



Dhaka, Bangladesh

16 million est. pop. 2008

Dhaka has seen many rulers: a succession of Buddhist and Hindu groups, followed by Muslim Mughals and the British; it became the administrative center of East Pakistan after the partition of India in 1947 and capital of the new country of Bangladesh in 1971. Urban growth has accelerated, and cheap labor has made the city an international center for textiles and mass-market goods. Although poverty, flooding, air and water pollution, and unplanned development pose problems, literacy standards are increasing, and there is a growing, aspirational middle class.

Dhaka City is centrally located in Bangladesh, in the southern part of the district of Dhaka, about 200 kilometers north of the Bay of Bengal. It is surrounded by distributaries of the Ganges (Padma, in Bangladesh) and Brahmaputra rivers: the Buriganga River in the south, the Balu and the Shitalakhya rivers in the east, Tongi Khal in the north, and the Turag River in the west. The inner areas of the city lie on a Quaternary river terrace, marginally above the contemporary floodplains of the major rivers, and hundreds of detached backwater lakes of all sizes dot the surrounding developed area. In addition, as a result of the accelerated rate of urbanization (Hossain 2008), a substantial portion of the adjacent lower-lying deltaic land is now also occupied, putting Dhaka residents at severe risk of seasonal flooding from the Himalayan rivers in the monsoon season.

History

The known archaeological heritage of Dhaka begins in the seventh century CE, when a small city-state was located on the river banks of the Buriganga. Historically,

Dhaka's origins appear to be centered around the present "old town" (of pre-Mughal period), with the city expanding westward and northward under the later Mughal and British administrations. During the brief period when East and West Pakistan were parts of one country (following partition from India in 1947 and prior to independence in 1971), urban development extended farther north. The city has subsequently expanded rapidly in an unplanned way and now has a total population in excess of 16 million (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics 2008). Already classified as a megacity, at currently projected growth rates it could be the home of 25 million people by 2025 (Davis 2006).

Pre-Mughal (before 1608) and Mughal (1608–1764) Periods

A succession of Buddhist and Hindu groups controlled the region before the Mughals came to Dhaka in 1606; Islam Khan made Dhaka his permanent capital, and the expansion of the present old town to Sadar Ghat took place then (GOB 1993). His successor, Ibrahim Khan (reigned 1617–1624), promoted construction of a 22-kilometer south–north road from Buriganga to Tongi, and an east–west road from Dolaikhal to Babupura, allowing the establishment of many industries and factories, particularly for textile production (GOB 1993). Alongside the progressive control of the river channels for international shipping, these new transport routes allowed Dhaka to emerge as one of the most significant centers of trade in South Asia, despite the local absence of valuable raw materials. In 1717 the capital was shifted away from Dhaka, to Rajmahal (Murshidabad), which resulted in a temporary check to population growth and urban development in Dhaka City (Mamun 1994).

British Period (1764–1947)

Toward the beginning of the British colonial period, in the eighteenth century, Dhaka experienced a further dramatic decrease in population as a result of famines, floods, disease epidemics, and loss of trade and business. Population growth nevertheless re-established relatively quickly, and the built-up area began to expand again with construction of new housing, transport and utility services, and health and educational facilities. Notable developments in the educational sector included the establishment of Dhaka College in 1835, Jagannath College in 1858, Eden College in 1880, the Teachers' Training College in 1909, and Dhaka University in 1921 (Mamun 1994).

Pakistan Period (1947–1971)

After the partition of India in 1947, during which the subcontinent was divided on broadly religious grounds into the new nation of India (with a majority Hindu population) and the much less populous Pakistan (where Muslims predominated), the mass movement of communities prompted civil unrest and many deaths, continuing a tradition of violent political upheaval that persisted throughout the twentieth century. Dhaka was identified as the administrative center of East Pakistan, but the province was separated from the larger and more powerful West Pakistan region by 1,800 kilometers of Indian territory, as well as by linguistic and cultural differences. Local administrators faced many challenges, though these did not seriously check Dhaka's population growth nor the explosive development of housing, industry, government offices, and infrastructure. Rapid development took place particularly in the outlying areas of Mohammedpur, Mirpur, Tejagaon, Ramna, Purana Palton, and Segun Bagicha, many of which were recognized after 1956 by the Dhaka Improvement Trust for development and effectively incorporated into the city (Alam and Huq 2003).

Bangladesh Period (since 1971)

Political disagreements between East and West Pakistan, combined with anger over the perceived mismanagement of the relief efforts following the devastating cyclone Bhola in 1970, created a climate for a bloody civil war. The resultant popular uprising led to the emergence of the new nation of Bangladesh in 1971, and Dhaka was reinstated as its capital city.

The significant influx of immigrants from rural areas and the natural growth of population after the cessation of hostilities rapidly made Dhaka one of the most densely populated cities in the world. Informal settlements (slums, squatters, and pavement communities) emerged

in the central areas, and many of the major problems faced by the city during the last fifty years are associated with this unplanned development. Extreme traffic congestion, air and water pollution, and lack of access to green space are endemic, and the environmental and health standards experienced by many residents are shocking to Western visitors. A substantial proportion of Dhaka's housing has no piped water or sewerage systems, and waste disposal systems are inadequate; despite substantial aid to this sector from Japan, much domestic refuse is thrown into local watercourses and lakes. The lack of progress with infrastructural development is fostered by widespread corruption among badly paid public officials.

Despite these challenges, there is nevertheless a rapidly growing Dhakaite middle class that is aspirational and entrepreneurial. Interest in Bangla culture and music is strong. There is a keen sense of history and a lively and generally free press. Alongside modern shopping malls there are small parks and open spaces surrounding national historic sites and monuments. Education is valued, as indicated by the huge rise in attendance at schools and in private as well as public universities. The literacy rate in Dhaka is increasing fairly quickly. Estimated at 62 percent in 2001, by 2010 it had climbed to almost 73 percent, significantly higher than the national average of 56 percent (Banglapedia 2006). This combination of extreme social and environmental problems and progress driven by high ambitions makes Dhaka a city of fascinating contrasts.

Demographics

The population of Dhaka is currently growing at an estimated 4 percent per year, one of the highest rates among Asian cities (McGee 2006). The continuing growth reflects ongoing migration from rural areas to the Dhaka urban region, which accounted for 60 percent of the city's growth in the 1960s and 1970s. The city's population has also grown with expansion of the city boundaries, a process that added more than a million people to the city in the 1980s alone (McGee 2006).

Economy

The ready availability of cheap labor has allowed Dhaka to emerge as an international center for the textiles and ready-made garment industries, leatherworking, and factories producing mass-market consumer goods. The presence of these facilities throughout the city adds to the traffic congestion, with supply and distribution trucks weaving their way among almost half a million cycle rickshaws and huge numbers of cars. Heavy industries

such as ship-breaking yards and the hundreds of smoke-producing brickworks along the river frontages add to the acute local pollution problems.

The annual per capita income of Dhaka is estimated at US\$1,350, with 34 percent of households living below the poverty line (Cities Alliance 2000), including a large segment of the population who come from villages in search of employment (Lawson 2002). For these people, life in Dhaka is a struggle to feed, clothe, and educate themselves and their children, and unemployment rates are high. By contrast, Dhaka's burgeoning middle classes drive a market for imported modern consumer and luxury goods (Banglapedia 2007; Lawson 2002). At present Dhaka has three traditional business districts, namely Motijheel, Kawran Bazar, and Mirpur, whereas the wealthier areas of Dhanmondi, Gulshan, and Bashundhara-Baridhara support a growing information technology sector, multinational corporation offices, larger shopping malls, and universities. Interspersed among the many commercial organizations and aid agencies, there are also social enterprise initiatives, including the Nobel award-winning Grameen Bank, which advances microcredit to entrepreneurs.

Perceived Opportunities in Dhaka

For millions of the rural poor in Bangladesh, Dhaka remains an attractive destination. Compared to other places in the country, it offers the best chance of economic opportunity, and this promotes their migration. Foreign investors select Dhaka because of the macroeconomic stabilization in Bangladesh over the years, the relatively inexpensive land, and the recent improvements in the transportation and shipping systems. Other factors that make Dhaka attractive to investors include the large and growing pool of cheap and generally compliant labor, especially of migrant women; its rich and active cultural environment; the general freedom from racial, religious, or ethnic violence, unusual in metropolitan areas internationally; and the broadly democratic and secular governmental system. Political awareness is strong, and memories of the war of independence from Pakistan still relatively fresh, but the occasional *hartals* or strikes tend not to escalate into major confrontations. It is alleged that traditional moral values and kinship networks in the city help keep Dhaka society comparatively free from

many modern urban vices, though prostitution and child abuse are nevertheless widely prevalent.

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See also Agriculture (South Asia); Consumerism; Ganges River; Labor; Public Transportation; Religions; Urbanization

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