# Celebrating Fulbright Program on the golden jubilee of US-Bangla partnership



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ECENTLY, Bangladesh and the United States have celebrated half a century of their multifaceted partnership. It would be quite opportune to point out that the Fulbright Program, the flagship academic exchange program of the US government, played a significant role in providing critical substance to this partnership. It has boosted technical knowledge and intercultural skills of Bangladeshi academics and other professionals, and prepared a couple of generations for nation-building pursuits. Concurrently, a large group of experts from the US have acquired positive changes in their professional interactive approaches and contextual sensitivities by being in Bangladesh under the program.

Over the 75 years of its existence, the Fulbright program granted awards annually to nearly 8,000 students and scholars from 160 countries of the world as well as the US. Since its inception, more than 400,000 Fulbright alumni have studied, taught and conducted research in each other's countries. The program is well-known for merit-based selection and academic prestige; its alumni include 60 Nobel Prize winners, 89 Pulitzer Prize winners, and 40 current or former state or government heads. Over the five decades, hundreds of members of Bangladesh's knowledge system, including this author, have had taken full advantage of this window of opportunity.

My association with the Fulbright program had been a family affair. I was a Senior Fulbright Fellow at the Center for Global Development (CGD), Washington, D.C., during 2004-05. In the recent past, CGD has elected me as one of its Non-Resident Fellows. On the other hand, my younger brother, Dr Debadarshi (Dipen) Bhattacharya, a professor of astrophysics who has worked for NASA and is a science-fiction writer, was a Fulbright Fellow from the US at BRAC University during 2006-07.

The program was created in 1946, in the context of the post-World War II, through legislation moved by Senator J William Fulbright. He was an influential statesman and the longest-serving chair (1959-1974) of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the US Senate. Democrat Fulbright's visionary leadership on

international relations greatly contributed to the creation of the United Nations as well as its peacekeeping initiatives. His efforts and contributions towards enhancing mutual understanding and partnership were recognised through the setting up of the prestigious Fulbright program. He passed away in 1995 at the

Senator Fulbright's influence on me predates my participation in the program. I was struck by his basic philosophy, which in many ways defines the ethos of the program, and this is best expressed in his own words: "In the long course of history, having people who understand your thought is much greater security than another submarine". On another occasion, he pointed out that "as a conservative power, the United States has a vital interest in upholding and expanding the reign of law in international relations". What is interesting is that he related the rule of law in international relations to domestic democratic polity. No wonder he asserted that "to be a statesman, you must first get elected".

But, as a civil society person engaged in policy activism, my favourite quote from the writings of Senator Fulbright was the following: "In a democracy, dissent is an act of faith." In the era of diminishing democratic space, particularly for civil society, this saying remains of enduring relevance for our leaders. I wish our leaders took on board the senator's observation that "the citizen who criticises his country is paying it an implied tribute". Indeed, it is time to do a fresh reading of not only the apostles of democratic dispensation, such as Benjamin Franklin, but also of modern thinkers like J William Fulbright, who articulated some of the fundamental values of a rule-based liberal economy and

Over the last 50 years, the US-Bangla partnership has reorganised itself not only on strong footings but has also been energised by new momentum. Over the last two decades, the US has consistently been the number one export destination for Bangladesh. Bangladesh enjoys an annual trade surplus with the US to the tune of USD 5.9 billion (2021). This is despite the fact that since 2013, after the Rana Plaza incident, Bangladesh is not a beneficiary of the US Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) which provides for preferential market access to export products from developing countries.

The US is among the top three sources of remittance for Bangladesh. Over the last decade, it has also remained as one of the top five sources of foreign direct investment (FDI) for Bangladesh.



REPRESENTATIONAL PHOTO: BIGSTOCK

The Fulbright program has not only evolved over the five decades as a mainstay of the US-Bangla partnership but has also emerged as a strong lever in Bangladesh's quests, inter alia, to leave the group of Least **Developed Countries** (LDCs). mitigate the adverse impact of climate change, and prepare for the 4IR.

The net annual official development assistance (ODA) from the US to Bangladesh increased to almost USD 310 million annually by 2020. The partnership reached a new height during the pandemic, which included supply of vaccines by the US and Bangladesh exporting personal protection equipment (PPE) to the American market. The US remains a steadfast supporter of Bangladesh's efforts to host the Rohingya refugees and send them back to Myanmar. It has already provided more than USD 1.7 billion to this end.

The bilateral partnership is evolving within the institutional framework provided by the Bangladesh-US Partnership Dialogue (since 2012), the Bangladesh-US Security Dialogue (since 2012), and the Trade and Investment Cooperation Forum Agreement or TICFA (since 2014).

However, the significance of the Fulbright program for US-Bangla partnership needs to be explored within the mentioned dimensions and framework of the bilateral relationship and, more specifically, in the area of education. The US is one of the top four bilateral providers in terms of ODA commitments to education, accounting for about 5 percent of the total commitment. From 2011-2020, the average annual commitment of the US to Bangladesh's education sector was USD 7.17 million.

In the context of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the contribution of the US is quite pronounced in the delivery of SDG 4 (Quality Education). Specifically, US support had been focused on target 4.4.b, which is to increase the number of scholarships to developing countries for enrolment in higher education. Bangladesh is the fastest growing country in terms of sending international students to the US. In the 2019-2020 academic year, over 8,800 Bangladeshi students studied in the US, with more than 75 percent of them studying in STEM fields (41 percent in engineering, over 19 percent in mathematics/computer science, and 14 percent in on-the-job training). Moreover, to improve early-grade reading and expand schooling to dropout children, USAID works with the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education of Bangladesh to invest in teacher training and production of teaching and learning materials.

To conclude, the Fulbright program has not only evolved over the five decades as a mainstay of the US-Bangla partnership but has also emerged as a strong lever in Bangladesh's quests, inter alia, to leave the group of Least Developed Countries (LDCs), mitigate the adverse impact of climate change, and prepare for the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR).

## The darker side of RTI in Bangladesh

SHAMSUL BARI AND RUHI NAZ

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**■** ODAY, we turn away from the positive and encouraging side of the Right to Information movement in Bangladesh, depicted in our previous column (The Daily Star, April 16, 2022), to peer into the shadows.

**Union Parishad Chairman threatens** to beat up RTI applicant: The case stemmed from an RTI application submitted to the Designated Officer (DO) for RTI of a Union Parishad (UP) in Nawabganj Upazila, Dinajpur District, on February 6, 2022. Harunor Rashid, a local journalist, sought the following information: the number of Succession Certificates issued by the UP during the calendar year 2021; the amount

of fees levied for their issuance; and the government account to which the the UP office on some other business on February 17, 2022. The Secretary of the UP, who is also the DO, spotted Harunor and informed the Chairman, According to local media, the Chairman apparently lashed out at him for his audacity to ask for such information. He used the "most filthy language, threatened to beat him behaviour is bound to scare prospective

Railway official enraged upon

money was deposited. While waiting for a response, the applicant happened to visit up and threw him out of the office." Such users of the law.

receiving RTI application: Rita Akhter of Godagari Upazila of Rajshahi district had submitted an RTI request to the

### CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

**ACROSS** 1 Brass band members 6 "Paradise Lost" figure 11 Of service 12 Banish 13 Submerged 14 Puzzled 15 Looked lasciviously 17 Pole worker 19 Bear's lair 20 Capt.'s superior 23 Bonehead 25 Flank 26 Deli staples 28 Annual race, for short 29 army exercises

30 Snaky shape

31 Sheltered side

32 Spot 33 Volcanic rock 35 Yellow gem 38 Like Santa's

41 In the know 42 Bert's buddy 43 Job bonuses 44 Oozes **DOWN** 

1 Soaking spot 2 Salt Lake City player 3 Wallets 6 Common dice

4 Baby wipe additive 5 Clinched roll 7 Cut drastically 8 Box office buys, in slang 9 Brewpub

offering

neighbor 16 Dwells 17 Jockey Arcaro 18 Beef cuts 20 Grinding item 21 "Skyfall" singer 22 Track great Owens 24 Jeans feature 25 Runner on snow 27 Folds 31 Takes it easy 33 Pound sound 34 Collected stories 35 Keg need 36 Need to pay 37 Hole number

39 Pointer

40 "Certainly!"

10 Homer's



### YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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С	Α	R	Α	Т		R	Α	Z	0	Z
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Since there are clear dereliction of duties by many public officials, the overarching supervisory role of the Cabinet **Division of** the Prime Minister's Office over public bodies could be put to use for their amelioration.

DO of the local office of the Railway Department, seeking information on three counts. One, what actions were taken by the authorities to combat black marketing of railway tickets; two, rules authorising ticket-checkers to recheck passenger-tickets at the exit gate; and three, railway policy/rules, if any, to deal with poor behaviour of transgender passengers on trains. After passing through several hands, the application ended up with an officer who called the applicant on the phone and asked about her background, profession, and reason for seeking the information. He allegedly went into a rage and asked the applicant whether she had visited the station recently and was aware of various measures undertaken by the authorities to combat black-marketing and so on. He was reportedly extremely rude to the applicant and was annoyed by the fact that she used the RTI Act, which he felt was an instrument to harass public officials. If what we gathered is correct, it is indeed sad that government officials hold such a misconception about the purpose of RTI. This must change for the law to succeed.

Designated Officer angered by an RTI application from a person who resides in another area: The case arose from an RTI application submitted by one Quamruzzaman Pasha, a resident of Sariakandi of Bogura District, to the DO of the Environment Directorate Office of Moulovibazar Sadar Upazila of Sylhet district. He asked for some information on the air-pollution situation in Amtoil Union under the Upazila. He wished to know what measures were undertaken by the authorities to protect local inhabitants from the harmful effects of factory emission in the Union and receive reports on factory visits by concerned officials. Upon receiving the application, the DO reportedly called the applicant and asked what interest he had in seeking information on an area where he did not reside. She further told the applicant that she had no time to visit the concerned

areas nor to respond to his RTI request for information covered by official secrecy. The DO was obviously unaware of the scope of the law, the lack of geographical limitation on its application countrywide, and requirement to provide reason for seeking information under it.

Our investigations revealed that applicants face a variety of reactions from irate officials who feel uncomfortable to deal with RTI requests. For example, DOs may call and ask them to withdraw their applications or face dire consequences; employ other tactics to withdraw requests; invite them to their office and behave rudely with them; claim that the information sought falls under the jurisdiction of other units or under some exempt category, etc. All these to avoid responding in writing.

At the same time, however, we discovered a few examples of positive attitude of DOs towards applicants. In some instances, the DOs sought further information from applicants themselves to pursue a wrongdoing or guidance to locate the desired information. In others, DOs would call the applicants to convey that the information was dispatched. Some would even praise applicants for using the law to improve governance.

It is indeed a mixed bag. Though the negative experiences clearly outnumber the positive ones, the latter indicate hope for the future. It is important, therefore, that the negative aspects are identified on an objective basis and redressed properly. Normally one would expect the Information Commission (IC) to deal with them. But unfortunately, our enquiries also revealed many complaints against the IC itself. This emphasises the need for the development of a close interaction mechanism between the IC and the civil society for promotion of RTI law in the country. And since there are clear dereliction of duties by many public officials, the overarching supervisory role of the Cabinet Division of the Prime Minister's Office over public bodies could be put to use for their amelioration.

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