorities are
absolutely dependent on government grants and hence have to work within limits set by the procedures of such grants. The inefficient personnel of the urban development authorities are appointed through political connections. Nepotism as well as bribes is also making the urban government inefficient. All mechanisms of the urban government are more or less corrupted. Islam (1996a) shows that the absence of real democratic representation and participation of the people makes the city corporation and other related bodies corrupt.

Conclusion

Dhaka City has emerged as a fast growing megacity in recent times. It is a city of extreme inequality with a stark contrast between the rich and poor. Urban transformation of Dhaka City has created severe pressure on existing infrastructures and its ‘absorbing’ capacities. A significant portion of poor residents are forced to live in a variety of slums and squatter settlements in the city which are mostly vulnerable to flooding, unhealthy environments and diseases, and generally unsuitable for habitation. The city faces serious problems in housing and in almost all areas of its infrastructure like electricity, gas and fuel supply, water supply, sewerage and excreta management, solid waste management and so on. There is little provision of access to social services for health, education and recreation for the urban poor. The frequency and severity of floods and of drainage problems pose serious challenges to city dwellers, more particularly to the urban poor living in slums and squatter settlements. Crime and violence have also developed as serious problems. Culturally the city has emerged as a ‘ruralised’ megacity. And overall, the city government of Dhaka has failed to play an effective role in its planning, implementation, administration and management.
References


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