Living in the High-rise Flats and Apartments in Dhaka City

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1. Introduction

The central focus of this paper is the insight of the social life among the dwellers in the high-rise flats and apartments in Dhaka city. It is found that a new form of social affiliation and a new dimension in the urban life are going to take place. It focused on the pattern of high-rise flats in Dhaka City and the distribution of the families in those flats, the social bonds among the dwellers, the culture of the community living in flats and finally the relationship of these communities with the other part of the urban society. This study has been carried out following anthropological research methods in four areas in Dhaka city: Shantinagar, Motijheel, Dhanmondi and Lalmatia. Data were gathered from 28 flat owners in 12 multistoried buildings. Respondents were selected for interview and case study through random sampling. This paper has been presented in three sections. A theoretical discussion on urban life has been presented in the first section. Dhaka City, trends of it's expansion and the development of the real estate business have been discussed in the second section. Finally, the dimension of life in the flats from social, cultural and economic perspectives has been analyzed in the third section.

2. Concepts and Issues

a) City and Urban

City is defined in terms of its' size (territorial), density of the population and institutions, and patterns of settlement of inhabitants. Many scholars termed the city as 'communities with specific institutions, such as autonomous political elite, or a commercial market' (Wheatley 1971), 'with a relative density and size for granted and concentrates on the quality of heterogeneity and access to a wider variety of services and goods than in generally accessible in smaller communities' (Ulf Hannerz 1980: 109), and 'societal

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contexts' (Richard Fox 1977). Urban anthropologists and sociologists concerned with understanding the way of life which are distinctive to city inhabitants. Many scholars consider 'loneliness, and privacy are the hallmarks of city life' (Zborowski and Herzog 1952). On the other hand, urbanism is the 'physical entity of the city' (Wirth 1938:4). At the beginning of the 21st century, systems of cities have become a dominant factor in the world's social, economic, cultural and political matrix (World City Report 2001: 10).

In broader sense city represents ongoing process in local, national, regional and global phenomenon. At the local level it works with the neighborhoods, households, families, and the individual. 'A city's identity is stamped both from the inside and from the outside; it is a part of and apart from other levels of human organization' (Hill 2004:374-5). City plays the functional role in the globalization process (Cross and More 2002:1, Friedmann 1986:318, King 1990:154, Sassen 1991:4, Taylor 1995:57–58). It is the key actor in 'widening, deepening and speeding up of world wide interconnectedness in all aspects of social life' (Held et al. 1999: 2). It provides the infrastructure and expertise that enable corporations to coordinate and control their transnational activities. These are prime sites for incoming and outgoing foreign investment and migrant workers. Cities are central nodes for the international transport and communications that compress and unify the world. The economic system in a region or in a country arrange through the network of the cities. Thus, it could be said that the economies in the world articulate into a global system through the cities.

b) *Frontiers in Studying Urban/City Life*

Max Weber, in his writing 'The City' (1922) prompted a great deal for sociologists and anthropologists to study urban and city life. Weber conceptualized city from different aspects. From sociological aspect Weber defines city as 'a settlement of closely spaced dwellings which form a colony so extensive that the reciprocal personal acquaintance of the inhabitants, elsewhere characteristic of the neighborhood, is lacking' (Weber, 1922:1212). From economic

aspect, a city is always a 'market center' (Weber, 1922:1213, Ahmed 2004). From political aspect the city is the appearance of a distinct 'bourgeois' estate (Weber, 1922:1226).

Weber explained the features of city as 'where authority had rested on a rational rather than on a charismatic or traditional basis; where the law was enforced on an universalistic basis rather than on a personal basis; where grouping existed on the basis of class rather than family and clan; where citizens were governed by trade groups rather than by religious groups; and where city's strength derived from an economic base rather than a military base' (Ahmed 2004:36). Weber has seen city from all aspects of social structure, economic, political, religious and legal institutions. Thus cities are treated in terms of their relations to other cities, to other parts of their society, as integral parts of the social and political order (Ahmed.2004: 35).

Another key figure in urban studies was Louis Wirth. His work 'Uurbanism as a Way of Life' (1938) is a hallmark in urban studies. He emphasized size, population density, and heterogeneity as characteristics of the city. Wirth conceptualized urbanism from three interrelated perspectives: a physical structure, a system of social organization and a set of attitudes and ideas. From his viewpoint 'urbanization no longer denotes merely the process by which persons are attracted to a place called the city and incorporated into its system of life (Wirth 1938:5).

Wirth's formulation has created a spontaneous interest among anthropologists and sociologists. Robert Redfield (1947) compared four communities in the Yucatian area of Mexico that ranged from a city to a small Indian village where urban society was impersonal, heterogeneous and secular, and folk society was posited to be personal, homogeneous, and sacred. Village life was seen to be satisfying, peaceful, well integrated, and comparatively free of strife. Oscar Lewis (1952) studied villages from Tepoztlan to Mexico City, found that the Tepoztecos maintained close kinship ties and kept many of their religious practices in the city (Lewis 1952). In general,

anthropologists challenged the idea that a single model or paradigm could apply to all cities in time and space.

c) Contemporary Perspectives

The twentieth century could be considered as 'the century of urban transformation'. Following the World War II the urbanization process got a serious momentum and created lot of cities around the world. During the great rural-to-urban population shifts over the past half-century, cities became supermarkets for employment, incubators of technology, suppliers of social services and shelter, portals to the rest of the world, processors of agricultural produce, adders of manufactured value, centers of learning, and, above all, places to make money through trade, industry, finance, real estate and, of course, attendant crime and corruption (World City Report 2001: 7). Now at the beginning of the new century and millennium, the planet hosts 19 cities with 10 million or more people; 22 cities with 5 to10 million people; 370 cities with 1 to 5 million people; and 433 cities with 0.5 to 1 million. The process of urbanization will continue well into the 21st century and, by 2030, over 60 percent of all people (4.9 billion out of 8.1 billion) will live in cities (World City Report 2001: 6). In cities, a wide range of services are easily available. That is why; cities became the representative and the symbol of culture, people and region. With these positive features, cities are burdened with a lot of crises such as unemployment, environmental degradation, lack of urban services, infrastructure, finance, adequate shelter, etc. Dhaka is one of the cities in the world that bears most of the features of a contemporary global city in this respect.

3. Dhaka: Portrait of a Global City

Dhaka is the capital and largest city in Bangladesh. It has a population of 14 million and covers a total area of 1353 sq. km. approximately. The Dhaka municipality was founded in 1864 and recognized as corporation in 1978 (DCC 2009). Dhaka City has faced its highest rate of physical and population growth during 1981-1991, with the population doubling during that decade and the city expanding from 510 sq. km to 1353 sq. km. (BPC 1981 and 1991).

Dhaka is one of world's most populated cities. The increasing rate of population size was 6.9% during 1974-2000 which was only experience among the cities in the world. The United Nations (1999) described this case of rapid population growth 'exceptional'. During 2000-2015 it is expected to grow at a 3.6% annual growth rate and reach a total population of 21.1 million in 2015. This will put it in 4th position on the list of the world's megacities (UN 1999, Hossain 2006). World urbanization Report (1999) presented that as a largest trade place, Dhaka with 6.6 million population was 25th in 1990 and with 12.3 million population was 11th in 2000 and with 18.4 million people it will be 6th in the world in 2010 (World City Report 2001:11). United Nations (2002) predicted that Dhaka would be the second largest city in the world and at the same time the rate of urbanization in would be the highest in the world. A survey report on quality of living 2008 shows that Dhaka stands 206th position out of top 215 cities in the world in that year and it was 203 rd position in previous year (2007). The same report published that Dhaka was the world's 2nd dirtiest city.

a) Development of the Real Estate Agencies

The perception of commoners in general did not change much and most people continued to prefer living in individual houses rather than in flats in multistoried buildings. In 1980s, the trend gained a momentum with large-scale acceptability of the concept of living in flat houses under sharp shortage of land, gradual increase in land prices and the cost of construction.

Real estate business (apartment/flat projects especially) has started in late 1970s but in 1980s, the business started to grow rapidly. Dhaka is now flourishing with lots of high-rise buildings and business complexes. Living in the flats started in 1980s, and then it was only for rich and wealthy families. A significant number of real estate companies are working under one umbrella association named 'Real Estate and Housing Association of Bangladesh' (REHAB). Approximately, 250 Companies are at present affiliated with this association, while more than 200 companies are working

independently but 95% business is still dominated by of top 15 Companies. Present market is growing at the rate 10-15% approximately. *Concord, Eastern Housing, Sheltech, South Breeze, Square, Navana, Bashundara, Jamuna, Amin Muhammad, Advanced, UDDL, Rupayan, etc.* are some of the renowned real estate projects in the city. Buying an apartment is very difficult for the poor and lower middle class people. Middle class families usually choose to live in central and neighboring areas. The rich people choose the posh areas in the city. Ther sie of flats varies from 550 square feet to 6000 square feet and above.

The real estate business has many features. The size and price of the flat, beautification of the building, and the brand construction companies, etc. are based on location and segmentation of the urban class. Though, some companies claim that they prepare only luxurious and quality apartments irrespective the location in the city as their brand. The general segmentation is mainly based on the location, price of the land, and size of the apartments. The major distinctive segment areas are: a) Baridhara, Gulshan, Banani, DOHS, Dhanmondi, where only rich can afford the apartments. b) Segunbagicha, Shantinagar, Kakrail, Malibagh, Kalabagan, Lalmatia, Eskaton, etc. where upper middle and rich buyers are becoming the dwellers. c) Uttara, Mohammadpur, Mirpur, Old Town, etc. are famous for middle and upper middle class buyers. This portion is the important section to understand the newly developed apartment culture. Besides, some multistoried building prepared for both or either corporate or business complex and residential spaces at the same time. Those are mostly located around the business area and wider road-sides such as Motijheel, Dilkusha, Karwanbazar, Panthapath, Dhanmondi, Gulshan, Banani, Eskaton, Baridhara, Elephant Road, Mohakhali, etc. The development projects for apartments and residential purposes include duplex and luxury home, individual flat/apartment, commercial space, office showroom, shopping center, etc.

The demand is extremely higher than the availability of land in Dhaka. Within the metropolitan area, an insignificant number of the

households are able to afford the price of the land. 'Land is beyond the means of ore than 80% of the city's population (Islam 1988). For flats, most of the owners depend on house loans and financial agents. Real estate financing is well known and widely practiced in Dhaka and other citis in Bangladesh. Hoek-Smit (1998) explained that 'the upper income group covers approximately 2% of the city population and 15% of the land in the city area. Then the middle income group covers approximately 28% of the city population and 65% of the land in the city area' (Hoek-Smit 1998:15).

In 1998, an estimate was configured by Hoek-Smit through the REHAB on the price of land, cost of construction and sale prices of the flats in different areas in Dhaka. Just 10 years later, in 2008, another estimate is prepared by through this association. The comparative price-list is remarkable. It was found that the price of land in Dhaka has been increased by 5 to 6 percent from 1998 to 2009. Similarly; construction cost increased by 1.5 times, sale price also increased by 4-7 percent during thid period (Hoek-Smit 1998, Hussain 2009)

4. Dimension of Social Life in Dhaka City

Social network is established by households over generations. It has taken a different form in flat context. In flats, social networks serve traditional adjustments and arrangement. It is supportive in the residences because of the mobility and heterogeneity of the inhabitants. The flats dwellers mostly maintain their relationships with relatives, friends and fellow dwellers. Dwellers keeps connections with their immediate neighbors. The households who are living in the flats for a long time have wider social network. Flat owners come from different social background. When they start living in a building, neighborhood grows among themselves. Everyone tries to find out the close fellow within the community. Thus, many clusters of fellow groups are taking place in a flat community. The basis of this grouping is age, education, occupation, origin (home district), political identity, regular religious practices, like minded, etc. The views are common that the city people as well

as flat dwellers bear confidence of having relationship with kin from blood and marital ties. Employment and land ownership play important roles for social networks.

This is the first generation who has started living in flats. They cope with urban life through diverged strategies: accessing basic goods which represent luxuries, providing education to their children, using social networks. The dwellers consider the interior design and setting of the flats. In many cases, dwellers change the interior structure of the flat. Reshaping is common in construction. Restructuring takes place in case of number of bath and wash rooms (lavatory), veranda, internal corridor, windows and their setting, sliding doors, cabinet, closet, etc. Those are usually prepared according to the choice of the owner. At present, some big companies are providing more facilities such as, a prayer room cum religious studies center, an office room, servants (imam, guard, liftman, cleaners) room, a small gymnasium or fitness center, a swimming pool, a community library, indoor playground, etc.

After the start of the apartment culture, many joint families have broken down and shifted to the apartments. The urban family structure has been gradually going for the nuclear family with parents having few children.

High-rise culture is a new characteristic in the city life. Residents are becoming accustomed to this. The number of apartments is increasing day by day and so also the number of apartment dwellers. Some customs, norms, rituals and ceremonies of apartments definitely touch the life of the dwellers either as an owner or renter in an apartment building. In this sense flats are the place of sharing knowledge, culture, and social life. Dwellers visit others' houses, participate common programs, join holiday gatherings, and similar groups. Dwellers can choose their friends and circles from a large number of people of similar interests and inclinations.

The distinctive features of the social life in high rise flats is consisted of the substitution of secondary for primary contacts (family), such as the weakening of bonds of kinship and the declining social

significance of the family, and the disappearance of the neighborhood and the undermining of the traditional basis of social solidarity.

The flexibility of living in the flats depends on close relationship to one another. It is important to expand this relationship to other as possible. This is done either by increasing frequent gathering, contacts or by increasing network gradually.

The concentration of residents in flats forms a high degree of mobility. The patterns of communication and greater mobility make it possible for individuals to maintain a sense of community life around the flat areas. The communities are more inclined to look at social networks that set the links between individual flat owner. Each individual in a particular place has a different series of links with others who live in the same buildings. Some dwelleres have strong ties while with other people the links are casual and weak. The network perspective provides a new dimension in flat culture.

Flats are the small centers of the struggle for social status. Their concentration of diverse populations and their attraction provide the conditions for competition and changes in social relations.

a) *Flat life in Dhaka: Taste of a Mainstream Society and a Global City*

The demographic feature of a city is important to consider the dimension of the real estate development. A living place of 14 million people is considered as one of the volumetric economy in the world. The country is not enough rich but the total volume of the economy of the city in relation to the country stands ahead than many economies of other states. Thus the scope for wealthy people in Dhaka is multidimensional and opportunities are enormous. The demographic size of the city, its' geographic location, the dynamics of their industry and commerce, cultural roles and diversity and particularly social conditions of the rich and middle class, etc. are important for real estate business and buyers.

Many dwellers claimed the status of an Islamic city where the high rise flats are the prime places to protect privacy accurately. This is

unlike the fluid boundaries of neighborhoods. Gender segregation is an important feature in Dhaka. Traditional values and practices led to building codes that prevented stranger from seeing the inside of the house. The layout of houses, bedrooms, and neighborhoods, as well as screening of windows, made it possible for insiders to see the outsiders, but not vice versa. The causes of the differences is the traditional religious practices in Dhaka.

b)   Some observation

According to residents the real estate companies or developers are mainly responsible for the high price of land in the city because they pay a much higher price for of land. It is argued that due to this reason middle and upper middle earners are unable to buy land in the posh areas. The value of urban land is actually determined and fixed through competition in a complex economic process.

Two decades back the city dwellers were reluctant to live in flats. This situation has been changed in last ten years. Recently, they started to show an increased interest in owning apartments. As mentioned earlier the main reason is the increased land cost as well as the cost of construction. The other reasons are individual's choice of spending time and energy in house construction, increased awareness of apartment living, and global influence. As a result, flats became popular. The other factor is the absentee buyers, such as, the wage earners. As a result of increased demand, many new builders appeared in the market in recent years. Earlier, few companies were engaged in developing land and building flats. It may be mentioned here that in 1988 there were less than 20 such developers in Dhaka. At present there are 300 such developers in business. Few companies and business individuals engaged in land development in smaller scale and selling apartments to friends and relatives only.

Apartment development, as mentioned earlier, has become increasingly popular in recent days and is likely to continue in future. It has a number of positive approach regarding solving housing problems of the city. But at the same time it has certain demerits and frustration too.

The frustration comes from the buyers about the price of the flats. In many buildings there is significant lacking of recreational and community space, open area, narrow entry, and space management, etc. Moreover, the high rise building prevents social contact with other neighbors due to status and prestige issue which lead to socio-psychological stress.

The problems regarding the physical features that have been identified by the respondents were: inadequate distance and height variation among the buildings associates, some parts of the building are always shaded, lack of green space, fire escape, community space, playing area, etc. Some problems are related to internal designing, such as, inconvenient corridor, improper ventilation system, small and dark rooms, narrow stairs, dampness, etc. Finally; there are frustration of the owners to the builders for frequent use of low quality construction and fitting materials, constructional defect leading to cracks in the floors and walls, dampness in walls and and excessive heat in the top floor due to lack of lime terracing.

The first advantage of living in an apartment is security. Residents, naturally, want to ensure security where they live. It is commonly observed children's stay at home causing parents to often be in a state of anxiety at their working place.

Home ownership is a greater burden for many urban dwellers. Rents are also higher and absorb a larger proportion of the income. That is why the middle and rich people like to have a small house or a flat in a building. They are inspired to buy it. The dwellers have the benefit of many communal services, such as, recreation, taste of mainstream culture, advancement of technology and spending a smaller proportion for food.

The recent phenomenon of high rise buildings, both in the commercial and residential sectors, clearly shows that land within the city has been exhausted. To cope up with ever-increasing pressure Dhaka has started going upwards, an inevitable and common phenomenon in all modern cities with dense population and little scope for horizontal expansion due to topographical reasons.

Dhaka is on the verge of a change in its urban character, vertical growth taking the place of horizontal expansion.

There has been a definite shift away from houses towards flats. Live in a well maintained and beautiful high-rise apartment in the city and getting other facilities is considered better as a fulfillment of a dream of ownership of the solvent portion of dwellers. The dwellers get some facilities which are not usually available in private owned houses such as, security, lift, beautiful design of the buildings, etc. A successful high rise dwellers community is widely expected by the residents. Some residents claimed that flat culture is fostering a transnational network between the global urban centers and local people.

5. Conclusion

A small portion of city dwellers are living in the high-rise flats. They are comparatively wealthy portion of the inhabitants of the city. Considering Dhaka City with all features of a 'global city' this paper examined the experiences of living in the flats in local and global contexts. The dwellers enjoy the taste of living in a global city with pleasure and satisfaction as well as sorrow with the anxieties of risk, pollution and uncertain destination of lacking of services, facilities and safety. A high rise culture including observing national, religious other ceremonies are common. Individual households celebrate birth anniversaries of children, marriage anniversary of young couples, marriage ceremony, etc. and organize other particular events. Age and gender based cultural programs such as music, games and sports, gym and fitness activities, concert etc. are organized by the respective groups.

Since the starting of flat culture in Dhaka some changes have been taken place. The notion of flat or apartment owning had the individualistic perceptive. The owner wanted to live separately. A secured, quiet and private space was a flat. Now the dwellers made it a common place to interact each others. People from different sphere and locations gather together. They want to enjoy a community life. Thus, from traditional community feeling, they isolated themselves

earlier and reoriented again. But this revival situation is different from previous one. It is more sophisticated and economic solvent-minded on the basis of ownership. Social, cultural and economic dimension of these changes have been observed. A significant gap between the flat dwellers and other urban groups has been observed. The flat dwellers are mostly interested to interact with their old friends, relatives and other flat dwellers. They show their less interest with commoners.

There are different set of relationships among the dwellers of high rise flats. These relationships are based on their cooperation and interaction in daily activities. The common pattern of social relationship could be said a complex set of competitive, conflict and cooperative relations. In a particular apartment building, cooperative relationship is found among the neighbors and participant in religious activities mainly. Otherwise, competition is common phenomenon among the dwellers. These are based on age, occupation, owner of luxurious equipment (e.g.; branded vehicles, ownership of more than one flats, etc.). Regarding social interaction, sometimes they involve in conflict where the association of flat owners take necessary steps to solve the conflict.

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