

STALEMATED by student unrest over a non-political issue of transport facility 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 former and detached village of Fatchabad 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 lived 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 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 but old habits die hard and they prefer to wait and then scramble for a sit in the bus.

I then expressed my fear that only for its unscientific and detached location the additional amount of money that was going to be spent for this university in the next 20 years could easily make another university. The above problems were also thoroughly and graphically analysed and I suggested a number of places within or near the city where the university could be relocated. Not surprisingly, therefore, the university authority soon received a letter from the Planning Ministry to consider and suggest ways for shifting the university to a place near the city. But unfortunately, at that time when the university was still in its infancy, controlled by a few senior teachers and officers, the Planning Ministry note was ignored as most of these people had already purchased a large number of plots around the campus. These gentlemen, therefore, had

clear reasons to oppose shifting and on the contrary suggest that any such idea of shifting the campus after so much of financial involvement would be unwise. So their were suggestion was accepted by the government and there was no further move on this matter until late in the year 1980 when nearly one hundred teachers of Chittagong University gave a signed statement in the newspapers urging upon the government to shift the university to town.

The then president of Bangladesh late Ziaur Rahman appointed a one-man committee with late Mafizul Islam MP of Comilla to look into the matter and give a practical suggestion. Mr. Islam visited Chittagong University and had many sittings with the teachers and the administration of the university but, unfortunately, once again those 'wise men' of the university prevailed. In fact, with many new owners of land and houses among the teachers, officers and employees in the area the vested interest group opposing the shifting of the campus was stronger than before. The chapter seemed closed 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 state 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

any other institution suited to this place, things would have been much different today and the government could save a lot of money.

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I mentioned in the beginning that in 1973-74 Chittagong University's transport expenses averaged between Tk five and six lakh. Now it is about one and a half crore. In this respect, I think, this is the costliest university in the world. Significantly half of this money is being spent for the transportation of the students. The old university railway station was about two miles from the campus and they had to reach the campus by detouring a hill that stood almost on the entrance of the university. On these considerations some buses were also engaged to commute the students between the railway station and the university. As the number of students was multiplying every year the transport involvement was also getting bigger. In 1973-74 the then vice-chancellor Prof. Abul Fazal took an attempt to construct a road through the hill and though the work was started in good earnest it was abandoned after he left the university to join late Ziaur Rahman's government as an adviser in December 1975. It was again in 1982-83 when Prof. Abdul Aziz Khan became the vice-chancellor that some serious and sincere efforts were made to complete the road through the hill as an extension of Shaheed Abdur Rob Road which runs from the main Hazari road to Chittagong University gate.

Leveling the road with high powered bulldozers and at the same time maintaining the slopes on two sides in scientific proportions required lot of money as well as good engineering skill. Vice-chancellor Abdul Aziz Khan contacted the army in the nearby cantonment and acquired their service at the cost of fuel only to bulldoze the hill. Having done a good job, at one stage, the army had to leave. Thereafter Prof. Khan contacted the local agent of a foreign company called Ial Monlagi which having laid the Bhakrabad gaslines near the university was resting its in-

struments including bulldozers and other earth cutting machines. At that time I was a member of the university syndicate and we also used the good office of my old class friend CM Mohsin, the then MD of Bhakrabad Gas Ltd., to persuade the Ial Monlagi people to help the university leveling that road free of cost and they agreed. They also could not complete the job but left after doing almost 80 per cent of the job. Thereafter the vice-chancellor asked the engineering department to invite contractors and the ultimate goal of completing the road seemed well in sight.

The completion of the road also became urgent in order to withdraw the student buses plying between the station and the Facilities. In the mean time a significant development had taken place. By 1984 a new university railway station was constructed at the entrance of Chittagong University and an additional rail line was laid between this station and the main Hazari line. Soon after the inauguration of the new station the university administration decided to cancel the bus service for the students since the distance between the station and the Facilities was now greatly reduced. But immediately there was students' demonstration opposing the decision of the university to withdraw bus service for the students. The students maintained that although the distance was reduced by more than half still they had to walk a great distance, almost half a mile, around the hill as the road through the hill was not yet complete. They, however, promised to support any such decision of the university as soon as the road is completed. But in April 1985 Prof. Abdul Aziz Khan was replaced by a new vice-chancellor and the road, since then, remained as it was. In the intervening years many vice-chancellors have come and gone but no effort was made to complete the road.

In fact, some quarters in the university or involved in the affairs of the university did never want the road to be completed

as it would go against their vested interest. For instance, the Hathazari Bus Owners' Association and their Drivers' Association who have been supplying and driving these buses for more than last three decades have become inextricably linked with the vicious racket of this university. Sometimes, some local student leaders also get involved with them for their personal benefit rather than that of the university. The university's transport section and a part of the accounts office which deals with transport money also appear to be a part of the same. There is no accountability or transparency in the transport sector as there is no proper monitoring system. Out of 20 to 30 buses hired everyday for the students and others none can tell how many buses or drivers really reported for the job but they would take their money every day from the accounts office without fail. Transport officials who certify their presence, only share the money. So the truth and the tragedy of the whole thing is that of the total amount of money now being spent for the transport at least 30 per cent is going down the drain. The University Grants Commission officials sometimes write letters to the university to minimise transport expenditure but they have never taken any practical measures to suggest how it should be done or how corruption can be stopped.

Now the present crisis of the university stems from the fact that after the completion of Abdur Rab Sarak through the hill linking the station with the Facilities the university administration decided to discontinue the bus service for the students between these two places. But the students are not ready to accept this decision of the university.

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dur Rab Sarak through the hill linking the station with the Facilities the university administration decided to discontinue the bus service for the students between these two places. But the students are not ready to accept this decision of the univer-

sity. They also seem to have forgotten the word of honour given by their predecessors that once the road is completed they would not oppose discontinuance of their buses. Now they claim that it is a part of their basic rights. They have come to the university not to walk, even if it is for five minutes, but to study. But the real studious students are hardly in this movement. They, possibly, do not know how much the students have to walk in the highly developed western world where most of the students have their own cars but are not allowed to go inside the campus with them. The same is true with many communist countries and I have personally seen it in the Beijing University of China where I and my guide had to disembark from the car nearly a quarter of a mile from the Faculty.

What about the general people in the west, whether young or old, they have to walk ten to fifteen minutes or even more to take the train, bus etc. from the nearest stop or station. There is no rickshaw, baby taxi or tempo and so everybody has to walk. But our students are different and they can't walk even for five to ten minutes. They have forgotten the fact that they are paying only Tk 10 per month as shuttle train fare which should normally be more than Tk 500. For this the university has to pay the railway something around Tk 30 lakh yearly or so and again more than double of that for free travel from the station to the Faculties by bus. What can be more unreasonable and illogical than this?

I think it should be more reasonable on the part of the students to ask for some rain shelters on the way from the station to the Faculties instead of asking for bus etc. They can also demand introduction of private tempo service from the main Hathazari road to the entrance of the university. Whatever may be the new arrangement they should be prepared to walk a little distance everyday which is also good for health. But taking the law into their hands is no solution and they

are doing that. They are doing that in presence of three hundred policemen stationed in the university for the last three years. What a wonderful police we have who love to watch people fighting from a safe distance. When the students lock the gates of the Faculty buildings and the main gate of the university or stop teachers' bus from entering the university they enjoy watching it standing like statues nearby. Then what is the use of maintaining such a large police force on the campus. They are being paid by the university and at the same time they are using university transports and other facilities, but why? Just the other day, while watching a gun fight between two groups of students, four policemen were injured by stray bullets. So miserable is their condition and so bad is their training. If with so many policemen present in the university killings take place one after another and the university has to close down indefinitely again and again then it is better not to have any police at all.

In fact, it is the responsibility of the government to come and stand behind the university authority when it is trying to do something in the greater interest of the university and the country. Unfortunately, our governments have never taken any interest in such things as they are more busy using the police force against their political opponents. Moreover, they are more interested to use the campus for their political ends rather than for education and by looking at the government or the parliament one can easily understand the difference between education and our politicians. Speaking frankly, from the day one after independence 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.

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