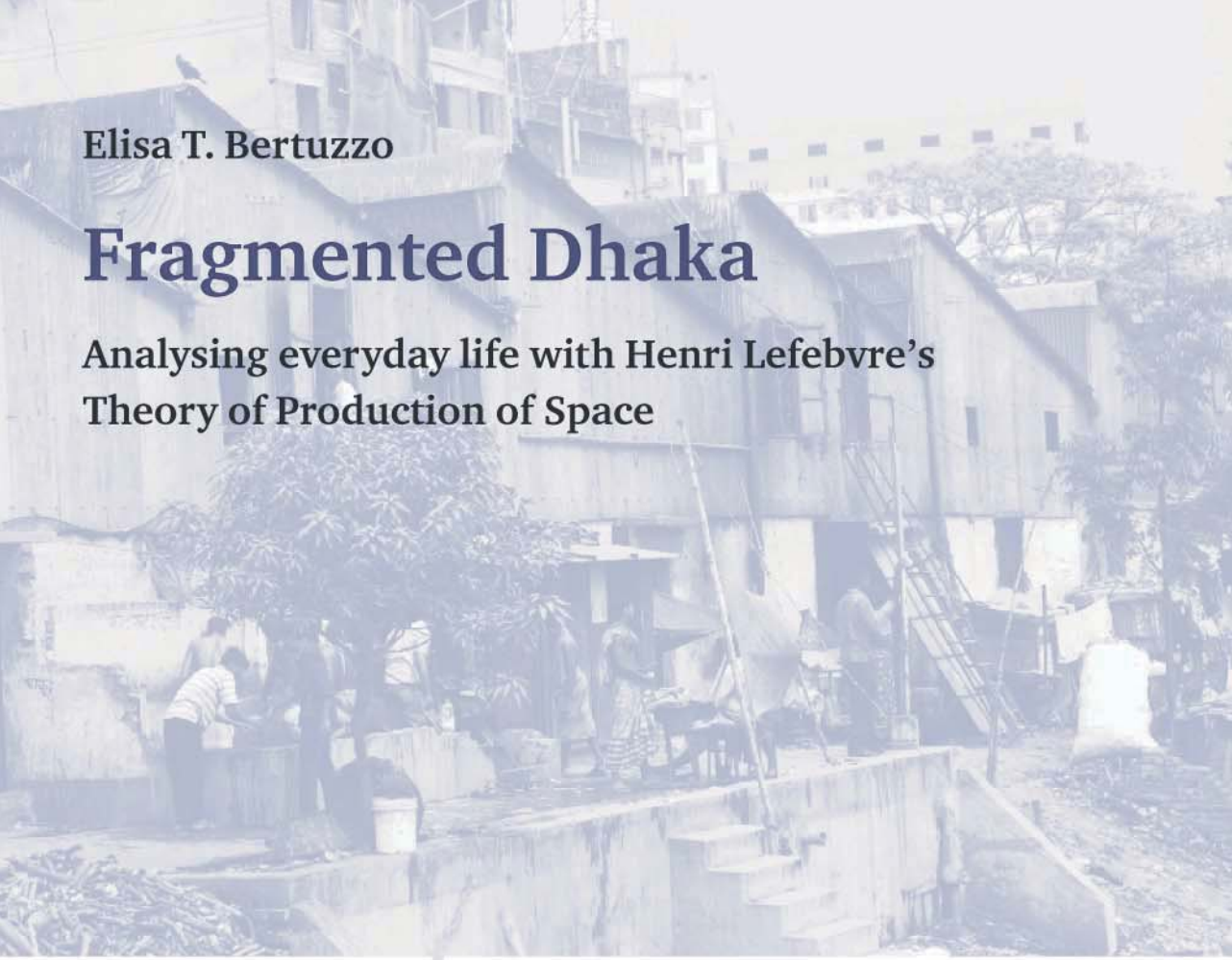


Elisa T. Bertuzzo

Fragmented Dhaka

Analysing everyday life with Henri Lefebvre's Theory of Production of Space

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This book, a juxtaposition of perspectives, tentative explanations, ideas, and above all of field experiences, reassembles the pieces of an adventure started in 2005. When I first visited Dhaka and Bangladesh on invitation of the German cultural institute, my personal need for spaces of communication – spaces in which the "urban culture" that I wanted to discover could be lived – led me to reflect on the use, or to say it better the uses, of space in Dhaka. From that initial search, innumerable questions quickly developed, which evolved all over the fieldwork and "production process" of my dissertation thanks to the contributions of indulgent, at times challenging, but always open, respondents, experts, and friends, in Dhaka.

I would like to thank those who accompanied my search, first of all Khorshed Alam, whom I like to call the "spiritual father" of this project. I found in Peter Herrle and Ingeborg Baldauf open-minded and critical supervisors, who encouraged and gave me orientation during the progress of the work.

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To him, and to my parents, I would like to dedicate this book.

EDITORIAL REMARKS

This book is a refined version of my dissertation, *Fragmented perspectives, transiting signs of urbanity – Everyday life's representations and uses of space in Dhaka, Bangladesh*, which I submitted to the Habitat Unit of the Technical University Berlin in June 2008. For editorial reasons, the contents of the appendix, consisting of the transcriptions of the interviews with hundred respondents, statistical materials, as well as background information around Dhaka, are not part of present publication. For details of this type, I will hence refer to the original version, which can be found online under: http://opus.kobv.de/tuberlin/volltexte/2008/1964/.

I would furthermore like to apologise for not having conformed to the norms that regulate the transliteration of the Bengali language and anglicised the words' pronunciation, which readers trained in linguistics may find regrettable, for the sake of a better readability.

1 *IN MEDIAS RES*

1951, regional capital of East Pakistan: 336.000 inhabitants.
1971, political centre of newborn Bangladesh: 1 Million inhabitants.
2001, world's first mega city in a Less Developed Country: more than 10 Millions[1].

There cannot be adequate initiation to a city like present-day Dhaka. It will confront one with the contradictions of its development, the cruelty of its everyday life, the warmth of its people, with its loudness, crowdedness, dirt and beauty, with dust in the dry season and humidity during the monsoon. This book begins and finishes there, *in medias res*. So before presenting its underlying questions and hypotheses, an attempt shall be made to confront the readers with the city as it encounters one, *unprepared*.

Between 2006 and 2008, period of my fieldwork and completion of this study, Dhaka was planning the celebrations for its official 400th jubilee[2]. While the city's incompletely investigated remote past merits the attention of historians, its growth in the last four decades, making it a prime example of the centralisation and urbanization processes currently concerning Developing Countries, justifies the concentrated study of Dhaka's modern and contemporary history within the broader context of Bangladesh.

From 1950 to 2000, Bangladesh's urban population grew at an annual rate of 5,9 %, the world's highest rate over such a long period of time[3]. While in 1950 less

1 Data of the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, reported by Nazrul Islam in *Dhaka Now* (2005), p. 12–13, which was used as a main reference for this study.

2 Dhaka was declared capital of the imperial Viceroy of Bengal by Mughal conquerors in 1608. However, the city had already been in existence for at least ten centuries before; specifically, it was the capital of a Buddhist kingdom (Kamrup Kingdom) since the 7th century. From the 9th to the 13th century, Hindu kings ruled it, while after 1299 it passed under Sultanate leadership, continuing to play an important role in the region as a commercial centre. Cf. Sharif Uddin Ahmed (ed.) (1991): *Dhaka Past Present Future*, p. 24–42. This book along with the encyclopaedic work *Banglapedia* was the main historical reference used in this study.

3 The average urban growth in Developed Countries in the same period was less than 2 %, while that of Developing Countries ranged between 2 % and 5,9 %. Data of the UN report *World Urbanization Prospects: The 2001 Revision*, www.un.org/esa/population/publications/wup2001/WUP2001report.htm (cf. in particular chapter IV: *Urbanization patterns and rural population growth at the country level*).

than 4 % of the country's population was urban, by 2000 the proportion had grown to 25 %. Current forecasts predict that by 2030, 44,3 % of Bangladesh's population will be urban. The urbanization process has been disproportionately concentrated in its capital city, Dhaka, and a few other larger cities, especially the port city Chittagong and the southern Khulna, whereby Dhaka with its 12 million inhabitants in the expanded metropolitan area accounts for more than one third of Bangladesh's total urban population[4]. The causes of Dhaka's particularly rapid growth are going to be following summarized.

Firstly, Bangladesh's overall poverty should be mentioned. According to estimations of 2004, 45 % of Bangladesh's population lives below the poverty line and people in extreme poverty, i.e. those living under absolute or hardcore poverty as defined by the United Nations, comprise 24 %[5]. This is partly linked to particular geoclimatic factors deriving from the country's location in a humid-tropic and monsoon region and contemporarily on one of the world's biggest Deltas, in which the River Ganges unites with the Jamuna and later joins the Meghna to empty in the Bay of Bengal. The seasonal rains can easily lead to serious inundations of the fertile land and cause significant parts of the crops to be lost to the rural population, whose economies are mainly based on agriculture. The geologically young river system causes erosion and consequent loss of land, which are additional factors for rural-urban migration on the part of impoverished rural dwellers. However, Bangladesh's chronic overpopulation aggravates economic pressure. It is the world's ninth most populous and, with a density of 1.045 persons over a square kilometre, the world's most densely populated country[6].

A second reason has to be searched in Dhaka's status as primate city due to the failure, on the government's part, to implement decentralisation measures, which is interlinked with the concentration of foreign capital investment in the city. For historical reasons, the infrastructural and socio-economic standards in Dhaka were clearly advantageous compared to those found in the rest of the country; over one century, this attracted political, administrative, financial, commercial and educational functions to settle in Dhaka rather than in its underdeveloped hinterland. In a vicious circle, the rural-urban gap continued to increase, whereby it became particularly evident from the 1950s and was additionally aggravated by the advent of

4 Cf. Islam (2005). Bangladesh's population in 2000 was 140 million, with an urban population of ca. 37 million. In Bangladesh there are 64 *zilas*, or "districts", which in turn underlie six major divisions – corresponding to the six biggest cities (Barisal, Chittagong, Dhaka, Khulna, Rajshahi and Sylhet) -, and are further subdivided in sub-districts, or *upazilas*. E.g.: Dhaka District, along with other 16 neighbouring and non-neighbouring districts, is one part of Dhaka Division, which has an area of 1.459,56 square kilometres. In terms of population, Dhaka *Zila* – with ca. 8,5 millions inhabitants and 5.835 inhabitants/square kilometre – is far less populated and especially *less densely* populated, than Dhaka's inner city, with an average of 14.608 inhabitants/square kilometre.

5 Cf. *Banglapedia*, which was updated by means of more recent estimations from the *World Fact Book*, www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/bg.html. The poverty rates are slightly higher in urban contexts.

6 With exception of state nations and island countries such as Singapore, Hong Kong, Bahrain or the Maldives.

industrialisation in the 1980s and 90s, when multinational firms "entered" the country[7]. The third consideration on the reasons of urbanization passes through the observation that an extreme urban growth was registered from 1971 to 1981[8]. That is to say, urbanization took place especially as a consequence of the 1971's Liberation War against Pakistan, as the extreme impoverishment of the rural population during this period led to massive migration towards Dhaka as for many the capital city represented the only promise of survival. Some words should be spent here on the history of Bangladesh's independence.

The beginning of nowadays' Bangladesh as an autonomous nation could be said to coincide with an act emitted in 1905 by the British colonial government of India. With it, an attempt was made by the British Raj to subdivide the geographically and historically coherent region of Bengal in an eastern (corresponding to present-day Bangladesh) and a western part (nowadays the Indian state of Bengal) for the sake of an easier administration and control over the population[9]. The fertile region on the plain of the River Ganges with its several affluents flowing in the Bay of Bengal distinguished itself by its peculiar landscape from the rest of India, and its rich cultural tradition as well as economy, based on agriculture and on textile manufactures, were indeed independent from the Indian context. This, along with the shared language (Bengali, currently called *Bangla* in Bangladesh), culture and social history, conveyed a profound feeling of identity to the Bengalis; they did not accept and contrasted the act, which was discarded only six years later, in 1911. However, the re-obtained unity was not destined to last very long. Since the late 19th century, various factors were contributing to the emergence of Muslim separatism in India[10]. A relevant role in the 1947' Partition was played by the Muslim League, a political party founded in Dhaka in 1906 with the aim to create a separate Muslim nation in

7 Nowadays, of the round 4.000 garment factories countrywide, 75 % are in Dhaka, employing round 2 million workers; textile industry is a strong contributor to the national GDP, with a share of 13 %, i.e. 8 billion US dollars. Cf. Islam (2005), p. 15–23, for a detailed sketch of Bangladesh's economic situation.

8 In the period from 1971 to 1974, Dhaka's population passed from estimated 1 million inhabitants to 1,774 million. Due to the latter, the census could not be held in 1971 but was conducted in 1974. The annual growth rates in 1974–1981 and 1981–1991 were of 8,1 % and 6,5 % respectively. Cf. Islam (2005), p. 12–13.

9 Cf. Ahamed, Emajuddin, and Harun-or-Rashid (ed.) (2007): *Cultural Survey of Bangladesh Series – 3: State and Culture*. The act disposed also for the creation of a third district, Bihar and Orissa, regions with an historical legacy to Bengal. According to historical sources, the British rulers looked with concern at the autonomist struggles of the Indian National Congress, as well as at the formation, in Calcutta – the capital of the Raj –, of a Hindu urban elite that was increasingly intolerant to the foreign control. By the partition of Bengal, they thus aimed at weakening potential struggles for independence in the populous region. Cf. Baxter, Craig (1997): *Bangladesh, From a Nation to a State*, Colorado/Oxford: Westview Press, p. 39–40.

10 Ahamed (ibid., p. 75) recalls among other reasons for the separatist struggles the asymmetric development and economic status of Hindu and Muslim communities, Hindu revivalism and use of Hindu symbols in public sphere as reaction to the British control, progressive introduction of a representative government and the unequal distribution of the Muslim population in different Indian regions (a Muslim majority was in North-West and North-East). Within Bengal, the eastern areas had a higher proportion of Muslims.

the Subcontinent[11]. When this was achieved with the declaration of Pakistan's independence, East Bengal, which had a higher proportion of Muslim inhabitants, was again separated from West Bengal and became a province of Pakistan, namely East Pakistan.

As early as in 1952, in particular on 21st of February, the students of Dhaka University and Dhaka Medical College along with other political activists started a protest against the repeated attempt of the government to impose the use of Urdu in the Bengali-speaking eastern province[12]. The procession escalated in an outburst, as the demonstrators were brutally repressed and killed by the police in the Dhaka University campus[13]. The unrest spread throughout the country but was sedated; however, this episode marked the beginning of the nationalist movement, which led to the declaration, almost 20 years later, of the state of Bangladesh. Independence was achieved on 16 December 1971 after an almost nine-month-long civil war between the "Liberation Army" composed of students, activists, as well as the members of the East Pakistan army – decisively supported by the Indian army – and West Pakistan's army, also supported by civilians who opposed independence[14].

1.1. DHAKA BETWEEN PRIMACY AND FRAGMENTED GROWTH

Although the urban growth rate decreased to 4,5 % in the decade from 1991 to 2001, and is expected to fall to 3,5 % in the next two decades, Dhaka's pace of urbanization remains one of the fastest in the world[15]. In 1981, according to a survey by the Bangladeshi geographer and urban expert Nazrul Islam, 69 % of Dhaka's urban popula-

11 On India's Partition, beside mentioned work by Craig Baxter for Bangladesh, cf.: Gossman, Partricia (1999): *Riots and Victims: Violence and the Construction of Communal Identity Among Bengali Muslims, 1905–1947*. Oxford: Westview Press; Hasan, Mushirul (2001): *India's Partition: Process, Strategy and Mobilization*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press; Khan, Yasmin (2007): *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

12 Urdu had been declared the sole national language of Pakistan in 1948, but the implementation of this law was problematic also due to the fact that the inhabitants of East Pakistan felt a not only geographic, but cultural distance from those living in the western province.

13 A monument in the campus area, Shahid Minar, commemorates the struggles and death of the students; the 21st of February has been declared International Mother Language Day b UNESCO.

14 Beside the language issue, other reasons, of political and economic nature, backed the separatist movement; among its opponents there were Islamist groups and Muslims from the Indian region Bihar, who had migrated to East Pakistan after India's Partition. The day of December 16, *Victory Day*, is a national holiday in Bangladesh. The first day of the war, March 26 is remembered and commemorated as *Independence Day*. It followed a night of atrocities perpetrated on civilians, especially on Hindus, by the West Pakistan Army; a process against the war criminals has not yet taken place. There is, indeed, a monument dedicated to the martyred intellectuals in the north-west of Dhaka.

15 Cf. also Fig. 2 (*Figures and Photos* compendium), which illustrates the rash urban expansion caused by these processes.

tion were of the first generation[16]. While in the following ten years (from 1981 to 1991) the most relevant factor for urban population growth was the annexation of new areas in the course of a reform of the urban limits, rural-urban migration was recognised by Islam as the main reason for Dhaka's urban growth[17].

The intense and uncontrolled pace of population growth affected Dhaka in terms of both socio-economic characteristics and physical appearance, so that Islam described it as "possibly the world's poorest and most ruralized megacity"[18]. Poverty can be stated on two levels: on one hand, nearly 50 % of Dhaka's urban population is poor[19]; on the other, its planning and management along the years have been inadequate, creating a critical situation characterised by lack of infrastructure and basic services. One of the most visible and urgent problems is hereby housing, chronically lacking due to the high demand and unaffordable for the poorest groups of society in particular. Pavement dwellers, scattered squatter settlements usually developed on public land, slums as well as informal housing for the poor on private land characterise the urban scape[20].

As far as Dhaka's "rural" appearance is concerned, again two aspects are meant. These are on the one hand the comparatively high percentage of settlers from rural areas in relation to the total population, and on the other the consequence of the typical coexistence of rivers, canals, high ground and low-lying areas in Bangladesh's landscape. According to Nazrul Islam, "many of the illiterate poor migrants find it rather difficult to adopt urban customs and acculturation is extremely slow for these groups of people"[21] – that is to say, rural lifestyles appear to be characterising the still emerging urban life. To the socio-demographic aspect the comparatively high presence of undeveloped and rurally used portions of land amidst developed areas can be added. In addition, the dwellings in ephemeral materials – bam-

16 81 % of all heads of households were found to have migrant status. Cf. *Migrants in Dhaka Metropolitan Area*, in: Nazrul Islam's publication *Dhaka – From City to Megacity* (1996), page 55.

17 During said period, annexation contributed 44,15 % of growth against the 33,53 % of rural-urban migration. Further 22,31 % of growth derived from natural growth. In absolute terms, the migrant population continues to grow, whereby its ratio to second-generation urban dwellers is decreasing with the passage of time.

18 Cf. Islam (2005), p. 2.

19 Cf. Islam (2005), p. 29–30, who in 1990 found 50 % of urban population to be living below the poverty line and 30 % below the extreme poverty line.

20 Cf. plan reproduced in Fig. 2. For the report cf. Centre for Urban Studies (CUS), National Institute of Population Research (NIPORT) and Training and MEASURE Evaluation (ed.) (2006): *Slums in Urban Bangladesh: Mapping and Census, 2005* (following abbreviated in SUB). Cf. Islam (2005), p. 77, for a review of last decades' most relevant supports to urban development, among which UNDP (for the preparation of one Strategy and one Master/Structure Plan in 1979–81and 1990–95 as well as squatters resettlement), Asia Development Bank (for urban planning in 1979–1981 and primary health care in the 90s), World Bank (for environmental improvement in Old Dhaka in the 80s, water treatment plan in 90s and transportation development in the late 90s and at present) as well as international NGOs and European states' support (for poverty alleviation programmes) will be recalled.

21 Cf. *Megacity Problems: The case of Dhaka* in Islam (1996), p. 196, The average literacy in 2001 was found to be 64,9 % by the local census, though the rates strongly varied between urban areas, with lowest values of 30 % and peaks of 90 %.

boo, thatch, wood, whereby the deployment of tin is increasing – in which squatters live, give the cityscape a "rural note" that strikingly contrasts with the currently proliferating modern glass and concrete buildings.

In 2005, a survey by the Dhaka-based *Centre for Urban Studies* identified 4.342 slums and squatter settlements within the limits of Dhaka City. Their number had increased by 65 % since 1996 and in the same period, the proportion of population lacking proper dwellings had gone from 20 % to 37 %. Since these squatter settlements occupy only 5,1 % of Dhaka's total land area, the density in the most congested among them – generally those on public land – can reach peaks of 220.246 persons/square km, whereby the same report calculated that the living space of 20 % of slum dwellers be as limited as 7 square metres[22]. The report also showed an increase in the number of slums on private land, probably due, as the report states, to a higher vigilance over public land. However, this appears to be also related to the increasing practice, on the part of land owners especially in inner-urban areas, to sub-let free plots as long until these are transformed into apartment buildings; dwellings of this type are often more attractive due to comparatively better building materials and provision of infrastructure, and therefore also more expensive.

The administrative plan reproduced in Fig. 3 provides the opportunity to define Dhaka's territorial identities and make the mentioned figures on population more precise. It has been mentioned above that Dhaka's population passed the 10 million mark in 2000, and that it was estimated to have reached 12 million in 2005. Yet, as Nazrul Islam pointed out, these figures refer to Dhaka Mega City or Dhaka Metropolitan Development Planning area (DMDP), whose only in part urbanised area of 1.528 square kilometres is popularly known as Greater Dhaka[23]. It comprises the two smaller territories of Dhaka Metropolitan Area (DMA) and Dhaka City Corporation (DCC). While latter corresponds to the central and most urbanised city, Dhaka Metropolitan Area consists of DCC and some adjoining areas to the city's east, which were developed and built up in recent years in order to face the housing demand[24]. Following the perspective adopted by precedent studies, among others also Nazrul Islam's, this survey was limited to DCC, that is the area generally called "Dhaka" by the locals, in which 6,7 million inhabitants live.

22 SUB, table 3.12, p. 40, and p. 41.

23 Cf. Islam (2005), p. 8–10. DMDP area corresponds to the extension that planners expected to be urbanised within 2030 and for which the last Structure and Master Plans have been compiled.

24 DCC has an area of 145 square kilometres, DMA of about 306 square kilometres. Another "concept" of the city is represented by Dhaka Statistical Metropolitan Area (DSMA), which is the total area contemplated in the census for Dhaka. DSMA has an area of 1.353 square kilometres and includes the four municipalities marked in blue in Fig. 3: Narayanganj to the south, Tongi to the north, Gazipur further north and Savar to the west. Three smaller administrative subdivisions are relevant for statistical and administrative purposes and are considered by thy study in the analysis of physical space: *pourashavas*, *thanas* and wards. The boundaries demarcated by *pourashavas* (Bangla for "municipality") are mainly used for taxation and delimit the urban area's boundaries, they are thus broad administrative unities; they are followed by the *thanas* (Bangla for "police station"), and in turn by wards, representing the smallest units of local government.

1.2. GOALS AND HYPOTHESES

While demographic and socio-economical processes characterising contemporary mega cities undoubtedly challenge urban administrations in the first instance, *inter alia* with an urgent need for sensitive and creative governance solutions, the focus of this study on Dhaka is set on the *moments* of the transitional period which the city is presently experiencing. "Moments" are hereby meant in a spatial rather than temporal sense, as simultaneous elements of a spatial process: urbanisation. In other words, the aim of this study is to understand and describe cultural elements of Dhaka's process of urbanisation while accepting its transitory and constitutively fragmentary, that is incomplete and heterogeneous, character.

Thereby, I consciously distance myself from common interpretations according to which urban dwellers, especially recently urbanised migrants, are passive "repeaters" of precedent cultural influences. My first hypothesis is that new and original "strategies" and survival modes are being developed in the challenging urban environment. The second hypothesis assumes that by adopting or being adopted by one of Dhaka's various "subcultures" (in the sense of the values and norms shared by segregated communities), dwellers not only end up living and working in definite parts of the city, but they also find themselves gathering in particular spaces. They build relationships not only within these spaces but also with them, and so give them an identity. This process leads to the transformation of spaces with a merely functional character into spaces with particular identities. Correspondingly, the object of interest here are concrete urban spaces with symbolic, i.e. culturally produced and codified, value.

A further level of research central to this work is urban everyday life, which reflects the individual spatial "competences" and "performances" of inhabitants as well as the ongoing cultural and social processes of urban societies. Dhaka dwellers' everyday life appears to be characterised by original and creative practices, necessary in order to cope with the rapidly evolving physical and social environment. These practices give form to what is termed *enriched space*, a space rich in different functions. In Dhaka – so my third hypothesis – space becomes an n-power of itself through particular uses, religious and symbolic transformations as well as the overlapping of productive activities accomplished by the inhabitants.

Correspondingly to these premises, the first ambition of this research is defined as follows: to individuate varying identities of *places*, decipher the *symbols* they are made of and to deduce the meanings of *space* in the mega city. The second is to study how, on the base of their representations of the meanings of space, dwellers "produce" space by means of their everyday life practices.

The study itself, designed as an empirical one, excludes a pre-formulated thesis, as such would evidently affect the researcher's perspective throughout the survey phase. Instead, it develops along the lines of three questions, which are here detailed. The first question emerges along with the examination of the spatial practices of everyday life, which – due to the necessity to cope with a changing environment and congested or even lacking space – give form to creative adaptations and solutions and generate or "produce" space. *Is the "production of space" observed in every-*

day life practices in Dhaka merely the response to urban congestion, or does it emerge thanks to specific understandings of space (such as religious or social values of the inhabitants, peculiar understanding of space deriving from rural life …)? As this "produced" space is not only physical nor mental, but also strongly related to social interaction, it appears to have potential in terms of "social capital".

The particular object of study requires a certain clarification concerning the choice of the survey's perspective. Compared to European and Western cities in general, on which my experience is based on and from which most existing urban theories were formulated, Dhaka is in a different – and not directly comparable – stage of modernisation and urbanisation, calling for an open perspective. It appears to be involved in a transition, in which pre-industrial and industrial social forms coexist and pre-urban and post-modern spatial features are mixed. At the level of the meanings of spaces in Dhaka, the second question regards thus the interaction and mixture of existing representations with ongoing modernisation phenomena that can already be observed in the capital city. *Do representations and meanings deriving from cultural and traditional understandings of space remain untouched in times of globalisation, or are they subjected to a transition due to both physical transformation of space as well as shifting (urbanising) lifestyles?* Based on the mentioned understanding of "transition", the impact of traditional cultural patterns on spatial representations is not expected to disappear, but rather to coexist with new ones. This would give form to hybrid and transitory states of mind and norms of behaviour, which reflect both global trends as well as culturally or regionally particular traits.

Dhaka's society, arguably following a certain school of thought, is not yet "emptied" due to the domination of abstract representations and consequent alienation, but rather "filled" by the overlapping of unequal ways of life and fragmentary development phases[25]. Precisely this "filled" or "hypersignificant" space and society are considered with particular interest and in answer to the third question of this study. *Is it possible to see in Dhaka's "hypersignificant" space, the fragmentary and contradictory space of a city that is still the "point of confluence of different social actors" as the classic literature describes cities, the core of a multi-faceted, not only top-down but "collective" urbanisation?*

1.3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Given the accumulation of problematic consequences linked to the ongoing urbanisation process, it should not come as a surprise that in the last years local as well as international agencies have initiated urban upgrading and development projects in Dhaka[26]. However, at the beginning of this study in 2005, attempts at wide-reaching

25 As stated for example by Tom McDonough in an article on *Situationist Space* within his publication *Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents,* p. 241–265. For Guy Debord's theory cf. *Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography*, in: Ken Knabb (ed and trans.): *Situationist International Anthology*, p. 5–8.

26 Cf. Islam (2005), p. 77, for a review of the last decades' most relevant supporters of urban devel-

urban research appeared to have been rather sporadic[27]. With the exception of the work of Nazrul Islam and the Centre for Urban Studies (CUS) established by Islam – which represents a relevant and indispensable contribution to the exploration of the process' course, of its implications (especially for the urban poor) as well as of possible solutions – only a few English-speaking researchers from Bangladesh have been involved in in-depth studies on Dhaka's urbanisation and urban population. The publication *Dhaka Past Present Future*, edited by historian Sharif Uddin Ahmed after a conference held among national researchers in 1989, dates back to 1991[28]. Distinct articles by architects and planners, especially from Dhaka's engineering university and the Aga Khan Foundation, evidence sectoral aspects of urban planning and development. At an international level, research on Dhaka also appeared to have been rare; the analysis underlying Dhaka Metropolitan Development Plan, though accurate, dates back to 1990–1995. Apart from the scattered information provided by studies conducted by international agencies and human rights organisations, only rare articles in publications concerning urbanisation in Asia could be consulted.

My personal field of competence could be ascribed to the sphere of cultural studies and my area of interest concerning the study of Dhaka is clearly focused on space and its cultural representation. As far as these are concerned, a similarly limited choice of works from Dhaka could be referred to. For example, the publications by geographers like Rosie Majid Ahsan and Hafiza Khatun or the Dhaka-based anthropologist Thèrese Blanchet, were characterised by a strong focus on gender and treated urban areas as setting or background for the observed phenomena rather than inspecting their significance for cultural representation. Such state of research necessitated a multidisciplinary involvement within the frame of the envisaged research, i.e. Dhaka, and a very individual definition of the topic and its approach. While searching for references and viable approaches within studies conducted on other cities and other urban contexts, inspiration was found not only in the publications by the Indian anthropologist Nita Kumar, who describes everyday life spaces and their cultural value but also in Central and South American urban studies, where anthropological and ethnological works inspect "imagined" space and its effect on urban life and culture[29].

opment, among which UNDP (for the preparation of one Strategy and one Master/Structure Plan in 1979–81and 1990–95 as well as squatters resettlement), Asia Development Bank (for urban planning in 1979–1981 and primary health care in the 90s), World Bank (for environmental improvement in Old Dhaka in the 80s, water treatment plan in 90s and transportation development in the late 90s and at present) as well as international NGOs and European states' support (for poverty alleviation programmes) are referred to.

27 Cf. *Bibliography*.

28 The work of the renowned Bangladeshi historian Muntassir Mahmun, who delved into many aspects of urban life, unfortunately has not been translated into English so far.

29 Cf. for example Kumar, Nita: *The space of the child: the nation, the neighbourhood, and the home* in: *The Politics of Gender, Community, and Modernity* (2007) as well as *Friends, Brothers, and Informants: Fieldwork Memoirs of Banaras* (1992); Aguilar, Miguel Angel et al. (eds.): *La ciudad desde sus lugres. Trece ventanas etnográficas para una metrópoli* (2001), or Wildner, Kathrin: *Zócalo – die Mitte der Stadt Mexiko. Ethnographie eines Platzes* (2003).

1.4. OVERVIEW

The structure of this book interprets the theory of "production of space" developed by the French philosopher Henri Lefebvre, which, due to its focusing on space and everyday life practice, was found particularly adaptable to the empirical design of the research project, as well as to its questions. After delving into the reasons and implications of Lefebvre's programmatic concentration on space instead of city, and illustrating the meaning he attributed to the concept of (social) production of space, the basis for an empirical application of this theory in its integrity is elaborated in chapter 2, *The production of space through practices of everyday life*. This part should be especially interesting in relation to current discussions in the field of critical urban studies, insofar as a consistent "translation" of Lefebvre's theory into practice is still missing. The following chapter, *Methodology*, illustrates the specific mix of ethnographic instruments that were deployed during the fieldwork, allowing to achieve a diversified understanding of representations as well as uses of space in Dhaka.

The illustration of the results of the evaluation process is structured around three main parts, which directly correspond to the three dimensions of production of space recognised by Lefebvre: the physical, the mental and the social. In particular, the chapter *Physical space – spatial practice* analyses structural aspects of the city as well as routines and everyday life. In chapter 5, *Mental space – representations of space*, the complex system of abstract and symbolic values related to Dhaka dwellers' representations of space is delved into. In particular, the subchapter *Representations of City* collects and inspects expectations, prejudices and generalisations on Dhaka as capital city of Bangladesh, but also on urbanity in general. The second subchapter, *Representations of space*, is concerned with representations of space, which are shown to depend on knowledge and education, as well as on internalised and unconscious social norms. These two subchapters are followed by a selection of ten mental maps drawn by the respondents, which are deeply discussed. Finally, under chapter 6, *Social space – representational spaces*, interactions, tactics and adaptation processes taking place in everyday life are described on the basis of their direct experience during a two-month participant observation.

The final chapter, consciously called *Trying to bring the elements together*, summarises on the one hand the main results of the empirical survey with special regard to the initial questions, while on the other localising this work within the urban studies as well as the current research on Lefebvre.

2 THE PRODUCTION OF SPACE THROUGH PRACTICES OF EVERYDAY LIFE

> … In the space of 30 years, Dhaka's literally car-free streets have been transformed into congested roads, where brand-new Japanese cars and rusted Chinese and Russian buses challenge hand-painted rickshaws and their drivers (only partially allowed in main streets and during rush hours); its neighbourhoods, until then unfolding around the traditional centre represented by mosque and bazaar, have lost these traditional reference points and opened up to the proliferation of shopping malls, attractive purchase-and-leisure resorts for an upcoming and aspiring middle-class; and in the meantime, a new type of procession has started to rhythmically pour young women onto the streets – from the home to the garment factory, and back …

> … It may be less a question of overpopulation than of tradition if the artisans and small businesses dispose of little space in the Subcontinent – the observation of their set-up in villages confirms that. Instead, everyday actions are often displaced to outdoor spaces: in private gardens, on verandas, or on the street, one can behold scenes of work, chats as well as a general bustling of people and goods. Thus, depending on the varying users and the time – of day as well as year – the street assumes different functions. Such variability of uses, gestures and passages in space is related through a simultaneity of actions and interactions between various individuals and social groups: an "enriched space", at once used by the most diverse individuals with the most diverse purposes, in an overlapping of inter-actions. This does not simply multiply, but rather squares, cubes, or elevates space to an even higher n-power …[1]

These "impressionistic" sketches witness that Dhaka's urban scape is rich in objects and signs mirroring ongoing historical processes; yet, as witnessed by the described rickshaws, the signs of globalisation, migration and adaptation perceptible on Dhaka's streets are neither univocal nor exclusive. While some dimensions of everyday life have undoubtedly undergone a complete transformation, others remain either untouched or still in transition. Confronted with developments that span from labyrinthine lanes to the real estate market or, to be more literal, confronted with the coexistence of traditional as well as new production ways, uses of space and lifestyles, this study abstains from indicating the way towards a "final" or "ideal" stage of development for Dhaka through an assumed, but not further questioned, "process of modernisation". The extent and nature of the changes presently concerning

1 Notes from own diary, April 2005.

this mega city (and other cities of recent urbanisation in non-Western countries) are such that the word "process" can only be used in its dialectic sense – meaning a constant transformation under the influence of coexisting and ever-present antithetical agents. Hence, my study's concentration on *moments*.

This study aims to move the technical and demographical focus typical of many publications on cities to a socio-cultural one. At the same time, instead of particular areas, it will approach the city as a whole, allowing the most contradictory trends and diverse living forms in Dhaka to be embraced. This purpose necessitates the examination of possible theoretical models that legitimise and sustain it. To begin with, the study of Dhaka, a city that challenges or even rejects traditional views with its inscrutable mixture of structural features, individual biographies and living forms, demands an in-depth reflection of the very concept of "city". The difficulty in approaching a fast growing city does not primarily come about due to the confrontation of proverbial congestion, informality or comparatively novelty of urbanisation *per se*. The reason behind my "critical diffidence" is rather an overall euro-centric perspective[2] and the previously mentioned tendency of urban studies to "reduce" the city to objectivable matters.

Ever since Max Weber[3] – who describes the historical development of the Western city from the charisma-dominated, through the commercial, up to the independent city based on political self-organisation –, modern urban studies have contributed to foster a pragmatic view of urban history resting on economic arguments. This was "varied" by historians like Lewis Mumford and Paul Wheatley[4], who stress the ritual or ceremonial foundation of cities since the antiquity and focus on the cultural and symbolic role of cities within their societies; nonetheless, these authors basically continued to lean on the concept of domination as well. Along with industrialisation and the improvement of capitalistic production systems, cities and urban structures underwent progressive changes and/or dissolved. According to the analyses of sociologists like Georg Simmel, Louis Wirth or Jürgen Habermas[5], in the

2 In fact, urban studies are mostly limited to analyses of the European/Occidental city, though Peter Marcuse has made a fascinating trial in an article of his book *Of States and Cities: The Partitioning of Urban Space* (2002)., in which he tried to shift the attention to the question whether "alternative notions" of urban life are peculiar of non-European countries and whether they continue to survive despite the colonial and globalisation influence.

3 Weber's analysis of the city is part of his fundamental work *Economy and Society* of 1914.

4 Cf. Lewis Mumford's work *The city in history* (1961) and Paul Wheatley's *The pivot of the four quarters* (1971). For Mumford, the historical development of the city started with the necessity to celebrate funerals as a way to elaborate the fear of death. Division of labour and consequent emergence of professions, as well as hierarchies, appeared in his interpretation along with an increasing importance of celebrations and rituals and an increasing abstraction of divinities. Wheatley dedicated one part of his work to demonstrating how, in the seven regions of primary urban generation (Mesopotamia, Egypt, Indus valley, North China Plain, Meso-America, central Andes and the Yoruba territories of south-western Nigeria), the city originally represented a ceremonial centre.

5 Cf. e.g. Simmel's *The Metropolis and Mental Life* (1903), Wirth's analysis of modern urban life's phenomena (dissolution of family bondages, isolation and individualisation, mobility, etc.) in *Urbanism as a Way of Life* (1938), as well as Habermas' *Technology and Science as Ideology* (1968).

modern city "urban culture" consists of an increasingly perfect adaptation to the market economy, running parallel to the uniformation of everyday life. Beyond the respective divergences, the urban society described by all these models comes to coincide with the final point of a universal "modernisation". In the last decades, such interpretations have been challenged by theories that conceive of the city as a continuous and never to be finalised process[6]. Contemporary thinkers stress the *simultaneity* of communication and interaction, the *heterogeneity* of lifestyles, ethnicities and languages as well as the *hybridity* of forms – medieval, rural-urban, pre-urban, post-modern – that characterise cities.

Such understanding appears not only reasonable, but also indispensable, especially when mentioned theories are applied to urbanisation processes in industrialising and developing countries. After having observed Dhaka's inhabitants in the ocean of traffic, slaloming on rickshaws, making hour-long walks (maybe in a *borkha*) to reach and leave the working place in garment factories, or driving protected from sun and sight in their cars, and after having tramped through vegetable gardens cramped between new high-rise buildings occupied by offices with modern furniture, it would be in fact difficult, if not impossible, to regard Dhaka as a static, quantifiable fact. Similar examples of fragmented development charm the student, and yet at the same time face them with a challenge, as it becomes crucial to define which and especially whose city should be looked at, and how. To recapitulate:

- Dhaka cannot be approached by classic sociological theories due to the latter's rootedness in the European socio-cultural and urban history,
- the fragmentary nature of its urban developments is the reason behind the city's appearance as a juxtaposition of different hybridities,
- city is understood as a process, which shifts the perspective of the study from city to urbanisation.

The coordinates for the search of an alternative theoretical approach will have to be directly derived from these insights, from which follows that theories on urbanisation and not on city are to be looked for. An approach beyond the established theories of urban geography and sociology was searched for in philosophy. Illuminating were the thoughts on urbanisation of the French sociologist and philosopher Henri Lefebvre. In his book *La production de l'espace*[7], Lefebvre integrates his critique of everyday life and an epistemology originally developed from the dialectic of historical materialism into a critical theory of urbanisation, all the while maintaining an awareness of the irreducible complexity particular to post-modern cities. In the

6 The spectrum goes from sociologists like Richard Sennett (*The Fall of Public Man*, 1976), to architects/planners/architecture theoreticians like Rem Koolhaas (*The Generic City*, 1995), to thinkers like Jean Baudrillard (*Citoyenneté et urbanité*, 1991) or Boris Groys (*Die Stadt auf Durchreise*, 2003).

7 "*The production of space*". *La production de l'espace* (following called PE) was first published in 1974. This survey refers to the fourth French edition, published in 2000; for English quotations, if not differently indicated, I will refer to the English translation by Donald Nicholson-Smith from 2007, *The Production of Space* (following called PS).