

BCL in private unis a dreaded prospect

Authorities must let educational institutions exercise their freedom to choose

AFTER Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) announced the formation of its committees in a number of private universities to “deal with terrorist activities” and “practice Bangabandhu’s ideals”, Education Minister Dipu Moni commented that it is up to the universities to decide whether political activities will be allowed on their premises. However, she demonstrated her tacit approval by saying that the implications of banning student politics are usually “not good”, and if we want a democratic society, there is no alternative to political consciousness. But as one vice-chancellor aptly replied, “Has anyone seen anything positive coming out of student politics in the last 10-12 years?”

That this negative connotation that our brand of student politics now carries is rooted in fact was proven only yesterday, when this daily reported on how newly-formed BCL committees in three public universities include “students” – that too in top positions – who were expelled from the organisation for criminal activities, and even accused in murder cases. Some of the selected are also not students – a far too common occurrence when it comes to student politics. The unfortunate reality is that student politics, especially of the BCL brand, is often associated with crime, violence, extortion, illegal contracts, harassment of students and teachers, forceful occupation of university property, etc. Not to mention the fact that, in recent weeks, we have once again been reminded of how often student wings only function as an arm of their mother parties in committing violence during clashes.

Why do private universities need BCL committees in the first place? BCL spokespersons have mentioned how private universities being left out of political activities is allowing terrorist ideologies to flourish. While there is little, if any, evidence to back up this claim, we must ask: since when is BCL in charge of dealing with terrorism? And in what ways do they plan on resisting terrorism? Will they take the law into their own hands, as we have so often seen them do in public universities? If their plan is to do so through conducting social and cultural activities, then why get affiliated with a political party? And what exactly are law enforcement forces doing anyway, if BCL is required to do this job for them?

Given that so many students and their teachers and families are worried about the influence of party politics on their education – and we must be clear that student politics has now become synonymous with party politics – we believe they are entitled to these answers. And while we are relieved to find that a few of the major private universities have already confirmed that they will not allow student politics, we hope they will continue to have this freedom to choose and will not face any untoward pressure to change their decisions on this.

An inspiring example of honesty

Ex-constable’s ‘ticket debt’ payment a lesson for railway passengers and officials

IT is heartening to know that a retired constable has settled his “debt” of unbought tickets for train journeys he had made while working for the Anti-Corruption Commission. Reportedly, the 61-year-old Emdadul Haque, a resident of South Mourail in Brahmanbaria who retired from service in December, visited the Brahmanbaria Railway Station on Monday, and expressed his desire to pay his dues. His wasn’t a case of late-blooming conscience. He kept a tally of the number of times he had to travel without a ticket over the last few years and, upon meeting railway officials, paid a duly-counted Tk 2,530.

In so doing, the father-of-four has set an example of honesty at a time when such efforts, particularly by government officials, current or former, are few and far between. Stories like this inspire us, teach us honesty and integrity, and make us want to be a better version of ourselves in both personal and professional lives. They show us how citizens can, and should, evolve from being mere customers into active stakeholders in matters related to them. By coming clean on his travel history, Emdadul has also shone a light on the travel habits of many train passengers as well as the mismanagement and irregularities currently plaguing the sector.

Train passengers travelling without tickets is a common phenomenon in the country. We often come across reports of people doing this, sometimes without so much as a thought spared for the impropriety of the act or its likely effect on a struggling sector. Our memory of a travelling ticket examiner (TTE) of Bangladesh Railway, who was suspended after he showed the audacity to fine three relatives of the railways minister travelling without tickets, is still fresh. As well as high-profile offenders, there are also university students and even ordinary citizens trying to take advantage of a system where there is little accountability for crimes and failures.

Railway officials themselves are perhaps the biggest beneficiary of this corruption enabling, inefficiency-tolerating system, which makes Emdadul’s story both an example to follow and a case study to scrutinise. The railway is a serial offender when it comes to questions over poor services, lax monitoring, lack of implementation of relevant rules and regulations, and poor execution of its many projects. Although the authorities routinely talk about improving and modernising railway services, the truth is, the huge investment made in this sector has amounted to little improvement over the years.

So while we hope non-paying train passengers will learn from Emdadul’s example of honesty, we also expect that the higher authorities will ensure total compliance with all rules and regulations, especially by officials who must lead by example in all their undertakings.

PM HASINA’S INDIA VISIT 2022

Will India ever reciprocate our favour?



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THE key part of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina’s visit to India, which ends today, is over with the conclusion of the meeting with her Indian counterpart Narendra Modi on September 6, 2022. The formalities of signing MoUs and the inauguration of projects are also complete. The fate of the visit is now set. So, what are the outcomes of this high-level diplomatic engagement? What are the gains for Bangladesh?

During the meeting, seven MoUs were exchanged and five projects were inaugurated.

Among the MoUs, the most important one is the withdrawal of 153 cusec (cubic feet per second) water from the Kushiara River by Bangladesh under the upper Surma-Kushiara project, via Rahimpur. The water will be used for irrigation of about 5,000 hectares of land. This is the first bilateral water-sharing arrangement between the two countries since the Ganges treaty in 1996. We must welcome this development. However, the major water-sharing disputes between the two countries remain unresolved.

Unfortunately, there has been no progress regarding the signing of the Teesta water-sharing agreement, the draft of which has been gathering dust since 2011. It is still at the assurance level, and not even mentioned in the statement issued by the Indian prime minister after meeting his Bangladeshi counterpart. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, in her statement, only expressed hope that the outstanding issues, including the Teesta treaty, would be concluded at an early date. The joint statement didn’t mention India’s current view on the matter either. Meanwhile, new dams are being planned on the Teesta River in the Indian state of Sikkim, which will further choke the river’s water flow.

Similarly, although the delegations of the Joint River Commission (JRC) discussed preparing the drafts of the water-sharing frameworks for the Manu, Muhuri, Khowai, Gumti, Dharla and Dudhkumar rivers, they couldn’t finalise them.

The Bangladesh government’s poor water diplomacy has failed us again. They have failed to make India understand that Bangladesh can’t wait forever to resolve the issues of sharing the water of the common rivers. It is worth mentioning that the JRC ministerial-level meeting was held on August 25, 2022 after about 12 years. Can we expect a better result?

Among the projects inaugurated, a major one is the unveiling of the Unit I of the Maitree power plant. The 1,320 (660x2) MW supercritical coal-fired thermal power plant in Rampal, Khulna is being set up at an estimated cost of approximately USD 2 billion, with



Despite high expectations, issues such as the Teesta treaty, border killings, etc remain unresolved during PM Hasina’s visit to India.

VISUAL: BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY

USD 1.6 billion as Indian Development Assistance under Concessional Financing Scheme. There has been strong criticism and protest against this controversial project since its inception. Numerous studies have shown that the benefits of the Rampal coal-fired power plant are negligible compared to its negative irreversible impacts on the ecosystem of the Sundarbans, a natural shield against cyclones and storm surges for Bangladesh.

On the first day of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina’s visit, Indian business tycoon Gautam Adani called on her. He expressed confidence in the completion of the transmission line under the Adani Godda Power Plant project to Bangladesh by December this year. The power deal was signed during Modi’s first visit to India in 2015. This project has also drawn a lot of flak from environmental activists and energy experts in both countries.

A report jointly published by the Bangladesh Working Group on External Debt (BWGED) and the India-based Growthwatch estimated that the capacity charge that Bangladesh is set to pay to the 1,600MW Adani Godda Power Plant over its 25-year lifetime is more than enough to build three Padma Bridges. The power from this plant, according to the study, will be 56.2 percent more expensive than the power imported from other sources.

to clear an Adani Group project in the island nation. Massive protests were held in the country against the proposed wind mill project by Adani Group. However, Gotabaya Rajapaksa “vehemently denied” the statement; Ferdinando subsequently withdrew his statement and stepped down from his position.

Through this visit, the two countries have also made some progress on the upgradation of train tracks, signalling systems and railway stations, training of Bangladeshi judicial officers, and cooperation in space technology. Those will definitely contribute to strengthening the bilateral relationship between the two neighbours, but Bangladesh deserves better.

There was some hype about the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA), but it didn’t get much importance in the statements of the prime ministers and the joint statement, except what Indian PM Modi said, “We will soon start discussions on the bilateral Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement.” In his special media briefing, the India foreign secretary disclosed that talks between the two countries on CEPA were proposed to start this year and conclude before the graduation of Bangladesh from LDC status by 2026.

The Hasina-Modi talk failed to reach a meaningful point on two major

During this visit, Sheikh Hasina again emphasised that India can “do a lot” to help Bangladesh cope with the Rohingya crisis. But no concrete initiative to address the crisis is found in the joint statement – Indian Foreign Minister S Jaishankar gave our prime minister only assurances.

Although Bangladeshis are regularly killed on the border by India’s Border Security Force (BSF), the joint statement expressed “satisfaction that the number of deaths due to incidents along the border has significantly reduced.” Are border killings no longer a concern for Bangladesh?

When the BSF DG justified border killings during a meeting in Bangladesh on July 21, 2022, saying all Bangladeshis killed on the border were criminals, his Bangladeshi counterpart maintained silence. Is such silence bringing satisfaction?

The prime ministers of Bangladesh and India have met 12 times since 2015. Every time, particularly during the state visits, high expectations arose and, invariably, as they were not met, disillusionment settled in. Sheikh Hasina, after returning from her state visit to India in 2018, said that India would always remain grateful for what Bangladesh did for its neighbour. This time also, there is no major gain from her visit. One can’t help but wonder: Will India ever reciprocate the favour?

How can Dhaka solve its traffic problem?



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IF I had a dollar for every time I’ve heard that “traffic was particularly bad today,” I could have retired already.

Over the years, people have hazarded various suggestions as to the cause of the terrible Dhaka traffic and its potential solutions. Causes include: not enough roads for all the cars; poor traffic management or a lack of operational signals; lack of lanes; an insufficient number of buses, including school buses; too many rickshaws; and the “disorderly” movement of pedestrians. Each cause suggests its own solution: build more roads/flyovers/elevated expressways; modernise traffic management and fix the traffic signals; mark lanes clearly; ban rickshaws; throw pedestrians in jail if they fail to use foot overbridges.

Some of those solutions have been

attempted. The result? Well, the traffic flow sure hasn’t improved, but as cars continue to gain priority on the roads, our air gets ever more polluted and road crashes become ever more frequent.

I’m not sure why we’re surprised. If you try to enable millions of people to move about within a small space, especially via the space-hogging private cars, what you will get is congestion. For Dhaka, it would be helpful to learn from the experience of other cities in the world, rather than try untested ideas and hope that they will magically work.

Here are a few basic truths that are illustrated around the world: the more that cities rely on the automobile for transport, the worse the congestion is – as well as pollution, road crashes, and other problems related to cars.

Since cars require so much space for movement and parking, vast amounts of urban land are expended to accommodate them. As a result, there is less space for trees, parks, and playgrounds, while the cost of housing goes up. We can never build roads as fast as people buy new cars, and wider roads simply invite more cars.

But the opposite is also true; when roads are permanently closed to cars, or lanes are converted from car lanes to bicycle lanes and to widen footpaths, much of the former traffic simply disappears. This is known as traffic evaporation. Cities that limit parking through high fees, implement congestion charges, and limit where cars can go, while simultaneously improving the quality of public transit and making walking and cycling more convenient, attractive, and safer, experience a decrease in congestion.

But not just that. Cities that control cars also experience less pollution and fewer road crashes. When the ground level of buildings is used for shops and offices, their rent subsidises that of the flats above, and housing becomes more affordable.

With mixed-use neighbourhoods, the need for travel decreases, which also reduces congestion. If we ensured

that each neighbourhood had decent schools, then children could walk or cycle to school, making them healthier and happier while dramatically reducing congestion. Fewer cars would also mean more space for canals, parks, playgrounds, and urban trees, all of which make for more liveable and cooler cities with less flooding.

Sure, we can continue to try to tinker around the edges, maintaining our car dependency while hoping that somehow congestion will magically decrease. We can continue to complain about traffic, mourn those lost to road crashes, and build ever more impressive monuments to our love affair with the automobile.

Or we could implement measures that would actually reduce congestion by discouraging and disabling car use while also improving our quality of life in numerous ways. Of course, there is a sacrifice: All the convenience that we get – or hope to get – from cars and motorbikes. But we should also consider all that we could gain if we greatly reduced our use of individual motorised transport: cleaner air, safety, some peace and quiet, and far more liveable streets and cities. Surely those benefits would outweigh the loss of status and imagined convenience.