

Campus Times

Building bridges : 35 years of Bangla-US

Thirty years ago, Dr Tafazzul Hossain left Bangladesh to study economics at Duke University in North Carolina under the Fulbright Programme. Dr Hossain also had offered to attend European universities, but he was fascinated by the prospect of studying under the direction of Prof Joseph Spangier, one of the pioneers on the subjects of demographics and government economy. As Dr Hossain found out, Dr Spangier was also special teacher, one who cared deeply about his students.

In 1961, he earned his Ph.D. in Economic under Prof Spangier's guidance and returned to teach in the Economics Department of Dhaka University where he has remained for the last 25 years. When he returned, demography and development economy was a new subject in Dhaka. But, after teaching the subject to hundreds of students and continuing his research, Dr Hossain thinks that he has "contributed indirectly to the economic development and progress of this country."

Dr Hossain also returned to Bangladesh with a new understanding of Americans. "As a student, he would often spend his weekends and holidays by visiting a family in the town of Durham, near the university. On a log in front of this family's house, he would sit, chat with family members and sometimes listen to folk music. "The impression imprinted on my mind through this discussion and exchange of views led me to believe that their joys and sorrows, hopes and aspirations are not at all different from ours", he recalled in a recent interview. "Here I realised that human beings are basically alike throughout the world".

The family he visited would probably express similar feelings about the experience of talking to the young Bangladeshi scholar.

Since 1947, more than 150,000 scholars, professor and students from the US and 120 other countries have had edu-

cational experiences similar to Dr Hossain's thanks to the Fulbright Programme, an academic exchange programme initiated in 1944 by a freshman Senator from the State of Arkansas, J. William Fulbright.

Toward the end of World War II, Senator Fulbright, a former Rhodes scholar, had the idea of using the proceeds from the sales of surplus military equipment to finance academic exchange between the United States and other countries of the world—almost a literal fulfilment of Biblical injunction to turn "swords into plowshares".

Congress passed this bill known as the Fulbright Act, and President Harry S. Truman signed it into law on August 1, 1946. In the words of the legislation as updated in 1961, the Fulbright programme is designed to "increase mutual understanding between the people of the United States and the people of other countries". The dialogue between Dr Hossain and that North Carolinian family is the embodiment of mutual understanding.

The Fulbright programme first came to then East Pakistan in 1952. Since that time, more than 273 Bangladeshis have received Fulbright Fellowships for graduate study in US universities. Others have travelled to the US for post-doctoral research or to teach as visiting professor in US universities.

While Bangladeshis have travelled to the United States, US scholars have come to conduct research on subjects ranging from development economics to the networks which adorn pickshaws. American professors have also taught in various departments at Dhaka University like the Bangladeshis participate in the US they learn more about the host country and culture and have conveyed their new understanding to their fellow Americans.

Building on the success of the Fulbright programme, the US Congress has created two

other educational exchange programmes in which Bangladeshis participate: the East-West Centre and the Humphrey Programme.

Located in Honolulu near the University of Hawaii, the East-West Centre was founded in 1960 to bring students and researchers from the United States and countries of the Asia Pacific region to live, study and work together on common social, economic, environmental and cultural problems. In addition to their graduate degree programmes at the University of Hawaii, the students work on research projects in one of four institutes: the Institute of Culture and Communication, the Environment and Policy Institute, the Resource System Institute and the Population Institute. The Centre also sponsors the visits of as many as 1,500 scholars, professionals and government officials each year for conferences and workshops. Forty-nine Bangladeshi scholars have

died in the US as Humphrey fellows.

The Fulbright, Humphrey and East-West Centre programmes share similar goals. But how can one measure their success, particularly in a developing nation such as Bangladesh?

The most obvious answer lies in the professional development the Fulbright fellow receive. In 1980, Mr Abdul Mueed Chowdhury, a career civil servant, studied public administration at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville under the Fulbright programme.

Mr Chowdhury thinks that the lectures, seminars and discussions with other students from developing countries have made him a more effective administrator in his subsequent positions as Divisional Commissioner of Chittagong and Director of the Bogra Rural Development Academy. But, he also learned outside the classroom. "One of my impressions was of how active Americans

Along with the Marshall Plan, the Fulbright Programme is one of the really generous and imaginative things that have been done since World War II.

—Arnold Toynbee, 1971

studied at the East-West Centre under degree programmes, and numerous others have attended its conferences and workshops.

In 1978, the Hubert Humphrey North-South Fellowship programme began bringing mid-career professionals and government officials from developing countries to the United States for a year of practical training. The fellows study for one year in a University graduate programmes. Their individualised programmes do not confer a degree but give the fellows to opportunity to study new ways of solving problems, knowledge they can apply after they return to the positions. They also participate in two annual conferences on development issues with their US counterparts. Eighteen Bangladeshi Government officials have stu-

are on the job, from the salesman in a store to the manager of a big establishment or an administrator in a public department. Everyone accomplishes as much as he can in a given period."

According to the 81-year-old Senator Fulbright increasing professional skill is not the most important measure of the educational exchange programmes. On the 40th anniversary of the programme he initiated, Senator Fulbright measures the programme's success not only by the educational benefits of the individuals, but by its contribution to international understanding.

The Fulbright programme, he says, builds "the habit of co-operation. When people work together, they build confidence in each other, disabuse themselves of the prejudices which cause fear, apprehension, sus-

educational exchange

When Bangladeshis return to their country after their programmes in the United States, they speak with a greater understanding of the what makes the United States and the American people like. During my stay in the United States I realised that all my preconceptions about that country constituted no more than a drop of water in the ocean," remarked Abdul Mueed Chowdhury.

Mr and Mrs Harun-ur-Rashid, who were both Assistant Professors of Architecture at the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology when they received their grants to study at the East-West Centre, learned about families in the US through a very personal experience. When they attended classes, they left their small child in the care of a family. "I will never forget the hospitality, friendship, help and cordiality of that family," Mrs Rashid recalled. "We used to sit, eat and gossip with the family for days together in their house. What a nice, quiet, but lively and happy family it was. How deep was the bond of love among the parents and children!"

"Previously, I thought that the family bounds of Americans were very loose and devoid of (sincere feeling)", she continued, "but in Hawaii, I found my ideas to be wrong".

Educational exchange programmes have also given Americans a deeper knowledge about Bangladesh through the Bangladeshi scholars they meet in the United States. The East-West Centre in particular, encourages students to teach their colleagues about their own countries. The Rashids organised celebrations of Independence Day and Victory Day at the centre. And Mr Rashid recalled that the colourful annual fair, it seemed as if "each and every nation of our region had come to Hawaii with their own history, culture, tradition and lifestyle".

Americans also gain a deeper understanding about Bangladesh through the impressions conveyed by American scholars after they return from

Bangladesh. Prof Carlton Jackson, who taught history at Dhaka University for four months in 1963, said that "the very intensity of life in Bangladesh, the wonder of it all, awes and astonishes, and makes the visitor, usually for some ill-defined reason, want to return."

Though he said that he had a difficult time adjusting to the frequent cancellation of classes at Dhaka University, Dr Jackson was impressed by the students' efforts to form small groups to continue their studies despite the disruptions. "One of the most charming aspects of Dhaka University was to see student formed into sizeable study groups on the grounds of the Teacher-Student Centre, pursuing their topics. Most Americans know of Bangladesh for its poverty. But, for Dr Jackson, "it is that very poverty that magnifies and illuminates their humanity. No matter how poor Bangladeshis are, they will usually offer a vision of what they have".

A contribution to international understanding to the breaking down of traditional stereotypes is difficult to measure. But the Fulbright Programme, the East-West Centre and the Humphrey Programme have brought Americans and Bangladeshis closer together. Not surprisingly, these programmes have received broad support in the United States and other countries of the world. According to Senator Fulbright, this derives from the need for reason and diplomacy in international relations in the nuclear age. "I think this kind of programme is extremely important when settlement of disputes is the alternative to nuclear war. And I think it is the alternative. The effect of this programme is to supply in all countries people who are knowledgeable of the culture and the psychology of the people and therefore, are in a position to make much sounder judgments than people who have no knowledge of the other country and no capacity for empathy."

—A.J.K.