

Paths and Politics

In this blog I reflect on the idea that our urban journeys, or paths, are far from neutral or mundane. Instead, they reflect deep histories and important political conditions. Comparing paths in Victoria and Dhaka, I argue that how we get around is much more than a simple matter of convenience or logistics – it's political.



Dhaka is not a static city. Movement seems to define this place, from the rise of concrete towers from bristles of rebar, to the rattle of rickshaws over bumpy streets, to the hundreds of thousands of internal migrants moving into and out of the city every year. In this blog, I reflect on what is at stake in all this movement and consider the politics behind how we get from A to B.

Everyday activities, from picking up milk at the stall across the street, meeting friends at a park on the other side of the city, grabbing

a bite to eat at a shop down the block, or getting to work on a busy morning all require people to leave their residences and travel on public sidewalks, streets and roads. Within the city these routes are of a relatively short distance, although their transit may take a long time. They can involve any number and combination of forms of transport, from walking, bussing, or driving a car, to hiring a rickshaw or riding a motorbike. How one gets around is more than a simple matter of moving from place to place. Like anything else, there is power at play.

In order to draw attention to this power, I will consider the routes that urban travel takes as *paths*. Paths are everyday sites of power. They are the imaginary lines we project in front of and drag behind ourselves as we travel. They host contestation and conflict, excitement and boredom, they are personal and public, entirely unique yet commonly shared. Paths are the stage upon which every aspect of life can play out – from the birth of a child in an ambulance to the death of a person in a collision. Politics is the presence of contestation, and paths are deeply political.

A shortcut can give one an advantage, while a jam can put an entire section of the city behind. Rarely do most engage in physical confrontation but for the path, as we force our cars into spaces,



boldly hold out our hands and assert our right to cross streets, and push past shoulders moving slower than ours. Hierarchies of power are a constant feature of paths, as pedestrians give way to rickshaws/CNGs/cars/busses and trains in ascending order. Yet these hierarchies are always open to contestation and change. Once a bus breaks



down and jams a road, the script may flip and pedestrians might hold the advantage, weaving through idle cars and rickshaws who can squeeze through the small gaps between trucks. Although we rarely stop to consider it, moving is one of the most political things we do. As the site of this movement, we ought to consider paths more closely.

One of the most striking features of Dhaka is the traffic. Dhaka is a city that seems to be constantly stuck. Infrastructure development has lagged behind rapid population growth and

Dhaka has no metro system to speak of – an anomaly among cities of its size. While flyovers and new highways are slowly being constructed throughout the city, these are unlikely to make any real difference. Congestion is a constant feature of daily life. Hundreds of thousands of rickshaws ply streets riddled with holes – some of which could swallow them – while rains can flood entire major intersections and put block after block of road underwater. In Dhaka, paths are unpredictable at best, impossible at worst.

The scale and intensity of movement in the city can be overwhelming. When I first arrived in Dhaka I had nearly no way of creating my own paths. With no previous experience, the streets were unintelligible. Stepping out into the flurry of activity initially felt like letting go of all control I had over my movement. From my perspective, the streets from which I had come in Victoria offered simplicity and legibility, while the streets of Dhaka were nothing but chaos.



To borrow an line of analysis from James C. Scott¹ I was going from a system built more on the synoptic viewpoint of “seeing like a state” – those easily abstracted and translatable

¹ James C Scott, *Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).



legible city layouts that look just like the maps used to plan and create them – to a city built more organically, through people, politics, improvisation and problem solving. Dhaka is a city that requires what Scott calls “metis”, or practical knowledge – one must learn to navigate and negotiate the city in such a way that they create paths that come from lived experience, not abstract knowledge.

In my limited experience, the paths I create in Dhaka rely much more heavily on other people than those I created in Victoria. I cannot get around Dhaka without relying on

interaction, from asking friends and coworkers about place names and directions, to hiring rickshaw wallah’s and hoping my strange pronunciations of intersection names and landmarks are understood. Traffic is such that my focus needs to be on my surroundings when I walk around. To put in my headphones and saunter off, unfocused, would be to meet the front end of a bus – quickly. I cannot be isolated in my journey. In Dhaka I must interact. Not so in Victoria.

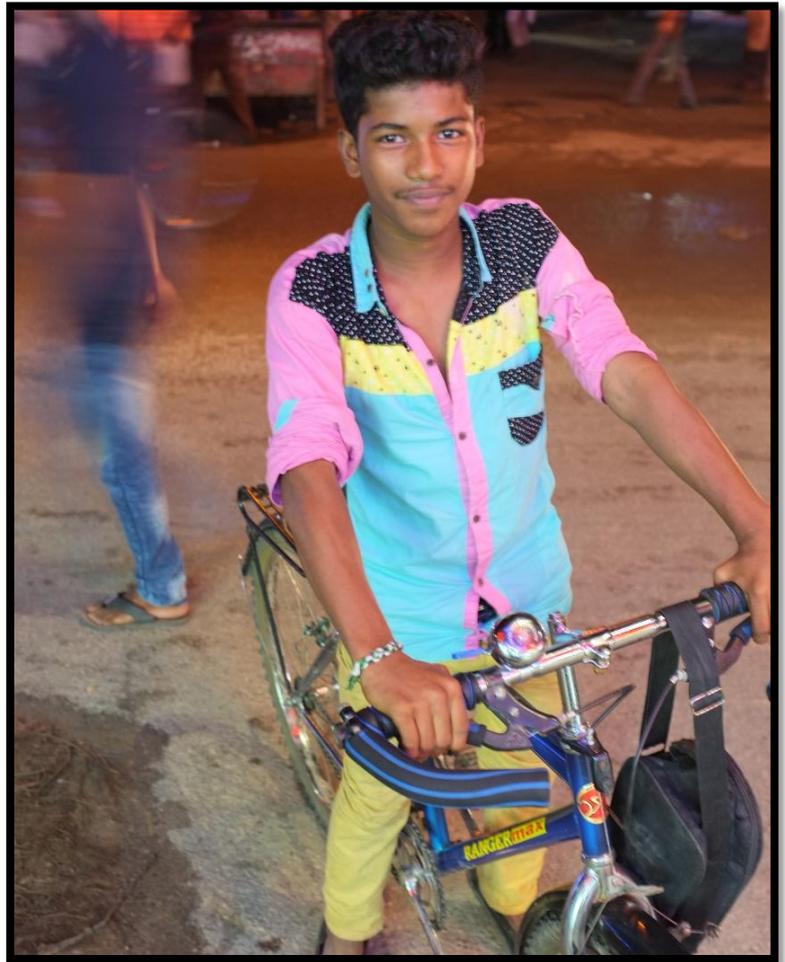
In Victoria it was possible for me to take long journeys that required little interaction. I was familiar with the systems and they were entirely legible to me. Paths were predictable, and as a privileged white male with a bus pass, very few places were inaccessible. Dhaka and Victoria present two rather different possibilities for path creation. So what do these differences suggest, politically? While I cannot answer that question here, I can reflect on what the differences *do not* suggest.

Although I used words like “chaotic” and “unintelligible” in describing paths in Dhaka, this is much less a reflection of the reality of the roads as it is a reflection of my inexperience. The point isn’t that the roads are anarchic or chaotic in the sense of not having any rules or standards. Indeed the more time I’ve spent here, the more I’ve come to appreciate the rules and power dynamics the roads do have. To a long-term resident of the city these are second-nature. But for someone new to the city they are intimidating and complex, hard to figure out. Likewise for the roads in Victoria.



For those who are accustomed to them, they make perfect sense. But to navigate the roads in Victoria for the first time could bring up interesting questions: Who gets the right of way? Who can I ask for directions? Where can I pass? Where can I park? To someone used to it, the system makes perfect sense. But to a newcomer, the norms, rules and power relations of the road are not immediately obvious.

In Victoria, paths are governmentalized, as they directly reflect the will of the state and what Michel Foucault called the “conduct of conduct”². Most people use sidewalks, crosswalks, passing lanes, bike lanes, etc. in the specific ways set out by the state. While the state wields limited control through the use of police, the majority of rules are followed due to self-discipline. Rules and norms taught by parents, teachers, friends, driving instructors, etc. function to shape certain types of subjects who by-and-large, follow state rules. In Dhaka, the presence of the state is much less apparent in the way people use paths. Roads, sidewalks and crosswalks are used differently, with people filling every available space with activity, using every available inch to move forward. These paths are not the way they are because of the state – they are this way because that is how the people created them. Far from a subtle distinction, this suggests quite different ways of engaging with the state. Politically, one system is based on state mentalities of discipline and discipline of self, while the other is based on personal freedom and the maximization of available resources.



None of this is to say that the differences between paths suggest any kind of superiority of one form over the other. Both systems of roads and paths are responding to unique and ever-changing conditions. Given these conditions, both make sense. They are constrained and enabled by history, geography, climate and politics. The paths that that are possible directly reflect this. Ideally both systems will improve, as traffic and urban mobility have a huge impact on the economy, environment, health and safety. What is clear however, is that far more than being simple ways of getting from A to B, paths reflect vast histories and politics. The ways in which we move through cities place us into a direct and embodied relationship with these deeper conditions. Class, race, and gender each directly inform the paths we are able to create. Our paths reflect contestation over limited resources, environmental challenges, historical legacies, geographical and climatic restraints, personal identities and social structures. In short, our paths are political.

Jordan Konyk, 2015

All Photos Are My Own

² Mitchell Dean, *Governmentality: Power and Rule in Modern Society*, vol. 2 (Thousand Oaks, Calif; London: SAGE, 2010).