

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.

STALMATED by student unrest over a non-political issue of transport facilities 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 firmness.

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 forlorn 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 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. Abul 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 live outside the campus, mostly in the city, I tried to calculate and show how many thousand 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 continues to date. Moreover, as I have already said, the manhours 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 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 stage 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

newly purchased a large number of plots around the campus. These gentlemen, therefore, had

nothing to do. Under an omnious star, they were shifted to this white marble-faced mansion. With the result that the country witnesses an array of shortlived 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 exactly one year's time, for the first time in the country's history, the first President of Russia will transfer power to a freshly, 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 Mr. 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 saying, "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's 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 published 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 VTsISOM 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 cooperation amongst the neighbours. During my recent meeting with 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

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But one content will remain in insatiable, which is the divine discontent in Man, inbuilt 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.

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