

# Fighting traffic jam in Dhaka city

## Is railway a bar, or a boon?

In 1999, the Ministry of Communications had taken a very suitable and viable project, "Elevated Mass Rail Transit System (EMRTS) for Dhaka Metropolitan City." full-scale suburban rail service and monorail service jointly can fight out the traffic jam, or at least, can keep it within the limit of tolerance.

MD. ABDUL WAHAB

**T**RAFFIC jam in Dhaka Metropolitan City is spiraling day-by-day defying all efforts of keeping this menace under control. Learned experts on this subject have so far suggested various measures, but results are not encouraging. Some have blamed railway level crossings for interruption to free flow of road traffic during passage of trains, and have suggested shifting of Dhaka Railway Station from Kamalapur to Tongi or Gazipur. Such a proposal needs to be examined in details and then come to a conclusion whether railway is at all to blame or deserves appreciation for its contribution towards reduction of traffic jam in Dhaka city.

It is true that level crossing gates within the city are closed for passing trains for 2 to 3 minutes each time. But interruption of road vehicles at non-railway traffic signals is much more; sometimes the detention extends to 15 or 20 minutes in a single event. One can have such bitter experience at many traffic signals without railway level crossing. Then why put the blame on railway?

Suppose Dhaka Railway Station is shifted from Kamalapur to Tongi, what will be the scenario? To ease traffic congestion railway alignment will be converted to road and invariably railway level crossings will turn into road crossings requiring traffic signals and controlling of vehicles as elsewhere in the usual fashion. So it will not help solve the problem, rather aggravate the situation in many ways.

The question of cost involvement for shifting cannot be ignored. Because, Kamalapur Station does not mean the station building only. As a 'terminal station' it includes yard, locoshed, diesel workshop, sick line, wash pit line, container depot (ICD), divisional headquarter

office, hundreds of staff quarters etc. as well as the land under possession of railway. Abandoning well-established infrastructures, construction of a new terminal at Tongi will incur huge expenditure, may be, several billion taka!

At present 78 up and down passenger trains are plying daily between Dhaka-Tongi and 22 between Dhaka-Narayanganj. Number of passengers entraining and detraining at all stations between Tongi-Dhaka-Narayanganj amounts roughly to one lakh per day. If railway is closed, train passengers to and from Tongi (the new terminal) will travel by road. If 80% (80,000) of train passengers move by bus, supposing carrying capacity of each bus 50 passengers, additional 1600 buses will be required. If the rest 20% (20,000) take taxi/scooter for their movement, and supposing average capacity of each taxi/scooter as 3 passengers, additional 6666 vehicles will be required. Can already overburdened roads of the city accommodate this number of additional vehicles? The answer is very simple. It must be agreed that instead of adding to traffic jam, railway is rather keeping the level of traffic jam at a lower scale than what it would have been otherwise.

The existing local train services between Narayanganj-Dhaka and Dhaka-Joydevpur have become very popular for low fare and punctual running. Public demand is growing for introduction of more local trains between Narayanganj-Dhaka-Joydevpur. In fact, railway should immediately come forward with "Suburban Train Service" to rescue Dhaka city from the whirlpool of traffic jam. There is no reason why the train service that cost taka 5 or 6 for traveling from Narayanganj to Dhaka or from Dhaka to Joydevpur should not get priority and patronisation of the government. Many high-tech, high-cost projects for building flyovers, elevated expressways

etc. are being considered ignoring the potential of railway.

To my consideration, for reducing traffic jam in the city, "Suburban Rail Service" between Joydevpur-Dhaka-Narayanganj with frequency of trains at every half an hour should be introduced as early as possible. But for doing this railway needs to enhance sectional capacity, improve infrastructure and procure special type rolling stock. To operate more trains with higher speed within the city area, following measures should be taken:-

Grade separation at level crossings by construction of underpass or overpass.

Construction of protection wall or fencing on both sides of railway line to increase speed of trains, as well as to avoid accidents of pedestrians while crossing the railway line.

Enhancement of line capacity of Dhaka-Tongi section by providing Intermediate Block Signals or Automatic Block Signals. At present 88 trains up and down (including goods trains) are running between Dhaka-Tongi and the line capacity is almost saturated. A feasibility study under Railway Sector Improvement Project done in 2008 revealed that by providing Intermediate Block Signals or Automatic Block Signals number of trains on existing lines can be increased to 160 per day.

Conversion of Dhaka-Tongi double line into 4 lines and Dhaka-Narayanganj single line into double line to meet present and future requirement for increasing number of trains. Till now land for this expansion is available, but may not remain so in future.

Development of Tejgaon station as a "Suburban Terminal," because, Dhaka station, with its existing infrastructure and terminal facilities, is not capable of handling the required number of trains in near future. Long distance and intercity trains will operate from Dhaka station, and Suburban Service between Narayanganj-Joydevpur will operate from Tejgaon Terminal.

Procurement of new rail-cars or DMUs (Diesel Multiple Units) for suburban trains, because railway is passing critical time for shortage of locomotives and passenger coaches, and is unable to introduce new trains from the existing fleet of rolling stock.

It may be mentioned that above recommendations will involve considerable investment, and a few of them will require longer time for implementation. But the experience of past few years leads us to believe that there is no cheap, instant turn-key solution to get rid of the traffic jam problem. Investment in railway infrastructure, I believe, will bring better results than high cost flyovers and expressways. If rail infrastructure is developed, as recommended above, it will be substantial and sustainable development for the country as a whole. Suburban, commuter or metro rail service play vital role in the mega-cities worldwide, including our neighboring country, India. Considering rail infrastructure development costly and time consuming, we cannot sit idle. What we require is proper planning, and implementation thereof phase by phase, with strong commitment. Rome was not built in a day. Our problem will also not be solved in a couple of days. It is important to start and pursue the goal.

In this respect, we should remember that development of railway service alone would not solve the traffic jam problem. With improvement of railway service, other measures like curbing private car import, increasing number of public buses, compulsory parking place for high-rise commercial buildings, compulsory own transport (buses) for all educational institutions, govt. and private offices, prohibition of bus-truck parking on public roads, modernisation of traffic control system etc. also have to be taken.

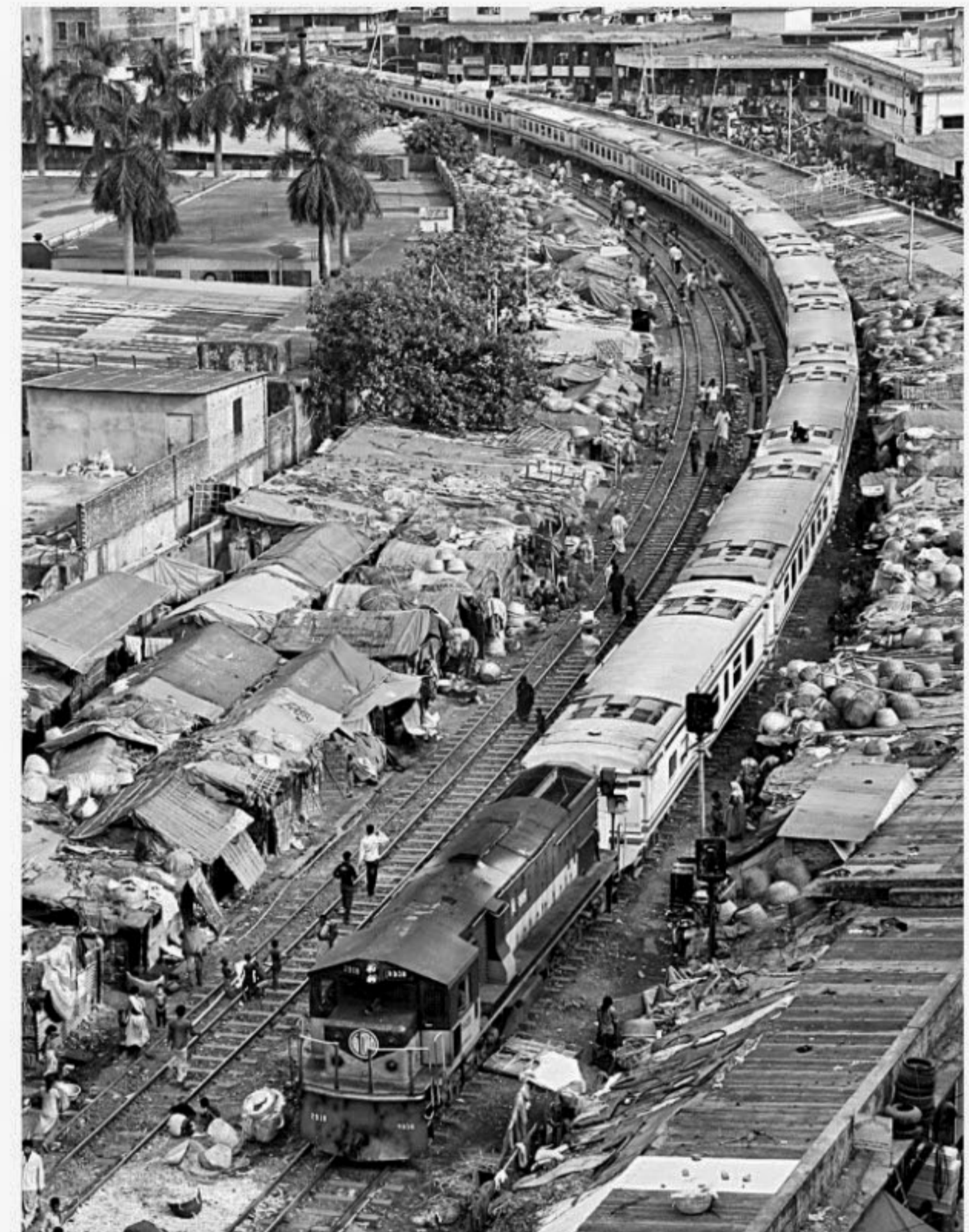
Before finishing, I cannot help mentioning this point. In 1999, the Ministry of Communications had taken a very suitable and viable project, "Elevated Mass Rail Transit System (EMRTS) for Dhaka Metropolitan City." Under this project international tender was invited for implementation of "Monorail" in Dhaka city on "BOT system." The offer of Transco Holding Inc. of Hawaii, USA was accepted. The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs recommended the investment proposal for final acceptance of the govt in July 2001. But no acceptance was received by the Ministry of Communications ever since. Had this project been implemented, at the end of its 3 years 1st phase, 4 lakh passengers per day could travel by Monorail on 29 km route, and at the end of

its 5th year (2nd phase), 8 lakh passengers could travel over 51 km route. Gradually the rider-ship would rise to 12 lakh per day. The project would need no govt. investment, no land acquisition, nor squeeze the existing road facility, as the line for monorail would be built on pillars along the middle of existing roads.

If such a project had been implemented, would there be traffic jam like this? But as our ill luck would have it, the then government could not give nod to the project, leaving the people of Dhaka

to experience the hell-fire of traffic jam. Since the project was taken up by those in power now, during their previous ruling period, can we expect that the govt. would consider reviving that "Monorail" project at the greater interest of the country's capital I believe, full-scale suburban rail service and monorail service jointly can fight out the traffic jam, or at least, can keep it within the limit of tolerance.

MD. ABDUL WAHAB is a former Chief Operating Superintendent of Bangladesh Railway.



# Looking back, looking forward

Having lived through the movement to bring back democracy in 1990, like many others, I am bitterly disappointed that Jatiyo Sangsad has never been able to function properly. An opposition giving robust constructive criticism is a 'must' for a fulsome democracy.

JULIAN FRANCIS

**I**T is a privilege to have been able to follow Bangladesh since its birth in 1971. I had actually seen how the Pakistani authorities had tried to starve Bengalis to death after the cyclone of November 1970, and in 1971, in the refugee camps in India I assisted the struggle for the refugees to survive in appalling conditions where malnutrition and death was widespread. I saw in early 1972 to what extent the infrastructure and the economy of the country had been shattered. Later on, in 1974, during the famine conditions of Rowmari, Kurigram, I witnessed, on one occasion, about 6,000 local people waiting all day for the 400 chapatis being made every day at a particular gruel kitchen.

There have been so many changes-many positive- since those very difficult days in the early 1970s. At present, my work often takes me to Rowmari, and though still a relatively poor 'monga-affected' area, I know that all communities ensure that nobody ever starves to death. Especially during the lean 'monga' months, many people may not eat 3 times a day, but relatives and neighbours ensure that all eat at least once. Bangladesh may now have more than double the 1971 population of 75 million, but it is now in a

position of being self-sufficient in staple food to feed over 160 million people. The big challenge that still remains is that many do not have the purchasing power to obtain that food.

I am often asked what has changed the most. Obviously food production, but also the huge contribution that the ready made garments industry has been making to the country. Communications too- specially roads and telecommunications- have dramatically changed how the country works. Mobile phones have revolutionised how people lead their lives, even in remote areas. While road communications to and from Dhaka have transformed the way business is run, it is unfortunate that the mass transit facilities for Dhaka have been completely neglected by successive governments and the great city seems to be grinding to a halt. This, in turn, is likely to have a great negative effect on businesses and livelihoods all over the country.

However, probably one of the biggest changes I have seen is the position, presence and visibility of women. What struck me when I came to Dhaka in January 1972 was the absence of women in the streets and in most offices I then visited. Though there may still be a long way to go, particularly in the rural areas, this positive

change is a significant one.

Change, however, often comes at a great cost. The largely mono-culture agriculture, with hybrid seeds and agro-chemicals has and is slowly taking a toll on the land in some parts of the country. Soil fertility is being adversely affected and, as the older generation points out, the diet of most people is less 'balanced' than 40 or 50 years ago. Many local varieties of indigenous rice have been lost, varieties that had over hundreds of years adapted to local soil types and climate. Recently, I went to an area in Tangail that I first visited nearly 25 years ago when I had visited the villages and studied the agriculture and peoples' livelihoods. Talking to the local people, especially farmers, 25 years later was both interesting and depressing. They say that as, no more, are there 'birds of prey', such as kites, hovering in the sky, it is clear that the 'food chain' has broken and that we are heading for some sort of catastrophe! In the old days, they say, the fishes and frogs in the paddy fields would eat the insects and the kites would eat them, mice and rats. There are no fishes in the paddy fields now and there are far, far less number of frogs. This is all to do, they say, with poisoning the land with fertiliser and insecticide. These farmers may be illiterate, but they are highly knowledgeable experts whose voices fall on deaf ears.

Compared to the early 1970s, Bangladesh is much better organized to react to natural disasters. I have been involved in relief and rehabilitation activities related to the floods of 1987, 1988, 1998 and 2007 as well as the cyclones of 1970 and 1991. Therefore, I have seen how reactions to disasters by Government and

NGOs have improved considerably. There is still much, much more to do, however, as the effects of 'climate change' are affecting the seasons, the patterns of rainfall and therefore food production.

What about other changes? There have been significant and visible improvements in health and education, not least run by some of the many NGOs that have sprung up since Independence. However, not nearly enough has been accomplished by successive governments and everything has progressed far too slowly. Communities in remote areas such as the island chars, where I currently work, are ill-served and are lacking in most of the basic services. Even the big NGOs do not find it cost effective to work in these remote areas and government extension services do not have budgets to move across the difficult terrain.

In the 1980s, those of us involved in rural development were very much encouraged with the recommendations of the Land Reform Commission:

- That all khas land (government land to which no one has title) should be distributed amongst the landless as quickly as possible,

- That sharecroppers should have legal protection and a just share of the crop grown on the land they till

- That the Government should fix a daily minimum wage for agricultural labourers from Brazil.

Another proposal to fix a ceiling of ten acres per family, would have involved land redistribution, but it failed to pass a later committee stage.

In 1984 two laws were enacted. One set the minimum agricultural wage rate at 3.5 kilos of rice or cash equivalent and the other was that all government land

should be released to the landless. However, after the passing of more than 25 years, it is clear that successive governments do not have the courage or political will to pass further laws to enable that these proposed benefits can reach the very poorest, particularly the extreme poor. Khas lands mostly remain unregistered and are controlled by mastans and lathiyals supported mostly by strong local political backing.

If governments are really serious about assisting the extreme poor to move above the poverty line, they have to become serious and distribute khas land to the landless on an urgent. The people of Bangladesh have the strength to succeed, but they need the support of a strong and courageous government.

A strong and courageous government is also required to reduce the amount of leakage or corruption which affects all development processes. I remember that even during the Rowmari famine of 1974-75, the chairman of a local co-operative association was systematically smuggling priceless food supplies over the border to India. Sadly, now, a certain amount of leakage is the norm, not the exception. I am told that a PWD Contractor, for instance, normally pays out, for bribes, about 30% of each contract's value. Therefore, most contractors inflate their tender quotations by 30%. To overcome this, we need a 'sea-change' in the way works are done.

Having a brother and a son, both with severe learning disabilities, I have always been very close to people with disabilities and disability issues. Since 1971, but more so in the last few years, the Government and donors are giving this sector more attention never enough, of

course and many dedicated NGOs are breaking new ground. This is encouraging and long may it continue. People with disabilities are showing that they can be assets for the country if they are provided with a few opportunities, but there is still so much more to do!

What about my dreams for the future of Bangladesh? Having lived through the movement to bring back democracy in 1990, like many others, I am bitterly disappointed that Jatiyo Sangsad has never been able to function properly. An opposition giving robust constructive criticism is a 'must' for a fulsome democracy. Successive oppositions of both major political parties have boycotted parliament on account of issues that should have been easily settled. By not contributing to the work of parliament, the MPs can be accused of cheating the people who elected them. This state of affairs saddens many citizens very much and I do not know who has the key to unlock this very serious problem, but this problem must be overcome for the sake of the country. In recent years, the economy has been growing at a very good pace, but only if confrontational politics is overcome, Golden Bangladesh will have a truly golden future.

These are a few thoughts as I look back over the years I have known Bangladesh as well as daring to dream of a more peaceful and prosperous future. In conclusion, I know how fortunate I have been to live amongst such warm, committed and passionate people who certainly have the will and strength to succeed and I am sure that they will.

Julian Francis, who, since the War of Liberation, has a long association with Bangladesh, is currently working with The Chars Livelihoods Programme, a DFID supported poverty alleviation programme of the Government of Bangladesh.

## UNESCO ENTERS 66TH YEAR

# Role in equity, research and science diplomacy

Bangladesh became a member of Unesco on October 27, 1972. Unesco is continuously in high esteem in the eyes of teachers and all concerned with education throughout the world, including Bangladesh, particularly because of the recommendations of Unesco along with ILO, concerning the status of teachers adopted in 1966 and 1997.

QUAZI FARUQUE AHMED

**T**HE flag, which shows a variation of the Parthenon, the ancient Greek temple located in Athens, is readily recognised as the symbol of Unesco. It contributes to peace and security by promoting international collaboration through education, science, and culture in order to further universal respect for justice, the rule of law and human rights, along with fundamental freedoms proclaimed in the UN Charter. To quote Irina Bokova, the first woman Director-General of Unesco: "Unesco was born from a simple idea. Since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed... The new context demands that the conditions necessary for mutual

understanding and peace-building be rethought. We must build a lasting universal human community, drawing on the fundamental values of humanity, and first and foremost on the resources of the mind. These are the stakes of this new humanism, where Unesco has a leading role to play." (Address in Milan, Italy on October 7.)

U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan echoed it in a different language while elaborating "The Vision of Education Reform in the United States" on November 4: "When Unesco was founded in 1945, much of Europe, Russia, and Japan lay in ruin. The promise of universal education was then a lonely beacon -- a light to guide the way to peace and the rebuilding of nations across the globe. Education is still absolutely the key

to eliminating gender inequities, to reducing poverty, to creating a sustainable planet, and to fostering peace. And in a knowledge economy, education is the new currency by which nations maintain economic competitiveness and global prosperity. Our goal for the coming year will be to work closely with global partners, including Unesco, to promote qualitative improvements and system strengthening. With such a shared commitment, we believe that we can greatly reduce the number of children out of school and ensure that the children who are in class are actually learning. Ultimately, education is the great equaliser. It is the one force that can consistently overcome differences in background, culture, and privilege."

**Research and development: Challenges from emerging countries**  
Unesco Science Report 2010 reveals that while the USA, Europe and Japan are still leading the global research and development (R&D) effort, they are increasingly being challenged by emerging countries. Led mainly by China, India and the Republic of Korea, Asia's share increased from 27% to 32% between 2002 and 2007. Over the same period, the European Union, USA and Japan, registered a decrease. In 2002, almost 83% of research

and development was carried out in developed countries; by 2007 this share had dropped to 76%.

The proportion of researchers in developing countries also increased from 30% in 2002 to 38% in 2007. Two-thirds of this increase is due to China alone. In 2007, China, with its 1,423,400 researchers, was on the verge of overtaking the US and the European Union. Today, Europe, US and China each contribute 20% of the world's researchers, followed by Japan (10%) and the Russian Federation (7%). While still in the lead, the developed countries have also seen their share of scientific publications drop from 84% in 2002, to 75% in 2008. During this period, China's share more than doubled, increasing from 5.2% to 10.6%. The number of articles published by researchers in Latin America has also increased, mostly from Brazil.

**The development of science diplomacy**  
According to Unesco: "Increasingly, international diplomacy will take the form of science diplomacy in the years to come. In this respect, Unesco must and will pursue its efforts to strengthen international partnerships and co-operation. This science dimension of diplomacy was one of the original reasons for including science in Unesco's mandate. It has fundamental significance for Unesco now-

days, at a time when science has tremendous power to shape the future of humanity and when it no longer makes much sense to design science policy in purely national terms."

**Bangladesh context**  
Bangladesh became a member of Unesco on October 27, 1972. Unesco is continuously in high esteem in the eyes of teachers and all concerned with education throughout the world, including Bangladesh, particularly because of the recommendations of Unesco along with ILO, concerning the status of teachers adopted in 1966 and 1997. They include: Firstly, "Since education is a service of fundamental importance it should be recognised as a responsibility of the state." Secondly, "Educational planning should form an integral part of total economic and social planning undertaken to improve living conditions." And thirdly: "To provide teachers with the means to ensure a reasonable standard of living for themselves and their families as well as to invest in further education or in the pursuit of cultural activities thus enhancing their professional qualification."

The activities of Bangladesh National Commission for Unesco (BNCU), however, are not up to the mark. During the 5-year rule of BNP-Jamaat government BNCU was thoroughly politicised. The

subsequent 2-year caretaker government, despite some steps in education, also did not take any remedial measures. However, there is enough scope for expansion of its functions especially in assisting and drawing teachers' training programmes in their related fields, particularly before bringing any change in the syllabus, development of curricula etc., and facilitating various programmes for the improvement of education, culture, science and technology. The assistance of Unesco and the experiences of its national commissions in different countries can contribute significantly. I strongly hold the view that BNCU should be run and managed on an autonomous basis with a non-partisan characteristic. The education ministry should play a facilitating role but BNCU should no more be considered as its apex body. The instance of South Korea may be taken into consideration in this regard. After all education and an important body like Unesco National Commission, which is supposed to promote education, science and culture must be allowed to remain above controversies and partisan debates.

Prof. Quazi Faruque Ahmed is Chairman, Initiative for Human Development (IHD) and Chief Co-ordinator National Front of Teachers and Employees (NFTE). E-mail: principalquazifaruque@yahoo.com