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Dhakaiyas and Gentrification in Old Dhaka

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Introduction
Dhaka is an ancient city with a long historical background. The city has gone through a number of transitions since the 7th century and till the emergence as the capital of Bangladesh. The present Dhaka is one of the top ten cities of the world in terms of population and home of about 15 million people. Various studies have indicated that the rapid growth of Dhaka’s population is mainly caused by natural increase and influx of migration from all over the country. It is estimated that nearly sixty percent population of the city are migrants, either first, second or third generation (Jones et al. 2016, Akhter 2014). These migrants are accommodated in different parts of the city. With this influx of migrants, meet the demand of the inhabitants, to cope with economic dynamism and technological advancement the city is always going through a process of changing its features and characteristics through gentrification.

Based on various characteristics, researchers have identified two parts of Dhaka i.e. Old and New Dhaka (Khan 1976; Ahsan 1980; Khan and Islam 1996; Khatun 2003 and Akhter 2014). The area of the old part is limited up to the extended area of Mughal Dhaka. The old railway tract presently, Hatkhola - Sonargaon road is the line of demarcation between the two parts (Map 1 and 2). The area south of this line is roughly taken as “Old Dhaka” and “New Dhaka” on the north. Like any other city both part of Dhaka is experiencing the dynamic process of change in characteristics of population and infrastructures and their use through infiltration and succession as well as gentrification.

Map 1: Old and New Dhaka

Source: Khatun (2003)
With long history and diverse cultural background the society of Dhaka is featured with a cultural mosaic. The presence of earlier settlers in this mosaic is prominent in Old Dhaka area i.e. within the area of Mughal Dhaka. The earlier settlers of this area are commonly known as “Old Dhaka People” or “Dhakaiya”.

Map 2: Old Dhaka Area

Like any other big city Dhaka is also experiencing gentrification i.e. the process that involves change of characteristics of the neighborhood. This change can be development of new infrastructures including multipurpose building or renovation of old housing structures and revival of deteriorated urban neighborhoods by means of influx of migrants with more affluent residents, which results in increased property values and the displacing of lower-income families and small businesses or change of functional characteristics of the structures. Gentrification is typically the result of increased interest in a certain environment or characteristics of neighborhood. Further steps are increased investments in a community and the related infrastructure by real estate development, businesses, local government, or community activities and resulting economic development. In addition to these potential benefits, gentrification leads to population migration.

Generally in a community undergoing gentrification, the average income increases. Poorer pre-gentrification residents who are unable to pay increased rents or cope with the escalated service cost or economic stress may find it necessary to relocate. Gentrification may be viewed as rejuvenation as many gentrified neighborhoods of the present were once affluent neighborhoods of the past. In other words gentrification generates social mobility and eventually intra-urban residential migration.
Ruth Glass used the term "gentrification" in 1964 to describe the influx of middle class people displacing lower class worker residents in urban neighborhoods in London (Glass 1964). Glass identified economic class as criteria of the successor or migrant community. One by one, many of the working class neighborhoods of London have been invaded by the middle-classes and later by high classes and shabby and low cost housing have become elegant, expensive residences. Once this process of 'gentrification' starts in a district it goes on rapidly, until all or most of the original working-class occupiers are displaced and the whole social character of the district were changed. Nail Smith (1979) explained the gentrification through rent gap theory. It describes the disparity between the current rental income of a property and the potentially achievable rental income that leads the gentrification and renovation of some properties or neighborhood as a whole takes place. The research also shows that gentrification also has strong influence on the characteristics of the community under the change. It can be through 'social mixing' of more than one group or changing of composition. It might weaken or strengthen community cohesion. In recent past researchers like Sharna (2016), Rahman and Khatun (2016) have conducted study on gentrification in respect of rent gap as well as change of land use, utility services, neighborhood amenities and change of livelihood in two areas of Dhaka city. These areas are Mirpur in New Dhaka and Lalbag in Old Dhaka. As Old Dhaka is predominantly inhabited by Dhakaiya people, with some special social characteristics and owning the inherited property by Dhakaiya people, impact of gentrification in Old Dhaka would have some unique pattern.

**Objectives and Methodology**

This study concerns with the participation of Dhakaiyas in gentrification in Old Dhaka area. This study is going to highlight the Dhakaiya community, the indigenous community of Old Dhaka and how they are participating in the process and contributing in changing the functional use of land as well as structure aided with other socio-economic and infrastructural parameters of the city. Intra-urban residential migration pattern and process of Dhakaiya people, mostly from Old towards New Dhaka will be examined to understand the involvement of the Dhakaiya people in the gentrification process in Old Dhaka.

Both qualitative and quantitative data from primary and secondary sources has been utilized in this study to reach the objectives of the research. An overview of the determining factors for making the move by a Dhakaiya family from Old to New Dhaka and consequent changes on the place of origin, i.e Old Dhaka area in terms of change of characteristics of physical infrastructure, functional change of land use and socio-economic characteristics of the mover as well as successor household. Finally, the personal experience of the researcher, field visit and some informal interviews as well as focus group discussion with in some Dhakaiya people moved to New Dhaka also enriched the research to a great extent. The author’s firsthand experience of being mover from Old to New Dhaka is reflected in the narratives analysis of the study.
Dhakaiya People

The Dhakaiya people or sometimes referred as the ‘Old Dhaka People’ are the earlier settlers of the city. In the literature, the Dhakaiya people have been identified as distinct community in this multicultural society being characterized by its large number, special dialect, strong community ties through different social, cultural and economic activities and tendency to stay in the inherited property in Old Dhaka.

There are many people who own property and living in Old Dhaka for quite a few generations but not the Dhakaiya people. The criteria of a Dhakaiya person have been identified by the Dhaka Shomitee (1995) which was formed in 1965 and these are followed in this study. The term “Dhakaiya” People as used in this study refers to those indigenes that presently own or owned the inherited land in Dhaka city as recorded in the Cadastral map of 1912. Therefore, this study identifies those persons/families as Dhakaiya people who presently own or owned inherited property in Old Dhaka which were owned by their previous generations for more than 100 years.

As one of the oldest and most traditional cities of this subcontinent Dhaka locally flourished during the Sen rulers, and turned into a small town and an important business center during the regime of independent Sultans of Bengal and turned to a industrially developed town of that period. However, as city it came into limelight under the Mughal in the early 17th century and became the chief center of trade and commerce in the area. With invasion of the city Mughals entered the city with military troops, administrators as well as artists, architects and other professionals from north-west i.e. Agra and Delhi. Most of them were Muslims followed by Hindus. Many of them settled in the city permanently even after completion of their tenure period. These people and others who were very close to them adopted a special dialect, Urdu/Persian mixed with local Bangla. They are known ‘Khusba’/’Sukhbas’ community of Old Dhaka (Taifoor 1956; Islam 1982; Humayun 1994; Hossain 1995, Rahman and Khatun 2003).

However, in the administration for general people and as a dominant spoken language of the common city dwellers ‘Hisdustani’ i.e. mixture of Hindi, Urdu, Persian, Arabic became a lingua franca in the city (Karim 1964; Ahmed 1986, Ahmed 1991 and Islam 1991). From mid eighteenth century Marwaris and up-country merchants were involved in rice trading in Dhaka. They imported paddy from the interior of the country and employed numerous local laborers as rice huskers to process paddy into rice. These rice huskers came from the adjacent districts and were called as ‘Kutties’. The cross language communication between the Hindustani traders and the rice huskers led to the growth of a hybrid dialect called ‘Kutti’. In later period this labor group participated in almost all sectors of city development. Initially they were the laborers or workers but in later period they worked as low class professionals like mason, shoe makers, tannery workers etc. (Taifoor 1956; Dani 1962; Ahmed 1986; Islam 1991 and Humayun 1994).

After long journey through the historical vessel the voyager i.e the indigenes of present Old Dhaka still speaks special dialect. The ‘Khusbas’/’Sukhbas’ people speak Dhakaiya Urdu which is quite different from the refined Urdu of the west. On the other hand the ‘Kuttis’ speak Dhakaiya Bangla, different from common Bangla but mixed with Urdu/ Marwari. But all of them use Bangla as their formal language. Presently many Dhakaiya people especially the educated
ones speaks normal Bangla, even within their family. However it is interesting to note that many non Dhakaiya living and having their livelihood in Old Dhaka speaks Khusbas or Kutti, mostly Kutti (Khatun 2003).

Dhaka is known as city of mosques. Dhakaiya people are conservative in nature and majority is Muslims. Business seems to be occupation of majority of them. They have been performing leading role in the Federation of Chamber of Commerce. Practically economic base of Dhaka has developed through the Dhakaiya people. They own property in Old Dhaka as well as in New Dhaka. In inheriting the property son usually gets the priority in having his share at the existing residential unit of the parents and daughter gets share of other property (Khatun 2000). They maintain a strong social bond through different social organizations. To upkeep this social bondage they encourage in-marriage system i.e. marriage within the community members. (Habiba 2008; Habiba and Khatun 2011). The ‘Panchayet’ system used to be the unique one to keep the Dhakaiyas in close bondage. Presently the formal ‘Panchayet’ system is no more in existence but the spirit still prevails among the Dhakaiya people. Informal Panchayet system is still in operation in Bangshal. This Panchayet resolves local problems, look after the wellbeing of the distressed people, distribute accumulated jakat in collaboration with the mosque committee and maintain community resources including one pond very efficiently.

It is presumed that still the overcrowded Old Dhaka is conspicuously inhabited by the Dhakaiya people and their socio-economic characteristics including occupation, level of education, language and other activities give a special character of this area. It can be said that being the members of the earlier community of the city, they prefer to live in earlier settled area of the city where they have been living for generations and maintaining their cultural and ethnic ties. According to Khatun (2003) ‘Dhakaiya’ people constitutes about 20 percent of the Dhaka city population in 1990s. Based on the total population of Dhaka City Corporation in 1991 total Dhakaiya population in Dhaka city was more than eight lac. By considering the natural growth of population of Bangladesh it is estimated that total Dhakaiya population in 2011 was about 11 lac. On the other hand Hasina Akhter (2014) has figured out that only about 24 percent of the Old Dhaka Dwellers are Dhakaiya.

**Gentrification in Old Dhaka**

In Old Dhaka the width of streets from building to building, varies between 3.05m and 7.32 with average of 4.88 meter (Chowdhury 1983). There are only small areas in Old Dhaka which can
be services by conventional buses. However, in last three decades some roads have widened mainly by filling the low laying land and canal but certainly with good drainage facilities. Flood was a common phenomenon in Old Dhaka five decades ago but now it is improved to a great extent.

Dhaka has been expanding towards north for long time but it got a momentum in the decade of 1980s. The expansion facilitated with extended housing opportunities, infrastructure development and establishment of numbers of commercial and service centers and industries from small to large size. On the other hand importance of Old Dhaka decreased with high population density and low infrastructure facilities. But with the development of road network like North South Road, Road along Dolaikhal up to Gandariya and some other roads in Lakhmibazar area and others in Old Dhaka remarkable gentrification took momentum since late 80s and expedited in 2010s. Changes in Old Dhaka due to gentrification have not been highlighted in a documented manner but it is going on as part of the process.

Intra-urban residential mobility is the change of residence within the same urban area. Through the process of residential mobility the city experiences a cultural diffusion as well as change in social structure of different residential areas. Clustering of early settlers in the older part of the city is a common phenomenon in almost all the South Asian cities. However, in response to the change of their basic needs, housing desire and other changes they also change their residence in the city, mostly towards New Dhaka. Over period of time their place is in filtered by other group of people may be Dhakaiyas or non Dhakaiyas and functional use of the land also changes from low class residential to high class residential or to commercial area with increase of land value or potential for high economic return. This type of change is a continuous process and Old Dhaka is no exception to that. By making this move Dhakaiya people are playing a vital role on gentrification in Old Dhaka area.

Intra-urban migration of Dhakaiya people and Old Dhaka Dwellers as a whole has been analyzed for last 7 decades and before, since before 1950s, in three separate studies by Sultan Shahriar (1988), Hafiza Khatun( 2003) and Hasina Akhter (2014). It is evident from the studies that highest percentage of intra-urban migration took place during 1981-90 followed by 1971-81. This is the decade when city size expanded for about 38 percent over the earlier decade both in
terms of population and area. Increase of move compared to the increase of city size is remarkable. This is the decade when a number of private developers had successfully introduced the concept of apartment building in Dhaka city like any other cities of the world (Huq 1991). Road network in Old Dhaka also developed in this decade mostly by widening the roads in some area. This facilitated the property owners in achieving high economic return by changing the functional use of land and structure i.e. through gentrification.

Movement pattern of Dhakaiyas from Old to New Dhaka have been evaluated for last 7 decades. In last three decades majority of them moved mostly to Dhanmondi, Mohammadpur, Gulshan, Banani, Uttara, Mirpur and other areas. However, four distinct patterns of the destinations of these movers have been observed. Firstly, there is the presence of a significant number around the eastern and western border of Old Dhaka area. Secondly, their concentration is high in densely populated areas and low in low density areas of New Dhaka. Thirdly, they have followed more or less the same trend of city development i.e. more concentrated in early developed areas and gradually decreased over the recently developed areas. Finally, they have followed more or less the main arterial roads of the city. However, in last two decades many Dhakaiya people also changed their residence within Old Dhaka towards a better housing with improved infrastructural facilities.

Like any others, Dhakaiya movers are dominated by young group. Majority of the head of the mover households are within the age group of 25 to 40. Most of these households are composed of youthful adults and young children and average household size of these movers is smaller than the average size of other city dwellers. It indicates that with the formation of a family and having children they move out from their inherited land as a nuclear family. It should be mentioned here that about 20 percent of these movers have moved with extended families. They moved either by selling the inherited property or changing its functional use, mostly for better economic return or to have better opportunities.

Only 5 percent of them moved to a rented house in New Dhaka but they have property somewhere in Dhaka. The Dhakaiya movers have got the ownership of the house in New Dhaka through three principal processes, (1) bought by the household head, (2) inherited by the household head and (3) owned by the wife of the household head either through inheritance or gift from the parents. Majority of them moved to or now living to multistoried building with bigger size and better utility and support services in New Dhaka. Before the move per capita housing area was 15 sq meter and it increased to 38 sq meter. However about 20 percent are enjoying more than 70 sq meter.

Education level of the Dhakaiya people is much less than the average city dwellers. However it is evident that household heads having the post graduate degree is about four times higher among the movers than the non movers. This can be explained as rising of education level, Dhakaiya people got the momentum of social mobility which aspired them to make a move from Old to New Dhaka. Dhakaiya people are predominantly involved with business irrespective of the location of their residence. However, more than 12 percent of the movers are land lords i.e. their principal income comes from renting houses or markets mostly in Old Dhaka and also in
New Dhaka. In-marriage (within Dhakaiya people) is predominantly high among the non-movers, whereas inter-marriage of the movers accounted to be higher among the movers. It can be said that like the other factors like education and occupation intermarriage also acted as a social force to influence the migration behavior of the Dhakaiya people and eventually influence on the gentrification in Old Dhaka.

The complaint about physical and social environmental condition in Old Dhaka followed by inadequate dwelling space, negative proximity to children’s school, economic reason and family problem acted as the principal determining factor of the moves to New Dhaka. Congestion, overcrowding, dirty, traffic congestion, dreadful environment of the neighborhood is very commonly used words to narrate the complaint about the neighborhood. On the other hand good environment of the neighborhood followed by economic reason, enough dwelling space, familial opportunity and proximity to school are the determining factor for selecting the destination area. However, the houses left behind are occupied by other group of people, may be Dhakaiya or non-Dhakaiya, mostly with same or some improved condition. It is clear that through the process of intra-urban mobility of Dhakaiya people the older part of the city experienced a social and physical infrastructure change through the process of infiltration and succession.

Present Old Dhaka inhabitants are classified as Dhakaiya and non-Dhakaiya. The non-Dhakaiya people are again identified as tenant and owner of the property. Average age of Dhakaiya household head seems to be higher compared to the non Dhakaiya owners followed by tenants. It is also evident that household size of non-Dhakaiya tenants is smallest among all the groups. In other words young working group dominated by male members with moderate education level, single or newly formed families are moving towards Old Dhaka and looking for their fortune. The present tenants have come here mostly within last two decades. As part of urban ecological system many of them have settled in low spaced and low cost housing in Old Dhaka. On the other hand, the non Dhakaiya owners who have come from different parts of the country but mostly from the districts around Dhaka and most of them are living in Dhaka for second or third generation with highest level of education among all.

Vertical development of commercial and residential land use made Old Dhaka an important employment generating area which attracts traffic and consequently creates serious accessible problem. A typical characteristics of the Old Dhaka commercial center (Like Chawk Bazar, Islampur , Banglabazar, Bongshal) was mixing of the business and residential uses in the same structure. Most of these structures were very old and owned by a number of members of the same family through generations. Many of these structures have been renovated or rebuilt. In some cases the dispute regarding the ownership prevented to participate in the development process. Even now many structures are being shared by many households for commercial as well as housing purposes.

It can be stated that Old Dhaka facilitates business opportune for all the dwellers but about quarter of the tenant are involve with services followed rickshaw pulling or laborers. Majority of all the dwellers in Dhaka are living in multistoried building but a remarkable percentage of
tenants live in kutcha and dilapidated structure. Per capita area for non-Dhakaiya owner is highest (20 sq meter) but is lowest for the Dhakaiya family (8 sq meter). Old Dhaka still plays a good role as the wholesale markets for the city as a whole. These markets are the main source of employment of most of the people in Old Dhaka.

Old Dhaka is the busiest and densely populated part of the city. Millions of people reside permanently in Old Dhaka for service, business and other purposes. The dwelling places required for this large number of people are very inadequate. As a result, the residential areas have turned into overcrowded, dirty localities with unhealthy environment.

Dhakiaya people who have sold their house to non Dhakaiya households mainly during the early periods have not necessarily made intra-urban move. They might have moved to other dwelling units of Old Dhaka. On the other hand in the recent past, within last four decades, the Dhakaiya intra-urban movers have not necessarily sold their house at the time of their move. Even if they have sold it, they have sold it to other Dhakaiya households. Many Dhakaiya movers have gifted or sold their share to their family members in Old Dhaka. The mover still maintains close link with their ancestor’s property through their business and social bondage. Many of them make their livelihood from that property either by using it as commercial enterprise or renting it out as a dwelling unit, certainly by improving the quality of the infrastructure. However, majority of the current inhabitants are non Dhakaiya people but most of the property is owned by the Dhakaiya people.

However, in recent past mainly in last two decades various developing agencies and numbers of private developers have constructed many new business centers or markets as well as service centers like hospital, diagnostic center, schools, universities in different parts of Old Dhaka. Most of these center/markets are becoming specialized. Majority of the shopping areas have been developed privately, taking advantage of the accessibility points, along the major roads, mainly the wider roads. Some of these are using the street level frontage forming ribbon patter. Others are clustering at nodal points.

Most of the structures in Old Dhaka is under multiple use except some specialized markets or service centers. At least part of the most of housing structure is being rented out, mainly for housing purpose, also for commercial purpose. More than one third of the housing infrastructures left by the movers are now being used for commercial purpose and more than one quarter as housing and rest are for multipurpose. It means some part of the house is being used for commercial purpose including shops, small scale industries and warehouse, office and sell centers. It is evident that Dhakaiya owners use more area for commercial purpose then the non Dhakaiya owners.

Since early 1980s most of the housing companies started their projects in different parts of the city, mostly in New Dhaka and later it started in Old Dhaka. Initially the developers usually sold the developed plots, mostly raised the low laying area. At that time, there were no active rules to control or manage their activities. Housing companies sold their plots to buyers and then buyers develop his or her own land. However, since early 1990s construction of buildings with multiple flats in sharing basis started and now a days this the practice still going one.
Maksudur Rahman and Rajiya Khatun (2016) through their research in Shekh Saheb Bazar in Lalbagh have recognized that like new Dhaka a new type of residential development has come on the scene in Old Dhaka, which can be broadly termed as apartment development by constructing multi-storied buildings both by the owners and real estate companies. And it is performing as an important actor of change in the ‘Mohallas’ or neighborhoods of Old Dhaka. Multi-storied building construction results in change in different aspects of the neighborhoods of Old Dhaka. The researchers evaluated the change of the characteristics of the housing structures, land use and utility services over last one decade (2005 -2015). Vertical expansion of buildings and construction of new multi-storied buildings is the major feature about the land-use change in Shekh Saheb Bazar neighborhood.

It is evident that 81 percent of the building structure is developed by the owners and rest by real-estate companies. However, 80 percent of the present ongoing under construction work is maintained by the real-estate companies. It indicates that the building owners participated in gentrification in this area by their own investment but recently developers are playing a role of catalyst.

As a consequence population density is increasing with the construction of multi-storied buildings, most of which has not been followed the National Building Code of 2006. Moreover the buildings are so much congested that they do not have any gap to prevent the pounding effect of earthquake. The average width of the access roads of Shekh Saheb Bazar neighborhood is about 6.4 feet which is almost inaccessible for any kind of emergency exit and rescue operation. Most of the buildings above six-story is located near the roads has a width of 3 feet to 6.5 feet. Construction of multi-storied buildings without maintaining the rules and regulations is increasing the risk instead of reducing.

**Conclusion**

For lack of law enforcement and strong monitoring by RAJUK, through gentrification people in Old Dhaka have violated the plans during the construction of their buildings and structures. Even for many buildings they do not bother to prepare or approve any plan by RAJUK. They build their structures on their own way. They do not follow the instructions, which has described in the Building Construction Act, 2008. Lack
of coordination among various public and private organizations is also a big issue for this unplanned growth and manages the services and it is alarming for the densely populated Old Dhaka area.

This scenario is more or less common in Old Dhaka for residential as well as commercial areas. Being the owner of the majority property in Old Dhaka, Dhakaiya people are pushing Old Dhaka to a more vulnerable situation through the gentrification, whereas gentrification supposes to make the area prosperous with better environment. However, this gentrification certainly brings positive change in terms of economic value but environmental value is in question.

References


