Dhaka Traffic: Disabled by Design—an Allegory

[*Rungh magazine*, Vol. 9, # 2, 2022. https://rungh.org/dhaka-traffic/]

It's been four years since I experienced the exhilarating yet numbing anarchy of Dhaka traffic. Picture streets dense with transport trucks, vans, cars, pedaled and motorized rickshaws threading a crazy quilt stretching to the blurred edges of one of the worlds' largest, most populous, and polluted cities. Vehicles oscillate between aggression and diplomacy, their electric-quick negotiations produce a flowing tangle. Smell the sub-tropical humidity infused with sweat, cooking odors, and the acrid emissions of industry. Hear the horns, engines, and shouts. Hang on to your seat during sudden lane changes—pedicabs have no seat belts. Arm hairs quicken with the rush of a whisper-close truck. Attention fixed on the stop-start battered van ahead, your peripheral vision detects bodies clinging to a bus. Above and beside, an over-loaded pick-up sways with a wave of scrap metal and indecision. Motorcycles zipper into sudden margins, narrowly missing pedestrians—though that's too pedestrian a word for their squirrely crossings.

My first impression of Dhaka traffic was its unfathomability. My mind could not grasp what my body experienced. Dhaka traffic isn't just more than I'm used to, it is an amplification of the familiar to a point of distortion. I could not have conceived such viscous chaos before it surrounded me and could not accept its reality even when I inhabited it. Dhaka traffic is not a simile. It is not like some other thing. It is not like a murmuration of swallows or a stampede of baby crabs. It is less orderly than grains of sand through an hourglass; more refined than a demolition derby; less certain than a rollercoaster. And its scale is beyond the comprehension such images attempt. Dhaka traffic is an embodied allegory of how poor design disables us.

Over-vigilant, even though I'm not driving. Sweating in a wheeled steel cage pedalled by a senior citizen, calamity feels as certain as my privilege. The rickshaw's windows are meshed to deter muggers. "Choose a hard top," the hotel guard with a machine gun advises: "Thieves knife through the soft top's canvas and rub tourist eyes with tiger balm." Situational awareness in a city of 23,234 people per square km is a completely different order of experience than anything Regina's 1,266 people per square km has to offer. I suppose you can get used to anything.

Day three: I recognize the mechanical melee as a human marvel, a dysfunctional system that works despite my confidence that it can't. Its operation, proof of a subtle system of unwritten protocols and communications. A tourist, I could step in and out of its flow, be carried by it, begin to recognize currents and hazards, but could not understand its nuances enough to navigate it on my own—though I tried, in dreams, for months.

Day four: I wondered if Dhaka traffic might prove the anarchists right. There is very little traffic enforcement. Cops direct at some intersections but rarely enforce the laws as written. There are traffic lights, but no one obeys them. And yet things appear to work. Drivers are free agents following only those rules that make sense to them and their fellow travellers at that moment. The fact that such a complex social system runs with few visible external controls seems evidence of the viability of anarchic governance. Perhaps my anxiety was simply unfamiliarity, or unconscious western rejection of alternative modes. I rode that giddy wave for a few days.

By the sixth day, the relentless grind and routine hazards felt as hair-raising, unhealthy, and dystopic as on the first day. I decided to check the facts and the perceptions of locals. It turns out that although I saw no accidents in the ten days I was in one small part of that megacity, "7,397 people [are] killed and 16,193 injured" in Bangladesh yearly,[i] and the local papers are full of rebukes for the absurd traffic which is considered the greatest problem facing Dhakaites. Looking closer at the participants, I saw no female drivers. The system works, but only for able-bodied men; very able-bodied. The skill required to participate enables only the alert, fit, and fast.

As a boy, my great uncle, Frank, a retired longshoreman and union leader, toured me through his former workplaces along the Vancouver waterfront. He recalled the pre-container era when goods were loaded and unloaded by hand. Work was plentiful but, he explained, few men were strong enough. You had to lift heavy loads quickly for eight hours or more a day. Few worked past their prime. I asked him why the boxes couldn't be half the weight so more people could do the work and fewer bodies would be wrecked. I remember his puzzled face but not an answer.

Capitalist, colonial, patriarchal societies strive for the frictionless flow of information, goods, and bodies. Those who are less alert, fit, and fast than the system is designed for are seen as impediments to progress. They are disabled by design.

The central challenge of decolonization, or what Indigenous Elders simply describe as being real human beings, is how to design to enable rather than disable. How do we shape our environments, policies, and relations to include the participation of bodies, beings, and ways of knowing other than those currently celebrated? What streams can we channel other than the mainstream? The mainstream, like Dhaka traffic, marginalizes those who do not qualify as participants and distorts those who do. Everyone knows the system is untenable. It cannot be fixed. It must be reimagined.

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[i]Abu Afsarul Haider, "Traffic jam: The ugly side of Dhaka's development," *The Daily Star*, Sun. May 13, 2018.