

Shishu Park closure is hurting children

Authorities must expediate the process to reopen the park

For over four decades, Shishu Park, the country's first amusement park for children, had been a source of joy and cherished memories for countless children and families. Located in the heart of Dhaka, it offered affordable entertainment options in a city where such opportunities are still scarce. It is, therefore, hard to accept the park's prolonged closure dating back to January 2019. According to a report, the closure, primarily attributed to modernisation efforts, has since turned into a saga of overlapping purposes, bureaucratic red tape, and budgetary complications, with the authorities unable to provide a tentative date of reopening even after four and a half years.

The question is, why is this being allowed to drag on? It is perhaps not surprising when you think of the plight of parks, zoos and other outdoor recreation facilities managed by urban authorities across the country. We have often come across similar reports of prolonged closures in the name of modernisation. Even those that are open to the public are often poorly run, with allegations of mismanagement and antisocial activities routinely heard of. The Ramna Park recently made news for still imposing a pandemic-time entry restriction during certain hours, when apparently only "sirs" can enter it. The picture that emerges from this state of affairs is deeply troubling, especially in a city with few public spaces and facilities left for recreation. Although there are some private amusement parks for children in Dhaka, those are often prohibitively expensive for low-income families.

Shishu Park is now the site of several development works simultaneously, thus complicating and lengthening their execution. While the DSCC's plan for its modernisation through the installation of 15 new rides is yet to take off, works on an underground parking lot within the park as well as an underpass – implemented by the Department of Public Works – are at various stages of development. Given the glacial pace at which all this is happening, DSCC thinks it may take another three years for its own project to be completed once it receives approval.

What this means is that the gates of this beloved and affordable amusement park will remain locked indefinitely. This is totally unacceptable. We urge the authorities to expedite the park modernisation work. Not doing so is an injustice to the children who are growing up without the joy and wonder that Shishu Park once offered.

An ex-MP's abuse of power

How did he get away with it for so long?

We are appalled at the blatant abuse of power of a former MP of Narsingdi that extended to misappropriation of fertiliser meant for the benefit of farmers as well as allegedly grabbing land of helpless people. Reportedly, a suit has been filed in court by the state-run Bangladesh Chemical Industries Corporation (BCIC), and the Anti-Corruption Commission (ACC) has launched an investigation following a *suo moto* rule by a High Court bench. We cannot help but wonder whether such large-scale corruption involving around 71,801 tonnes of imported chemical fertiliser would have been exposed had those organisations or the High Court not taken a stand against it.

As revealed through a report by this paper, the former lawmaker, with the help of his henchmen, had also been involved in allegedly coercing people to sell their land at prices much lower than the market rates, and building boundary walls and occupying the land if they refused to comply. In fact, he was so powerful that many victims were too scared to file a case, fearing repercussions. It was also revealed that nearly 50 people from different areas of the Palash upazilla brought allegations of land grabbing against him.

The fact that such abuse of power could have gone on for so many years and on such a scale points to the impunity that many ruling party leaders enjoy in their constituencies. In this particular case, the former lawmaker used his position as president of Bangladesh Fertiliser Association to get major contracts to transport the imported fertiliser, a large part of which he allegedly misappropriated. Was it not a conflict of interest for someone to head an organisation responsible for supplying fertiliser to farmers to also have a business that would financially benefit from getting contracts to transport it?

We hope that the ACC probe results in starting the process of bringing him to justice. In addition, we urge the authorities to initiate a thorough investigation into the land grabbing allegations that will result in the return of the lands to their rightful owners.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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What every parent should know

The Cambridge Dictionary defines overparenting as "too much involvement by parents in the lives of their children, so that they try to help with or control everything that happens to the child." If we look around, we will see many such parents, who always try to solve their children's problems.

It is only through letting children face their own challenges, and pursue their own dreams, that we can allow them to grow. Every parent should be aware of this.

SM Imranul Islam Rajon, Dhala

How to explain Jamaat's return to the political scene?



THE STREET VIEW

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Jamaat-e-Islami, one of the largest fundamentalist parties in Bangladesh, was recently allowed to hold a public meeting in Dhaka after almost a decade. The official permission from police to hold the rally has led to numerous questions and, pending any clear answers, much speculation.

A day after the rally, ministers and senior leaders of the ruling Awami League came out with various statements seeking to give some explanation. Perhaps the most important remark was made by the Minister of Agriculture Abdur Razzak, who said that allowing Jamaat to hold a rally in Dhaka was a "political decision." That term alone raises questions across at least two fronts: what prompted Awami League to take such a decision, and what does the government want to achieve through this "political decision?"

Jamaat has faced a myriad of challenges since the BNP-led alliance, which included Jamaat, handed over power to a caretaker government in 2006. This was followed by a period of serious political clashes.

Over the next two years, amid a state of emergency, Jamaat's principal ally BNP's political capital appeared to have eroded substantially, so much so that Awami League won a landslide victory in 2008. The war crimes trials that soon followed saw the top leadership of Jamaat get executed for their crimes against Bangladesh and its people in 1971. Many of its leaders were also arrested between 2013 and 2015, when the BNP-Jamaat alliance staged a fierce campaign to thwart the elections.

Since 2013, Jamaat had not been allowed to hold any rallies. In fact, whenever they attempted to stage any kind of public demonstration, their leaders were summarily detained by law enforcers with a clear indication from the government that they would not be accorded such liberties. But after the announcement of the US visa policy, it seems Jamaat has been the only party that has been able to seize the opportunity to benefit from it.

There have been rumours that Jamaat had an "understanding" with the government, based upon which they were allowed to hold the rally. Awami League General Secretary Obaidul Quader, however, said that BNP had brought Jamaat out to the streets to carry out arson attacks – essentially evading the fact that it was his government that let Jamaat hold this particular rally.



Leaders and activists of Jamaat-e-Islami gathering at the Institution of Engineers, Bangladesh, in the capital ahead of their rally.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

Some members of Jamaat have been found guilty of committing war crimes. The organisation, as well as many of its leaders, had actively engaged against Bangladesh's liberation forces in 1971. The party also has a solid track record of carrying out arson attacks. So, why has the government suddenly become softer on the party?

The BNP, which was blamed for forming an alliance with a controversial party like Jamaat, had dissolved its grand alliance of 20 parties apparently just to rid itself of any links with Jamaat. Although not in any alliance officially, there have been reports that Jamaat and BNP resumed talks to simultaneously launch a one-point movement. So far, that seems to hold true, considering the kind of noises Jamaat is making – they want election under a caretaker government system.

Political commentators believe that the government has a political equation in mind. If BNP boycotts the polls, then the government will try to bring Jamaat into the election under a different name to make the election seem inclusive and participatory. Leaders of Jamaat have already applied to the Election Commission for registering a new political party, and there is a rumour that the Bangladesh

Democratic Party will get registration.

Jatiya Party Chairman GM Quader recently said at a programme that there was much chatter and speculation around the political scene. He said the word was that Awami League would concede some constituencies to Jamaat. "They will give some seats to us too. 'Get more organised and you will get more seats

that the government's hands are tied and it was compelled to give permission to Jamaat in light of the US visa policy. Many believe that through this, the government wants to show that it is not obstructing any of its political opponents. Jamaat, on the other hand, needed to show that it was still present, and it most likely leveraged the benefit of the US policy.

too,' they said," Quader said at a party event. It is becoming increasingly clear that this time, getting re-elected would be challenging for the ruling party and it would not be possible to repeat what happened in 2014 or 2018.

If BNP and other political parties do not join the polls, the credibility of the election will be questioned to an extent that it might get branded as largely illegitimate. That leads to the obvious question as to whether the government is trying to bring Jamaat back into electoral politics to change this scenario. Many might dismiss this idea as mere conjecture, but Jamaat's intimacy with the ruling party is nothing new.

When BNP boycotted the 1986 elections during the regime of military dictator HM Ershad, it was the Awami League and Jamaat that joined the polls and gave it legitimacy. Awami League and Jamaat waged a joint movement against the BNP government in 1995-96, demanding the introduction of the caretaker government system, which led to a constitutional amendment as well. If Awami League had found it expedient to join hands with Jamaat then, it may find it expedient to do so again.

There is also a strong suggestion

It must have been desperate to make a show. That is also important when one is playing the game of electoral politics.

In Jamaat's absence, the Bangladesh Islami Andolon appears to have taken over its vote bank, although both parties have distinct ideologies. But as far as Jamaat is concerned, their vote bank is being seriously eroded.

Founded by the controversial Islamist scholar Abul Ala Moududi in 1941, Jamaat had been banned twice in Pakistan – in 1959 and 1964 – for its communal role. During the Liberation War, the party had directly taken a stance against independence and provided the bulwark of Razakar, Al-Badr and Al-Shams militia and the notorious Peace Committee that collaborated with the Pakistani army to commit war crimes.

In 2013, Jamaat's registration as a political party was declared illegal by the High Court. Acting on the verdict, the Election Commission cancelled its registration in October 2018. But the government did not take any move to ban the party over these years. So, Awami League's intentions regarding Jamaat are still dubious at best. Jamaat, on the other hand, being politically savvy as always, has picked just the right time to indicate that it is ready to be courted.

Looking back on India's triple train crash and the safety of rail travel



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The triple train accident in Balasore in the eastern Indian state of Odisha on June 2 was considered the worst in three decades involving India's largest public transport system that ferries nearly eight billion people annually. The accident left 290 people dead and more than 1,100 injured. The statistics point to the persisting issues of concern India needs to address as it goes about expanding and upgrading its rail infrastructure and services.

The accident between the speeding Shalimar-Chennai Coromandel Express and the Bengaluru-Howrah Express carrying nearly 2,000 people brought forth many questions about the state of India's rail infrastructure, particularly its safety aspect. Was it due to faulty signalling system or human error? There are two parallel investigations which are going on – one by the Commissioner of Railway Safety and the other by premier investigating agency Central Bureau of Investigation with the latter probing if there has

been any tampering with the signalling system as claimed by Railway Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw. Was Balasore accident a toxic mix of mechanical failures and human error? Perhaps, we will get a correct picture only after the two probes. But this should in no way deflect the attention – and greater attention for that matter – from a key area begging to be addressed – safety of rail travel.

India's rail infrastructure was largely set up and left behind by British colonial rulers. The Indian government has an ambitious plan to tune up that infrastructure and Rs 2.4 lakh crore has been allocated for capital expenditure in the FY23-24 national budget. The Indian railway has seen a dramatic increase in its capital outlays. As such, currently funds are less of a hindrance to upgrade the rail infrastructure including safety measures. However, putting funds to optimal use remains an area of worry. According to a report by India's top auditor Comptroller

and Auditor General (CAG) which has oversight over all government departments, money allocated for track renewal works were not fully utilised between 2018-19 and 2019-20. Clearly, the work of upgradation and maintenance work of rail tracks and signalling brooks no further delay.

The graph of rail accidents in India has shown a declining trend over several years. Out of 1,127 derailments between 2017 and 2021, 289 were linked to track renewal. The number of "consequential" train accidents has declined from 74 in 2017-18 to 20 in 2020-21. According to one estimate, derailments constituted 75 percent of "consequential" train accidents and collisions another five percent between 2016-17 and 2020-21. It is unfortunate that divisions should be created by terming accidents as "inconsequential" or "consequential" because every life matters and even one death should be of major concern.

Maintenance of tracks and the rolling stock are areas the Indian railway authorities can ill afford to ignore. Safety measures, including installation of anti-collision systems in trains are expanding but not at the desired pace. Both the CAG and the parliamentary standing committee on railways have flagged concerns over railway safety. They had brought out three reports showing that railways fell short of safety standards between

December 2016 and March of this year. The government had set up a dedicated fund in 2017-18 to carry out safety-related work. In March 2023, the parliamentary committee pointed out that not once had the annual funding been spent fully. What is more disconcerting is a CAG report on derailments showed that the dedicated fund allocation had begun to see an increasing proportion diverted to a "non-priority" area. The Balasore incident should be an eye-opener to the urgent need for the much-needed upgrade of safety mechanism and constant vigil on this.

The Balasore accident has set off a debate whether the government was giving more priority to semi-high speed passenger trains like Vande Bharat, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's favourite project, announced in 2021. What has been forgotten or ignored is that semi-high speed trains, rail safety and track upgradation are not mutually exclusive. It is not a case of either or. All should run simultaneously but with different degree of emphasis because the issue of safety in all trains remains paramount.

The two separate probes into the Balasore accident should fix responsibilities but that exercise has to be part of a comprehensive review of the path to modernise the country's railways and its safety. It should not be a case of a train to nowhere.