

A Happy Denouement

After a period of unimaginably long spell of delay that would have perhaps put even Prince Hamlet to shame for sheer procrastination — no less than six years since the project was proposed and approved —, the Sayedabad Water Treatment Plant has taken the first step to its being with its building process getting off to a ceremonial start last Tuesday.

An assortment of evil starting from governmental indecision, red-tapism, WASA employees vested interest and their opposition to fulfilling the World Bank's reform pre conditions for financial assistance led to this inordinate delay in the beginning of a project that has come to be unanimously deemed as a vital factor in meeting the spiralling urban challenge of enhanced water supply. The World Bank and the French government have come happily forward to finance the project. Thanks to them.

Dhaka has been in the throes of serious water supply crisis for quite some time now. The average shortfall in supply to the total demand is reportedly 43 crore litre. More than this diurnal duel with paucity the utility of the Sayedabad Water Treatment Plant which is expected to add some 225 million litre a day when completed, lies in its huge contribution to offsetting the increasing depletion of the underground water level. Ninety eight per cent of the WASA supplied water comes through lifting from the underground water reserve. This has led to the caving in of the city surface by some 36 feet foot — a fact that is deemed dangerous for city's existent structures. Besides, the spread of arsenic contamination is being attributed to indiscriminate sinking of deep tubewell.

WASA's performance will be key to water management when the plant gets operational in the year 2002. The agency is now incurring a systems loss of 46% which is untenable. Going by the international standard of administrative and technical systems loss the figure cannot be more than 23%. The Prime Minister gave a very stern warning to the WASA officials that the rate of systems loss has to be curbed.

One source of systems loss is the open nozzles and the other illegal connections given by a section of corrupt WASA employees. According to a figure some 40000 illegal connections are there in the city now. While the government is being robbed in the order of Taka 20 crore revenue every year these people are making their fortunes with reckless abandon. Despite WASA's recent announcement that there has been an 18% raise in its income one really doubts how far things have improved with sources when such rampant corruption still there.

WASA, as the PM observed at the inaugural ceremony, has to turn itself into a profitable organisation.

A Nation of Addicts?

There are a million drug addicts in Bangladesh. No, this is no government figure. The United Nations Drug Control Programme — UNDCP — had initiated some studies and surveys and that figure is their finding. But the number looks way out of the real strength of addicts. This is understandable as the survey was conducted without governmental participation. And possibly certain districts were not covered. In spite of certain such inadequacies, the UNDCP report points a correct picture of the drug situation getting out of hand very fast.

The report points out that from a country used as a transit route for the world drug traffic, Bangladesh has become a consuming nation. And drug abuse, already widespread in cities and district towns and even small upazila headquarters, is now reaching the villages. To this we add that in the mafassil towns, starting with the satellite city of Narayanganj, most of the medicine selling pharmacies do thrive on a brisk business in drugs, conducted, of course, after dusk.

The report quotes a 1991 WHO survey which said 13.32 per cent of Dhaka city's students took sleeping tablets as an addiction, 5.74 per cent drank spirit and 3.30 lapped up cannabis and opium. The situation, to our knowledge, has changed radically. It may be that the total of these percentages now stands for students consuming dangerous drugs.

Drugs are pretty expensive stuff. And to get to these the boys in the small towns and villages would be forced to emulate the ways of their big brothers in Dhaka and take to snatching and mugging, stealing and murdering. This is a particularly horrifying hell we are heading for.

Do the quantum and kind of the government's concern in the matter promise any change for the better or even of arresting the slide? We feel this is far too inadequate. The government owes it to the nation to stop the smuggling, possession and consumption of drugs by going up to, if necessary, Malaysian harshness.

Border Firing

When it is a border of peace and tranquillity that one takes for granted between India and Bangladesh, given their excellent bilateral relationship for quite a while now, the occasional news of BSF firing comes as a veritable surprise. That this is being apparently resorted to without so much as a demur makes it sound even more out of rhyme with the expected percolatory effect of the shared friendly ambience at the top. One cannot entirely rule out isolated petty incidents of altercation along such a long border between the two countries. That is why flag meetings are held to sort these out, but nobody in the right frame of mind expects such tiffs will degenerate into firing and violence of the kind that reportedly took place in Rajshahi on October 21. BSF personnel from Sharpara border outpost in West Dinajpur got entangled in a squabble with villagers of Kalupara when they went to the bordering area to cut grass at noon-time". At one stage they opened fire inflicting wounds on 12 persons at the Naogaon village.

Recently we have had the border coordination conference between Bangladesh and India addressing various weighty issues like cross-border crimes border demarcation, etc. One wishes very much it had taken due note of the interminable firing incidents and perfected the local mechanism for quick, reflexive trouble-shooting whenever the situation demanded it. The conduct at the borderguard level where the weapons are handled must be truly reflective of the friendliness beamed by the two governments at each other.

University-Government Relationship: Comparative Perspectives

by Khan Sarwar Murshid

The route of institutional autonomy and academic freedom through economic independence, would not be easy to take in Bangladesh, but we could still learn a lot from the British and American examples as well as from developments in the fast industrialising countries of Asia, such as Singapore, Thailand, and India, which are adapting speedily to new pressures and needs.

GOVERNMENT-university relationship in Bangladesh is perceived, for historical reasons, rather narrowly, even negatively, as one between adversaries, characterised by a none too covert desire for control and the inevitable antagonism and suspicion it arouses.

This is perhaps the pattern to be expected in countries with a record of colonial rule and/or indigenous authoritarianism or dictatorship. But many of those countries are moving out of this sterile pattern into a more positive relationship for the potential it offers for reconstruction and development in a fast changing and competitive world.

Also the question of institutional autonomy and academic freedom, with which university academics in Bangladesh are concerned, is a common concern across the 'developing and developed' divide and rightly so. But it is by no means the only aspect of government-university relationship, nor should it occupy academia to an obsessive extent as it seems to do in Bangladesh at present or inhibit cooperation.

I believe our universities should change in important ways. I also believe major and long-term goals could best be realised in an environment of collective understanding which should include a measure of understanding between them and the government, possible under democracy. I therefore wish to stress the importance of expanding our horizons, getting the universities and the government to collaborate as partners and to address problems like access, quality, infrastructure and extramural benefits to society. I would also like to plead for a vision of the university, facing the twenty-first century, as an instrument of designated political change within a democratic frame, social renewal, liberation of women and environmental care. I believe when ideas and institutions are in decay and new initiatives are needed, universities have a special role to play.

To read even a fraction of the literature about the history of the development of universities is to confirm three things, among others, of importance to us in Bangladesh: a) universities are products of particular societies and their problems and their solutions must be specific to their genetic setting.

b) in the course of their growth, somewhere down the line, universities appropriate the role of critics of society and interpreters of its needs and inevitably clash with power structures in and outside government; and c) each country treats the problems of academic autonomy in its own way, for the measure of freedom, academic freedom in particular, is contingent upon the character of the state, political and cultural norms and expectations, and economic realities.

them, even indirectly, is dead beyond resuscitation. They have to prosper or perish by the market, a doctrine for a time upheld, during conservative rule, by a single-member majority in the sovereign parliament of Great Britain and every penny spent on them must be accounted for in terms largely of quantifiable performance. The situation is not likely to be very different under new Labour either.

The British situation has several interesting features for us to note: a) institutional autonomy is regarded in Britain as a means to academic freedom understood as the freedom to teach and do research. In Great Britain, academic freedom is not in total jeopardy because she has a strong tradition of intellectual freedom and tolerance. (I am not unaware of the criticism though, that the tolerance might be limited to the 'tribe' as judged, for instance, by the rather 'endogamous' reaction of some Britons to the location and architecture of the Saudi-funded Islamic Institute at Oxford.) There is notionally freedom of choice too, but actually that choice is reduced by financial constraints whenever the universities fail to raise revenues through successful bids for resources from the state or increased fees from enrolments or other means. The universities are unhappy because their financial circumstances force compromises on them that affect standards of teaching and research. In a free market situation, academic freedom could therefore include the freedom to contemplate and accept decline; b) scarcity as a factor in the financing of higher education is a widespread phenomenon with poor and rich nations alike unable to cope with the vastly increased demand for places at institutions of higher education. Although there is a staggering gulf between the scales of their economies and the sizes of the budgets involved, Britain and Bangladesh share a problem. But while in Britain the universities are subject to intense scrutiny in respect of their pri-

orities and performance, the universities in Bangladesh thrive in their absence and are unbelievably cavalier in their attitude to the demands of accountability in all its senses. They seem to have fairly marginalised the University Grants Commission which is supposed to have a mediating and critical role in their affairs, while the academics have largely used the system of autonomy, founded upon a series of elections to various structures of authority within the university, to fend off the world and to promote and protect their own interests.

The American system of higher education, a vast and complex enterprise, has grown and prospered under governments generally friendly and supportive and occasionally interfering and overbearing, serves very varied needs of a community which could be both bigoted and open. It consists broadly of two types of universities, those privately endowed and those funded by the government. The first category contains some of the richest and most prestigious institutions of higher learning in the US. American universities have at least four sources of income: the government, industry, current students and alumni and are extremely adaptive to the demands of the economy as well as the needs of the community. The latter seems to transcend the imperatives of supply and demand and is probably linked to the impulse to serve that went into the creation of the land-grant universities. Among the strengths of the American higher education system is the plurality of its patrons, although the state universities are almost wholly dependent on government largesse, a great deal of money flows into the system from research programmes of the government and private industries.

The history of the profession of higher education in America is replete with conflicts with political authorities as well as the racist and religious right. Nevertheless, academics through their moral stamina

and resilience, have been able to establish a vigorous tradition of intellectual freedom which is supported by the judiciary and helped by the presence in the statutes book of The First Amendment to the American Constitution guaranteeing freedom of expression which, incidentally, at times causes intellectual and moral conundrums. Here the notion of institutional autonomy includes the right to act in pursuit of values a university believes in, while the notion of academic freedom is essentially founded on the integrity of teaching and research. Not all the universities as well as from developments in the fast industrialising countries of Asia, such as Singapore, Thailand, and India, which are adapting speedily to new pressures and needs.

The route of institutional autonomy and academic freedom through economic independence, would not be easy to take in Bangladesh, but we could still learn a lot from the British and American examples as well as from developments in the fast industrialising countries of Asia, such as Singapore, Thailand, and India, which are adapting speedily to new pressures and needs. In fact, adaptation seems to be the secret of the growth and survival of the university which is civil society's most enduring institution. Created in Europe 800 years ago, it produced, in succession, priests, 'gentlemen', politicians, administrators, inventors and engineers, corporate executives and technocrats of all kinds, to serve the needs of a changing society, and along the way preserving as well as generating ideas.

The rising demand for higher education, extremely limited choice, a stagnant curriculum, aggravated by the lack of resources, unwillingness to tap new sources of income, flawed structures of governance, the absence of a rational policy in respect of access and quality, a faulty admission system, ceaseless turning out of unemployable graduates and above all, an unimaginative and pernicious default on the need for responding to new challenges, are the features, forgetting for the moment the problem of campus terrorism, of a crisis which call for serious engagement and effort for its comprehensive and phased solution.

We must all take an informed part in the endeavour to find solutions to the crisis.

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man's Wharf costs two dollars. After nine in the morning and before seven in the evening, there are long lines. The cable cars are so crowded that tourist often have to stand on the steps and squeeze themselves by clinging to bars.

San Francisco was destroyed by fire in 1906. It sits atop the number one fault line in the USA. A devastating earthquake, the 'big one', is predicted any time. In 1989, as the San Francisco Giants were about to take the field to play the Oakland Athletics in baseball's World Series, a mighty one actually did - killing hundreds and destroying billions of dollars of property. Yet, in spite of the mortal danger, the San Franciscans would not like to be anywhere else.

There are two hubs for the tourists - the downtown area around Union Square, and Fisherman's Wharf, by the Bay. From the Wharf it is possible to cruise the Bay on a boat, take a ferry to the idyllic village of Sausalito on the other side of Golden Gate Bridge, or take the ten minute boat ride to the island prison of Alcatraz. The Ahmed family took a sea plane trip that took us over the city coast, Alcatraz, Golden Gate Bridge, Sausalito and the beautiful Muir Woods.

Alcatraz was a federal prison for violent criminals until 1962, when Attorney General Robert Kennedy closed it. It boasted of such notorious inmates as Chicago mobster Al Capone. Tourists are allowed to go through the prison, and in an attempt to simulate reality, the prisoners hurl verbal abuse at the tourists over the head phone. Many prisoners attempted to escape. However, because of strong current and shark-infested cold water, few made it. The attempt by four inmates to escape just before the prison was closed, is immortalised in the Clint Eastwood film, 'Escape from Alcatraz'. The four have not been heard from since. People are under the mistaken notion that the 'Birdman of Alcatraz' became an expert on birds as he bid his time at the prison. We were told that actually he became an expert after he left the prison.

Our second day in San Francisco was a Friday. At a downtown Pakistani restaurant, which serves exquisite food, we learned where to go for Juma prayers. Only a few blocks from the restaurant, Muslims gather on the third floor of a building to pray. It was gratifying to see such a nice, large and well-kept facility dedicated to prayer, right in the heart of downtown San Francisco. Thanks to Allah (SWT), these days on business trips to large US cities, it is always possible to find a mosque where one can pray.

For our last day, we drove sixty miles south to San Jose, the heart of Silicon Valley, the computer capital of the world. Apple Computers, the chip maker Intel Corp, and innumerable other computer-related companies are located in and around San Jose. Few months back, as President Clinton visited the area, he asked to have lunch with Steve Jobs, Apple computer's founder and current leader.

LETTER FROM AMERICA

On the Road in the Pacific Northwest

Dr. Fakhruddin Ahmed writes from Princeton

Redwood forest national park, just a few miles away. Redwood is a much cherished building material. Trees are huge, both in length and width. The trunk of one tree is so wide that they have cut a road through the tree! After gathering some redwood as souvenirs, we resumed our southward.

dian province, is Latin for New Scotland.

We went straight to the house of my friend from Faujdar Cadet College days, Schams. Since Bangladeshi are so well spread out throughout the world, these days it is no surprise to be able to look up friends or relatives anywhere, even in Alaska. The first order of business was to go to the grave yard where Schams' father was buried and pay our respects.

Then Schams took us on a tour of Vancouver. It is a cosmopolitan city with about 30% people of Chinese origin, many of them expatriates from Hong Kong. The Chinese are very visible everywhere. There is a substantial number of Indian, especially Sikh, population as well. Equally strong is the Iranian presence. Unlike the Americans, in their rush to get to the West coast, the Canadians did not fight the native Indians; they signed treaties with them. Consequently, a substantial chunk of Vancouver's prime real estate is owned and leased by native Indians.

We flew to Seattle, Washington from New York, in roughly the same time it takes to reach London, UK, and after a night's stay at a hotel near the airport, rented a car and headed towards Vancouver, Canada about 150 miles to the north. We went by many apple farms alongside the road; among other things, Washington apples are considered delicious. We passed the town of Redmond where, in a picturesque setting is located its best export to the world - computer genius Bill Gates' Microsoft.

Then Schams took us on a tour of Vancouver. It is a cosmopolitan city with about 30% people of Chinese origin, many of them expatriates from Hong Kong. The Chinese are very visible everywhere. There is a substantial number of Indian, especially Sikh, population as well. Equally strong is the Iranian presence. Unlike the Americans, in their rush to get to the West coast, the Canadians did not fight the native Indians; they signed treaties with them. Consequently, a substantial chunk of Vancouver's prime real estate is owned and leased by native Indians.

We spent an hour appreciating a quaint marina, which also doubles as a harbour for trips to the gorgeous Victoria island. Along the way, we passed the largest monkey bridge in the world. There were no takers among us for crossing the rope bridge. Then Schams took us to the mountain top for a breathtaking view of the city. The mountain top is a ski resort during winter. Since the resort, like all provincial parks in Canada is free, nearby Americans cross the border and rush in to take advantage.

Canada must be the only nation in the world to suffer from negative nationalism. "I am not an American", is how

Canadians attempt to distinguish themselves from similar-sounding Americans. Canadians are also the only people to use the term "North American" to describe themselves and Americans. Americans never do.

Back in Seattle, we went up the Space Needle, built in 1962. Atop the revolving restaurant, high up in the sky, we had our lunch. Back on earth, we took a stroll along the beautiful harbour. My kids had a notion of watching their baseball hero, Ken Griffey, Jr. of Seattle Mariners play at the Kingdome. Fortunately, the Mariners were away playing in New York!

Next morning, we drove to the Everett, to visit the factory that Bill built - no, not Bill Gates' Microsoft, Bill Boeing's aircraft company, established around 1915. Seattle is the head quarter of the Boeing Aircraft company.

On a free guided tour of the company, we witnessed a Boeing 777 being put together. The back of the plane is assembled first, then the main cabin, followed by the wings and the engines. I succumbed to a Freudian slip and asked our guide how much one these planes cost."Mockingly, she shot back, "who do you work for?", implying I was spying for Europe's Airbus, Boeing's only competitor. Of course they never tell you the price. Upwards of 128 million for a Boeing 777, and 158 million dollars for a Boeing 747.

Customers have to fork out a third of the price when they order the plane, another third before the plane is painted in their colours and the last third on delivery. Customers have to come to Seattle to pick up their plane and fly home. There is no

home delivery. Our guide was happy to tell us the price of jet engines, manufactured by others. Each jet engine cost about 10 million dollars.

Our next stop was Mount Rainier, about two and a half hours' drive from Seattle. The snow-capped Mt. Rainier is visible from anywhere in Seattle, although it is hundreds of miles away. Along with Mount St. Helens, which erupted in May, 1980, Mt. Rainier is one of the two active volcanoes on the US mainland. There are paved mountain roads that take visitors to within a breathtaking view of the top. The peaks play hide and seek with cloud cover, as we snapped up photographs and lifetime of memory.

The next morning, we headed for the Oregon Pacific coast that we had heard so much about. On the way we stopped at Portland, Oregon. Portland has a good professional basketball team, and our two kids made sure we stopped there for lunch.

On reaching the coast we realised why it is such a sought after vacation spot. Driving on Route 101, with the mountain range on the left and the breathtaking view of the blue Pacific ocean on the right, it is difficult to keep one's eyes on the road. There are scenic overlooks every few miles, and beaches whenever the road descends to sea level.

We drove all afternoon, hugging the picturesque coast, until sunset. As the sun set over the ocean, serenity reigned. In the twilight it appeared that all of God's creations - the waves, the rocks, the trees and the seals - were humming Allah's (SWT) praise in unison. We said our

Maghrib prayers in our car.

After a long day's drive through the states of Washington and Oregon, we reached the Californian border. Believe it or not, the state of California maintains check points at its borders. They are afraid of fruit pests that could destroy their billion dollars industry. We were asked, "Are there any fruits and vegetables in the vehicle?" Satisfied with a negative answer, the guard waved us on. We stayed the night at Crescent City California.

The next morning we explored the Redwood forest national park, just a few miles away. Redwood is a much cherished building material. The trees are huge, both in length and width. The trunk of one tree is so wide that they have cut a road through it - allowing cars to pass through the tree! After gathering some redwood as souvenirs, we resumed our journey southward.

As Route 101 gave way to Route 1 in California's Pacific coast, the road became tortuous. As the narrow, zigzagging roads ascended towards the heavens, for a vertigo-afflicted (fear of heights) motorist like the writer, the driving became a nightmare. Although these roads are a monumental engineering feat, it was in no mood to appreciate that.

We crossed the Golden Gate Bridge, the first such suspension bridge in the world, into San Francisco. As we headed towards our hotel from the Fisherman's Wharf, we came upon Filbert Street, the steepest road in San Francisco. Failing to see what lay at the end of the steep drop, I refused to budge. "I am not going in there", I said. The chorus of the horns of the late drivers behind me rose to a crescendo. Finally I began to descend! It really was not that bad when it was all over! Determined not to encounter San Francisco's undulating roadways again soon, for the next two days, we parked our car solidly in the garage of our abode. The Fairmont Hotel! With Filbert Street under our belt, when we drove through Lombard street - "the crookedest street in the world" before leaving San Francisco, it was a piece of cake!

With the temperate weather