

Investing in Space Program for Making a New Bangladesh

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Bangladesh's closest neighbor, India, is the fifth space power of the world; it has brought incredible socio-economic development through space-based technologies and programs (Duchaine, 2023). Pakistan launched its communication satellite, Badr-1, in the 1990s (Zafar & Zafar, 2022), and Sri Lanka launched its first satellite in 2018. Other South Asian states, namely Nepal, Bhutan, and Maldives, have also started investing in space programs (Lele, 2022). When India and Pakistan have civil and military interests in investing in space programs, other states mostly do it for civilian purposes. For a long time, Bangladesh remained dependent on space-faring countries' satellite services support, including telecommunications and broadcasting.

Although Bangladesh's first space research-related government organization, Bangladesh Space Research and Remote Sensing Organization (SPARRSO), was established in 1980, its focus remains limited to remote sensing, and it collaborates with international and regional space organizations. Bangladesh has recently taken the initiative to invest in space programs as an aspiring space-faring state. The Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission – a state agency– started working on launching a communication satellite in April 2008.

Bangladesh became the fourth South Asian nation to establish its stakes in Outer Space by launching a communication satellite in 2018.

Bangladesh's journey to launch its first satellite was not easy. As communications satellites are usually installed in the Geostationary Orbit (GEO), Bangladesh tried to get a suitable slot since 2012, but initially, it failed to obtain the required slot. The GEO slots are distributed per the norms on a "first come, first serve" basis. So, all vital slots were already taken by major space actors, while the rest of the slots are under competitive distribution. Finally, Bangladesh obtained a slot by paying a hefty amount to Russia and successfully launched its first satellite in 2018.

Bangladesh established in 2015 a company named "Bangladesh Communication Satellite Company Limited," (renamed as "Bangladesh Satellite Company Limited" in 2017) to lead the post-launching activities, including satellite activities, ground station monitoring and marketing and selling communications services to other regional states. Bangladesh manifested its desire to explore Outer Space through its first satellite launch. However, the project of launching the satellite has been criticized for various reasons. One of them was that launching a

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satellite into Space was resource-draining. However, the previous regime argued that having its own satellite would save money in the long run. As per the previous government's plan, a second satellite of Bangladesh was planned to be launched by 2025 (Deal for countries, 2024).

Now, it is in the hands of the current regime whether to go forward with the second satellite project. The government needs to review the project while considering that having its own satellite makes many services easily accessible and allows control over crucial data. The importance of satellites in today's digitalized world makes modern states' investment in space programs an imperative. The potential benefits of Bangladesh's investment in space technology, such as improved internet connectivity, enhanced digital economic sectors, and a technology-based society and governance, underscore the importance of this initiative.

Bangladesh is at a high risk of climate crisis. In the last few years, Bangladesh has experienced drastic climate change-related extreme environments like heat waves, delayed monsoons, and flash flood-like issues, affecting the agricultural sectors and food security. Therefore, Bangladesh requires adequate remote sensing, earth observation, and weather satellite services to overcome these extreme climate change-related situations. For instance, in 2021, Bangladesh used its first satellite services to resume telecommunication and internet in flood-affected areas in Sylhet (Bangabandhu satellite-1, 2022).

Currently, Bangladesh requires satellite-based internet for socio-economic development, including sustainable development. In terms of internet communication, Bangladesh is still behind many of its regional neighbors. According to Bangladesh Sample Vital Statistics (BSVS), around 53.7 per cent of the urban population and 37.1 percent of the rural population get internet access. A digital gap exists between male and female users as well. A study suggests that 47.6% of men use the internet, and the percent of women who use the internet is 34.6 percent (Sharmin, 2023, para.9). Bangladesh's space program could

potentially bridge this gender gap in internet access, thereby contributing to gender equality in the digital sphere.

By considering the positive sides of having its satellites, the government must focus on building adequate capacity building. Not having its own satellite will make Bangladesh a "dependent state" on foreign actors. As Space is now a trillion-dollar economy, the absence of a Space program and launching capability will create barriers for non-space-faring states to enjoy the benefits of the space economy.

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