

Dreaming of a world class university Langelbandh: Pilgrimage for a holy dip

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MANY scholarly essays, books, and treatises have been written in the area of knowledge, education and learning within the context of a university. The continuing debate about the role of a university is rich and revealing. For example, Robert Wolf in his book The Ideal of the University discussed four models for ideal university: a) the university as a sanctuary of scholarship, b) the university as a training camp for professions, c) the university as a social service center, and d) the university as an assembly line for established 'men and women'.

Philip Rinelader commenting on Emerson's essay "The American Scholar" remarked that "our colleges and universities have been content to develop mere thinkers; what has been lost is the "Ideal Man Thinking", i.e., the conception of the scholar as first of all a concrete individual engaged in the art of living who is specially qualified by his education to bring to bear the resources of rational thinking upon the solution of the major and pressing problem of human existence and of social justice."

In this essay we limit our definition to the role of a university in creating and disseminating knowledge. Within the context of a university all activities in which the faculty and students engage themselves are expected to create and disseminate knowledge. The university bears the responsibility of moving the society forward by addressing the pressing problems for the society and producing the positive thinkers, business and political leaders and intelligent workers.

Very few nations of the world are blessed as Bangladesh is with enormous human resource which can give the nation the innovators, entrepreneurs, and political and business leaders -- in Emerson's term "the Ideal Man Thinking". The potential for development in Bangladesh lies in its population not as the exportable cheap labour but as a creative and innovative force to participate in the new global economy. Our failure to develop these million minds as "Man Thinking" is a terrible loss to the humanity.

Advanced countries made progress not because they have huge natural resources but because they were able to generate and use new knowledge through invention, innovation, and technology adoption. At the root of all of these are the top

rated educational and research institutions these countries support and nurture diligently. For example, many countries in Africa and the Middle East are resource-rich but knowledge-poor and thus remain less developed. The less developed countries like Bangladesh should come out of subsistence (basic) education mentality (developed out of years' occupation and foreign vested interests) to the aspiration of advanced education. As long as the seats of advanced higher education are not developed and nurtured within these countries their hopes for economic emancipation will remain unfulfilled. It is heartening to note that India, Singapore, and Malaysia have made noticeable progress in this

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direction.

The internet revolution as the most significant thing that has happened over the last 10 years has changed the world order in an inconceivable way. For example in 1977 Ken Wilson the founder of Digital Equipment said, "there is no reason anyone would want a computer in their home." Now, in US more than 60 per cent of households has a computer. The new economic order in fact is the new global internet connectivity order. It has created a new set of pressing needs for 'human existence and social justice'. The internet explosion redistributed the controlling power and leadership roles to a new generation of institutions and societies. They may potentially emerge from anywhere to anywhere. Bangladesh could be a global power in this sense only if it can give world class education to its talented young people. Talented people are not a scarce commodity in Bangladesh. Why do you think Bangladeshi scholars made significant marks around the world, or Bangladesh army has earned high reputation in UN peace keeping missions, or RAB within the country is so welcome? It is all talents of Bangladeshi people.

If serious attempts are made Bangladesh can compete in this global economic order intellectually

and reduce the burden of cheap human labour, inefficient and non-value added export and import of marginally relevant technical skills. I start with a list of things needed to be considered to move forward in creating a world class university.

1.Need to provide world class education: World class education will allow educated men and women compete for any jobs worldwide and also move the nation forward. We can do it. For example, MBA and BBA from Dhaka IBA have already made their marks in the banking sector in the Middle East.

2.Smooth and unhindered access to technology: Technology is the backbone of the new economy and world class education. Bangladesh is

tive list of things we need to be aware of but are some examples.

The mission of a university should be to provide quality education for the future leaders. By quality I mean world class quality, of course. Talents fortunately are normally distributed among all populations in the world.

In terms of intellectual capacity there are the best, the moderate, and the worst. Education should be for all but at the same time the talented students should be adequately served. It is a shame that so many talents are wasted in our country for the lack of opportunities. It is a shame that there are many young people who can pass the litmus tests of global standards and achieve a high level excellence to compete and challenge anyone from anywhere has nowhere to go. It is true that Bangladeshi young people are successfully competing in rigorous programmes around the world. They are only a fortunate few. Opportunities are needed for those left behind.

There are 58 private universities in the country, some with little or no academic standards. Many of which reportedly operate with outdated contents (knowledge); use old text books having little or no relevance to the needs of the society, employ poorly qualified and over worked faculty members at nominal compensation, have inadequate or nominal physical facilities, and copy curricula, programmes and courses from foreign universities. It is an alarming situation for the future of higher education in Bangladesh. In the name of privatisation part of higher education has been hijacked in Bangladesh. There are, of course, some really good ones who are trying honestly to achieve a level of excellence. But must I say that though their efforts are noteworthy but they may not be providing world class education.

I believe that it is possible to establish a dream university with the world class standards. For a world class university three things are needed -- talented students, excellent faculty members, and appropriate facilities. All of these elements can be assembled if there is financial support. What is needed is the backing of philanthropists who understand the need of quality education and the costs associated with it.

An institution cannot attract top scholars with poor salary. Modern and innovative curriculum cannot be delivered without adequate physical facilities, library, and technology. To establish such a world class university substantial endowment fund is necessary. But such a dream university will make the difference in years to come. Private entrepreneurs and government should accept this challenge if they really want to make the difference and join together in such a venture in right earnest.

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EVERY year, Hindu pilgrims from all over Bangladesh and adjacent West Bengal and other parts of India converge at Langelbandh for a dip in the holy waters of the Brahmaputra on a particular date -- the eighth day of the bright fortnight in the Bengali month of Chaitra (between mid-March and mid-April). The pilgrims earn religious merit by taking this dip because all other pilgrimages are said to converge at Langelbandh on this occasion, making it the holiest of all pilgrimages. This date coincides with Basanti Puja (Durga Puja of the spring season).

This holy place called Langelbandh in the district of Narayanganj is located on the Adi Brahmaputra river, quite close to Sonargaon. I read some books which threw light on the religious importance of this ancient pilgrimage. Mysterious are the ways in which myths work to create and nurture faith that lies at the root of many religious traditions. It is, therefore important to pay heed to ancient myths and legends if we are to trace the sources of many of our religious practices as well as to ascertain the mythical basis of the sanctity that is associated in the public mind with our pilgrimages and holy places.

The river on which Langelbandh is situated came to be called Brahmaputra, because, according to Hindu mythology, it was the son ('Putra') of Lord Brahma. The Kalika Purana describes how Amogha Devi, the wife of sage Shantanu, conceived by holding the prowess ('Tejas') of Lord Brahma and gave birth to a bonny son. Before this Shantanu had a lake ('Kund') excavated, which was surrounded by four mountains -- Sambatark on the east, Jarudhi on the west, Kailas on the north and Gandhamadan on the south. Lord Brahma, who came to see his son, gave him the name 'Lohitya' and placed into the lake ('Kund') who assumed the form of water in the lake - - 'Brahmakund.'

The legend of Parashurama brings out how Brahmakund became the holiest of all Hindu pilgrimages. In the Treta Yuga, Jamadagni, son of sage Richik (alternatively known as Bhrgumuni), had married Renuka, the daughter of king Prasenjit. Renuka gave birth to five sons of whom Parashurama was the youngest. It is said that at that time the whole world had got enveloped in all-pervading sin and the Kshatriyas had become mad with malice. Parashurama appeared on earth as the sixth incarnation of Lord Vishnu. He wielded the axe to completely eliminate the Kshatriya from the face of the earth twenty one times over. His original name was Rama, but since he had used the axe (Parashu), he came to be known as Parashurama.

Once Parashurama's mother Renuka went to bathe in a river where Chitrarath, the king of the Gandharvas (a class of demi-gods), was engaged in water sport along with a hundred Apsaras (celestial nymphs) who were his wives. Chitrarath had a hundred arms. As he forced the water of the river to flow into his hands, his hundred wives got drawn into them as well. And as he let the water suddenly flow out of his hands, the wives were speedily carried away from him. This game went on for some time and the sight of

the frolicsome Chitrarath disporting himself with gay abandon aroused amorous feelings in Renuka, whose return to the hermitage of Jamadagni was thus considerably delayed.

Through spiritual powers, Jamadagni came to know the circumstances that had led to Renuka's crush on Chitrarath. He ordered his sons to do away with Renuka. As the first four sons refused to kill their mother, they were reduced to inert objects as a sequel to their father's curse. Parashurama did his father's bidding and beheaded his mother with a stroke of his axe. Pleased with the performance of his son, Jamadagni told Parashurama to ask for any boon he wanted upon which the latter prayed that his mother be brought back to life and his brothers be rid of their lifeless

earth. Jamadagni further said that when Parashurama bathed in the waters of a river at a particular holy place, the axe would automatically come off his hand. And that place, Jamadagni said, would be venerated as the holiest pilgrimage on earth. Parashurama set out on a tour of the world's pilgrimages. He came to Brahmakund and as he bathed in its waters, the exe became unstuck, as predicted by his father.

Parashurama decided to bring down the holy water of Brahmakund to the plains in order to make them available to the people at large. He used his axe to cut through the rocks to make way for the water to flow through. He used a plough to make a furrow in the soft soil of the plains through which the water flowed in a

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state. His prayer was immediately granted. Renuka was restored to her life and the four brothers of Parashurama got back their state of animation.

But the axe with which Parashurama had killed his mother continued to cling to his hand, however much he tried to throw it away. Jamadagni told Parashurama that since he had committed two grave sins -- killing a woman and killing his mother, to boot -- he would have to suffer the consequences. He advised Parashurama to have patience and go on pilgrimage to all the holy places on

southward direction. He went on doing this till he got tired and stopped at a place near Sonargaon. This place started to be called Langelbandh, because it was there that the plough (i.e. Langel) had stopped (i.e. Bandh).

According to another legend, towards the close of the Dwapar era, Balaram had incurred sin by killing many Brahmins. To get rid of his sin, he renounced the world and visited many holy places. In the last lap of his travel, he arrived at the confluence of the Laskshya and Brahmaputra rivers and by ploughing a furrow on the ground, he caused the river to flow in a channel

and meet the river Dhaleshwari. This was the spot where the plough stopped and so it was called Langelbandh.

It is believed that the Pandavas had come to Langelbandh during the period of their exile and had bathed in the river at a spot called Pancharighat. According to some, Sri Chaitanya had come here to bathe and offer Tarpan (libations of water to the ancestors). In 1901, Swami Vivekananda had visited this place along with his mother, Bhubanshewari Devi, on the occasion of Budhastami, a date of astronomical and spiritual significance.

A Mantra that the pilgrims chant while bathing at Langelbandh is: "Vishnurome Tatsadadya Chaitrey Masi Meena Rashisthey Vaskarey Shuklapakshey Ashokastamyang Tithoh Omuka Gotrah Omukah Janajnkrta Sarvapapakshyapurvak Osmin Brahmaputrey Sanamahong Karisye." (massing the pilgrim is bathing on the occasion in the Brahmaputra with the hope that he will be absolved of all his sins and acquire merit equivalent to that gained by taking dips in all other pilgrimages).

A vast multitude of people -- numbering several lakhs -- throng the place over a couple of days every year. Some of them put up in the Dharmashalas (inn), but most of them hung out under the open sky to take a holy dip.

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