

Fiftieth anniversary of the first sub-four minute mile

DR. FAKHRUDDIN AHMED writes from Princeton

FIFTY years ago, on May 6, 1954, a lanky young man from Oxford University, Roger Bannister, cracked the four-minute barrier in the mile for the first time at Oxford University's track at Iffley Road. Medical researchers had predicted that human body was incapable of running the mile under four minutes, making it a psychological barrier. When the 25-year old medical student destroyed the mystique, human beings celebrated worldwide in a manner reminiscent of the conquest of Mount Everest by Sir Edmund Hillary a year earlier, and the first human landing on the moon fifteen years later. Everything seemed possible.

Sweden's Gunder Haegg's 1945 world mile record (4:01.4) had stood for nine years. Nevertheless, by 1954 there was excitement in the air. The world boasted of a new breed of "can do" athletes: Bannister, Christopher Brasher (3000 meters steeple chase) and Christopher Chataway (5000 meters) of England, who were in intense competition with John Landy of Australia and Wes Santee of the US. There was a sense that the barrier was about to be broken. It was not known at that time that Roger Bannister weight-trained built his muscles by training with weights, something Tiger Woods introduced to golf forty years later. Athletes, who were mostly students, were truly amateurs in those days. Studies, in Bannister's case medical studies, came ahead of running. Bannister knew that 1954 would be his last year in track. He decided to make the most of it.

As The New York Times reported recently: "On the morning of his big race, Bannister went to St. Mary's Hospital in London (70 miles from Oxford.) After completing a few duties, he sharpened his spikes on a grindstone in the hospital's lab, then took an early train to Oxford. When he arrived, gusty winds were whipping up leaves on campus. He and Chataway discussed postponing the attempt at the record. As Bannister lined up with five other runners for the start a few minutes 6

p.m., he noticed that the flag on the nearby St. George's church had begun to flutter more gently as the wind died down. He told the pace-makers, Brasher and Chataway, that the sub-four minute attempt was on. Brasher went right for the lead and Bannister settled effortlessly behind him. Brasher ignored Bannister's urging to go faster, and took the field through a 57.5-second first quarter. Perfect pace. After the half way split of 1:58, Chataway took over as planned and brought the crowd of some 1000 to a full-throated roar. He led Bannister through the three-quarter mark in 3:00.7. On the backstretch Bannister swept by Chataway, accelerating into the cool, damp evening. "I felt at that moment that it was my chance to do something supremely well," Bannister wrote in the "First Four Minutes," his autobiography. After bursting through the finish line Bannister collapsed into the arms of the track officials. "I felt like an exploded flashlight," he recalled.

What happened next was narrated to the writer by Sir E. T. Williams, the Warden of the Rhodes House who was in charge of the Rhodes Scholars at Oxford, when the writer met him for the first time in the early 1970s. The announcer for the meet was Norris McWhirter, one of the brewery Guinesses, who co-founded the Guinness Book of (World) Records a year later in 1955. (Mr. Norris McWhirter died last week.) McWhirter announced: "Ladies and gentlemen, here is the result of event No. 9, the one-mile. First, No. 41, R. G. Bannister of the Amateur Athletic Association and formerly of Exeter and Merton Colleges, with a time which is a new meeting and track record, and which, subject to ratification, will be a new English native, British national, British all-comers, European, British Empire and world record. The time is three minutes... and the crowd's roar drowned the rest of McWhirter's announcement, Sir E. T. Williams recalled. Bannister's time was 3 minutes, 59.4 seconds. A few months later, in the Mile of the Century, Bannister beat John Landy in 3:58.8 at Vancouver, Canada.

LETTER FROM AMERICA

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After winning a European championship gold medal in the 1500 meters the same year, Bannister quietly retired to become a physician and researcher. The British took their time in honouring him. Bannister was knighted twenty years later in 1974. I still remember one his comments: human beings as we know them should not be able to run faster than 3:30. Sir Roger also recalled that when he met his future wife Moyra, a few weeks after his historic sub-four minute mile, she knew nothing about the sport. "She thought I had run four miles in one minute, and she wasn't much impressed," he said.

Within six weeks, on June 21, 1954, Bannister lost the record to his bitter rival, John Landy of Australia (3:58.0), never to regain it. Landy's record stood for three years before Britain's Derek Ibbotson lowered it to 3:57.2 on July 19, 1957. Australia used to dominate all sports in the 1950s and the 1960s, and therefore it was no surprise when Aussie Herb Elliot, the writer's high school hero and the 1960 Rome Olympics' 1500 meters champion, reclaimed the title for Australia on August 6, 1958 (3:54.5) for the last time. New Zealand's double gold medalist (800, 1500 meters) at the Tokyo Olympics, Peter Snell, dominated middle distance running in the early 1960s. Snell lowered the mile record twice, first to 3:54.4 (January 27, 1962) and then to 3:54.1 (November 17, 1964). France's Michael Jazy claimed the title on June 9, 1965 (3:53.6) and kept it for a year before America's Jim Ryun smashed it by over 2 seconds (3:53.3) on July 17, 1966. Jim Ryun, who was the writer's running role model in the university and is currently a Republican congress-

man from Kansas, kept the title for ten years, lowering it once again on June 23, 1967 to 3:51.1. To date, Jim Ryun remains the only American world record holder in the mile.

On May 1975, Tanzania's Filbert Bayi ("Good Bayi") became the first non-white to hold the mile world record by lowering Jim Ryun's record to 3:51.0. In less than three months, on August 12, 1975, New Zealand's John Walker (winner of the 1500 meters at the 1976 Montreal Olympics) became the first runner to break the 3:50 in the mile, by taking the record to 3:49.4. A few years ago, John Walker achieved another outstanding feat - he celebrated his one hundredth sub-four minute mile! Between 1979 and 1981, Britain's bitter rivals, Sebastian Coe and Steve Ovett, broke the world record in the mile five different times! Seb Coe claimed it on July 17, 1979 (3:49.0), only to be bumped off by "Brighton Express" Ovett a year later on July 1, 1980 (3:48.8). Coe won the 1500 meters and Ovett the 800 meters at the 1980 Moscow Olympics, which the United States boycotted as a protest for the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (thus denying a young Carl Lewis and the 400-metres hurdler Edwin Moses of sure gold medals.) Fans feasted on the bitter rivalry and the one-upmanship of Coe and Ovett, when in the course of only ten days in August 1981, they broke the world mile record three times! Seb Coe kicked off the track hostility by smashing Ovett's one-year-old record on August 19, 1981 (3:48.53). (Notice that beginning this date, times were reported up to one hundredths of a second.) Ovett responded by reclaiming the record a week later



Roger Bannister

on August 26, 1981 (3:48.40). Not to be outdone, Seb Coe went really low and broke Ovett's record by over a second (3:47:33) only two days later on August 28, 1981.

Englishman Steve Cram lowered the record to 3:46.32 at Oslo on July 27, 1985, a telecast the writer was fortunate enough to watch live from Princeton.

Planning Dhaka: Visualising the solution

The Architectural League of New York is the pre-eminent architectural organization of New York City that organizes exhibitions, symposiums, publications and other events to discuss the state of architecture and urbanity in the United States and elsewhere. Recently, the League launched a web page dedicated to profiling various cities of the world, starting with Caracas. The next web profile will be on Dhaka that will be launched on May 15. Saif Ul Haque, architect in Dhaka, and I created the report for Dhaka city. Following is a part of a conversation with us and the editor of the web page, Alex Kliment.

Kliment: A prominent theme in your report is a focus on the historical failure of Dhaka city to develop any coherent urban planning strategies. In your estimation, how can Dhaka's planning institutions be made more efficient and effective, and what planning models would you suggest going forward?

Haque: Dhaka has too many authorities and there is very little coordination among them. The Capital Development Authority (RajUK) has become a real estate developing agency instead of a city planning organization, and whatever planning work they do is for facilitating the works of real estate. The city is governed by the City Corporation, whose broader responsibility is collecting garbage, providing street light and maintaining city roads, but most of the time they are busy constructing markets in vacant urban lots and at times in playgrounds and parks. The water supply and sewage disposal authorities, the electricity authority, the telephone people, all make their own plans without any coordination. This list could go on. The only way out of this is to create a supreme planning authority with all the agencies involved in providing various utility and other urban services work according to the plans prepared by this authority. The plan should be a well-detailed one taking into account all the growth projections and existing conditions. A time frame for preparing this plan should be worked out and the authority should be staffed with adequate planners, architects, engineers and other professionals. The authority can invite world-renowned architects and city planners to advise on the preparation of the plan. Dhaka can evolve its own planning strategy but other dense cities especially those located in the tropics can be studied.

Ashraf: To bring changes to a city like Dhaka with its near apocalyptic future, you need a political will, bold imagination, and a serious commitment to carry that out. The planning of Dhaka needs imagination more than technocracy, and lots of it. Dhaka needs more imaginative prowess than, say, New York City. The planning is not going anywhere because of two inter-related issues. There is no real political will to deal

with Dhaka in an effective way, and the existing institutions are completely unequipped technically, intellectually and legalistically. In fact, planning and administrative institutions themselves are the key sources for many of Dhaka's problems. They should be completely overhauled as Saif suggests... that should be the first task. People who understand the designing of cities should be brought into the helms and not bureaucrats and seemingly intelligent technocrats. Of course anything like that needs political and community backing.

Kliment: Mr. Ashraf, you point out that meaningful change in Dhaka planning is currently constrained by a lack of political will. Would it be fair to assume that political will to make changes is related to the degree and clarity of popular will to see changes? If so, what kinds of actions, grass-roots or otherwise, can galvanize the public at large to demand real change in the policies and politics of Dhaka's planning culture?

Ashraf: I think that's a very good question. Although there are lots of activism centering around human rights issue, women's issue, and some around environmental issues... I don't think there is any organized activity around the future of the city, to imagine changes, and to demand such changes at a popular or community level. One thing that can happen, through newspaper writings, through grass-root programs, through initiatives by architectural and other institutes, is to constantly inform people of the need for a meaningful change, and consequently demand from the major political parties to outline in their various manifestos a vision for Dhaka.

Kliment: Mr. Haque, could you describe the process through which you envision the establishment of such a supreme planning authority. How difficult would it be to get other urban institutions and municipal bodies to listen to it?

Haque: The process can begin with an initiative from the architects and planners working in the city. They are capable of comprehending the magnitude of the problem and at the same time visualizing the solution. This initiative can be in the form of preparing a proposal for the

VIEWING DHAKA, AGAIN

...Dhaka is no Jaipur, and Dhaka is no Lahore. Dhaka is a city in the delta. No matter how much you globalize, no matter if you build with titanium or platinum, the building paradigm in the delta is still the pavilion what I call a "machine for living" in a hot-humid milieu and the theoretical impulse should be to conceive a whole city out of that basic architectural paradigm. Unfortunately, much of the practice is like in most other places in South Asia, it's primarily market driven...and theory as a condition for practice, reflection, and much less resistance hardly exists.

government and having a public presentation of that proposal. It should highlight the various problems confronting the city and illustrate their possible solutions. The objective of this should be to create a public pressure on the government to act without delay. The existing town planning rules need to be amended for enforcing the plans of the supreme planning authority. It should be legally binding on all individuals and organizations living and working in the city to comply with the plans.

Kliment: Water is, as you report, the defining natural feature of Dhaka city. How can Dhaka's hydrological resources be harnessed and incorporated into coherent planning strategies?

Ashraf: You know, I have said that in many ways that Dhaka is a deltaic city, or was one before the arrival of "development." Water in the form of rivers, canals, waterways, ponds and flood plains formed the matrix of Dhaka. It is not just an image of a picturesque landscape, it implies communication, drainage, economic life, festivity, and a certain way of being. That's what made the city unique, which required a different strategy for urban development and planning. But since the 1950s all that has been destroyed, either

systematically or as the fall-out of one misplaced decision after another. And now even Buriganga, the mother river of Dhaka, has become the target of destruction. Can a river be destroyed? You know, in Dhaka it can be, that's the tragedy. You ask, 'Can the hydrological resources be harnessed?' Of course they can be, even with whatever is left, but do we realize that there are such resources to harness?

Haque: It is very unfortunate that much of Dhaka's water resources have vanished and those that still exist are in the process of vanishing. I also believe there is still some hope to save whatever is left. Dhaka could make itself a prime example for deltaic tropical city. Even Louis Kahn, the architect of the capital complex at Dhaka, indicated a possibility of land-water living solution in his last sketches. Water could provide inexpensive transport solution for the city, it could serve as reservoirs for containing monsoon rains, it could provide for valuable protein for the city dwellers by fish farming, and it could help in keeping the underground water table stable by way of percolation. This land-water planning could give Dhaka a very unique feature distinguishing it from the other cities of the world.

Kliment: To what extent is

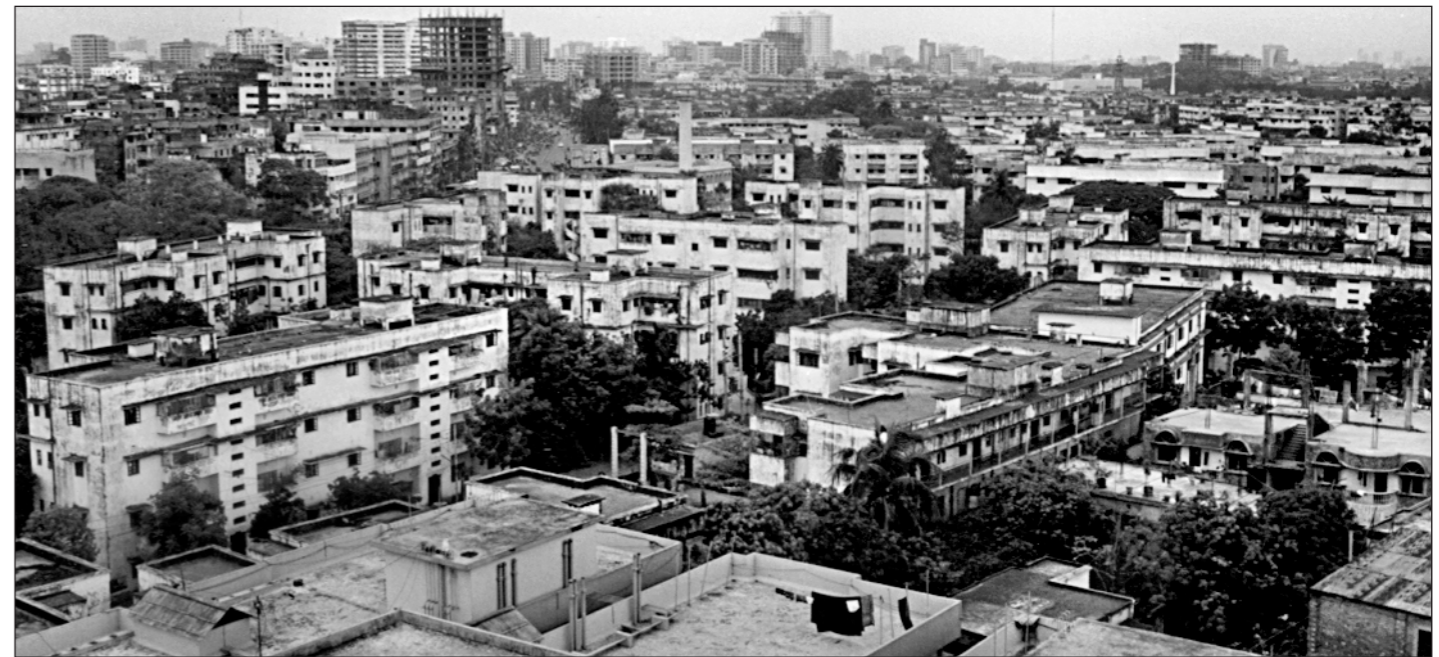


PHOTO: SYED ZAKIR HOSSAIN

Bangladeshi architectural theory and practice distinct from broader South Asian trends, and what theoretical and practical directions do you anticipate that architecture will take in Bangladesh?

Haque: Historically, architecture in Bangladesh has always been distinctive within the broader framework of South Asia. The recent years show a different trend. There is now a tendency to appear more global than local by way of, say, using imported materials even if the relevance of their use is questionable. The architects in Bangladesh are faced with many issues: the collapse of the existing urban fabric and order due to the pressures of rapid urbanization; the challenge of housing a rapidly growing population that lives in substandard conditions; finding cost effective solutions to building needs; and evolving sustainable models of development. I think architects in Bangladesh work under very extreme professional conditions where the law of the land is yet to recognize the profession. Architects are very small in number compared to the need, and architects have an important role to play in the development of the country.

Ashraf: I don't know if the

ory/practice in the region is fundamentally different but it sure can be, and should be, for Dhaka is no Jaipur, and Dhaka is no Lahore. Dhaka is a city in the delta. No matter how much you globalize, no matter if you build with titanium or platinum, the building paradigm in the delta is still the pavilion what I call a "machine for living" in a hot-humid milieu and the theoretical impulse should be to conceive a whole city out of that basic architectural paradigm. Unfortunately, much of the practice is like in most other places in South Asia, it's primarily market driven...and theory as a condition for practice, reflection, and much less resistance hardly exists.

Kliment: Following the release of Nathaniel Kahn's recent film about his father, there has been great and renewed interest in Louis Kahn's capital complex at Dhaka. How do you assess the project's impact on the planning and the culture of Dhaka city twenty years after its completion?

Ashraf: Good question! I would say nothing and a lot. The city fathers do not care much about the profound significance of the project. But at the same time, thank god for Kahn's complex, it is still one of the few redeeming urban spaces in the

For the last fourteen years the world's most prestige track record has belonged to North African Arab Muslims Nouredine Morceli of Algeria (winner of the 1500 meters in the 1996 Atlanta Olympics) and Hicham el-Guerrouj of Morocco. On September 5, 1993 at Rome, Morceli broke Cram's record by almost two seconds (3:44.39) an astounding feat. Six years later, on July 7, 1999 also at Rome, el-Guerrouj lowered it by another 1.3 seconds (3:43.13) an equally outstanding feat. If all the legendary mile runners were running together and recording their personal bests, Hicham el-Guerrouj would finish 25 yards ahead of Steve Cram, 45 yards ahead of Jim Ryun, 85 yards ahead of Herb Elliot, and a full 120 yards ahead of Roger Bannister! To put this in perspective, the best runners in Bangladesh in the 1960s and the 1970s, such as the writer, covered the mile in four minute and 30 seconds. Which means that we would have been about 180 yards behind Bannister and about 300 yards behind Hicham el-Guerrouj! In the mile (1610 meters), which requires the runners to start 10 meters behind the start/finish line and to go around the 400-meter track four times, this is like being lapped! We must say in our defense that we ran on the notoriously slow grass track, and in Dhaka-made running shoes so uncomfortable that I could not wait to take them off! Roger Bannister ran on a cinder track at Oxford University that represented the best technological expertise of Britain. Hicham el-Guerrouj runs on the lightning fast Mondur tracks with custom-made running shoes that embody the latest technological advancements.

In the early 1970s, the writer was fortunate enough to run and compete on the same Iffley Road track at Oxford University that Roger Bannister had made so famous. To be honest, Roger Bannister was the last thing on the writer's mind. I was far more impressed with the red, springy Tartan track, which was so much superior to the grass track we ran on in Bangladesh. We would hop on our bike, go to Iffley Road track, practice, hop on the bike again and

either go to the house (Christ Church in my case) or my lab. When we returned to England in 1998 we found things very different. The Iffley Road track had been fenced off and entry controlled by cards. We took photographs of our two sons, aspiring runners, standing next to the plaque that commemorates Roger Bannister's monumental feat. Our sons also trotted on the hallowed track. Plastered on the walls of the stand and the adjoining office buildings were enlarged newspaper clippings not of Bannister's, but of Sebastian Coe and Steve Ovett's exploits of the early 1980s.

Kenya's legendary Kip Keino (1967) and his son Martin Keino (1996) are the only father and son duo to have run sub-four minute miles. Among the many brothers to accomplish the feat, (along with the year of their best performance) are Algerians Amar Brahmia (1981) and Abdenacer Brahmia (1989) and most famously, Abderrahmane Morceli (1983) and Nouredine Morceli (1993). Approximately, four-minute mile barrier has been broken 4,700 times thus far by 955 runners. Fourteen record holders have set nineteen world records in the sub-four minute mile. Still, the mystique of the sub-four minute mile remains. The track world had gone metric, except for the mile and the marathon (26 miles, 385 yards). Just as a sub-four minute mile is still a tremendous achievement for an elite runner, the completion of the marathon is a superb achievement for ordinary runners. The writer was fortunate enough to complete the New York City Marathon four times in a row (1992-95). He noticed that although the winner of the marathon wins a Mercedes and cash, everyone - the first to finish and the last to finish - receives the same "Finishers Medal." This is to acknowledge that anyone who finishes the marathon has subjected himself or herself to the limits of his or her physical capabilities - for human beings are not supposed to be able to run 26.1 miles and came out victorious! I have no doubt that every sub-four minute mile feels the same way, every time they accomplish the feat.