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Urbanization in Dhaka: A Lefebvrian Analysis

ABSTRACT

How to understand the patterns and practices of Urbanization in Dhaka? How do the numerous development projects in Dhaka shape spaces and lifestyles of dwellers of Dhaka? How do the acts, routines, and practices of Dhakaites in their everyday life get shaped by the spatial management in Dhaka and, in a reciprocal way, how do the Dhakaites themselves take part in this spatial management? With some interesting questions like this, a Lefebvrian analysis can reveal some useful conflicts and conjectures—significant insights on the interactions and exchanges between spaces and lives that can help us rethink the spatial construction, management, and maintenance involved in the urbanization in Dhaka. With this hypothesis as a point of departure, the present research theoretically engages Lefebvre's spatial triad and his ideas of Abstract Spaces and Differential Spaces. Practically, it collects data on 'the spatial constructions in Dhaka' and their management, and maintenance. These data help identify the points of conflicts and conjectures between spaces and lives in Dhaka, and, in the process, critically examine the patterns and practices of Urbanization in Dhaka. Methodologically, the project integrates an inquiry into ideas of space to understand urbanization in Dhaka. In doing so, the paper develops a theoretical frame—Space and Differential Spaces. This framework would help analyses on Urbanization in Dhaka.

Keywords: Cultural Studies; Spatiality; Urbanization; Anthropogeography; Development; Representation

I

Urbanization in Dhaka is asymmetric, unorganized, poorly planned, and unsustainable. Islam, Rana, and Ahmed (2013) identify some challenges of urbanization in Dhaka. For them the challenges

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include population growth, hasty industrialization, and unplanned urbanization. According to Hossain (2013), the problems include massive migration of people from other districts and urban poverty. Alam (2018), however, foregrounds the issues of urban land management as impediments to planned urbanization in Dhaka. While the reasons for and impact of Urbanization in Dhaka has been explored in a number of research works, A Lefebvrian analysis of Urbanization in Dhaka would reveal a close view of the dominant trends in Urbanization here. In *La révolution urbaine*, Lefebvre (2003a [1970]: 32) argues that there are some countries in the world in which one can trace the interesting presence of the urban, the rural, and the industrial at the same time. These are the three phases that a country normally goes through one after another. This paper identifies Dhaka as one of these places. Place, for Lefebvre (1991), is a physical site. Place is a site that can be measured and mapped. Space, on the other hand, is more conceptual than physical. Space is a product of three things: place, time, and being. Being, for Lefebvre (1991), is the life forms. Dhaka as space, therefore, turns out to be an interesting case in point. Dhakaites or Dhaka-dwellers as life forms witness the asymmetric, unorganized, and poorly planned urbanization.

Urbanization is a process in which historic transformation of social factors guide the gradual replacement of the rural phase of development and the industrial phase of development by the urban phase of development. But Dhaka is city where urbanization is not that sequential, and linear. It is rather sporadic, chaotic, and cacophonous. In most neighborhoods of the cities one can find residential areas, the commercial space—groceries and other business enterprises, the small and/or medium scale factories.

Urbanization in Dhaka produces asynchronous spaces. This paper attempts to identify these spaces. But to formulate a Lefebvrian analysis of them, I must explain Lefebvre's spatial triad.

1. Spatial Practices: These would refer to everyday practices of members in a community or society, their habitual patterns, their usual routines. Humans with the help of their five senses coordinate some specific negotiations with their surroundings. On the basis of these negotiations, they conduct everyday activities in their lives. As an example, we can think of the ways in which someone's choice within spatial management take shape. I, for instance, can go to my office in my car, on foot, or by bus. I, however, cannot go to my office either by train or plane. In fact, the spatial management in my surroundings has shaped these three choices for me. My act of choice is space-based or a kind of spatial practice in the sense that I must accept the workings of Representations of Space (see below).

2. **Representations of Space:** This refers to production of discourses, knowledge creation, and designing of spaces. It must be highlighted that none but discourses create knowledge, and on the basis of the collective acknowledgment of this knowledge, urban planners, architects, engineers, and workers plan, create, and redesign urban spaces. Representation of space is essentially ideological. This, therefore, must include the not only the political and the economic interests of a state, also the security measures—the police and the army. To continue with the previous example, more vehicles are being purchased and driven in Dhaka than ever before, but this is not regulated by the government. Not having a plan regarding this is an ideological issue. Not having a plan creates unbearable spaces tossed up with traffic congestions—Dhakaites waste working hours on streets. As nine to five workers Dhakaites have made traffic congestion as an unavoidable component in their everyday life. Until there is any change in representation of space, Dhakaites must endure this.
3. **Representational Space or Lived Spaces:** A constant participation in meaning making process is an integral element in lived realities of lived spaces. Representational spaces tend to uphold ideals of lived spaces in and through countless signs: images, icons, indexes, symbols, and so on. In our lived spaces we tend to hold some invisible, powerful, decisive patterns of thoughts and ideas: self/other, person/society, society/state, welfare/harm, and so on. This space can also be thought of as poetic space. This is poetic because in the first two categories of space logic is the key configurative. How spaces shape persons and their choices is what becomes prominent in the first two types of spaces. But do men live in logic alone? Men also require the canopy of the non-logic. Non-logic does not mean irrationality but non-rationality. To keep consistent with the previous examples, Dhakaites can say: We are in a hell in Dhaka! The fact that no one is in hell in Dhaka is quite true and logical, but the nature of lived space tends to be non-communicable in logics. It can only be expressed in symbols, images, or conceits. More examples include a rat race, a bed of roses, and so on.

For many, the idea of the representational space or lived space is awkward and unnecessary. They would wonder why Lefebvre (1991) thought about this space of images, metaphors, symbols, and dreams in the first place. How any conceptualization of this space is of any help? To be true, representational space or lived space is a powerful one. Only while

standing in this ground of space, one can negotiate with the two other spaces.

This space is also a poetic one. This is a space of poetry, music, imagination, literature, art, painting, love, revolution and so on. This is the reason why any dictator or any repressive governments tend to ruin the free flowing operation: creation and maintenance of this space. Capitalism also tends to ruin this space in a different way: by diverting Dhakaites in our case from thinking, by taking away time for reflection.

Lefebvre's spatial triad is accepted by Edward Soja (1989), a postmodern geographer. But Soja proposes three different spaces:

1. First Space: It is geometric space. It can be measured and shown in map. This is none other than Lefebvre's spatial practices.
2. Second Space: It is a perceptive space. Ideological understanding tends to shape this space.
3. Third Space: This is the space of collective meaning making process. In other words, it gets shaped in and through the interactions between the individual and the social imagination. This space gets manifested or communicated in images, symbols, metaphors, and so on. This is none other than Lefebvre's poetic space.

Apparently, Soja (1989) considers mind, body, and society as separate from each other. But that is not what Soja proposes here. Soja has borrowed Lefebvre's spatial triad and explained them as three different facets not divisions or compartments of each other.

Retrospectively, the spatial practices (Lefebvre, 1991) or the first space (Soja, 1989) can be taken as the space of logic. Observing the surrounding through sensory perception and navigating accordingly is what occurs in this realm. The representations of space or the second space is then can be taken as the space of the logic of logic. Why do people live in box-like flats? The maximum utilization of minimum resources here gets matched with the limited affordability of the consumers. The utilitarian logic here gets accepted by the logic of consumer capitalism. The ideologies of the consumer capitalism here work as the logic of logic.

But humans don't live in the realms of logic and rationalities alone. Along with numerous logics, there remain many trends, propensities, and tendencies: imagination, impulse, depression, and so on. The realms of these get recognized as the representational or the lived space by Lefebvre (1991). Soja (1989) identifies them as the third space. I would like to acknowledge it as the space of the logic of non-logic.

In retrospect, it can be argued that the production of spaces is correlated with the modes of production in the different paradigm shifts

across centuries. The private and the public spaces in the feudal economy are different from the same in the capitalist economic system. One significant point must be made: unlike Carl Marx, Lefebvre believes that the production of spaces is not merely economic, political, and social but also spiritual.

What is so spiritual about spatial production? Here the spiritual refers to the creation and perception of space, the changes and the reconfiguration of space in the mind of the individual. It is dynamic and perpetually changing. To explain this, Lefebvre uses an example: the cubist paintings do not directly reflect the exact social realities the way painters see them. They rather express painters' felt realities or perceived realities. Now, to emphasize the active agent behind the action: who do feel or perceive? Obviously, the painters and the audience do. In contrast, the classical paintings portray the realities as the social and the collective. Hence the reality in the classical painting is objective: here the issue of the individualized experiences gets overlooked. The premise is simple: reality is independent of an individual's reception of it. But this way of thinking can lead to problematic thoughts and events that do not count the understanding of an individual really important. This way of thinking promotes the top-down view of the world. The top-down logic tend to be hierarchical and manipulative: forms of thought, ideas, and concepts in the top-down logic of capitalism, for example, get considered as objective, mathematical, and scientific. But, this is pseudo-objective in the sense that math and date, and so on get used to wipe out history, the history of the capitalist accumulation though colonialism, genocide, warfare. These realms of objectivity, the ones of math and science and utilitarian logic are what Lefebvre identifies as abstract space. In contrast to this abstract space, Lefebvre introduces another kind of space: differential space.

Abstract Space is one of mathematical and scientific logic. It takes shape through erasure of history. It colonizes lives and life forces. To take an example, we may consider how capitalism colonizes our lives. Disseminating the logic of profit and interests, it makes counting and measurement of everything as practical, commonsensical and good. This logic perpetually intrudes our personal spaces so much so that what we would do hour by hour gets dictated by the logic of utilitarianism and capitalism. Abstract spaces also colonize our social life: in theory, we may stay wherever we want to stay, but, in practice, we are confined and trapped within the threads and webs of the capitalistic logic. Any authoritative institutions and forces can dominate, control, and suppress lives only within the logic of the abstract space. This dominating force takes control within the rationalities of the objective logic: the survival of the fittest, the logic of profit, the logic of free market and so on.

Any abstract space is cautious to demarcate its areas by drawing boundary lines around it. Whoever and whatever the abstract space excludes constitute 'differential space.' Shopping malls, banks, mega shops, corporate offices, rich neighborhoods in Gulshan and Baridhara are few examples of abstract spaces in Dhaka. Whatever remains outside these sorts of spaces are differential spaces: slums, poor neighborhoods in Mirpur and Kamrangirchar and so on. On the other hand, sites and modes of protest, those of processions and movements, guerrilla warfare, and so on are also differential spaces. These are considered differential because they get excluded within the logic of the same prevalent in the abstract spaces. The relations between the rich neighborhoods in Gulshan and shopping malls have the homogeneous utilitarian interests. In contrast, the rich neighborhoods in Banani, Basundhara, or Dhanmondi have the differential relations with slums and poor neighborhood in those areas or other area in Dhaka.

The relationships between the abstract spaces and the differential spaces are quite interesting. Apparently, the relations are one of conflict and contestation. But, practically, the abstract space and the differential space are interdependent in the sense that they need one another for their formulations and demarcation. It is not that differential spaces always oppose and get conflictual with the abstract spaces. But any abstract space wants to devour and annihilate differential spaces when such appropriations is profiting. For example, to create more and more residential building and commercial complexes, slums in Dhaka get burned down in a planned way. The governments tend to overlook these planned atrocities because the governments also want to become another abstract space.

Lefebvre (1991) does not conceptualize the abstract spaces and the differential spaces as mutually exclusive. Any abstract spaces can be converted into differential spaces: doing something in an abstract space for which that abstract space is not built in the first place can reconfigure the operations of the abstract space and they may behave like differential space for some time. Roaming around in the shopping mall for passing time and not buying anything for example can be an act of reconfiguration, and it would be more impactful if hundreds of people do the same for a longer period of time. Though these conversions are temporary, they do have revolutionary potential. These may be sparks, but they may lead to forest fire of contestation and protest which are real differential spaces. The differential spaces within any authoritative control tend to become abstract spaces. The logic of hierarchy, priorities of interests and profit become prevalent and the abstract spaces tend to manipulate live forms and life forces within the utilitarian logic. This is how Lefebvre (1991) would have analyzed the trends, tendencies, and patterns of urbanization in cities where he would

have detected the simultaneous workings of the three phases: the rural, the industrial, and the urban.

With the theoretical frame sketched above, the rest of the paper would analyze some sites of contestations within Dhaka city.

II

More than 14 million people live in Dhaka. Statistics and numbers like these may help us understand the rapid urbanization in Dhaka, but to get insights into the uneven development and asymmetric urbanization, a Lefebvrian analysis can be useful. With an aim to offer this, this part of the paper does a close textual analysis of three images of Dhaka's spaces. The objectives of this analysis are:

1. To examine the presence of the rural, the industrial, and the urban.
2. To examine how Lefebvrian spaces function.

The first objective will help us understand the asymmetric urbanization in Dhaka while the second will help us understand the quality of urban life in Dhaka.

Image 1:



Figure1: The slum in water bodies

The slums in water bodies in the image represent many slums like this across Dhaka.

The make shift houses on the bamboo poles accommodate the working class people like rickshaw pullers, garment workers, hawkers, maid servants, and so on. Poor people from villages of different districts arrive in Dhaka in search of livelihood. Thus they provide the cheap labor the urban economy craves for.

The water is blackened with the chemical releases from the nearby factories in which some of the slum dwellers work. The skyscraper next to the slum indicates not only the co-existence of the rural and the urban, but, more importantly, the unplanned urbanization Dhaka undergoes.

The skyscraper is an ‘abstract’ space that has demarcated its boundary keeping the slums separate, hidden, and ignored. The slum dwellers are living in a differential space, but they are dependent on the abstract space in the sense that people in the abstract space recruit them for work. Given the focus on the representational space, slum dwellers’ life chances are shaped within the spatial management in which the abstract space would manipulate the differential space. Lived spaces of the slum dwellers remain the same for centuries as they would hardly get any scope or intention to question the spatial management that makes them deprived of life chances.

Image 2:



Figure 2: The proximity of the residential building and the factory

More than 60,000 factories can be traced in the residential areas of Dhaka. The combination of the industrial and the residential in Dhaka is quite alarming for the Dhakaites. Many chemical factories in Old Dhaka often cause fire and other hazards. The image shows the interesting proximity of the residential building with the factory, and the horizon shows the greenery and a good view of the neighborhood. This is typical in many parts of Dhaka. Consequentially, water pollution, air pollution, and sound pollution and other hazards are damaging the life forms and life forces in Dhaka.

The abstract space of the factory is totally ignores the risks the people in this neighborhood carry. They are exposed to all kinds of pollution and the law enforcing agencies tend to overlook this. The spatial practices of the people in this neighborhood, their day to day life activities are shaped by the representations of space. Their lived spaces, their imagination and leisure time, their dreams, and their aspirations are visibly ignored and suppressed by the spatial management here. Interestingly, the image 1 above shows how the lived spaces of the working class people get ruined while the image 2 represents the same for the lower middle class and the middle class people in Dhaka.

Representational space is one of ideology, beliefs, and knowledge. As the image 2 shows, the co-existence of the factory and the living areas is managed in the logic of capitalist configuration of thoughts. Neither the government nor the neighbors in their lived spaces feel the urge to oppose this. Perhaps, a segment of the neighbors understand the injustice, but, again their lived spaced fail to enable them to accomplish any resistance. The factories, consequentially, remain in the residential areas.

Image 3:



Figure 3: The mixed use of the commercial and the residential

In some relatively rich neighborhoods, a new phenomenon is the increase of the mixed use real estate. While some floors of the building get used for shopping mall, others are designed for apartments for people to live in. Such a combination is an example of the profit oriented spatial management at the expense of lowering the quality of lives for the city dwellers. The abstract space here dominates the life forms. The sound pollution, the traffic, and other hazards defy the requirement of peaceful environments in such residential areas.

As the Lefebvrian analysis reveals, Dhaka is a combination of some abstract spaces that constantly regulate and tends to ruin the differential spaces. Playgrounds, water bodies, and empty lands are being occupied with building and make shift shops, and factories. River banks are occupied with shops and houses. Lived spaces of Dhakaites are tinged with anxieties and fear. Therefore, they are dumbfounded to mobilize differential spaces. The state and its multiple organizations are themselves becoming more and more abstract spaces that either exclude or annihilate differential spaces. Therefore, Dhaka's urbanization is asymmetric and it promotes uneven development.

The spatial mismanagement of Dhaka, as the paper analyzes and exemplifies, is the deterrent to a planned urbanization in Dhaka. The educational institutions, the state organizations and the governments must understand the value of nurturing differential spaces. Initiatives must be taken to create local job and business opportunities so that big waves of migration to Dhaka can be stopped. Dhaka is already overburdened with more than 14 million people, and for a proper spatial management any unplanned expansion would just increase the problems we already have. Critical geographers having insights of Lefebvre (1991) must be consulted while doing urban planning for Dhaka.

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Spatial triad of Lefebvre Table 1:

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