

Homecoming From The City: Covid-19 & Dhaka

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Due to the outbreak of Covid-19 in Bangladesh, the government has announced a countrywide shutdown. The declaration of “public holiday” came on March 24th in the afternoon. The shutdown – to be started from 26th of March for 10 days – was proposed to restrict community transmission of the coronavirus. Since the declaration, we have witnessed some extraordinary scenes of mass travelling that severely violated the health guidelines of maintaining social distances. Mass travel from the city that could spread the virus to every corners of the country, nonetheless, reflects, why understanding crisis and normalcy of life as perceived by the people are important areas of investigation. This also reveals the nature of Dhaka as a city.

People leaving Dhaka – the capital city of Bangladesh, in cramped mass transports echoes statements like ‘the city is not ours’. It can be argued that these people were not properly informed about risk of mass travelling or did not trust the authorities regarding the threats of Covid-19. Yet, the rush of people out of the city indicates that for most of the inhabitants Dhaka is not inclusive. People perceived that daily necessary goods will not be available in Dhaka once the city is locked down. An additional factor, that instigated such mass travel to villages is the existent perception of “home” vis-à-vis the city. Most working-class people living in Dhaka consider their status as in a transitory phase. Either they want to return to the home-village after overcoming the (socio-economic) crisis that forced them to migrate to the capital or to establish themselves in Dhaka so that they could build a “home” in the city. It is not just about possibility of finding a job and renting a place in the city, rather what makes their transitory phase longer is the difficulty of gaining enough means to support the immediate family in Dhaka. Thus, what most of the Dhaka dwellers consider “home” remains in the villages.

Dhaka usually appears in the imagination of the villagers as a place where they could make their fortune. But Covid-19 rendered Dhaka as the centre of a crisis. Thus, people left Dhaka to pass over the crisis period. It reveals that the idea of crisis and normalcy are important features of our lives and differentiates between crisis and chronic crisis. People living at the margin of the society supposedly suffer from chronic crisis making the divide between crisis and normal apparently insignificant. H. Vigh (2008) and V. Das (2006) argued that phenomenon of crisis such as conflict, violence, and abject poverty sometimes become embedded in the social fabric that does not necessarily remain distinguishable. Even though the urban poor of



Thousands of people leaving Dhaka and crossing a river via ferry on 24 March after decision of shutting down the country was announced to prevent transmission of Covid-19 (Photographer: unknown).

Passengers cram a ferry on Paturia–Daulatdia route as many people leaving Dhaka on 25 March after the government declared public holiday till April 4 amid coronavirus spread fear. — Sourav Lasker (The New Age)



Dhaka remain in a precarious condition and do not wait for normalisation in near future, the covid-19 situation produces additional burden, such as the sudden loss of income or joblessness, thus, influencing their return to the villages.

Homecoming from the city also indicates the need to reconceptualise the idea of the Polis or city. It must be fluid in nature to accommodate the people who reside for some time but really belong somewhere else. Dhaka as a city attracts a lot of migrant workers from the rural areas and is continuously expanding but is still not inclusive. Dhaka is built on working-class people who find it hard to become a part of it, as revealed by the growing squatters, unemployment, and sustained income inequality. Thus, when the city was shut down a stream of people flew out of it. We may treat cities like Dhaka as Taskscape (Ingold 1993) or Ethnoscape (Appadurai 1996) and argue that Dhaka - as a capitalist centre is used by the financial capital and arguably shaping the spaces and social relations within and for capital accumulation (see Lefebvre 1991 and Harvey 1989). But the mass movement out of the city when it was locked down due to the outburst of Covid-19, reflects how the capitalist hegemony failed to dictate or obfuscate the social relations of the people.

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