

# **Socio-cultural Interactions: A Study on Apartment Dwellers of Dhaka City**

**Abul Baker Md. Touhid  
Bishawjit Mallick**

## **Introduction**

Man is social in nature. In his society he performs various activities and responds towards activities of others. These activities and subsequent responses, in other words interactions among people, are the kernels of the society. The communication and interaction both depends on the rationality of the actors. These interactions differ from society to society with respect to geographical location and existing socio-cultural aspects and so on.

## **Social Interaction, Cultural Identity and Research Question**

Tony Bennett & Mike Savage (Bennett and Savage, 2004) has described that the concept of cultural capital has been identified as a crucial axis of social inequality, especially in the internationally renowned work of Bourdieu et.al. (1999). Interest in the significance of cultural capital has proliferated in recent years. It was pronounced that cultural capital was the single most important factor generating the transmission of inherited social position in all western societies. Yet although these debates about the concept of cultural capital have raged for decades in studies of education and social stratification, there remains a surprising lacuna in considering the significance of cultural capital for understanding the nature of cultural citizenship and cultural policy.

Whereas an ethnic community as characterized by the emotions and sentiments that bind members together as a collective, and culture as the store of knowledge, practices and experiences held by the ethnic group, which serves as a powerful symbol of its identity. Similarly, identity is a composite of attitudes, feelings and perceptions of the degree of affiliation and belonging to one's own group and/or the larger culture. While a group may possess a core of cultural values, whether or not all members subscribe to these values in the same manner and to the same degree is a different matter; cultural values and actual behavior are mediated by constraints, opportunities, institutions and socio-economic background. Accordingly, social exclusion involves not only the lack of material resources but also a multi-dimensional process in which various forms of exclusion are combined: participation in decision making and the political process, access to employment and material resources, and integration into common cultural processes (Byrne, 1999; Atkinson and Hills, 1998; Burchardt, Grand and Piachaud, 1999). It means much more than poverty because many exclusions and inequalities are embedded in everyday social interactions, social practices and social discourse (Atkinson, 2000; Gurney, 1999).

It is important to add that, concerned with the ways in which different kinds of cultural knowledge and skill get translated into particular kinds of economic advantage (and vice versa), it focuses primarily on the ways in which the connections between particular kinds of cultural training in the home connect with those that are recognized in, and rewarded by, schooling and the education system in ways that reproduce class divisions, between the working classes and the middle classes, for example, or, within classes, between supervisory

and manual workers within the working classes and, for the middle classes, between professionals and managers.

This paper concentrates on the issues related with Bangladesh. She has a unique socio-cultural phenomenon in the world history, which is being practiced over centuries. Centuries after centuries, so many outsiders or intruders or so called *benias* (businessmen came from outside of the country) came to this land and fortunately or unfortunately gave something to her indigenous culture. For this reason, it is found that, the country has developed a mixed culture, which is reflected by her people, their behaviors, their complexions, appearances and their nature of interactions. Dhaka, however, is the prime city of Bangladesh. At many occasions Dhaka was the capital of this geographical part of Indian sub-continent, and it is now the capital city of Bangladesh. Over the years, Dhaka, located on the bank of the River Buriganga, is a Mega city from a local town. The number of population has also increased by this time. Side by side the problems related to different urban issues including housing for accommodating this large amount of people has increased, particularly, since independence in 1971 (Sultana and Lipi, 1999). The pressure of population was very high. At that time the land was cheap and available. But since the beginning of 1980s the land became scarce and thus created housing shortage day by day in Dhaka (Sultana and Lipi, 1999). The real estate companies are trying to provide apartment buildings to the people. A significant number of people catered by the private real estate companies, who are playing vital role in both in-migration and intra-migration (Khatun, 2001) of Dhaka.

This apartment dwelling introduces new arena of “modern Bangladeshi society”, which is very different in nature and practice rather than the so-called “rural Bangladeshi society”. Historically the Bangladeshi society was developed as per the occupations and customs of a group of people, namely “Gusti”, which is till today significant in some areas of Bangladeshi cities like Shankharipatty, Chakbazar of Dhaka city, Biharipatti, Roypara of Khulna city etc. Mostly the shankharies (who make Shankha, ornament of hindu-women) live in Shankaripatty, same as mostly the Biharies (so-called West-Pakistanis) lived in Biharipatty.

However the apartment cannot give any identity but the name of the developers who constructs the building only. Their signage denoted the culture of the developer’s company, not the culture of the peoples’ who live inside. The dwellers character or culture only deploys when they communicate each other. It brings a flavor of westernization of the modern Bangladeshi society. Taking such issues into consideration, this paper attempts to know the socio-cultural interactions among those apartment dwellers of Dhaka city.

### **Socio-cultural Life and Interactions in Dhaka**

#### **Past Scenario**

Socio-cultural interactions are referred as the meetings of people of a community in a certain time, at a certain place and in a certain occasion. Possible reflections of these interactions are religious festivals, family programs, cultural festivals, various national days etc. Whatever the types are the main thing is the interaction and communication among the people. At past in Dhaka it was explicitly reflected by the nature of festivals and the ways in which they are observed. In one hand the number of population was low and intimation of kith-and-keen in a certain place was more. It was resulted as more interactions among them. The major festivals of Dhaka were *Eid* (the biggest religious festival of Muslims), *Muharram* (the first day of Arabic Calendar), *Durgapuja* (the biggest religious festival of Hindus) and *Janmashtami* (the

date of birth of Krishna-Hindu God) at 150 or 200 years ago (Mamun, 1989). These were pervasive in nature.

The most attractive part of *Janmashtami* was the procession with colorful masks, statues and posters. It was so high in pomp and prestige that even people from west Bengal came and joined the parade and fair, arranged in the occasion of *Janmashtami* (Mamun, 1989). *Durgapuja* was the most colorful and important religious festival of Dhaka at past. Due to the religious enthusiasm, people went for outing who could afford, the servicemen came back to their home, the *jaminders* (the land lord) visited their countrymen, there were *jatra* (local play) and *kabigan* (poet's face to face competition) arranged in the community. People from all level of the society would participate in the festival.

In *Muharram* there were also procession with colorful dresses, knives and *Tajias* (imaginary mausoleum). There was a fair for the *Muharram* in where people came and interact with each other. Same thing was applicable for *Eid*, though its history as a festival like *Janmashtami* and *Muharram* was relatively new in the then Bangladesh. Eid fair were held in Chak Bazar and Ramna Uddyan.

*Halkhata*, is an occasion of interaction among people, particularly for the businessmen. It is somewhat a festival which is held on first of Baisakh (the first month of Bengali Calendar Year). It is the day of all types of business and commercial transactions. Old Dhaka was characterized by unique business activities and a number of specializations. *Halkhata* was observed with huge enthusiasm. The ritual is usually done in the business place and seldom at home; own residence became a sitting of entertainment for the most exclusive business partners.

A special interaction was available for the women of the families in the community of old Dhaka in the place of well, where they came for taking water and interact with other women of the society. They exchanged their feelings and various information relating to the families and of their own. Here housing form had an important role in terms of accessibility of women. There was an inner way of communication among the houses. Moreover, Vistee (Rahman, 1991) served drinking water to the each and every houses of the then old Dhaka. There was also an option lies of interacting with each other and outer world of the ambient periphery of the people, particularly women. Pond/river ghats (stoppages) were also important locations of interacting with the people.

Besides yearly calendar of festivals, Marriage has always been a useful way of interacting with each other. In Indian sub-continent, marriage is great meeting occasion for the relatives of bride and groom. So far found in Dhaka at past the program is used to be staged in front of houses where an open space named *kholan* or *khuli* located. *Penndel* (Tent) was decorated with colorful clothes; gate was arranged with preferably banana trees etc. This place was the meeting place of the guests, hosts and relatives concerned.

When a social problem arises, the honorable persons are responsible for settling this dispute. At past, there were *Panchayats* (Hollander and K. M. Azam, 1990) in Dhaka. *Mahalla* (community) head and some other aged persons constituted the panchayat. It was also a place where interaction occurs among the people of the community. The system was abolished now in Dhaka.

There were some *mores* (cross section of roads) which had somewhat seating arrangements for the people. These were also used as the meeting place of older people of community at past.

Still some of these are found in the old Dhaka. *Jumma Prayer* (weekly prayer on Friday for the Muslims) can be called an important form of interaction among the males of the community. Moreover, open fields and fairs were important place of interaction among the people.

### **Present Scenario**

The types of festivals of Dhaka have not changed but their nature and extent of observing as well as the styles of interaction has changed over the years. These changes can be attributed to rapid urbanization and its impact on human behavior, and its impact on availability of land. Moreover, drastic disparity between receipts and socio-cultural aspirations has a negative impact on the socio-cultural interaction among the mass people. It is found in a wide-ranging nature in the society of present Dhaka. This has changed the nature of peoples' activity and behavior towards others.

*Eid, Puja, Muharram* and *Janmashtami* have still been playing an important role in the interaction among the people. Fairs, processions etc are arranged various part of Dhaka in response to these festivals. Among them at present Eid Procession is in no doubt the most prestigious and pervasive parade in Dhaka that interacts huge amount of people.

First day of Baisakh of Bengali Calendar Year is going to be another most gorgeous and splashing means of interaction among the people particularly for the middle class of Dhaka. Ramna, Teacher and Student Center (TSC) of Dhaka University, Bangla Academy are the places of meeting of this festival. Recent years it is reached in invasive in nature throughout the country.

31st December is also a means of interaction among the elites of Gulshan Baridhara, Banani, Dhanmondi, Uttara and even people from the old Dhaka. A huge gathering of young fellows in TSC of Dhaka University is found at that time.

It's amazing but true is that, TSC of Dhaka University, open ground of Parliamentary Building and Dhaka New Market are some of the places of interacting with each other among the young people, particularly bachelors, who are in job or engaged in various universities as students from outside and within Dhaka. They meet preferably in the weekend and holidays. At present, almost all the marriage ceremonies are held on the community centers, among the families of both old and new Dhaka who can afford. No doubt, it is also a place of interaction among the relatives and same apartment dwellers (if good relation exists) of Dhaka city.

### **Socio-cultural Interactions among the Apartment Dwellers**

Apartment building in most cases is the shelter of nuclear family with husband, wife and children. A recent study has shown that, on an average their family member is between 4 and 6 (Sultana and Lipi, 1999). In such a situation internal interaction among the kith and keens of the apartment dwellers are very much occasional; means interactions take place in the familial program like marriage, birth day, death and the religious festivals like *Eid, Puja, Christmas* etc. But what's about the interaction among the apartment dwellers, neighbors, which was very common at past in Dhaka. Are they interacting? - How, when and where?

A glimpse at the ownership pattern of the apartment buildings will reveal that among them 37% are businessmen, 16.5% are government employee, 14.5% are half govt. employee, 10.5% are non govt. employee and 21.5% are engaged in foreign countries and other profession

and among them 48% are educated at master level (Sultana and Lipi, 1999). These indicate homogeneity among the apartment residents in terms of education, income and profession as well. This homogeneity is the result of aspiration to live in a same social status or class. It is fine that the apartment dwellers are homogenous but are they interacting or can they if they want? One can just look at the places of a multistoried apartment building with maximum facilities available where the residents can meet or just have an eye contact with each other: Stair, Parking Space, Elevator, Community Space, Roof / Roof Top Garden, Gymnasium, Children Park / Play Ground.

All of the above spaces are for their own nature of specific functions. Stair and elevator for climbing and downing, parking space for parking the vehicles preferably cars, roof or rooftop garden for just to enjoy the nature, rain and moonlit night, or enjoy the stars of sky, gymnasium for having good health, children's play ground for playing. This setting might provide opportunities face to face contact with each other for both kids and adults. And more face to face contact creates an interaction by heart among them. This is resulted by the invitation of other residents of the building in the birth day, marriage ceremony or anniversary etc. And thus interaction grows day by day. This might be the ideal situation so far. Actually the residents of two side by side flats do not know each other. They have not any communication among them. Interaction occurs only when special issues arise as follows:

- Among the residents of apartment buildings, there is a managing committee to look after the facilities and problems of the residents. Owner of each flat should be the head of that committee on rotation. They occasionally meet and discuss if a problem arise like water supply, electricity, gas supply, elevator, intercom etc. or reviewing the activity of the security guards. Here an interaction takes place among the residents of apartment buildings.
- If there is community space and young in the apartment building and there is a cultural mobilization among them, they might arrange program in various national days and may publish souvenir, wall paper etc. in the occasion of these memorial days of the country. It may also create an interaction among the residents.
- Old fellows of the building may have a morning work each and every day. This may create an interaction among them.
- If there is a playground for children in the apartment building, it can make interaction among the kids of the building and thus the women of the building.
- If women of the apartments come from same economic and education background and work in relatively same field, they face some common problems in their way of life means moving, working environment and the like. It makes them closer in response to these difficulties. Moreover among the housewives of the apartment buildings there is also a communication with each other relating to the familial issues. Moreover, if the kids of the same apartment building study in the same class or same educational institution, there lies an opportunity of interaction among the mothers in the school periphery or in the transportation or relating to the performance of the kids or having private tutor.

Another reality must be mentioned here. There is a reasonable intra-migration of *old dhakaiya* (the people of old Dhaka) people to new Dhaka (Khatun, 2001). In old Dhaka they had the inherited property where they live and even run their business activities. But due to various reasons they are migrating to the new Dhaka and try to own apartment in known residential areas of Dhaka.

Most mover households were either in child-bearing or child-rearing stages of their life cycle at the time of their moves. They changed their residence to adjust their various demands but not to buy a new house. Their main flow is towards multistoried houses with more space and better utility services. Higher level of education compared to the other people in old Dhaka and inter-marriages have created social mobility and encouraged the *old dhakaiya* movers to change their neighborhoods. On the other hand, the characteristic of the neighborhood is also the principal reason for selecting a destination in New Dhaka (Khatun, 2001).

Among these movers 64% live in multistoried apartment building. Are they interacting with people as were in old Dhaka? One study (Ali, 1999) shows that,

- Multistoried apartment living prevents social contact with other neighbors
- Multistoried living is not suitable for families with children

The parent living in upper floors of high rise (apartment) buildings are often reluctant to send their children down for playing due to lack of control over them. So, the children living in high rise buildings remain isolated and suffer from unbalanced socio-psychological development.

So, with the thirst of better urban living, those old Dhaka people who have been shifting their locations are facing such kind of repetition in new Dhaka, which they did not want so far. Even in some cases, it is unsuitable for them and their children as well. That is the critical issue so far in terms of socio-cultural interactions among the apartment dwellers of Dhaka city. It is to be noted here also that, old Dhaka and its people are also changing gradually with the impact of urbanization, economic struggle and cultural heterogeneity which is evident from the following statement:

In spite of all the vices of modern urban society of an under developed country, Dhaka does still retain some old charms. The typical Mahalla or neighborhood qualities of some communities in old Dhaka or such middle class areas as Gopibag could please persons like Jane Jacobs (the author of the Death and Life of Great American Cities). But unfortunately even such environments are now fast yielding to new areas like Dhanmondi or Gulshan of the modern classy type neighborhoods where neighborhood qualities are more or less absent. The extreme in the urban community environment is the squatter settlement, where one may find community brotherliness, usually required as a defense mechanism (Islam, 1996).

### **Conclusion**

The study was an attempt to know the socio-cultural interactions among the apartment dwellers of Dhaka city. Here it is incorporated mostly all the possible ways or means of interaction among people. As it was not a field based study, it could not provide any statistical databases of interactions or the psychological circumstances of the people concerned. It has just only provided the type and nature of spaces where the apartment dwellers interact, or at least have an eye contact or face to face contact or just an exchange of smile with each other. But so far found, there exists very less scope of interaction by heart of the apartment dwellers. It has also enhanced by the structure of the building where they live and the tremendous pressure of city life upon individuals. No doubt it is creating an unbalanced society full of socio-psychological problem among the kids and adults as well. Society is always supposed to move forward. In this endeavor, old traditions in many cases lost their ways. New values come and create new traditions. Attempts are also seen to reshape the old traditions. The conflict between basic instinct of traditions and proliferation of hectic urban life can be resolved by

creating proper space not only inside the apartments but also in the communities and cityscapes.

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