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Dhaka Metro Rail Project

Citizens in development

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THOSE who have visited Kolkata, New Delhi, Amsterdam or New York will certainly acknowledge the effectiveness of metro rails in reducing travel time and saving travel costs. It has been a physical indicator of a city's pride in technology upgradation. Because of its high utility, city dwellers generally press their demand to have metro stations close to their residence and working place. However, the opposite is observed among the students of Dhaka University. They have been protesting the government's plan to set up a metro rail track across the campus, since the train will create undue noise pollution that will disturb the cultural and academic atmosphere of the university. In response, the government has expressed its inability to make adjustments to the current plan of the project as its implementation is going to be kicked off in next March. The government further argues that the rail track plan was finalised through consultation with the university authority.

It is difficult to appreciate all decisions taken by the university authority, although the university is credited for the construction of some historic monuments such as the Aparajayo Bangla and the Raju sculptures. In the past, the authority decided to construct the Persian Institute with financial support from the Iranian Government in the open space between the Central Library and DUCSU cafeteria. The students strongly protested against the move, resulting in the project being scrapped. Thus, an open space of breathing could be saved. However, another large open space adjacent to Modhu's Canteen has been engulfed due to the construction of the massive Social Science Faculty building, making the eastern entrance of the campus, leading to a further filling of the place by concrete structures. The protesting students argue that the route of metro rail will shadow the Raju sculpture and thus, its triangle locational beauty will be lost. They further argue that the National Heritage Preservation Policy prohibits any heavy construction around 200 square kilometers of the National Museum, Fine Arts, Three Leaders' Cemetery and the Dhaka Gate. In addition, one year of tremors emitted from the metro rail, equal to 6-6.5 scale on the Richter scale, will present a threat to Curzon Hall and Dhaka Gate.

Students expressed that the proposed metro route, which is supposed to run close to the Institute of Nutrition & Food Science, Department of Computer Science, Department and Micro Biology, etc. will disturb the academic atmosphere severely (Prothom Alo online, January 18, 2016).

The Executive Committee of National Economic Council (ECNEC) approved the metro rail project at a cost of Tk 219.85 billion on December 18, 2012, for which a loan from the Japanese government, through Japan International Cooperation Agency, will bear 76 percent of the cost. Unlike the metros in many other cities, the 20.1 kilometre-long metro rail tracks will be constructed overhead, going through Uttara-Pallabi-Khamarbari-Farmgate-Sonargaon Hotel-Shahbagh-TSC-Press Club-Bangladesh Bank. When the project is completed, an estimated 60,000 commuters will be able to travel per hour with a minimum fare of Tk 10 and a maximum fare of Tk 60. It would take around 37 minutes from either Uttara to Bangladesh Bank or Bangladesh Bank to Uttara and thus, travel time will be lessened to a greater extent. Given these benefits, the Prime Minister has requested that the development of the metro rail be allowed to go forward smoothly.

Now, the question arises: can the government go ahead coercively with the project? There are often two groups of people under a policy. A group of people or organisations bears the burden of complying with policy requirements and the other group is the target beneficiary of the policy. In case of the metro project, the first group includes the organisations that have won the contract to build the project, the companies that will supply the construction materials and the engineers and workers who will be given salaries for working on the project. Government coercion can be applied on this group of people to fulfil their contractual obligations; failing to do so, they have to bear a range of penalties like fines, forfeitures etc. These people are not the target public of the project yet. The city's commuters will benefit from the reduced travel time and cost saving resulting from the metro rail project. The government can convince the beneficiary groups through democratic means. Leading American political scientist Harold Lasswell said that “a policy is good for society when it is the product of a political process”. Thus, students' protests should be viewed as an activity of working democracy where citizens participate in government's actions to ensure its responsiveness and accountability and thus, influence the government to work democratically in between elections.

Furthermore, students' opposition provides the government with an opportunity to check the accuracy of the project from legal, social and technical perspectives. If their concern is logically resolved, it will provide more respect and support for the metro rail project. To understand the disadvantages of disregarding public consultations for infrastructure projects, one can assess the Moghbazar-Mouchak Flyover construction. It was revealed that the flyover's design is suitable for left-hand drive vehicles, whereas Dhaka's vehicles are all right-hand drive. According to BUET experts, some 60 pillars need to be replaced to correct the design, leading to a hike in project cost. ECNEC has already increased the project cost by Tk 446.2 crore (about 58 percent increase) and extended the timeframe by another 18 months for extension of the flyover and to make other structural changes. National infrastructure experts say that they were not consulted on the design, which was prepared by an American company.

Lastly, the citizens should have the main influence over development initiatives that affect their lives. The onus of striking a balance between conflicting pressures or imperatives lies with the government. Democratic means of reaching the balance entails consultation with the citizens in a transparent and candid manner. Particularly, consultation with the sector specialists will help the government avert technical mess-ups as seen with the Moghbazar-Mouchak flyover. The

government is better advised to mobilise opinion through public hearing, as it broadens citizens' ownership and acceptability of government activities as well.

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