*Original Article*

# Right to the city in the age of neo-liberal development: A case study of two slum communities in Dhaka, Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT: Due to rapid urbanization and the influence of neoliberal development policies, slum dwellers frequently encounter marginalization, inadequate living conditions, limited access to urban resources and spaces, and limited political representation throughout the world. Bangladesh is not an exception. This study investigates the right to appropriate and political participation of the urban poor in Bangladesh within the context of neoliberal development. In addition, the study critically evaluates the role of the state and various non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations in mobilizing the urban poor in Bangladesh. The study, therefore, implements a mixed-methods approach, including surveys, interviews, and community consultations, to obtain answers to these questions from two slums in Dhaka, Bangladesh, named *Sattola* and *Pallabi*. The findings show that the urban poor in these informal settlements confront significant challenges in claiming urban spaces due to local legislation, regulations, and development plans. As a result, they must negotiate with various formal and informal stakeholders to exercise their rights over urban spaces. The study also emphasizes that the urban poor face social and institutional barriers that limit their ability to participate effectively in decision-making, such as exclusion from formal political processes, limited access to information, and a lack of awareness of their rights. These difficulties exacerbate their marginalization from conventional urban development planning. Furthermore, the study demonstrates that due to the authoritarian state's control over them, NGOs and other civil society organizations cannot assist the urban poor in mobilizing their right to the city. As a result, this study underlines the importance of a democratic government in Bangladesh for recognizing and defending the rights of the urban poor. Additionally, it emphasizes the importance of policy reforms and partnerships among government institutions, civil society organizations, and international actors to achieve inclusive and sustainable urban de-

velopment that prioritizes the rights and well-being of the urban poor.
KEYWORDS: Neoliberalism, right to the city, urban space, NGOs, autocratic government.

## INTRODUCTION

As an independent country, Bangladesh has made remarkable strides in socio-economic development and has achieved substantial growth in various sectors, including reducing poverty and increasing literacy levels. However, the country faces a significant crisis stemming from the impact of economic neoliberalization. Although many scholars like Hamza Alavi and Samir Amin think that this crisis lies within the colonial legacy and, moreover, within the autonomous state apparatus, as Polunontaz, a renowned Marxist thinker, claims that in the colonial and post-colonial phases, the main function of the state was to preserve and strengthen the capitalist mode of production, and therefore, the state establishes the rule of the economically dominant classes (Sen, 1982; cited from Mondol, 2014). As a result, Bangladesh has always experienced economic crises propagated by its attachment to the colonial state apparatus.

The historical analysis showed that the newly born state had taken significant actions to support capitalism and the capitalists from the beginning. Although the leader of the Bangladesh Independence Movement, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, nationalized all major industries (Dennecker, 2002), due to the management crisis and weak governance, a small fraction of the population received a huge amount of wealth from the state by using political power and corruption (Mondol, 2014). Some also accumulate a capital from various foreign grants and aid given to the country for its vast infrastructural development. Consequently, these types of capital accumulation and political instabilities caused a financial crisis in the first five years after independence (Ibid; cited from Mondol, 2014). Dennecker (2002), a German scholar, showed that due to regular pay constraints, the state faced huge challenges running these industries. Therefore, after the demise of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in a bloody military coup, when General Ziaur Rahman took over the charge of the state, he initiated privatization in the public sector and inducted a good number of retired civil bureaucrats and army personnel into his cabinet (Khondoker, 2004). Some new recruits were already working in the private sector, profiting from the privatization of formerly government-run enterprises. Later in 1982, after the killing of President Ziaur Rahman in a military coup, General Ershad took over state power and initiated the IMF and World Bank-sponsored projects of privatization through the industrial policies of 1982 and 1984. Since then, Bangladesh's economy has adopted neoliberal policies on the one hand and politically designed national policies on the other. As a result, since the 1990s, the essence of capitalism has altered substantially because of the tremendous expansion of market-driven neoliberal policies and practices (Mondol, 2014). With these changes in economic structure, political struggles over the 'production of urban space' (Lefebvre, 1974) have become more widespread and intense (Haque, 2012). Furthermore, due to accelerated urbanization, Bangladesh is currently confronted with enormous social

and population problems. The rate of urban population growth will likely moderate in the future, but it will still be quite high. According to UN Habitat (2003), the projected urban population of Bangladesh in 2030 was 86. 5 million. In 2050, the total urban population will surpass 100 million (Islam, 2012; cited in Hossain, 2013).

Dhaka has emerged as the 11th largest megacity in the world, with a large informal population of 6.46 million (The Daily Star, 2023; Lata, 2020; UN, 2016; Hossain, 2006). By 2030, Dhaka would become the 6th most crowded city in the world, and the population is estimated to be over 27 million (UN 2016, Arefin and Rashid 2021). Approximately 40 percent of the population of Dhaka lives in the city's neighborhoods, and hundreds of millions of new urbanites will be engaged in peripheral economic activities, e.g., informal sectors, because of the limited resources in formal employment. Therefore, Dhaka would become a living museum of human exploitation in the age of surplus humanity (Devis, 2006; cited from Hossain, 2013), where slum dwellers didn't have access to their fundamental rights, such as clean water, sanitation, access to healthcare, and education (Dhaka Tribune, November 18, 2014). Again, rapid privatization of all services has exacerbated further discontent and distress among the urban poor. As a result, the idea of the *Right to the City*, as proposed by Lefebvre (1991) and Harvey (2008), is constantly contested in Dhaka city.

In this context, considering two informal settlements in Dhaka named *Sattola* and *Pallabi* as case studies, this paper will explore whether 'neoliberal development' is compatible with the 'right to the city' concept in Bangladesh. Specifically, it will explore urban poor people's right to appropriate and participate in the production of spaces. Besides, the study will critically evaluate the role of various non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations in mobilizing the urban poor during the autocratic government in Bangladesh. Therefore, the next section will discuss the conceptual framework of neoliberalism and the right to the city. Then it will describe various anti-neoliberalist movements initiated by people experiencing poverty worldwide. Again, this will be followed by a brief discussion of the study's context and methodology, leading to the presentation of empirical findings by analyzing the right to the city, NGOs, and civil society intervention in Bangladesh. Finally, the article concludes with a remark on achieving inclusive city governance in Bangladesh.

## CONTEXTUALIZING NEOLIBERALISM AND THE RIGHT TO THE CITY

Since the 1970s, 'neoliberalism' has been prevalent throughout the world, first through the Thatcher and Reagan revolutions in Britain and the United States, primarily in political and economic practices. It has always been a widely used and contested term across the world. In its most systematic usage, it might refer to an economic theory that came out of the limitations of liberalism. Although David Harvey, an influential urban geographer and Marxist thinker of our time, views 'neoliberalism' as not simply an economic theory but rather a political project aimed at restoring class power by creating new institutional arrangements that advance the interests of capital (2006), According to him, "Neoliberalism is a theory of political economic practices proposing that human well-being can best be advanced by the maximization of entrepreneurial

freedoms within an institutional framework characterized by private property rights, individual liberty, unencumbered dual markets, and free trade" (Harvey, 2007, p. 22). On the contrary, James Ferguson, an anthropologist at Stanford University, contrasted Harvey's ideas of 'neoliberalism' by arguing that neoliberalism is not just a set of economic policies but rather a broad social and political transformation that creates new forms of subjectivity and governance. By claiming that neoliberalism has been used to explain a variety of policies and practices, such as the demise of the welfare state, the privatization of public services, and the spread of market logic into all aspects of society. Again, he finds that neoliberalism is not a monolithic or coherent ideology but rather a series of activities that can be contested and transformed (2009).

In this backdrop, the function of the state and governmentality is determined by the powerful financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the Inter-American Development Bank, which imposed neoliberalism on a global scale, restoring global capitalism and ensuring individual freedom of business. Harvey, in his book *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, clearly articulated the function of the state as being to establish an institutional framework, establish the military, defense, and police, and foster an optimal business environment for capitalists. In his view:

> (...) the neoliberal state should favor strong individual private property rights, the rule of law, and the institutions of freely functioning markets and free trade. These are the institutional arrangements considered essential to guarantee individual freedoms. ....The state must therefore use its monopoly of the means of violence to preserve these freedoms at all costs. By extension, the freedom of businesses and corporations (legally regarded as individuals) to operate within this institutional framework of free markets and free trade is regarded as a fundamental good. (2005, p. 64)

For example, in a study, Evans empirically examined the role of the Brazilian state under neoliberalism. He finds that the Brazilian state facilitates alliances between multinational corporations and local capital by creating a favorable investment climate for foreign capital and protecting local elites. This is accomplished in part through the development of new financial instruments and markets that facilitate the global accumulation of capital (1974). However, in the case of Bangladesh, the neoliberal policy was gradually imprinted as a 'structural adjustment policy', first through the industrial policies of 1982 and 1984 and then, in the 1990s, through IMF and World Bank-sponsored privatization initiatives. As a result, since the early 1990s, the nature of capitalism has changed drastically by extracting more profits while leaving the marginalized urban poor access to their rights in the city. So, in this study, I mean "neoliberalism' as a market-oriented privatized policy and a new form of 'governmentality' (Ferguson, 2009) that devalues public enterprise and the 'right to the city' (Lefebvre, 1974) by facilitating 'accumulations by dispossession' (Harvey, 2008) of the urban poor in Dhaka.

But what do I mean by 'right to the city' in the age of neoliberal development in Bangladesh? This needs further explanation. The concept of the 'right to the city' was put forth by Marxist thinker Henri Lefebvre in his 1968 book *Le Droit à la ville* (*The*

*Right to the City*) as a political program that aimed to strengthen the ability of the 'citizen' to take charge of processes of spatial production (Lefebvre, 1968, 1974; Purcell, 2002, 2003). Since urban space is so vital to the right to the city, the notion of space includes what he calls perceived space, conceived space, and lived space (Lefebvre, 1991). Therefore, according to Lefebvre (1997), the 'right to the city' indicates the rights of all urban dwellers, regardless of citizenship, ethnicity, ability, gender, and so forth, to participate in shaping the city. It basically entailed two intertwined rights: (1) the right to participate in the conception, design, and implementation of the production of urban spaces, shifting decisions about the production of these spaces away from the state and towards urban residents; and (2) the right to appropriate—through access, occupation, and use—urban spaces and produce them in ways that would meet the needs of urban inhabitants, hence shifting control away from capital that conceptualizes space as a commodity that can be exchanged in the form of property rights (Lefebvre, 1974; Logon & Moltoch, 1987). Hence, the idea of the 'right to the city' is like a reaction against neoliberal urban politics and capitalism in the city and, at the same time, a hope for the empowerment of its inhabitants. As a result, Purcell views Lefebvre's conceptualization as:

> Lefebvre's right to the city is a good starting point to explain the problematic and complex situation of the city, and it is a challenge for the current effects of the capitalist system and liberal citizens on the city. (Purcell, 2002, p. 14)

Later, Harvey (2008) extended this idea by arguing that the 'right to the city' is a fundamental human right, which is to claim some kind of shaping power over the process of urbanization and over the ways in which cities are made and remade. And he offers to do so in a fundamental and radical way (Harvey, 2009). According to him,

> The right to the city is far more than individual liberty to access urban resources; it is a right to change us by changing the city. It's, moreover, a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the process of urbanization. (Harvey, 2009, p. 315)

So, from the above theoretical discussions, the idea of the 'right to the city' is an anti-neoliberalist movement that demands control over the production of urban spaces and the urbanization process with the active participation of all urban citizens. However, in this study, I will borrow Lefebvre's concept of the 'right to the city' and try to understand the 'right to the urban poor' through the lens of the right to appropriation and participation in everyday urban spaces and city development projects in Bangladesh. Moreover, this article will explain how the urban poor's right to the city in Dhaka is denied by both the state and the market in its spatial production.

## NEOLIBERALISM AND THE RIGHT TO THE CITY: GLOBAL STRUGGLES AND MOVEMENTS

From the early 1970s until now, this neoliberal development policy across the world has created immense crisis and tension. In the name of 'freedom and liberty', it has

violated humans' basic rights to life and liberty. It has also concentrated capital into a few, which has created social exclusion, poverty, segregation, and polarization across the world. For example, it created a debt crisis in Mexico, Brazil, Ecuador, and Poland in 1982-85, as well as a crisis in US savings and loan institutions in 1987–88. Besides, it also created wide crises in Sweden in 1990, Indonesia, and South Asia in 1997-98, as well as crises in Russia, Brazil, and Argentina in 2001-2002, and finally in the US housing market in 2007-2008 (Harvey, 2016). This global crisis has changed the nature of the economy, market system, power dynamics, social relationships, and people's struggles. The city of today doesn't recognize everyone equally. Therefore, Lefebvre stresses the need to restructure the power relations that underlie the production of urban space, fundamentally shifting control away from the capital and the state and towards urban inhabitants (Purcell, 2002). Harvey also proposes an urban revolution to ensure collective rights and social justice for the urban poor (Harvey, 2009; Plushteva, 2009).

But what we can see in practice is far from the right to the city movement. From the neoliberal experiences of Tanzania, Lebanon, Chile, Brazil, Mexico, South Africa, the United States, India, and Dhaka, we found that the poorest section of society, especially the urban slum dwellers, informal workers, migrant workers, and women, are the worst victims of urban spatial politics. Although it is also noted that different protests and movements are also found in some of the countries, such as Brazil, Chile, Mexico, the U.S., and Mumbai, against anti-neoliberal development, they are inadequate. In the case of Brazil, the formation and struggle of the Comites Populares da Copa [Poular committees for the World Cup] in 2014 may be viewed as an example of heterotopic practices that were the first resistance against neoliberalism (Santos Jr., 2014). In Chile, against Pinochet's military dictatorship, landless migratory people contested urban space against gentrification, which has become one of the major fronts upon which poor people's struggle for permanence and dignity is most visible (Machbanski, 2013). It is also notable that against this injustice and vulnerability among the poor or working classes in Chile, social movements were dormant for many years following the end of the authoritarian regime, as the 'concertation', or coalition of center-left parties provided civil society with the comfort that democracy had assumed power in the democratic transition from the dictatorship (Machbanski, 2013).

Moreover, in Mexico City, the Right to the City movement sprung up from a collection of citizen groups that organized the city's marginalized residents, known as the *Movimiento Urban Popular-Congress Nacional Democratic* (MUP-CND), along with NGOs like the *Habitat International Coalition* (Adler, 2015). As a result, in July 2010, the city government relented, and Mayor Marcelo Ebrard's government initiated several programs to establish city rights for everyone. We can also see that in the United States, a 'Right to the City' movement covering 50 community organizations and partners based in 13 cities around the country is trying to fight against gentrification and social justice in the city. At first, the alliance consisted mostly of community groups from Brooklyn and other obvious magnets for wealthy young professionals, such as the Bay Area and Los Angeles (Kanfo, 2015). But in the later few years, many smaller cities like Lexington and Springfield were associated with this movement. As a result,

Bodega became the headquarters of the Right to the City, a national alliance of community-based organizations that, since 2007, has made it its mission to fight against "gentrification and the displacement of low-income people of color" (Knafo, 2015). Again, the protest made by the common people of Bucharest in Romania against the corrupted government and political elite after the Colectiv fire in October 2015 is the momentum where protesters used the urban space and the city centre location for a spontaneous action against the governing system, including deep-rooted injustice and corruption, state repression, stolen elections, and grievances, to establish their right to the city (Crețan & O'Brien, 2020; Arefin & Rashid, 2021). Similarly, in the context of south Asian countries, the street vendors of Delhi, Gujarat, and Mumbai in India have successfully achieved their vending rights through law enforcement and collective political actions under organizations like NASVI and SEWA (Jhabvala, 2010; Alva, 2014; Roever, 2016; Arefin & Rashid, 2021).

The discussion thus far indicates that some governments in developing nations permit citizens to participate in local decision-making and to organize themselves to assert their citizenship rights, including their right to a city. Not everywhere, however, is the case. In many cities, the urban poor are unable to assert their right to the city due to their governments' intolerance of social movements or the prevalence of autocratic governments (Lata, 2020). Consequently, the urban poor frequently employ the 'exit strategy', or what Bayat (2004) calls the 'politics of informal people': invisibility and avoidance of direct confrontation with the state or its apparatuses. The urban poor in Bangladesh rarely confront the state to assert their rights, but now it is completely unthinkable because of the nature of the state which is authoritarian following two failed elections in 2014 and 2018 (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Hence, the cases of Sattola slum and Pallabi in Dhaka are used to illustrate why and how the urban poor are unable to claim their right to the city or whether there is any avenue of resistance after analyzing the roles of various non-governmental and civil society organizations in Bangladesh.

## CONTEXT AND METHODS: TWO INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS IN DHAKA CITY, BANGLADESH

Dhaka is home to 23.21 million people (World Population Review, 2023), with a substantial influx of migrant populations. Friedman estimates that 500,000 people relocate to the capital from coastal and rural areas each year, roughly like the whole population of Washington, DC (Cities Alliance, September 10, 2009). Millions of Bangladeshis are relocating to Dhaka because agriculture can no longer meet the economic needs of the country's rising rural population (Hossain, 2016). Furthermore, poverty, a lack of employment prospects, a desire for better livelihoods, climate injustice, and economic restructuring drive the rural poor to relocate to Dhaka (Ishtiaque & Mahmud, 2011; quoted in Tamanna, 2014). But government housing projects are very limited in Dhaka City. According to present statistics, 30 to 50 percent of urban populations in the country do not have access to formal housing (Arefin, 2018). As a result, many migrating populations, accounting for 40% of the overall population, began to

live in numerous informal settlements. Dhaka today has over 5000 slums (UNICEF, 2020), and the number of slum residents and urban poor is growing in tandem with the tremendous spread of urbanization and neoliberal economic restructuring.

Sattola slum is in the Mohakhali, Niketon, and Gulshan areas, which are under the Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC) jurisdiction. In 2016, there were 12,893 houses in Sattola (BRAC, 2016; Lata, 2020) built on a 28-acre plot owned by the Institute of Public Health. On the contrary, Pallabi slum is in Mirpur, which is under the Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC) and has 12,000 urban poor families. Pallabi's land is mostly private, but it also has some public land. In 2017, I carried out a study on these two informal settlements for several reasons. Both slums are among the most dense-ly populated in Dhaka, with geographically unique surroundings. Pallabi is in Dhaka North City Corporation, which is also far from the city core. In contrast, Sattola is in Dhaka South City Corporation, which is also close to the downtown area. Furthermore, the most noteworthy difference is that both communities are juxtaposed with more affluent neighborhoods. Again, most slum dwellers in these two communities are in-formal workers in desperate need of urban services while living in horrible conditions.



Fig. 1 - Location and administrative map of Dhaka City, with Pallabi and Sattala slum
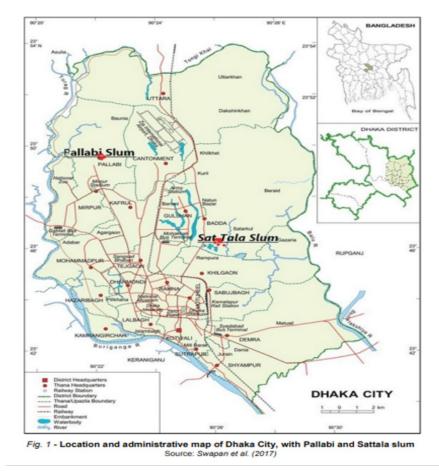Source: Swapan et al. (2017)

Figure 1. Location of Pallabi and Sattola slum in Google map
Source: Arefin & Rashid (2021)

This study's findings are based on empirical data gathered through a survey, in-depth interviews, observations, and field notes. Initially, I collected 180 survey data points (94 males and 86 females) across slum communities using a semi-structured

survey questionnaire, specifically to investigate socioeconomic and demographic characteristics, as well as patterns, services, and problems of urban poor people using urban spaces. Most respondents (58%) are between the ages of 25 and 54, with the youth (15-24) and elderly (55-60+) constituting 26.11% and 16.66%, respectively. Once more, 41% of respondents were uneducated, and almost 49% had only completed elementary school. An estimated 52.8% of all respondents participated in various informal activities, and 16.1% worked in the private sector. In this survey, slum dwellers made up about 85% of migrants, compared to only 15% of city residents who were born and raised there. Additionally, I conducted 14 in-depth interviews with informal workers, city government officials, and NGO officials to better understand the broader dynamics of these slum communities, including the treatment they received, available urban services, development politics, NGO and civil society initiatives, and the role of the local government. Along with the interviews, I spent a significant amount of time observing the everyday activities of informal workers and their interactions with other agents in the study contexts.

While conducting the essential quantitative and qualitative studies for this research, respondents were informed explicitly and accurately about the objective of this research and their confidentiality of the data was prioritized. Participants were able to leave at any time during the interview, and almost all were granted a written and verbal agreement to their voluntary participation or when the recording was required. However, qualitative data were analyzed using an open-coding method until major typologies and categories appeared. Furthermore, quantitative data were coded and entered IBM SPSS 24 for statistical analysis and tabular presentation, with bivariate and cross-tabulations performed. This study integrates both data collection and analysis approaches to produce a full understanding of slum communities, their struggles, and survival strategies in Dhaka City, Bangladesh.

## RIGHT TO APPROPRIATION

In Dhaka city, though the livelihood of the urban poor vastly depends on utilizing public spaces like streets, parks, neighborhood localities, and transportation stations, the state proclaims them and their illegal livelihood activities, such as street trading (Lata, 2020). As a result, they cannot use any urban grounds permanently, and they are everyday victims of spatial politics. In this study, it was found that 43.8% of the respondents couldn't use the same space every day, and about 53.3% faced various difficulties, including public harassment, police repression, local *mastans* (criminals*)* threats, and frequent evictions from one place to another. While speaking with Md. Kabir Hossain, a 45-year-old fisherman now doing business at Mohakhali Wareless Gate in Sattala Slum, I noticed regularly shift from one location to another. When I questioned him why he was moving frequently, he told me:

> When I started with this business (fish selling), I had no capital. I used to live in an open space and had no permanent space to use. Every day, I had to face various problems while using public spaces. Then, a few months later, I got this free space. But I couldn't enjoy using this space for a long time because a multi-story

apartment building was built here within a few months. Again, after some days, a man came to me and ordered me to pay 3500-taka monthly fees if I wanted to continue using this space. That's why I must shift this space. (Interviewee 3)

This affects their daily income, and it also deprives them of their right to urban space. From the right to the city perspective (Lefebvre, 1968), it can be argued that the urban poor in Dhaka city are unable to appropriate the urban spaces according to their needs. Instead, eviction, displacement, harassment for money, intimidation, uncertainty, and even sexual harassment are everyday events, regardless of gender and sex, in the urban space. From quantitative data, I found that around 57.0% of the female respondents who utilized public spaces in everyday life had to face several obstacles that restricted their movement within the space. Shayla, a 21-year-old garment worker from the Pallabi slum, shares her experiences in this regard:

It is difficult to move after the evening comes. Stalkers are everywhere in this locality. If anyone moves alone on the streets in the evening, she will certainly be harassed by these stalkers. (Interviewee 1)

Lata (2020a), in her recent study at Sattola slum, also found that urban poor women bear the triple burden of social stigma, religious barriers, and patriarchy when accessing public space to earn an income. Even the elderly women who earned a living for the families' survival faced sexual and verbal harassment and maltreatment. Besides, some women interviewees told me that they were treated as sex objects as they were working in public spaces. A similar context prevails in Indian society, where women face specific constraints when it comes to accessing urban space and other urban resources; young women, poor women, women of religious minorities, and women with disabilities are all equally vulnerable (Lama-Rewal, 2011).

Furthermore, because these people have few options for relocating or pursuing alternative livelihoods and because they have little authority to oppose dominant groups due to a lack of tenure security in their livelihood areas, they must employ negotiation techniques. As a result, they negotiate with various local states and non-state actors, such as *mastans* and police officers, by paying them on a regular basis. It represents a 'circle of money relations' where the state plays an ambivalent and crucial role, often by neglecting the real scenario and by continuing this dialect of eviction and repatriation of the urban poor by these unrecognized power holders. This relationship is continued through several formal and informal agents, e.g., middlemen, urban informal power holders, and the urban poor. On one side, the state is denying these people their status as legal citizens of the city, thereby excluding them from the necessary rights to use the urban spaces. On the other side, the state is not evicting the poor from the city permanently, and it has allowed many private organizations as well as intermediary actors to sustain the process. For instance, Lata et al.'s (2019) study on street vendors discovered that local politicians, mastans, linemen, and police all work together to stop street vending by disobeying higher orders and the need to maintain the highway clean of street business. In this study, I also revealed that the urban poor people's bargaining began with the powerful elite, such as local mastans, political leaders, and even fellow men of Members of Parliament (MPs) who have money, musclemen,

and political affiliation. Sometimes their negotiations concluded with them paying a monthly space fare, and other times they had to make a payment to the linemen, local mastans, and police officers. Shafiqul Islam, 38 years old and a resident of Mirpur's Pallabi Slum for the past 15 years, demonstrated the mechanism of the procedure within the slum. He says as: "I know this is government land. But in this slum, the local MP controlled everything. So, we had to pay 600–800 taka as space fees every month to the followers of the MP so that we may survive in this slum" (Interviewee 2).

Again, sometimes they face evictions from their workplace by the city corporation when urban elites demand their city to be clean and slum free. But those with close ties and a strong network in my study area can reclaim their space temporarily. Sometimes they must pay security fees to multiple channels so that they can do business without any hindrance. And those who lacked proper channels and money had to leave their temporary places, so they returned to their villages after the eviction. This mechanism has been described by Bashar Molla, aged 52, who has been living at Hindu Para Slum in Sattola, Dhaka, for the last 20 years:

After the eviction, some people left this settlement, and they started to live in other slums. Some are seen to live in peripheral areas like Savar and Gazipur. Only a few remained under the open sky because they had close connections with the local leaders, and they knew that they could be able to reclaim their space by giving money to the local leaders and mastans. (Interviewee 7).

In their study, Lata, and Walters (2016, 2020) discovered that Sattola inhabitants with strong family or social networks are powerful and may retake their space after displacement. In this approach, the government and its agencies have established 'grey spaces' in which official and unofficial coercive forces collude to deny the poor their access to the city. Yiftachel (2009, p. 89) situates grey zones "between the 'whiteness' of legality/approval/safety and the 'blackness' of eviction/destruction/death… literally 'in the shadow' of the formal, planned city, polity, and economy". They exist somewhat outside the purview of governmental authorities and city plans.

## RIGHT TO POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Due to the neoliberal state and its market-driven policies, the urban poor in Dhaka are consistently denied their rights to participate and decision-making in the production of space and other urban development initiatives. As a result, this process of commodification and marketization, according to Polanyi (1944/1957), generated a crisis of social dislocation and inequality, which eventually led to the development of authoritarian regimes in the twentieth century. This is also obvious in the findings of this investigation. Because of their involvement in numerous informal businesses, most of the urban poor were prevented from participating in collective decision-making and space appropriation. According to survey results, more than 77% of respondents lacked authority in decision-making for the benefit of their slum communities. Even though around 54% of respondents in this study do not have any voting rights in the community, those who have (46%) were unable to vote for their legitimate candidates

due to the prevalence of authoritarian regimes. One of the Pallabi slum interviewees, Enayet, conveyed his rage to the researcher:

> We don't matter to them because we're poor, and our votes are worthless to them. Prior to 2014, we could vote to choose our leader. But how could I vote when the current government in Bangladesh has hijacked it? (Interviewee 5)

Apart from their right to vote, this survey revealed that most slum dwellers have no connection with politics or political leaders and are critical of Bangladesh's current political culture. Nearly 54% of respondents in this poll stated they have no affiliation inside their neighborhood communities, and 64% said they don't have any community leaders to whom they can communicate their concerns. Because it is difficult to reach the local leaders, they must rely on their fellow men most of the time. This is because, except during the voting period, they are rarely available in the community. It was found in Mirpur that local leader MP Ilias Molla's fellow men handled their situation because it was extremely difficult to reach him directly. This is how Kalpana Akther, a 35-year-old house owner from Mollar Bosti at Pallabi, describes the situation:

> We don't have any rights for the betterment of this community. MP Ilias Molla and his fellow men took all the decisions here. They never discussed anything with us. Even when they increased space rent, they never asked our opinion. (Interviewee 8)

On the other hand, most of the Sat Tala Slum dwellers in this study stated that their local ward commissioner, Mr. Nasim, regularly tried to keep in contact with them and listen to their concerns. However, when it came to making decisions, he depended on his fellow men. The study also shows that, in addition to ward commissioners, the poor identify several intermediary actors with whom they interact to solve problems, including *mastans,* government service providers, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Although some NGOs were found to be actively providing urban services to the slum communities, others were found to be preoccupied with extending their projects rather than addressing impoverished people's true needs. Furthermore, in some instances, it was discovered that the CBO committee is attempting to play some specific roles in the resolution of any conflicting behavior and any need or demand of the slum community. These informal political leaders amplify their crisis by depriving them of their communities in the name of community development.

In this context, it was evident that urban poor people could not make decisions for the improvement of their communities because they were excluded from communal life, political parties, and neighborhood ties. Even usually, they never protested to assert their community rights and their rights regarding the production of urban spaces. Approximately 76.1% of respondents stated that they never participated in any protest or campaign for their rights and privileges in their communities because they did not feel the need (50.1%) to do so. This is clear from Didarul Islam's statement, "We didn't need to do any protest or movement for our city rights because our local community leaders gave us assurance". In this regard, Nicola Banks (2008) discussed why political mobilization and participation in decision-making for the poor in Bang-

ladesh has become challenging. According to his point of view,

> Where there is a high degree of centralization in decision-making and weakened powers at the local level—as is the case in Bangladesh—local mobilization has a limited impact on higher levels of government and policymakers. (Banks, 2008)

Similarly, regarding participation in the decision-making of urban affairs from the RTC perspective, it is found that more than two-thirds of the slum dwellers believe that they do not have any right to participate in the decision-making regarding their use of space, as well as other matters of their community life. Moreover, their absence of citizenship identity and voting rights, their lack of social connection with the neighbors, and their fear of powerful local actors restricted their participation in any kind of slum community affairs. As a result, according to Lata, the urban poor have accepted such socially embedded power relations arising out of the state's lack of proper policy concern and intention to provide a permanent solution to their problem (2020).

## ROLE OF STATE, NGOS, AND CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS

In his paper, Harvey (2008) stated that the neoliberal state often sanctioned numerous regulatory frameworks and legislation in promoting corporations and private institutions, and in doing so, it also established a good business environment to restore the elite class by undermining the poor. In Dhaka, the highest city development authority in Bangladesh, Rajdhani Unnayan Kartipakha (RAJUK), has implemented city development acts titled *Town Improvement Act-1953* and *Building Construction Act-2006* to promote private real estate housing companies by displacing thousands of urban poor from the center to metropolitan periphery areas like Mirpur and Mohakhali, where Sattola and Pallbi slums are located. In addition, the local government authorities do not recognize the slum populations in the study regions as legitimate city residents; hence they are not deserving of any urban services from the city corporations. Even though during the pandemic, local ward commissioners in both study areas offered some humanitarian aid, urban poor people living in both slums were typically denied their constitutional rights to the city. This was reflected when I interviewed one of the local government officials in Mirpur Thana. According to him,

> Most of the slum dwellers are illegal, informal citizens. They came to the city to do work, and after finishing their work, they will again return to their villages. They didn't even pay any taxes to the city corporations. As they are not enlisted citizens of the city corporations, the government has nothing to do except provide some humanitarian assistance. (Interviewee 11)

In addition, the Bangladeshi government no longer offers social services to the poor unless there is an emergency. In both areas, about 84.4% of participants claimed they never received any services from city corporations or representatives of their local governments. On my field visit, I discovered only one public school providing elementary education in both study regions, even though many urban services, such as water, sewage, electricity, and education, have been totally privatized in both study locations. Therefore, to obtain essential urban services like water, sanitation, educa-

tion, etc., slum residents must rely on a variety of intermediary private and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), such as BRAC, Navana, Prashika, Meghna Life, ASA, Jagoroni Foundation, etc. Selina Afroz, a 45-year-old resident of the Pallabi slum and one of my interview subjects, stated her joy with the NGO operating in the study area. Her opinions are as follows:

> DHK has provided us with sanitation." We couldn't move into the street until a few years ago. Children were unable to attend class. Then came BRAC. They now provide free education to all students. Also, they provided tiffin in each class. (Interviewee 13)

Even though one of the CBO (community-based organization) members admitted that non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as DHK, BRAC, and Proshika provided various urban services as well as community development programs in the study regions, they had to pay money to receive these services, except in a few cases. Meanwhile, in the study areas, many slum residents are vulnerable to various NGO interventions. In an essay (2014), Bernal and Grewal expressed their worries about non-governmental organizations' (NGOs) involvement. They think that non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have progressively accepted neoliberal ideas such as marketization, individualization, and depoliticization, which have turned their focus away from collective political fights and towards service provision (2014). Additionally, Kabeer et al. (2012) discovered that NGOs had moved away from social mobilization organizations and have homogenized around the provision of services, primarily microfinance services. Besides, some NGOs in Bangladesh clearly support the ruling party, while others support the opposition. As a result, the ruling party does not trust non-governmental organizations, continually questions their transparency and accountability, and pushes them to function under rigorous government regulation (Lata, 2020; Lorch, 2017). Before launching any development programme in slum areas, for example, NGOs must obtain approval from the DNCC. While questioning another local government official from the Sattola slum, I uncovered how the local government and NGO collaborated to maintain their influence over Bangladesh's urban poor. In his words:

> In this slum, various types of NGOs came to work in the same manner. We negotiated with them and allowed specific NGOs to work in a specific area. Besides, we cooperated with the government registered NGOs and tried to assist them administratively. (Interviewee 10)

The government also wants to limit NGO activity to service delivery, which means that NGOs do not work much on capacity building or with grassroots organizations, thus depoliticizing them. As a result, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have been unable to secure poor people's tenure over livelihood areas or mobilize them as a grassroots movement. Several studies in other contexts have highlighted the role of NGOs in capacity building grassroots organizations towards transformative political engagement and demanding the latter's rights to housing and livelihoods (see, for example, De Souza, 2006; Bhowmik, 2005), but NGOs in Bangladesh have so far failed

to address slum communities' right to claim their access to public space. Although the formation of Nagar Daridra Basteebashir Unnayan Sangstha (NDBUS, Urban Poor Slum Dwellers' Development Organization), which was registered as an NGO, had limited success communicating people's needs and negotiating with local service providers to get access to water, electricity, and tenure security for housing, it has yet to take any initiative to fight for the urban poor's right to use public space for livelihood (Lata, 2020; Soltesova, 2011).

## DISCUSSION

Since the 1980s, Bangladesh, which became independent from Pakistan in 1971, has embraced privatization policies. Following the implementation of new industrial policies in 1982 and 1984, the then-governing parties began carrying out several neoliberal development initiatives with the direct assistance of the IMF and World Bank. As a result, there were significant changes in capitalism, which led to large-scale rural-urban migrations, swift urbanization, and spatial politics over the capital city's limited resources. Gradually, Dhaka transforms into a dumping ground where tens of thousands of people migrate annually from different regions of the nation and becomes the trajectory of urban injustice. Of this population, 3.5 million are urban poor and live in slums in the North and South of the city, where they lack access to basic human rights like food, shelter, education, clean water, sanitary conditions, and healthcare. Additionally, the poor's discontent and misery became worse by the commodification of labor and the privatization of urban space, creating a cycle of socio-spatial marginalization (Haque, 2012, p. 15). Furthermore, the country's overall position was exacerbated by inadequate governance, an autocratic administration, and the global epidemic. As a result, millions of urban poor living in Dhaka's various slums face enormous problems in claiming and exercising their right to the city, which is a fundamental human right for all urban inhabitants, according to Harvey (2008).

In this study, I argued that the urban poor in Sattola and Pallabi slums in Bangladesh could not directly appropriate urban spaces due to municipal governance regulations, exclusive urban development plans, and the existing political structure. Rather, it was clear that eviction, displacement, intimidation, uncertainty, and even sexual harassment are common occurrences for slum inhabitants when they use urban spaces, regardless of gender or sex. As a result, they had to negotiate with a variety of formal and informal actors, including *mastans*, police, local government officials, and local leaders, to assert their right to manage urban spaces and obtain various urban services. Therefore, this negotiation produced a circle of money and power relations among various stakeholders where the state plays an ambivalent and crucial role by projecting itself as a neoliberal state. On one side, the state is denying these people their status as legal citizens of the city, and it is thereby excluding them from the necessary rights over using the urban spaces. On the other side, the state is not evicting the poor from the city permanently, and it has allowed many private organizations as well as intermediary actors to sustain the process. This result is consistent with another study conducted by Lata on the street vendors of Sattola Slum in Dhaka, where she

observed that local politicians, *mastans*, linemen, police, and state officials all worked together to ensure that street vending could continue by ignoring higher commands and the necessity to keep the street clear of street trading (Lata et al., 2019).

Similar findings were made regarding involvement in the decision-making process of the urban development project, which revealed that urban residents living in both study regions lack any rights to engage in the decision-making process in their local community. Additionally, their participation in any community development initiatives was constrained by their lack of citizenship and voting rights, lack of neighborhood ties, depoliticization, and fear of a repressive regime. This conclusion is in line with a recent study by Uddin and Piracha (2023). Their research discovered that the Australian urban planning system created an unequal geography where the urban poor have little power to influence urban development projects because of their socio-economic fragility. As a result, the urban poor have accepted socially embedded power relations arising from the state's lack of proper policy concern and intention to provide a permanent solution to their problem.

Furthermore, Dhaka city has provided slum residents with job opportunities and stable settlements, as most have come to Dhaka for a living in other parts of the country (Hossain, 2013). Living in a segregated neighborhood deprives them not only of all state social services and the decision-making process but also of their right to claim the city. While the existing literature demonstrated the urban poor's coordinated efforts to bring about successful right to the city movements in many Latin American nations, including Mexico, Brazil, and Chile, as well as in some European and South Asian nations (Machabanski, 2013; Santos Junior, 2014; Adler, 2015; Málovics et al., 2019; Vesalon & Crețan, 2019), there is hardly any such potential for RTC movements in the case of the urban poor in Dhaka. Therefore, I found three reasons for the lack of protest when seeking their rights in Dhaka. First, Dhaka's slum residents are the 'subjugated subject' who are not even conscious of their subjugation, and because of their temporary living circumstances in the city, they did not feel the need to stage any protests. In this regard, one of the respondents told me, "We came here to work. We'll go back to our country when we're done working. What justifies staging a protest, then?" This is consistent with another study conducted by Murshid on rural poor women who, after obtaining microfinance from NGOs, regard themselves as neoliberal subjects and accept personal responsibility for circumstances such as poverty and intimate partner abuse that are beyond their control. As a result, microfinance depoliticizes potential anti-capitalist movements while legitimizing capitalism at the micro level (Murshid, 2020). Second, people who become aware of their enslavement are unable to complain since they lack political representation in the ward municipality. Elections are seldom in Bangladesh due to the peculiar democratic system in effect, and there is ample evidence of election rigging in both municipal and national elections. Again, despite receiving a good allocation from the government during this pandemic in Dhaka, the poor have seldom taken advantage of such possibilities due to their disorganized efforts and lack of awareness of their rights. Third, based on my research, I discovered that wherever the urban poor achieved a successful right to the city movement, such as in the cases of Roma people in Szeged, Mexican poor people,

MPL in Chile, and street vendors in India, they did so through the collaborative efforts of many non-state actors such as NGOs and with the participation of civil society organizations. However, in Dhaka, NGOs and civil society organizations are heavily regulated and controlled by the state. In addition, NGOs in Bangladesh and many other nations were unable to focus on grass-roots mobilization for the poor due to the rigorous M&E policies of major financial organizations, including the IMF, WB, and UNICEF (Mueller-Hirth, 2012). As a result, the urban poor in Dhaka engage in regular social contract relationships with a variety of state and non-state actors to appropriate urban space rather than asserting their claim to the city.

## CONCLUSION

Dhaka City has become a profoundly unequal society, with a clear distinction between the rich and the poor. Overcrowding, neoliberal development policy, and the state's withdrawal from social commitments all contribute to the creation of 'grey space' in which the urban poor are deprived of the right to the city. The study demonstrates that the urban poor in these informal settlements face major challenges in claiming urban spaces because of state laws, regulations, and development plans. Therefore, they must negotiate with a variety of formal and informal individuals to exercise their rights in urban spaces. The study also emphasizes that the urban poor faced social and institutional barriers that limited their ability to participate effectively in decision-making, such as exclusion from formal political processes, limited access to information, and a lack of awareness of their rights. Although urban poor people in Brazil, Chile, Mexico, and India have been effective in mobilizing people, they have been unable to claim their right to the city in Bangladesh for a variety of socio-political and economic reasons. These difficulties lead to their isolation from mainstream urban development processes. Future academics should do additional research in other slum areas in Dhaka from a postcolonial city perspective to understand the uniqueness and historical roots of this depoliticization.

Furthermore, the study demonstrates that, due to the authoritarian state's control over them, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other civil society organizations (CSOs) were unable to assist the urban poor in mobilizing their right to the city. Future research could focus on non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations (CSOs) to better understand their problems and opportunities in grassroots mobilization in Bangladesh. Finally, this study underlines the importance of a democratic government in Bangladesh for recognizing and defending the rights of the urban poor. It highlights the importance of policy reforms and collaboration among government institutions, civil society organizations, and international actors to achieve inclusive and sustainable urban development that prioritizes the rights and well-being of the urban poor.

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