Fires in Old Dhaka: Can a Phoenix of community participation rise from the ashes?

NUSHRAT JAHAN

DHAKA is shocked once again by the terrible news of an inferno engulfing the famous Chawkbazar. Although 10000 miles away, I am affected by it nonetheless. In the year 2010, the Nimtoli fire incident took 124 lives. The nation was shocked, and elegies were written. However, few wanted to explore why the co-existence of chemical warehouses and residential units is so rampant in parts of Old Dhaka from the perspective of urbanisation and megacities. I was intrigued, and so were some of my fellow researchers.

We went to Nimtoli and Armenian Street and had extensive discussions with the locals about fire safety issues in the locality. Summary of our findings indicated that "Fire hazard risk was a result of storing and handling flammable chemical products in mixed-use buildings, the structural inefficiency of buildings for fire safety and a lack of awareness of the building users and occupants regarding fire safety rules and safe handling of chemical products" ("Fire Hazard Risk Assessment of Mixed Use Chemical Storage Facilities: A Case Study of Chemical Warehouses in Old Dhaka." *Journal of Bangladesh Institute of Planners*). Looking back, I firmly believe that the most crucial reason behind the repeated infernos in Old Dhaka is the lack of community awareness and involvement around fire safety and handling of chemical substances. It is common knowledge that residential buildings that are also used as warehouses for chemicals or many other commercial products are dangerous for public safety. The question is, why this common knowledge is

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not incorporated in the everyday practices of the city dwellers in Dhaka.

In the post-90s world of neo-liberal economic growth, profit maximisation and valorisation of immaterial qualities are driving the daily life in mega cities like Dhaka. Old Dhaka is related to the rest of the city through a series of exploitative relationships of profit and immaterial qualities. We fetishise its historical value, romantic narrow alleys, cheap products, and cultural worth during Sakrain or other religious-cultural festivities. At the same time, it is described as old, congested, and even uninhabitable because of gross violation of the city planning codes. This dualistic representation of Old Dhaka has robbed it of the value of its inhabitant's everyday lives.

When we look at the narrow alleys of Old Dhaka and the numerous shops, storages, and artisan-style factories of counterfeited products

we see the symptoms of the more significant issue of "informality" in the city. The dangerous mixed-use of built structures happens because of the potential profit maximisation and an absence of safer and better alternatives. Unfortunately, most of the efforts to deal with Old Dhaka's planning problems have framed the structural code violations only through the frame of "illegality" and refuses to acknowledge the role of "informality". Safe alternatives for relocation do not take into account the world-making factors (e.g. proximity, kinship, history, sense of belonging, livelihood) that turns spaces like Chawkbazar into places of bustling economic zones (often informal). Henceforth, we see decades of failed negotiations with businesses for relocating polluting industries like the tannery or the chemical storages and shops from the locality.

The approach towards fire safety in Old Dhaka so far has been highly governmental which follows the existing laws and regulations in place. While laws and policies give us baselines for fire safety, these are not well equipped to guide us in dealing with everyday life in a place like Chawkbazar. Going back to the summary findings of our research on Nimtoli and Armenian Street of Old Dhaka, the underlying reason for violation of building codes and fire safety regulations is the lack of knowledge and sensitisation of the community about fire safety and chemical storage. To create fires, one needs a spark and flammables and to escape from the fire, people need a fire-resistant escape route. Many chemical products used in our everyday life are highly flammable, and in majority of the cases, buildings of Dhaka do not have escape routes. This knowledge of fire

safety is not widely discussed and people come across it only after something has happened, and lives are lost. In this city where every square foot is equivalent to gold, it is not so hard to understand why a homeowner will rent out their damp and dark first-floor unit for storage purposes although it is illegal to do so. The knowledge about fire safety is inaccessible, and this applies to the entire city.

At this point, one might ask why this op-ed if the issue is public awareness. One might print a few posters and be done with it. But, the risks of fire hazard are created in our everyday life and community participation and monitoring is the key to prevent further tragedies like Nimtoli or Chawkbazar. One of the strengths of the Old Dhaka communities is their ties and kinship. This tie can be a crucial element in raising awareness about fire safety.

Dhaka has a long history of citizen activism and partnerships. In the case of ensuring fire safety and safe handling of chemical storages, community participation will be crucial. To prevent any future blaze, we need every homeowner and every citizen to come forward and resist the urge to cash the easy cheque. Issuing a couple of posters in public spaces will not suffice. We need to start a discussion around the bigger problem of what kind of city we want to live in and how to make its informal practices safe for city inhabitants. The discussion must include community members as active participants. Safety begins in our homes and everyday lives, and planners and city officials might want to tap into the resource of kinship.

Nushrat Jahan is an Urban Planner, and a Planning PhD student, University of Toronto.

India's rival coalitions hunt for allies for elections

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

WITH parliamentary elections just a couple of months away, the alliance-building exercise by the two major rival camps vying for power led by ruling Bharatiya Janata Party and its allies on one hand and opposition Congress and other regional parties on the other is gaining pace. It is the time for sending friend requests, accepting many of them, rejecting a few and finding mutual friends to create a perception of being on the right side of potentially winning combinations.

Within a span of three days from February 18 in the run up to the poll, one saw the BJP and the Congress taking the regional route to firm up alliances. First, the BJP clinched seat-sharing arrangements with its oldest Hindutva ally Shiv Sena in Maharashtra state, which elects the second highest number (48) of members to the Lok Sabha after Uttar Pradesh (80), on June 18 and the very next day cobbled up the alliance with Tamil Nadu 's ruling party All India Anna Munnetra Kazagham (AIADMK). Not wanting to be lagging behind, the Congress on February 20 formed a poll pact with Tamil Nadu's main Dravidian opposition party Dravida Munnetra Kazagham (DMK).

In the process, there was some hard-nosed politics and hard bargaining behind the scenes especially in the BJP-Shiv Sena tie-up as both parties sought to put behind them a rocky relationship between them caused by Sena's vitriolic attacks day in day out on Prime Minister Narendra Modi, his close aide Amit Shah, BJP President, and their party on a range of issues for the last four and half years. So strong was Sena's fulminations that it endorsed the Congress President Rahul Gandhi's direct salvos against Modi on alleged corruption in the deal with France for purchase of Rafael fighter planes.

Announcing the pre-poll alliance, both BJP President Amit Shah and Sena chief Uddhav Thakeray cited their umbilical cord of Hindutva ideology and the recent Pulwama terror attack.

But behind the scenes, there was give-and-take by both sides. Although, the BJP is heading the ruling saffron coalition government in Maharashtra in which the Shiv Sena is a junior partner, the former had to make certain concessions to the latter about contesting the parliamentary polls almost on equal footing by agreeing to fight an equal number of seats: 25 for BJP and 23 for Sena. Politics is full of twists and turns. It was just last year that the Sena had at its national convention announced that that it would contest the coming parliamentary and assembly elections in Maharashtra alone.

The second give-away for the BJP to the Shiv Sena was to agree to an equal sharing of the total of 288 seats in the Maharashtra legislative assembly, elections to which are due soon after the parliamentary polls, as well as power if the two parties win. In the previous assembly poll in the state, the BJP and the Sena had contested without an alliance and the former emerged a runaway winners pushing the latter to the second slot. But strangely, the Sena had been sulking since then for not getting a higher share of ministerial berths, something analysts feel contributed to the Sena's rant against the BJP. But this time around, the Sena is reported to have extracted an assurance from the BJP about the creation of a post of Deputy Chief Minister if the Sena finishes behind the BJP in the assembly polls. This was the reason why the Sena had insisted on a package deal combining seat-sharing for the parliamentary poll and seat and proposed power-sharing after the assembly elections in Maharashtra. But there remains a key sticking point in the BJP-Sena tie-up which came to the fore just two days after the alliance announcement when the two parties differed on Sena's claim that the pre-poll pact also envisages sharing of the post of Chief Minister for two and half years each, a claim contested by the BJP. This is reflective of the hurdles often faced by a national party—be it the BJP or the Congress—in dealing with a demanding regional outfit especially

in a region where both are locked in a turf war.

By contrast, The BJP did not face any difficulty in firming up the partnership with AIADMK, which was once led by Jairam Jayalalithaa for decades, in Tamil Nadu for the simple reason that the saffron party is a negligible political force in the state's politics dominated by an array of regional and Dravidian parties based purely on caste-calculus. A BJP-AIADMK alliance has been doing the rounds ever since Jayalalithaa died in December, 2016 and the change of guard happened in the AIADMK.

The BJP had won just one parliamentary seat in the previous poll in 2014 and under the deal this time, it would field candidates in five seats. Here too, the BJP conceded to the AIADMK's insistence of remaining content with five seats as against eight demanded earlier.

The AIADMK-led alliance in Tamil Nadu got a boost when it managed to rope in Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK) which has a sizable support base among lower castes in northern part of the state. That there are no permanent friends or foes in the quick sand of politics was underlined once again by the PMK's joining hands with the AIADMK after subjecting the latter to severe criticism. The PMK, which is an existing ally of BJP, was also reportedly wooed by the AIADMK's arch rival in state politics the DMK. Tamil Nadu has a total of 39 parliamentary seats.

The BJP and the AIADMK were allies in the past too when Jayalalithaa was alive. The two parties had won 30 of the 39 seats in 1998 when Atal Bihari Vajpayee became the Prime Minister. But mercurial as she was known to be, Jayalalithaa pulled the rug leading to the fall of the Vajpayee government after just 13 months. The PMK too has a history of being on the right side of the alliance that rules India, having been part of the BJP-led NDA from 1998–2004 before jumping to the Congress-led block when it came to power in 2004 and returning to the NDA on its return to power in 2014. Whether the inclusion of the PMK in

the AIADMK-led alliance is a correct move will depend on to what extent the PMK vote base can be transferred to its allies.

The BJP may have been caustic about the move by its rivals to put together a grand alliance but its stitching up pre-poll alliances in Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu and moves for tie-ups with regional parties in Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and Jharkhand are badly needed as the saffron party saw three of its regional allies Telugu Desam Party ruling Andhra Pradesh, Asom Gana Parishad

in Assam and Rahstriya Lok Samata Party in Bihar parting its company in the last one year. Besides, most of the BJP's allies in the north-eastern region, which has a total of 25 parliamentary seats, are upset with the Modi government over the Citizenship Amendment Bill. The BJP has already sewn up the pre-poll pact with Janata Dal (U) in Bihar. With this, the BJP has so far reached an understanding with regional parties in 128 parliamentary seats.

Behind the scramble for allies lies a recognition that the coming

parliamentary elections is turning out to be a hotly-contested one where every seat will matter and each party's support will count. That is why the BJP will be looking up to support from regional parties like Biju Janata Dal ruling Odisha, Telangana Rahstra Samiti in Telangana and Y S Rajasekhara Reddy Congress Party in Andhra Pradesh, which are not part of either of the two broad contending coalitions, as potential allies in a post-poll fractured scenario.

Pallab Bhattacharya is a special correspondent at The Daily Star.