

Can the new DAP cure Dhaka’s ills?

Only if Rajuk has the will and organisational capacity

THAT Dhaka has become an unliveable city is a reality for most of its 22,478,116 residents. The gruelling traffic jams, broken roads, pedestrian-unfriendly footpaths, overflowing garbage, paralysing waterlogging and the overwhelming number of people in each square foot of the city have severely hampered our quality of life.

The new Detailed Area Plan (DAP) gives a vision of a better Dhaka city, one that this city’s dwellers have been dreaming of for many years. It promises to solve all the problems plaguing the capital – revive all rivers and water bodies, reclaim the canals and make them navigable for water transport. It will apparently address the population density problem, build housing projects for the poor and lower-middle-income groups, make the city pedestrian-friendly and build big parks for each area. On paper, the new DAP will make Dhaka the functional city of our dreams.

Reality, however, foretells something different. DAP’s implementing agency is Rajuk, an agency that does not have the organisational capacity to carry out the work that this ambitious DAP entails. Urban planners, at a recent discussion organised by the Bangladesh Institute of Planners (BIP), pointed out that the government formulated many plans to address the city’s myriad problems in the past, including DAP 2010, but none of them was implemented.

So why wasn’t DAP 2010 implemented? Various ministries have carried out development work without any regard for the plan, while unauthorised construction and encroachment of public spaces and water bodies went on unabated with no effective measures taken by Rajuk to prevent them. Lack of initiative of the authorities concerned, lack of coordination among stakeholders, and inconsistencies in policies have also been cited as reasons for this failure.

This begs the question: If DAP 2010 could not be implemented, how will the new and improved, highly ambitious DAP be executed? Rajuk has thus far not expressed how it will address all the bottlenecks that prevented the previous plan’s implementation.

The urban planners insist that all government agencies must refer to the DAP when making their plans and obtain a “No Objection Certificate” (NOC) from Rajuk before carrying them out. There also must be regular coordination and cooperation between Rajuk and the local administrative institutions.

We would also like to add that ensuring transparency and accountability of Rajuk is crucial for any plan to work. The government must step in and make sure that all the previous bottlenecks that led to the DAP’s failure are addressed on an urgent basis, and Rajuk is capacitated to make the new DAP a reality.

Let creativity be Revolutionary OTT platforms must be allowed to flourish

THE evening of September 3, 2022 will remain memorable as the Blender’s Choice–The Daily Star OTT & Digital Content Awards 2021 paved the way for artists creating content on OTT platforms by rewarding them with the recognition they deserve. The rise of popularity for content from local OTT platforms has rejuvenated Bangladesh’s mainstream entertainment industry – especially since the beginning of the pandemic in 2020 when public entertainment options such as cinema halls and concerts were no longer an option. Now, these platforms have triggered a cultural regeneration in terms of what we in Bangladesh view as go-to digital entertainment. Most importantly, OTT platforms have allowed for local artists to make a living out of their creativity, no matter what their background. Content on such platforms also works out well for viewers as they can subscribe to each platform at more and more affordable rates, being able to avoid the nuisance caused by commercial breaks aired during traditional television content. Such success of OTT content and their large-scale recognition has given us renewed hope for the future of the country’s entertainment scene.

For our OTT platforms to flourish, we need creative and critical minds to be able to explore and tell nuanced stories about people and the society at large. However, we are alarmed that, in addition to the repressive laws that are already suppressing freedom of expression in the digital sphere, the government wants to introduce even more restrictions for OTT platforms. The (draft) BTRC Regulation for Digital, Social Media and OTT Platforms, if passed, could arbitrarily criminalise the content aired on OTT platforms based on vague criteria. The broad terms presented in the draft – prohibiting content that, for instance, “is offensive, false or threatening and insulting or humiliating to a person” or that threatens the “unity, integrity, defence, security, or sovereignty of Bangladesh, [and its] friendly relations with foreign states” – indicate just how limiting it could be for artists and their creative abilities on digital platforms. We wonder whose good is being prioritised when such regulations are proposed, given the sweeping restrictions it would impose on creators and artists for OTT platforms.

Now that the entertainment industry of Bangladesh is flourishing again after many years of hiatus, with people choosing locally made content both in theatres and online, it is crucial the authorities do everything possible to help our artists fulfil their creative potential. OTT platforms have made making films and shows a more accessible process, allowing all genres to exist and succeed in one place. Besides recognition, creators must be given assistance, and not be muzzled, in achieving their creative vision.

PM HASINA’S INDIA VISIT 2022

Will our expectations be met?



MACRO MIRROR

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FAHMIDA KHATUN

HIGH-level state visits between Bangladesh and India always carry importance for both the countries. This time is no exception. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina’s visit to India is taking place at a time when the world is trying to recover from Covid-19 fallout and is reeling from the effects of the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war. High inflationary pressure, fuel and food crises, and low job growth have crippled many economies around the world. International organisations have forecast that this situation will not be normal before 2024.

Unfortunately, when an economic crisis of such nature and scale occurs, countries resort to protectionism instead of cooperation as they want to protect their own interests first – the pandemic has shown us that. This inward-looking strategy leads to further inequalities between advanced and poor countries. Hence, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina’s visit to India on September 5-8, 2022 is critical for Bangladesh. This visit is expected to resolve some economic and political issues that are mutually beneficial.

Sharing water of common rivers, long-term supply of fuel oil from India to Bangladesh, unhindered supply of essential commodities, withdrawal of anti-dumping duty on jute exports from Bangladesh, removal of other non-tariff barriers on exports from Bangladesh, speeding up rail, road and waterway connectivity, and border security and management are some of the issues that are likely to be on the discussion table.

As far as the economic issues are concerned, the Bangladesh-India relationship covers a wide range of sectors. Bilateral cooperation can only be meaningful if Bangladesh can benefit from this and leverage such cooperation for strengthened regional and global integration of its economy. We are currently on a journey towards dual graduation, during which Bangladesh will not only have to work on its strategies and policies, but also need support on a host of



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VISUAL: STAR

areas including trade, investment and finance from friendly countries.

Over the last decade, a few initiatives have been undertaken to deepen bilateral cooperation in areas such as trade in goods, services and energy, multimodal transport connectivity, cross-border investment, capacity-building, people-to-people connectivity, and security measures. In the case of trade, it is not only about trade in goods, but there are also opportunities for trade in services and energy. In view of the emerging demands of Bangladesh’s economy, there are opportunities for trade in services in healthcare and education, digital and information technology services, skills development, and technology transfer.

Bilateral trade between Bangladesh and India has been increasing over time; in 2021, the volume was over USD 14 billion. India has provided duty-free market access to Bangladesh under the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) arrangement, which helped Bangladesh to increase its exports. In 2021, Bangladesh’s export to India was about USD 2 billion. But Bangladesh’s

facility it offers to Bangladesh. India has imposed anti-dumping duties and countervailing duties on Bangladeshi exports. Another important NTB is the inadequate trade facilitation. This, of course, exists on both sides. Due to a lack of appropriate trade facilitation and good logistical arrangements, the cost of trading is high since time requirements for trade is high. This is discouraging for traders. Also, the land ports through which about half of the total bilateral trade between the two countries takes place are somewhat inefficient. So, the delay at the control and checkpoints increases the cost. Inspection also takes a long time, since results come from laboratories far from the border. Therefore, effective transport, investment and logistics connectivity can help increase trade between the two neighbours.

Bangladesh’s graduation from LDC status will result in the loss of duty-free access to all markets, including in India under SAFTA. A joint study by Bangladesh and India has been prepared for new means for cooperation through the Comprehensive Economic Partnership

Why BCL is not welcome at private universities



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FAISAL BIN IQBAL

DURING the university admission season of 2016, I got accepted into an engineering programme at a public university outside Dhaka. I was excited about it, but by the time I reached the gates of that university to complete my admission process, that excitement died down and turned into fear.

A banner stretching the entire height of the university’s main academic building caught my attention. It was a banner welcoming the university’s newly elected leader of a political organisation. What felt even more jarring about this was the fact that the leader in question was the head of the department I was supposed to enrol in.

It didn’t take me long to do a 180 turn and see myself out of that university without getting admitted. Later that year, I enrolled myself into an engineering programme at a top private university in Dhaka. The costs there were significantly higher, but I comforted myself thinking that at least such policies would not find its way into a private university – the politics I ran away from earlier that year.

Like myself, there are thousands of students who, despite getting the chance to study at various public universities across Bangladesh, make the tough choice of not doing so simply because of the politics associated with those universities. Like me, they would rather spend almost 10 times the amount it takes to study at a public

university and enrol in a private one, than having to tolerate the political chaos at public institutions.

Sadly, this is no longer an option as, a couple of days ago, Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) announced the official formation of its committees in several of the country’s top private universities. Most of the students at these private universities have strongly criticised the decision, and they have good reason to do so.

Over the last few years, BCL has developed a bad reputation as the student wing of the country’s ruling party. The group has repeatedly bullied, harassed, and often engaged in physical violence against those who shared different opinions or views from theirs. The murder of Buet student Abrar Fahad in 2019 is a grave reminder of how ruthless the group can get.

From forcing students to leave their dormitories to assaulting them in public and in private – BCL has done it all. Local news portals as well as the general public bear witness to the atrocities committed by this group. Private university students, therefore, are in their rights to be worried about this group infiltrating their educational institutions.

But why now? What made the political group turn towards private universities?

One of the main reasons for this could be the fact that private university students in the last few years have played active roles in

protesting against major injustices. Whether it was the 2015 No VAT on Education protests or the 2018 Road Safety Movement, these students have almost always voiced their concerns. On top of that, these students have gone on to protest actions or decisions of their own universities that they unanimously found unjustified.

BCL is either eager to bring these students under their wing to gather more support, or they are looking to ensure that such protests don’t break out in the near future, which can often go against major and controversial government-backed policies and decisions. With the next general election fast approaching, one can understand BCL’s motive to aim for new recruits from private universities.

Scouring social media platforms will make you realise BCL’s take on these latest developments. As per the comments made by many of the organisation’s members and top leadership, BCL’s presence within these universities is vital to prevent the rise of militancy. These individuals associated with the group have even gone as far as saying that without their presence, these universities will produce students that will one day become terrorists.

Another reason Chhatra League is repeatedly stating for establishing their committees within these institutions is that other rival political parties already have student committees in private universities. Thus, it is only logical for them to establish their committees there as well.

But during my four years at university, I have never seen any of the so-called rival groups hold any rally or political event at my university. BCL’s claim that these rival groups exist lacks evidence. As a rebuttal to that, BCL will likely say that it will not be long before these rival groups start their activities at the private universities,

Agreement (CEPA). This is expected to help realise opportunities in areas of trade, transport and investment connectivity.

Bangladesh also requires huge financial resources to undertake its development activities. Following the graduation from the LDC category, most of such resources will have to be mobilised through higher revenue generation domestically. Given the continuous decline of funds from the developed countries, the importance of South-South cooperation has increased. Large developing countries such as India and China have emerged as major players in the landscape of South-South cooperation. The New Development Bank (NDB) and Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) have the potential to help Bangladesh in accessing a greater amount of financial resources. In 2010, India committed to lend about USD 7.86 billion under three lines of credit (LCs). These are supposed to help Bangladesh implement some projects in economic, social and human capacity-building areas, and institutional strengthening. However, implementation of projects under the Indian LCs is very slow due to some conditionalities and the slow disbursement of funds. For effective utilisation of the LCs, these issues will have to be resolved.

Bangladesh is keen on enhanced investment and efficient connectivity. It has offered two special economic zones (SEZs) to India for private investment at Bheramara upazila in Kushtia and the coastal Mongla belt in Bagerhat. Bangladesh has allowed India to move goods between its western and northeastern states through Bangladesh’s territory. It expects that the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal Motor Vehicle Agreement (BBIN-MVA) signed in 2015 will facilitate movement of cargo-carrying vehicles across the borders and reduce costs significantly.

Despite some positive initiatives, the path towards realisation of the potential benefits is still challenging due to the unresolved issues. This is not only unhealthy for Bangladesh and India, but also for the region. Collaboration between these two countries is an important factor for enhancing economic stability in South Asia, since all the other countries in the region have exposed their vulnerability. The people of Bangladesh are eagerly waiting to see the outcome of this high-profile state visit.

for which they must be the first ones to establish their ideologies, which according to them reflect the true spirit of nationalism.

As for the students of these private universities, on-campus harassment and violence are not the only concerns. Many are also fearing the influence the political wing will have on their academics as well as on various university policies. How long will it take before faculty members and the administrative staff are influenced to side with these groups? What will happen when the universities fail to control these student political organisations? And who knows how day-to-day academics might be affected because of all this?

What political groups like BCL stand to gain by infiltrating private universities is something we will have to wait to find out. However, as students grow more and more impatient and worried with time, universities must respond to the situation and share concrete ideas as to how they plan to handle the situation. Otherwise, this issue will only lead to more panic among the students and their parents.

Private universities in Bangladesh have a lot of problems. They are not the embodiment of how a perfect educational institution should be. Despite that, hundreds and thousands of students still enrol in these institutions simply because they are (or were) free from politics. That freedom is being challenged right now, and if not acted on or overseen properly, the situation is likely to worsen at some point.

For those of us who oppose the idea of student politics entering private universities, we are likely to be branded as anti-state, anti-government or even terrorists. These political groups will do whatever it takes to turn the narrative in their favour. At this stage, you are either one of them, or you are against them; there is no in-between.