

# The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR  
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DHAKA SUNDAY APRIL 25, 2021, BAISHAKH 12, 1428 BS

## Govt's decision to reopen shops, malls baffling

How will it help to contain the spread?

THE government's decision to reopen shops and malls from Sunday, just as the recent "strict" lockdown was beginning to curb the rate of new Covid-19 cases and deaths, is bewildering. This decision also gave way to transport owners seeking permission to resume their operations after April 28.

While it is true that the recent restrictions on movement likely contributed to bringing down the number of new daily infections and deaths (the positivity rate consistently falling from 23 percent on April 16 to 14 percent on Friday), we do not believe there has been a significant enough drop to allow for such opening. Given that it is the month of Ramadan, people will certainly be thronging the shops and malls in huge numbers ahead of Eid-ul-Fitr, and many will flout the health guidelines. One can only wonder how the government expects to contain the virus' spread when such large number of people gather in one place.

It seems the government is once again being hasty about its decisions (as it had been when introducing the initial 11-point directive on April 4, with only a day's notice), a law enforcement officer, who did not want to reveal his name, was quoted in a report to have said that they had not been given any directives regarding this reopening yet from their higher-ups.

While the "strict lockdown" was extended to last till April 28, it did not take long for the authorities to first allow financial institutions and field-level account officers to operate on a limited scale, and then to issue this new notice of reopening malls and shops on Friday. What is the logic behind this reopening? Yes shop owners and other workers associated with shops and malls will be economically hard hit if they cannot make Eid sales, but considering the surge in infections and death rates the second wave of the pandemic has brought about as well as the fact that hospitals and health workers are already overwhelmed, we cannot but fear the consequences of such opening. If malls must reopen and public transport must resume, we would urge authorities to be stricter in their enforcement of health and safety guidelines. Shopkeepers and shoppers must all wear masks and maintain personal hygiene at all times. Social distancing should be maintained as much as possible as well with restrictions on the number of customers allowed into each shop. Premises must be thoroughly cleaned. The Covid-19 situation is bound to worsen with this new decision, so it is each individual's responsibility to keep themselves and others around them safe by consciously practising these necessary precautions.

## Chemical warehouses still in Old Dhaka residential buildings

Meanwhile tragedies continue

THE fire at a building with a chemical warehouse in Armanitola that left four people dead and 25 others injured was a tragedy waiting to happen. This is because the government projects to relocate chemical, plastic, printing and electronics from Old Dhaka initiated in 2010 are far from being completed. They were initiated after the horrific Nimtoli fire caused by chemicals stored in a residential building that exploded and took 126 lives. So 11 years and another fire in Chawkbazar with another 80 people dead later, we are back to square one with another tragedy to haunt us.

Chemical traders say they are still waiting to be relocated to the Chemical Polli in Munshiganj as was agreed in an MoU with the government. Why are they still waiting we ask. We cannot understand why a project drafted in 2011 and scheduled to be completed in 2022 is still in its rudimentary stage with not even the work for raising the land at the site having started. This is according to an official of the implementing and evaluation body of such projects who could not get any satisfactory answer for the delay, according to a report. In fact, the official was baffled as to why project officials had rented an office in a shopping mall for Tk 78,000 per month without any of the work being done. Saying only 30 percent of the work has been done after about a decade is ludicrous. Projects to relocate other factories such as those producing plastic are also going at snail's pace. Even the temporary project to relocate 55 chemical warehouses in Tongi has faced delay due to the slow progress of constructing the seven one-storied structures to accommodate them.

This continuous trend of government projects being run at a lackadaisical pace due mainly to bureaucratic tangles, inability to acquire land and frankly a total apathy towards getting things done on time and within the original budget, has had devastating consequences. In this case we are talking about people living in the most risky circumstances with the threat of fire and death looming over them all the time. It is appalling that there is so little value for human life that such risks have been taken. It is time now for the government to take responsibility and make sure all bottlenecks delaying the implementation of the projects are removed. It is already too late for many. Let it not be so for others.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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### Doctors have been crucial

A big debate took place after an altercation between some law enforcers and a doctor went viral. We need to understand that everyone's service is important. But the role played by doctors during the pandemic has been crucial. So their quick movement has to be ensured.

Iftekhar Ahmed Sakib, Dhaka



MUSTAFIZUR RAHMAN

IN recent times, the discussion on Comprehensive Economic Partnerships Agreements (CEPAs) has gained considerable traction in Bangladesh. Policymakers and trade officials have mooted the idea of signing CEPAs with a number of Bangladesh's trading partners. The issue of CEPA has gained renewed attention particularly also in view of the visit of the Indian prime minister to Bangladesh when this came up for discussion at the highest level. The Communiqué which was issued following the visit stated: "Recognising the immense potential of bilateral economic and commercial ties, both sides emphasised on expeditious conclusion of the ongoing joint study on the prospects of entering into a CEPA".

It needs to be kept in mind that a distinctive feature of a CEPA is that by definition it goes beyond trade in goods, to cover such areas as trade in services, transport and connectivity linkages, logistics, trade facilitation, investment and also areas of standardisation and harmonisation of policies including in labour and environment related areas and mutual recognition of certification and sanitary-phytosanitary standards (quarantine and biosecurity measures). However, it is not essential that a CEPA needs to deal with all the relevant issues at one go or to the fullest extent. Nonetheless, CEPAs generally include a road map, to be implemented over a time-bound period, with appropriate pacing, phasing and sequencing. For example, some CEPAs envisage a gradual deepening of economic relationship through graduation from free-trade arrangement to customs union to common market to economic union, under a time table.

Bangladesh is among only a few countries which is yet to sign a bilateral free trade agreement (BFTA) or a CEPA with a trading partner. Only recently, in December 2020, a Bilateral Preferential Trade Agreement (BPTA) was signed with Bhutan. However, Bhutan is a small trading partner of Bangladesh, with bilateral trade not exceeding USD 50 million (or about one-twentieth of one percent of Bangladesh's annual global trade in recent years). As would be appreciated, negotiating CEPAs is going

to be a much more challenging task, more so if this is with major trading partners such as India, second most important after China with a bilateral trade of about USD 9 billion (about nine percent of Bangladesh's global trade).

It needs to be kept in mind in this connection that, till now, Bangladesh's partnerships were primarily founded on principles of non-reciprocity, thanks to its status as a least developed country (LDC). Preferential market access under the various WTO Agreements, as also, on bilateral basis. Mention may be made here of, for example, the duty-free access offered by India to SAARC LDCs under the South Asia Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA) which is being enjoyed by Bangladesh on the basis of non-reciprocity. However, the future is going to be different. Bangladesh's graduation from the LDC group will have important implications for any BFTA or CEPA negotiation because of its status as a soon-to-be developing country. In anticipation of this, Bangladesh will need to design appropriate strategies and approaches for undertaking BFTA and CEPA type negotiations. Adequate preparation will be required to identify areas of *offensive interests*, and *defensive interests*. The *offer lists* and *request lists* will need to be carefully prepared; the *trade-offs* will have to be decided in an informed manner. The exercise to be undertaken in this backdrop will need to be backed up by appropriate evidence and sound analysis.

A major issue that will come up in the course of CEPA negotiations, with India or any other partner for that matter, will involve preparation of offer and request lists associated with preferential market access. However, these should not necessarily be negotiated on the basis of full reciprocity. Experience of agreements of this type bears out that when the partners are at different levels of economic development, the coverage and speed of tariff reduction and trade liberalisation plan tend to be built on a *two-track modality*. For example, one recalls that when the Common Effective Preferential Tariff (CEPT) was being negotiated as part of the ASEAN-FTA, there was a separate track for Cambodia, Myanmar, Lao PDR and Vietnam (CMLV), the relatively weaker members of the ASEAN. It may be noted that while the first three countries were LDCs, Vietnam was a non-LDC developing country but perceived at the time to be a relatively weak economy. In the context of many BFITAs and CEPAs it is a widely accepted

practice to embed the principle of *less than full reciprocity* if the partners are at different levels of economic development. It will thus be justified if Bangladesh argues for a two-track liberalisation plan in CEPA negotiations with any prospective major economy including India.

In the context of BFTA or CEPA type negotiations, partners are generally required to prepare three lists as far as market access is concerned: (a) list of items for immediate duty-free access; (b) list of items for phased duty-free access and (c) list of sensitive items which are to be excluded from preferential treatment, at least for the time being. In designing such lists, revenue (loss) implications and implications for domestic import-substituting industries will need to be considered. For example, given the pattern of Bangladesh's trade with India (import and export trade ratio being about 8:1), Bangladesh will need to take cognisance of the revenue implications of almost a billion dollar worth which is annually collected at the import stage. Thus, revenue loss will be a key concern for Bangladesh. On the other hand, interests of consumers of final goods, and intermediate inputs-importing domestic producers, investors and export-oriented entrepreneurs, who will stand to benefit from tariff reduction, will also need to be considered. A cautionary note, however, should be sounded here. Implications for employment creation, trade creation, trade deflection and trade diversion and the potentials of revenue generation down the line need to be carefully assessed.

Attendant concerns could and does often tend to lead to highly restrained and conservative approach to such negotiations undermining the very purpose of the CEPAs. It is in consideration of this that a broader, medium term perspective with implications, challenges and potential opportunities of deepening partnership ought to guide strategic stance of partners. Of special importance in this connection will be to look at CEPAs from the perspective of realisation of opportunities of triangulation of trade, transport and investment. This will be particularly relevant in view of a CEPA with India in collaboration with which Bangladesh is at present implementing a number of initiatives to deepen economic partnership, in areas of trade, transport, investment, energy, trade facilitation and logistics connectivities. The prospects of attracting investment

from India and transforming transport corridors into economic corridors must be put at the centre of deepening bilateral ties with India through CEPA type of cooperation. The idea should be to develop production networks and value chains that draw on comparative advantages of partners. Also, mutual recognition agreements will need to be part of such a CEPA so that many of the usual irritants that arise because of lack of standardisation and harmonisation of sanitary and phytosanitary measures can be avoided. An institutional arrangement for dispute resolution should also be put in place. In this regard, the experience of Indo-Sri Lanka CEPA (and the subsequent Economic and Technology Cooperation Agreement-ETCA) and the recently signed Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (RCEP) that include the ASEAN 10 plus China, Australia, New Zealand, Japan and South Korea should be studied closely to draw necessary insights.

It needs to be emphasised that a CEPA will call for wide-ranging consultation with industries, business, workers, experts and professionals and other key stakeholders both for understanding the perspectives of important domestic constituencies and also to ensure buy-in of government proposals on the part of major non-state constituencies.

Bangladesh's graduation from the LDC group, scheduled to be effective from 2026, would imply that it will lose most of the preferential market access treatment at that point or thereabout (in the EU, in three years following this timeline). There will be a need to strategise in anticipation of this going forward. CEPAs should be seen as one of the key strategic options in addressing the attendant adverse implications for trade and economy of Bangladesh.

In view of the challenging task of negotiating BFITAs and CEPAs, policymakers should seriously consider setting up, on an urgent basis, a *Negotiating Cell*, similar to the *WTO Cell* in the Ministry of Commerce. Any CEPA type of negotiation will be highly complex and call for appropriate and careful preparation. Such a Cell must be adequately resourced and endowed with the required human resources and professionals. One must remember the old adage that in CEPA type of discussions *countries get not what they deserve but what they negotiate*.

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# Are we forgetting the ideals of our Bengali cultural identity?



NAADIR JUNAID

FOR two successive years now, thousands of inhabitants of Dhaka dressed in traditional Bengali outfits were not seen swarming joyfully in Ramna Park and Dhaka University areas from the early morning on Pahela Baishakh. The cultural institution *Chhayanaut* could not organise their traditional programme of welcoming the New Year in Ramna Batamul for the second consecutive year. The vibrant mass procession known as "Mongol Shobhajatra" conducted to hope for the peace and well-being of the people did not make the city roads festive. Vacant Ramna Batamul premises and deserted roads conveyed a sense of gloom on Pahela Baishakh for two consecutive years, and people could only cherish the fond memories of gleeful celebrations they used to have on this day before the sudden occurrence of the deadly pandemic.

But Pahela Baishakh does not only imply merrymaking. The day also conveys a sense of secular spirit and a pride in Bengali cultural identity. The day is a celebration of cultural traditions and sensibilities that form the core of the concept of "Bengalines". One of the prime attributes of Bengalines is the strong desire to uphold religious harmony. People of this land practice different religions yet they speak the same language, have similar food habits, and enjoy common cultural activities. A sequence of Tareque Masud's maiden feature *Matir Moina* (2002) shows colourful village carnivals and exciting boat races that are considered an important part of our rural heritage. On the soundtrack we hear the rhythmic beats produced by local percussion instruments such as *Dhol* and *Dhak*. Villagers, Hindus and Muslims alike, are seen revelling in these rural celebrations and dancing delightedly to the drumbeats.

In a sequence of Ritwik Ghatak's 1974-film *Jukti Takko aar Goppo*, a Bengali folk singer generally known as *Baul* or *Boyati* is seen performing a song on a road in Kolkata. The song is composed by Durbin Shah, an eminent writer of Baul songs. The lyrics of the song *Namaaz aamar hoilo na aadai* (I could not perform my

prayers) refers to the prayers performed by Muslims five times every day. A young woman named Bangabala sits beside the road where the Baul is singing the song. She is a refugee in Kolkata from Bangladesh. As soon as she hears the song her face is lit up with a smile. Though she is a Hindu, she feels happy having heard the song replete with references to Muslim religious rituals and it evokes memories of her homeland. In his important film *Komol Gandhar* (1961), Ghatak used the expression "Dohai Ali" in different scenes. Although Ali is an Islamic name, Bengali boatmen and fishermen irrespective of religion used to chant "Dohai Ali" when they had sailed their boats out into the mighty rivers. Through such depictions,

the Arab script. The communal attitude of the Pakistani authorities became evident when they had imposed a ban on performing and transmitting the songs of Rabindranath Tagore because he was not a Muslim. In protest at this government decision, from 1967 *Chhayanaut* started welcoming the Bangla New Year in Ramna Batamul by singing *Esho He Baishakh*, a song written by Rabindranath Tagore.

So, the celebrations of Pahela Baishakh also symbolise a stand against oppression, bigotry, and intolerance. Mongol Shobhajatra began from 1989 and in the procession that year a protest was registered over the despotic rule the country was undergoing. Since then, every year thousands of people join Mongol



Hefajat-e-Islam activists set the historic Sur Samrat Alauddin Sangitangan in Brahmanbaria on fire.

PHOTO: STAR

both Ghatak and Masud indicate the fact that a common cultural heritage binds the Bengalis following different religious beliefs together.

During the Pakistani rule, the rulers based in West Pakistan did not like the deep attachment of the Bengalis to their native culture. Ignoring the fact that instead of a religious heritage, indigenous customs and culture contributed crucially to the formation of Bengalines, the West Pakistani rulers emphasised the notion of religious identity. As Bengali Muslims did not adhere to the Pakistani set of ideas marked by religious orthodoxy and intolerance, the Pakistani ruling elite considered the Bengalis lesser Muslims. In an attempt to Islamise our language, the Pakistani authorities even suggested that Bangla should be written by using

Shobhajatra and many of them carry various replicas and masks prepared by Fine Arts students of Dhaka University. All of these artworks displayed in the procession are strongly reminiscent of our local culture. Apart from expressing joy the procession also includes specific artistic components to symbolically denunciate social and political problems plaguing our society. Because of its secular nature and its attempt to uphold and glorify Bengali culture and heritage, the celebrations of Pahela Baishakh have been subjected to extreme contempt of the orthodox Islamists. In 2001, a vicious bomb attack on people enjoying the cultural programme of *Chhayanaut* in Ramna Batamul on Pahela Baishakh claimed 10 lives and left many injured. Police investigation found the

involvement of an Islamist extremist outfit in the attack.

Twenty years have gone by since that brutal bomb attack on innocent people. But our society is still afflicted by religious fanaticism and zealotry. In this year of celebrating the golden jubilee of our independence, savage communal attack took place in a Hindu-majority village in Shalla upazila of Sunamganj. A few weeks ago, the activists of the Qawmi madrasa-based organisation Hefajat-e-Islam wreaked havoc in different districts. In Brahmanbaria, they set several public offices on fire and vandalised various establishments and houses. The intense hatred of the zealots towards local culture was manifested once again as they torched the music academy named after the legendary classical musician Ustad Alauddin Khan. Everything inside the academy including the musical instruments were completely destroyed by this heinous arson attack.

Showing a total disregard for the values of our Liberation War, intolerant and religious dogmatic forces have been making sustained assaults on the practices espousing secularism, progressiveness, and Bengali cultural roots in our country for many years now. Religion-based parties and groups gained greater footing only because our major political parties had often attempted to appease them in order to reap political benefits. Making concessions to Islamist parties and groups may be regarded as a practical approach by some politicians. But it is not difficult to understand that such conciliatory policy would not in any way prove beneficial to the efforts to strengthen the ideals of our Liberation War in contemporary society. During the recent mayhem created by the Islamists, a mural of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was also vandalised by the supporters of the group. Although it was not possible to have festivities on Pahela Baishakh this year, given the situation we should be more committed now to upholding the spirit embodied by the long-established celebrations held on this day. Have we tried enough lately to make the citizens, especially the young people, aware of the fact that secularist principles and Bengali identity are recognised as important pillars of our Liberation War ideals? Pro-liberation politicians and citizens should come to terms with this question at the moment through self-analysis and introspection.

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