

Chittagong University and the Crisis: Looking at the Roots

by Hayat Hussain

Speaking frankly, from day one there has been a continued dictatorship of ignorance on this poor country and that continues to be a shameful indictment on our political system from which there seems to be no escape in the near future.

STALEMATED by student unrest over a non-political issue of transport facility for the students, Chittagong University is now closed indefinitely after a gun battle between two factions of Chhatra League. It is difficult to say when the university will reopen but one thing is clear that if the varsity authority surrenders this time to the unreasonable demand of continued bus service for the students for a distance of hardly two or three hundred yards then this university will never cease to be a white elephant. The university has been bleeding white and running on deficit budget for many years mainly on account of transport expenses much of which could be avoided with better planning and little more finance.

In fact, Chittagong University was born, about three and a half decades ago, with many problems one of which was and still is its location in the form and detached village of Fatehabad about 12 miles north of Chittagong city. In a third world country like Bangladesh we cannot really afford to have a self-sufficient university town like Oxford, Cambridge etc. In our country or the erstwhile East Pakistan the idea of having isolated campus, in fact, stemmed from the mistaken political idea of distancing or isolating students from politics but that, in most cases, have proved counter productive.

Chittagong University is a clear example of that. Though it is located quite far away from Chittagong city it is heavily dependent on the city for almost everything including the daily necessities. In 1973-74 when I was the secretary of Chittagong University Teachers' Association and member of the transport sub-committee we recommended to the then Vice-Chancellor Prof. Abdul Fazal to introduce shuttle trains for the students between Chittagong city and the university in order to minimise transport expenses which at that time was a little over Tk 5 lakh. At that time all the students and teachers of the university used to commute by buses hired by the university. In early 1974 after prolonged discussion with the railway authorities the shuttle trains were introduced for the students which is regarded as a landmark in the history of Chittagong University. The students

were charged only Tk. 10/- per head monthly for this train journey up and down while teachers continued to come in university's own buses, and sometimes by a few hired buses for Tk. 60/- per month.

In spite of all these measures the overall expenditure of Chittagong University was shooting up for obvious and unavoidable reasons. In 1974 I wrote an article in a national English weekly of Dhaka urging the government to shift the university to a place near the city before it was too late. As 90 per cent of the total population of the university including the students, teachers, officers and employees lived outside the campus, mostly in the city, I tried to calculate and show how many thousands and lakhs of man hours were being lost everyday by these people, and how the real daily working hours in the university were reduced to mere two to three hours. Everybody wanted to come to the university by the last train or bus and go back by the first train or bus and this trend continued to date. Moreover, as I have already said, the man hours or time lost during the journey and waiting for the transports at different places while coming and going is really upsetting. In fact, waiting for the buses at the station often takes a student more time than perhaps in walking down to the faculty but habits die hard and they prefer to wait and then scramble for a sit in the bus.

I then expressed my fear that only for its unscientific and detached location the additional amount of money that was going to be spent for this university in the next 20 years could easily make another university. The above problems were also thoroughly and graphically analysed and I suggested a number of places within or near the city where the university could be relocated. Not surprisingly, therefore, the university authority soon received a letter from the Planning Ministry to consider and suggest ways for shifting the university to a place near the city. But unfortunately, at that time when the university was still in its infancy, controlled by a few senior teachers and officers, the Planning Ministry note was ignored as most of these people had already purchased a large number of plots around the campus. These gentlemen, therefore, had

clear reasons to oppose shifting and on the contrary suggest that any such idea of shifting the campus after so much of financial involvement would be unwise. So their suggestion was accepted by the government and there was no further move on this matter until late in the year 1980 when nearly one hundred teachers of Chittagong University gave a signed statement in the newspapers urging upon the government to shift the university to town.

The then president of Bangladesh late Ziaur Rahman appointed an oneman committee with late Mafzul Islam MP of Comilla to look into the matter and give a practical suggestion. Mr. Islam visited Chittagong University and had many sittings with the teachers and the administration of the university but, unfortunately, once again those 'wise men' of the university prevailed. In fact, with many new owners of land and houses among the teachers, officers and employees in the area the vested interest group opposing the shifting of the campus was stronger than before. The chapter seemed closed for ever but, in fact, it was not. In 1997 just one year after Awami League came into power a strong delegation of the entire university syndicate led by the vice-chancellor Prof. Abdul Mannan himself met the prime minister and chancellor of the university, Sheikh Hasina. It was, in fact, an Awami League delegation with the vice-chancellor himself known as an Awami activist and there was a great deal of hope and enthusiasm among the general teachers, students and others that this time a real decision was going to come out. A decision did come, indeed, and it sealed the idea of shifting the campus once for all.

Sheikh Hasina made it categorically clear that the idea of shifting the university at this state was unacceptable and absurd. So now it is too late for a change. If any of the earlier governments, say from 1972 to 1980, acted a bit wisely and took a determined step to shift the campus leaving the present one to the Forest Department or

any other institution suited to this place, things would have been much different today and the government could save a lot of money.

I mentioned in the beginning that in 1973-74 Chittagong University's transport expenses averaged between Tk five and six lakh. Now it is about one and a half crore. In this respect, I think, this is the costliest university in the world. Significantly, half of this money is being spent for the transportation of the students. The old university railway station was about two miles from the campus and they had to reach the campus by donkey or a hill that stood almost on the entrance of the university. On these considerations some buses were also engaged to commute the students between the railway station and the university. As the number of students was multiplying every year the transport involvement was also getting bigger. In 1973-74 the then vice-chancellor Prof. Abdul Fazal took an attempt to construct a road through the hill and though the work was started in good earnest it was abandoned after he left the university to join late Ziaur Rahman's government as an adviser in December '75. It was again in 1982-83 when Prof. Abdul Aziz Khan became the vice-chancellor that some serious and sincere efforts were made to complete the road through the hill as an extension of Shahed Abdur Rob Road which runs from the main Hathazari road to Chittagong University gate. Leveling the road with high powered bulldozers and at the same time maintaining the slopes on two sides in scientific proportions required lot of money as well as good engineering skill. Vice-chancellor Abdul Aziz Khan contacted the army in the nearby cantonment and acquired their service at the cost of fuel only to bulldoze the hill. Having done a good job, at one stage, the army had to leave. Thereafter Prof. Khan contacted the local agent of a foreign company called Ital Montagi which having laid the Bhakrabad gaslines near the university was resting its in-

struments including bulldozers and other earth cutting machines. At that time I was a member of the university syndicate and we also used the good office of my old class friend CM Mohsin, the then MD of Bhakrabad Gas Ltd., to persuade the Ital Montagi people to help the university leveling that road free of cost and they agreed. They also could not complete the job but left after doing almost 80 per cent of the job. Thereafter the vice-chancellor asked the engineering department to invite contractors and the ultimate goal of completing the road seemed well in sight.

The completion of the road also became urgent in order to withdraw the student buses plying between the station and the Faculties. In the mean time a significant development had taken place. By 1984 a new university railway station was constructed at the entrance of Chittagong University and an additional rail line was laid between this station and the main Hathazari line. Soon after the inauguration of the new station the university administration decided to cancel the bus service for the students since the distance between the station and the Faculties was now greatly reduced. But immediately there was students' demonstration opposing the decision of the university to withdraw bus service for the students. The students maintained that although the distance was reduced by more than half still they had to walk a great distance, almost half a mile, around the hill as the road through the hill was not yet complete. They, however, promised to support any such decision of the university as soon as the road is completed. But in April 1985 Prof. Abdul Aziz Khan was replaced by a new vice-chancellor and the road, since then, remained as it was. In the intervening years many vice-chancellors have come and gone but no effort was made to complete the road.

In fact, some quarters in the university or involved in the affairs of the university did never want the road to be completed

as it would go against their vested interest. For instance, the Hathazari Bus Owners' Association and their Drivers' Association who have been supplying and driving these buses for more than last three decades have become inextricably linked with the vicious racket that has been sucking the blood of this university. Sometimes, some local student leaders also get involved with them for their personal benefit rather than that of the university. The university's transport section and a part of the accounts' office which deals with transport money also appear to be a part of the same. There is no accountability or transparency in the transport sector as there is no proper monitoring system. Out of 20 to 30 buses hired everyday for the students and others none can tell how many buses or drivers really reported for the job but they would take their money every day from the accounts office without fail. Transport officials who certify their presence only share the money. So the truth and the tragedy of the whole thing is that of the total amount of nearly one and a half crore taken now being spent for the transport at least 30 per cent is going down the drain. The University Grants Commission officials sometimes write letters to the university to minimise transport expenditure but they have never taken any practical measures to suggest how it should be done or how corruption can be stopped.

Now the present crisis of the university stems from the fact that after the completion of Abdul Rab Sarak through the hill linking the station with the Faculties the university administration decided to discontinue the bus service for the students between these two places. But the students are not ready to accept this decision of the university.

sity. They also seem to have forgotten the word of honour given by their predecessors that once the road is completed they would not oppose discontinuance of their buses. Now they claim that it is a part of their basic rights. They have come to the university not to walk, even if it is for five minutes, but to study. But the real studious students are hardly in this movement. They, possibly, do not know how much the students have to walk in the highly developed western world where most of the students have their own cars but are not allowed to go inside the campus with them. The same is true with many communist countries and I have personally seen it in the Beijing University of China where I and my guide had to disembark from the car nearly a quarter a mile from the Faculty.

What about the general people in the west, whether young or old, they have to walk ten to fifteen minutes or even more to take the train, bus etc., from the nearest stop or station. There is no rickshaw, baby taxi or tempo and so every body has to walk. But our students are different and they can't walk even for five to ten minutes. They have forgotten the fact that they are paying only Tk 10 per month as shuttle train fare which should normally be more than Tk 500. For this the university has to pay the railway something around Tk 30 lakh yearly or so and again more than double of that for free travel from the station to the Faculties by bus. What can be more unreasonable and illogical than this?

I think it should be more reasonable on the part of the students to ask for some rain shelters on the way from the station to the Faculties instead of asking for bus etc. They can also demand introduction of private tempo service from the main Hathazari road to the entrance of the university. What ever may be the new arrangement they should be prepared to walk a little distance everyday which is also good for health. But taking the law into their hands is no solution and they

are doing that. They are doing that in presence of three hundred policemen stationed in the university for the last three years. What a wonderful police we have who love to watch people fighting from a safe distance. When the students lock the gates of the Faculty buildings and the main gate of the university or stop teachers' bus from entering the university they enjoy watching it standing like statues nearby. Then what is the use of maintaining such a large police force on the campus. They are being paid by the university and at the same time they are using university transports and other facilities, but why? Just the other day, while watching a gun fight between two groups of students, four policemen were injured by stray bullets. So miserable is their condition and so bad is their training. If with so many policemen present in the university killings take place one after another and the university has to close down indefinitely again and again then it is better not to have any police at all.

In fact, it is the responsibility of the government to come and stand behind the university authority when it is trying to do something in the greater interest of the university and the country. Unfortunately, our governments have never taken any interest in such things as they are more busy using the police force against their political opponents. Moreover, they are more interested to use the campuses for their political ends rather than for education and by looking at the government or the parliament one can easily understand the difference between education and our politicians. Speaking frankly, from the day one after independence there has been a continued dictatorship of ignorance on this poor country and that continues to be a shameful indictment on our political system from which there seems to be no escape in the near future.

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Eviction of Sex Workers They Want Protection

by Khaleda Khatoun

THIS is inhuman and unconstitutional. We are deeply shocked to see the sex workers of Tanbar and Nimtoli forcefully kicked out of their 200-year-old sanctuary. The government is trying to legitimise this action by putting them in vagrant houses run by the Social Welfare Department to bring them under the so-called 'rehabilitation' programme. Only women's organisations and NGOs have been protesting against the eviction of sex workers. We have observed that most political, social and cultural organisations have preferred to remain silent on this issue. Some religious fundamentalist groups have of course, as anticipated, welcomed the government move.

The horrifying story and photographs in the newspaper of women being tortured during eviction should have shaken the conscience of the nation. But surprisingly it didn't cause much of a stir. The brothel was there for 200 years and it seemed nobody had any serious problems with its presence for such a long period of time. Why, all of a sudden, had the government have to evict the women from their shelters where they had been living for generations? It's a pity to see that the government of this country not only fails to protect fundamental human rights for the people but also does not hesitate to take it away theirs through threat and coercion. And this time it carried out the eviction in the darkness of the night.

Right to shelter is one of the fundamental rights of the citizens of this country guaranteed by the constitution. Sex workers are the citizens of this country too and their rights have been violated by the state itself, and brutally so, by the state appointed forces. Government repression is not new to us but we still write, protest and sometimes file lawsuits against the government, though most of the time we end up with a *rule nisi* from the High Court. Nothing much happens after that. It seems like the state couldn't care less. It continues to violate people's rights instead of giving them protection as in the cases of several slum evictions and eviction of sex workers from Kandapatty.

Who Gained? Neither the sex workers nor the general public have benefited from this eviction. During the eviction process, most women lost their life-long belongings—money, ornaments and other household utilities including TV, VCR etc. Now they are floating in the streets.

One of the ruling party politicians who wanted to establish control over this brothel got it finally. There is a very old conflict between two major political parties over this brothel. This rivalry created a situation where sex worker Jesmin was murdered and this triggered off the cruel eviction.

The result of this eviction through intimidation and coercion has been that a group of people have become economically and politically strong. Over 10,000 women have become destitute and homeless. The government could accommodate about 300 in two vagrant centres, one in Kashimpur and the other in Pubail. As to the other 2700 sex workers and their children, the government has apparently decided to take a *laissez-faire* attitude. We have learnt from newspaper reports that relatives of the women in vagrant houses have been coming to pick them up. However, it is suspected that they could very well be pimps posing as relatives. The reason given for the recent murder of Jesmin is also suspect and it is widely believed that the evicted sex workers have been victims of power politics.

Pimps, Mastans and Bariwalas: A Peaceful co-existence!

The other interesting matter is the relationship among pimps, mastans, *shardanis*, *mashis* and the *bariwalas* concerning profits from this trade. The *bariwalas* or landlords get the biggest share of the profit. Then come *mastans* (some of them are political *mastans*), *shardanis* and finally the sex workers themselves down in the order. The money from clients or *khaddar* as service charge keeps the flesh trade alive. We did not hear about any fights between these interest groups as they maintained a peaceful co-existence. Despite being the lowest paid group, the sex workers told me they were much better off in the brothels than they are now, both economically and socially.

No Clear-cut Policy for rehabilitation

Apart from the now evicted sex workers of Tanbar and Nimtoli, there are hundreds of other areas where a large number of sex workers live, some of them in very bad conditions. When we asked different government officers of the social welfare service and law enforcing agencies if there were any directives or executive orders from top government officials to rehabilitate sex workers

from other areas, they replied in the negative. This shows the government does not have a clear-cut policy for the rehabilitation of sex workers. Now again we have been hearing that the government is planning to evict and rehabilitate inmates of other brothels, the result of which will be as bad or even worse than the evictions in Tanbar.

Reactions of the Victims

In protest rallies, processions and news conferences, the Tanbar sex workers have repeatedly expressed their wish to be allowed to return to their home in Tanbar. Some voiced their fear of being ostracised if they are forced to choose a different line of work. Few hundred sex workers were asked whether they wished to be rehabilitated. In reply they said they enjoyed a reasonably good standard of living working as a sex workers and did not think they would be willing to change their profession.

Reactions of Common People

Some people supported the Government move saying that it was a 'moral responsibility' of the local people to evict the sex workers and 'clean up' the area. Others thought though it was a good step that the brothel was pulled down, the evicted sex workers should have been immediately rehabilitated somewhere else. Yet others thought the eviction was a gross violation of human rights and they demanded that their houses be reconstructed and handed over to them immediately.

Concerns

My first concern is the fate of the evicted sex workers rendered homeless and driven out to a state of total insecurity. The second concern is the manner in which the police showing utter disrespect to human rights kicked them out of their dwellings. The final concern is about denying burials to deceased sex workers.

The issue of prostitution needs to be addressed realistically. The central issue here is the 'stigmatisation' of a particular community because of the nature of their work. Driving prostitutes out from brothels is never going to efface the oldest profession from the world. Meanwhile, the evicted prostitutes have decided not to give in and continue to fight for their rights. The spirit of resistance is very much there. Their slogan is: "It is our life, we want to protect it."

The writer is a legal practitioner

The Jinxed White House of Moscow

by I. K. Gujral

MR. Primakov's tenure as Prime Minister was brief but it has left an indelible mark. He has won universal praise for steering Russia out of the financial meltdown without a major catastrophe. In the jinxed White House of Moscow nothing survives. In 17 months, a fifth Prime Minister is now paraded out. In its hinged history, even an elected Duma was shelved out not by any alien power but by the head of state himself. The succeeding Parliament moved its chamber away to a safe distance. In the Soviet era, the offices of the Prime Minister and his deputies were located in the prestigious Kremlin Palaces. But no more. Under an ominous star, they were shifted to this white marble-faced mansion. With the result that the country witnesses an array of short-lived Prime Ministers. Stepashin served just under three months, the shortest terms of any of Yeltsin's Prime Ministers, following Yevgeny Primakov, who was fired after eight months. Sergei Kiriyenko, survived for five months. Of course, Mr. Viktor Chernomyrdin stayed for five years but before him, Mr. Gaidar had lasted only six months.

Back to back, the White House and the Annex of the American Embassy are close neighbours. It seems the magical spell had spilled over to it too. The Americans suspected that the Soviet builders had

bugged it despite all denials till Mr. Gorbachev revealed the secret. As a gesture of friendship, he gave to the CIA detail of the extensively imbedded bugs. The distracted Americans could not decide if the de-bugging would be a good option. During my July visit to Moscow, I heard no whisper about the Prime Minister, Mr. Stepashin's impending fate. On the contrary, he was believed to be Mr. Yeltsin's close confidant. My meeting with his first Deputy Prime Minister, who recently visited India, and the Foreign Minister gave me enough evidence of his durability. But the 'revolving door' revolved soon after my departure.

No diplomat would have heard about Mr. Vladimir Putin beyond his career as a Soviet spy in Germany. But Mr. Yeltsin has his own ways. He is now projecting him as his successor. Though Mr. Putin's response was characteristic to say that he was not planning for the Presidential run since he was accustomed to 'obeying' so he would seek office if ordered to. "We are military men and we will implement the decision that has been made." But why this sudden change? Soon after his dismissal, a "shaken Stepashin" told his Cabinet colleagues, "he thanked me for my good work — and dismissed me. I honestly expressed my position concerning my resignation to Boris Nikolayevich (Yeltsin), but this is his right as President and commander-in-

chief. I told the President that. I have been, am and will be with him until the end." What next? President Yeltsin says, "In the active one year's time, for the first time in the country's history, the first President of Russia will transfer power to a fresh, newly-elected President." The sceptics have their doubts. They persist in asking, "will he?" The Moscow Times asks its readers, "If they remember Sergei Shakhrai, Vladimir Shumeiko and Oleg Soskovets? Like the acting Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, all three were publicly anointed as heirs to President Boris Yeltsin's throne — just as Alexander Lebed and Boris Nemtsov. But like Lebed and Nemtsov, they found that being named Yeltsin's political heir was a one-way ticket to the political wilderness." "Almost from the moment Yeltsin came to power in 1991, naming his chosen successor has been a bit of a Kremlin parlour game — a game that is hazardous for the careers of the so-called 'winners'. Being named Mr. Yeltsin's heir — either by the President himself or by Moscow's chatty news media — has turned out to be the kiss of death." Said the Speaker of the Duma cryptically, "Yeltsin has put an end to Putin's career."

These banter apart, several serious names are in circulation as potential candidates for the next July elections. A highly-rated Mayor of Moscow, Mr. Luzhkov, is one of

the front-runners. He has given a remarkable face-lift to the city. In my long association with Moscow, I had never seen it looking so beautiful. Mr. Luzhkov has projected this accomplishment as his election manifesto. "If elected, I will give a similar face-lift to the whole country." The Russian media believes that a possible reason for Mr. Stepashin's exit was his failure to checkmate the formation of the Luzhkov-sponsored "Fatherland Russia," that unites him with some powerful regional governors. Mr. Putin has lost no time in attending to this task. Mr. Luzhkov recently said that he would be happy to support Mr. Primakov's candidature. This "Primakov factor" has received the attention of the American media too.

The Moscow Times has publicised a public opinion poll that holds Mr. Primakov as the "most popular and trusted politician," who could single-handedly alter the December poll of the State Duma. A Russian pollster agency the VT-SIOM says that the Communist Party will dominate the Duma elections and is likely to get 34 per cent votes while Mr. Luzhkov's Fatherland is much lower with 16 per cent. "But this picture could change dramatically if Primakov decides to join the Fatherland. Then Luzhkov's party leapfrogs past the Communists into first place with 28 per cent, pushing the Communists to second place

with 27 per cent. If, on the other hand, Primakov were to join the Communists, then the Fatherland sinks with it securing just 12 per cent. The Communists, correspondingly, will soar taking a startling 40 per cent."

Mr. Primakov is well-known to us in India. He had turned around Russia's post-war foreign policy that had tilted Westward ignoring its traditional allies and friends in the East. During his recent visit to India, Mr. Primakov talked about China-India-Russia cooperation. He was not suggesting a bloc formation, but was visualising benefits of co-operation amongst the neighbours should have shaken him in Moscow. I asked him if he had sounded China. "Not yet, but this could be explored," he said. My friendship with Mr. Primakov dates back to the days of my mission in Moscow when he was Director of the Institute of Oriental Studies. Subsequently, he moved to other domains but we kept in touch. Both of us later took charge of our respective Foreign offices to evolve a shared vision of the post-Cold War era and consolidation of Russia-India relations.

As is known, Mr. Primakov's tenure as Prime Minister was brief but it has left an indelible mark.

The writer is a former Indian Prime Minister.

Courtesy: The Hindu of India

The Divine Discontent Active in China?

by Abdul M Ahmad

WHAT is happening in China (as gathered from the Western anti-Chinese media sources) is interesting — philosophically. A religious or 'spiritual' meditation cult has grown up during years, to a huge dimension, its membership exceeding that of the Communist Party itself.

Naturally the Chinese administration is cornered at such 'spontaneous' response to a non-violent practice which seeks the divine right, as human beings, to contemplate on the nature of life and its purpose (this may not be so as details of the practices are not available readily).

The mind is a powerful tool, and needs a vast space to oper-

ate in relative freedom (without violating the Constitution of the country). When this mental elbow-room is restricted, artificially or otherwise, pressure starts to build up, annoying the traditionalists and the opponents.

China's philosophical background has depth and breadth. It is one of the cradles of civilization, with cultures and traditions of thousands of years, involving more than a billion people through the generations. The nations in the West developed later, with hybrid cultures grafted from Asia (climate plays its part with the habitability in a zone or region). Judgement values differ culturally and religiously.

The rise and fall of civilizations also affected China. Naturally it fell on the succeeding generations to think seriously on how to improve the condition of the people, starting with economic emancipation. Isn't it remarkable that poverty breeds some good thinking in all civilizations? There are other phases of thinking. One, for example, begins when the disparity between the poor and the well-off becomes wider and wider. At the other end is the mass uniformity. Man seeks security and protection; and is therefore a hoarder. This is a natural instinct in all living creatures — the will to survive.

Economic theories (man-made) have changed more than

those set up by the scientists. There is a reason for it. One appeals to the mortal desires and wishes, and the other is practical and works according to natural principles (the wheel was discovered or invented?). Therefore administrations based on human ideas and conceptions will always be subject to change when topicality is a built-in factor in the theory or hypothesis of the time. This is in contrast to the eternal values of truth and morality, which stand the test of time.

One of the jobs of any regime is to maintain stability. The means to an end may differ, according to the environment, background, and the operating

conditions. China today might be passing through a phase of transition or introspection, after having tried a system for quite sometime. The administration is aware of it, as also the remote observers. This is the age of transition as the millennium approaches. Adjustment is a human faculty, adapting to the changed circumstances.

But one content will remain in insatiable, which is the divine discontent in Man, imbued by the Supreme Creator. The divinity in Man is not open to change. It is human nature to seek, and the adventure of the minds will continue. Some seek it on Wall Street, some on the slopes of the Himalayas.

by Jim Davis

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