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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 Spanier, one of the pioneers on the subjects of demographics and government economy. As Dr Hossain found out, Dr Spanier was also special teacher, one who cared deeply about his students.

In 1961, he earned his Ph.D. in Economic under Prof Spanier'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 educational 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 1951. 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 artworks which adorn trishaws. American professors have also taught in various departments at Dhaka University like the Bangladeshi participants in the US they learn more about the host country and culture and have then convey 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 Center 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-five Bangladeshi scholars have

studied 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 receives. In 1980, Mr Abdul Muyeed 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 a 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

are in the professional development the Fulbright fellow receives. In 1980, Mr Abdul Muyeed Chowdhury, a career civil servant, studied public administration at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville under the Fulbright programme.

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

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