

BDI ACTIVITIES 1992-1993

6. BANGLADESH TODAY: A VISITOR'S PERSPECTIVE

(Talk given at Pittsburgh on April 3, 1993 by the Secretary-Treasurer of BDI on the occasion of Eid-ul-Fitr)

- (1) For the benefit of everyone present here today, I will speak in English. I recently spent three weeks in Bangladesh. For a trip like this, three weeks is a very short time. When I think about it, I feel as though those three weeks were a dream. Now I must tell you what I saw in Bangladesh.

To almost everyone present here and elsewhere, in this country and around the world, Bangladesh stands for desperation. Some perceive it as a country of broken hopes and lost dreams. That is apparently true. As soon as you land in Bangladesh, you encounter clear signs of desperation everywhere. You see thousands of half-nourished and underprivileged human beings running around, fighting dawn to dusk to earn only a few pennies.

- (2) Let me begin by telling you a story. I was in New Market and wanted to go to Farmgate. Most of you are familiar with these places in the city of Dhaka. I boarded a transport called "tempoo" in Dhaka. It is a three-wheel baby-taxi converted to carry 11 to 12 passengers. The driver slowly proceeded towards Farmgate. To my surprise, the conductor of the tempoo was a child who was hardly six years old. He said his name was Ruhul Amin. When I asked him how old he was, he said he did not know. My fellow passengers picked up from there and started discussing the issue of child labor. One of them commented on having seen young children at work, but he had never seen anyone this young. I could not participate in that discussion. I kept on looking at Ruhul Amin. He looked somewhat like my elder brother Liakat when he was about Ruhul Amin's age. He barely managed to stand on the pedestal by clinging to a rod by one hand and started collecting the fare by stretching the other hand. The fare was 1 taka and 50 paisa. Everyone gave him two takas. He put all the money together neatly putting one hand around the rod. Near the end of the journey, Ruhul Amin brought out shining half-taka coins from the pocket of his dirty half-torn shirt and gave one to everyone. I also got

one.

For a moment I was overwhelmed and forgot about my surroundings. Like a thoughtless robot, I put the half-taka coin in his hand, not reflecting what it all meant. I could show him pity, only if he were a beggar. But he wasn't. I ran away from there as fast as I could.

- (3) If you look around in Bangladesh, specially in Dhaka city, you discover hundreds of small businessmen. Some have small to medium shops selling all kinds of locally produced goods. Others are seated on the sidewalks with baskets full of goods: shoes, sandals, shirts, combs, hair clips, cosmetic items and food items. All these goods are almost always of low-quality and low-price. But there was no dearth of products in the market.

Since I visited Bangladesh during the Winter time, I could not help noticing that Bangladesh appeared to be floating on fresh mouth-watering 'your favorite' vegetables like cauliflowers, onion leaves, beans, cabbages, white potatoes. These were being sold at very reasonable prices even by Bangladeshi standards. I also saw plenty of fish and meat in the market. However, the prices were mostly beyond the buying power of common people. The same thing was true for fresh fruits like orange, apple and grapes.

- (4) Out of the 19 days I stayed in Bangladesh, I spent only two and a half days with the rest of my family in my village. I spent the rest of the days checking into the economic and production potential of Bangladeshi industries and establishing a BDI National Innovator's Award Fund or BDI-NIA Fund in Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET), Dhaka. I presume all of you know that BDI, Bangladesh Development Initiative, is a Pennsylvania-based non-profit non-political federal tax-exempt corporation under IRS code 501©(3). I succeeded in establishing the Fund. Dr. Mohammed Shahjahan, the Vice Chancellor of BUET, himself accepted the cheque of 5000 US dollars. A Press Release on the news of the establishment of the BDI-NIA Fund has been published by the Bangladeshi news media in USA and Canada as well as in Bangladeshi newspapers.

BDI-NIA Fund is and will remain a perpetual Fund in Bangladesh awarding a yearly prize to a Bangladeshi who has demonstrated extraordinary feat in the production method or capacity in Bangladesh in any field: medicine, agriculture, basic sciences, engineering and so on. Many of you contributed money for the establishment of the Fund. On behalf of BDI officials, Yunus Bhai, Jahangir Bhai and myself and the people of

Bangladesh, I thank you for your support. BDI has set a goal to raise another 15000 dollars this year. We have already succeeded in raising 9000 dollars. We have to collect another 6000 dollars by the end of this year. So we continue to urge you to make your tax-deductible contributions toward the BDI-NIA Fund or you may want to contribute toward other projects that BDI has undertaken.

- (5) I checked into the production activities in and around the city of Dhaka, e.g., in Bongshal-Nowabpur Road and Dholai Khal areas. I saw their actual production methods. Some of them are producing bicycle parts and others are producing parts of rickshaws, motor cycles, trucks, pumps, and so on. When you get into the Dholai Khal area, you may feel that an industrial revolution is waiting to happen. I talked to the officials of the Associations that try to look after the interests of these manufacturers. I listened to the success stories and the problems of these manufacturers.

Among other places, I visited the workshop of Sharif Ahmed who happens to be the Treasurer of the Dholai Khal Manufacturer's Association. I saw his employees producing a few truck parts using lathe machines. I asked Sharif Ahmed where he bought the lathe machine from. He said he made the lathe machine himself. He also said he was in the business of manufacturing lathe machines. About two years ago he had to shut down the production of lathe machines because Bangladesh Government allowed imports of lathe machine from India and other countries. The price of the lathe machine manufactured by Sharif Ahmed was marginally higher than those imported from abroad. It is my conjecture that, although locally manufactured goods are not always of international quality, the price difference in favor of the imports is not always fully market-driven. As a result, one feels outraged with the Government and bureaucracy of Bangladesh. But you should ask the question whether Bangladesh possesses the decision-making sovereignty over the affairs that really matter to Bangladesh, and involve the fate and well-being of millions of Bangladeshis. This, I feel, is the crux of the matter.

I recorded the stories of Sharif Ahmed and others and the opinions of the experts in the field on the audio tape. Right now the text of the audio recordings is being compiled. BDI is planning to publish a Journal in August of this year, which will feature these stories.

- (6) For Ruhul Amin, our salute to him. I saw the future of Bangladesh in Ruhul Amin. To me, he symbolizes the next generation of Bangladeshi people. In one rather obvious scenario, he would become the driver of the tempoo of which he

is now a conductor and engage his six year old son as the conductor. The other scenario derives from the fact that Bangladeshis like Ruhul Amin do want to work and refuse to beg and as a result there is hope for our future generation. We only have to provide them with the right kind of tools and training. It is now up to us. Through BDI we are striving for macro-level changes in the economic structure of Bangladesh so that Bangladeshis like Ruhul Amin can face life with the right kind of training and tools. We won't settle for anything less. And I know you won't either. Thank you for listening.