

BIMRAD Entangling with High Hope

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Building an institution has always been a challenging task. This is mainly because an institution is built not merely for serving the interests and issues of the present but rather for the sake of survivability of the future generation of beings, particularly humans. In fact, no other beings but only humans make institutions, indeed, not only for itself but for the survivability of all beings. And that is quite a tall task. But then there are institutions of all kinds: political, social, cultural, hydrological, educational, and so on. Civilizations across the world have worked diligently over centuries but have fared better only relatively from one another in building one or the other. Europeans, for instance, are good builders of museums, while the Chinese can certainly take pride in textuality. Until the advent of the

Wikipedia the Chinese could boast of having the largest encyclopedia in the world, which contained some 800 million Chinese characters and published during the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911). Earlier in the 15th century, the Yongle Emperor of the Ming Dynasty produced yet another set of encyclopedias, which consisted of over 370 million Chinese characters in 11,000 handwritten volumes. The University of Oxford is credited to have built the first public museum in the world in 1683. Since then the Europeans and their descendants around the world, including in the US and Australia, have built one museum after another, some are now over two hundred years old. But then when it comes to the survivability of educational institutions none could surpass the Arabs! The University of Al

Qarawiynn in Fez, Morocco, established by a woman in the name of Fatima al-Fihri in 859 AD, still remains the oldest existing, continually operating and first degree-awarding educational institution in the world. Other civilizations, although had deficits in producing encyclopedias or building museums and universities, exceeded in building other kinds of institutions.

South Asians, including Bangladeshis, for instance, have not fared well in building political institutions. This is quite evident from the fact that the region has been under foreign domination for nearly nine hundred years. The Sultan Dynasty whose rulers were basically nomadic Turks ruled a greater part of South Asia for nearly 320 years, from 1206 to 1526. Then came the Mughals, who were Chagatai Turks (a combination of Mongols and Turks), and they ruled for about 330 years, from 1526 to 1857. Finally, we had the British, whose rule in Bengal and in some adjacent areas extended for 190 years, from 1757 to 1947. Bangladesh then continued for another 25 years under the Punjabi-dominated Pakistan in a semi-colonial relationship. The protracted rule by the foreigners took a toll in building political institutions. The legacy continues even today in some form in post-colonial Bangladesh. But this has not restricted the people of Bangladesh in building institutions related to culture or gastronomy. In fact, the oldest operating institution in Bangladesh, as it would probably be the case in some other parts of South Asia, is sweet shop! But the Bangladeshis can certainly take pride

when it comes to having institutions related to culture, like music, poetry, or gastronomy, which has a longer history and has survived largely because of samaj (society), which took the responsibility of reproducing institutions related to culture and gastronomy in homes, mufasil towns, and villages, indeed, in marked contrast to the policies of the state or rashtra. This provides us a clue in building institutions in Bangladesh.

In fact, the survivability of institution depends on how much the latter has succeeded in fulfilling the aspirations of the people. It is precisely for this reason that educational institutions have a longer survival rate, as it would be the case with Al Qarawiynn University or for that matter, Al-Azhar University in Cairo, which was established in 10th century AD. European universities too, some of which were established in 11 century AD like Bologna and Oxford, had a longer span of life, and still surviving. This is where the theory of abundance, as opposed to the prevailing practice of designing development on the basis of theory of scarcity, becomes critical when it comes to building institutions. The idea is to see what we have more and not what we have less!

Bangladesh has two items in abundance. One is people, which have already been put into some good use, particularly when it comes to reproducing Bangladesh's economy. This refers to the remittances from the migrant workers, numbering 10 million, settled in over 140 countries, and remitting USD 13 billion (2018), and 4.2 million workers,

mostly female, working in the ready-made garment sector, which includes 4,500 factories and exporting goods worth over USD 28 billion (2017 figure). Bangladesh is now the world's second largest producer of ready-made garments, next only to China. No mean achievement, particularly in the backdrop of being called 'an international basket case'! The second one is water rain, riverine, and oceanic. The focus on the latter, however, has been dismally low if not negligible. This is unfortunate because Bangladesh, after all, is a water-country and not a land-country. But in recent times, the second item has gained greater significance, particularly for two factors. One is the issue of Climate Change with an urgent focus on the livelihood of the deltaic people and the other one is the fixing of the maritime boundary with Myanmar in 2012 and with India in 2014. Bangladesh's territoriality or sovereign rights in the Bay of Bengal has finally been accomplished. BIMRAD could not have been established at a more appropriate time.

The Bay of Bengal is a unique area. Not only where the waters of Ganga-Brahmaputra the largest delta in the world - are emptied but it is also the home of numerous islands, marine biology, flora and fauna, minerals, particularly gems, and about 30 billion tons of oil deposits. The latter is as much as the current deposits of Saudi Arabia, one of the world's largest oil exporters. The richness of the Bay otherwise remains undisputed. But this is as much for consumption as it is for preservation for the future

generation of beings, including humans. By fixing the maritime boundary Bangladesh has now obtained absolute maritime territory of 1,18,813 square kilometres, 200 nautical mile Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and an additional area of Continental Shelf, indeed, with undisputed rights to the fish and fisheries and the natural resources beneath the seabed. Bangladesh's oceanic rights as well as responsibilities or what can be best referred to as Bangladesh's Oceanic Futures can no longer be minimised. It is here that BIMRAD is destined to play a productive role. Indeed, as an institution in the making, hardly a year old, what is required for BIMRAD now is a touch of creativity, and passion, patience, and hard work.

Four areas can easily be flagged for BIMRAD to start working, although it need not be limited to these areas alone:

1. Research

There is a dearth of knowledge, including institutions, when it comes to researching on the Bay of Bengal in Bangladesh. Inversely, there is actually an overwhelming intellectual dependence on the West when it comes to our understanding of the Bay, particularly in acquiring resources from it. This incidentally is not exceptional but the situation is glaringly dismal when it comes to the Bay and the oceanic world. This is surprising given the fact that Bengal had once been a great shipbuilder and the legendary Chinese mariner and explorer, Admiral Zheng He (1371-1433) and his fleet, did make a stopover at the Chittagong port in the

15th century. BIMRAD should initiate both short and long-term research focusing on the different areas related to the Bay, indeed, from shipbuilding to sea-pollution. Such research could be both in-house and partnered with other research centres and academic institutions, including universities. This would help not only to initiate research that requires immediate attention but also create a pool of Bangladeshi researchers for the development of home-grown knowledge and maritime activities.

2. Training

Research and training must go hand in hand. In fact, both junior and senior officers require training to keep themselves informed about the rapidly changing world, particularly in areas relevant to the naval profession, so that the latter can take actions or even restrain from taking actions on the basis of well-informed, authoritative knowledge. Such training could be designed for one or two weeks, and could include not only officers from the navy or defence services but also other stakeholders, including media personnel, civil bureaucrats, academicians, parliamentarians, and members from NGOs. It is always good to have professionals from all fields, both military and civil, in such training programmes, mainly to get a sense of the diverse opinions on the subject and all the varied scenarios from different disciplinary backgrounds for resolving problems. Topics for the training course could include marine biology, marine tourism, Climate Change, plastic terrorism, or marine innovation. Of course, the selection and prioritization of the course would

depend on both short and long-term requirements of the institution, people, and the country. In the beginning some of the training courses could be partnered with other institutions, with officials at BIMRAD actively participating in the designing of the course.

3. Advocacy

This is fundamental in linking BIMRAD with the people, both at home and abroad. Earlier I have indicated the lessons from history when it comes to the survivability of an institution. Indeed, only when an institution flourishes amongst the people can an institution get reproduced. Alienation from the people otherwise distorts or kills the institution. BIMRAD needs to remain attentive about this from the beginning. The advocacy can have various instruments, including e-publishing weekly updates, printing reports and research findings, making documentaries, and holding workshops, seminars and conferences at all levels - divisional, national, and international. An annual or biennial international conference under the title Oceanic or Maritime Futures, indeed, in the like of Shangri-La Dialogue would only add to its efficiency and help BIMRAD attain a global status. Short-term fellowships could also be designed, and the outcome could be presented at both in-house and public seminars and conferences. Indeed, some of these workshops could be on the naval ships so that maritime researchers, both young and senior, can get a first-hand knowledge of marine life and living.

4. Security

This is certainly an area that requires specialization when dealing with issues related to land, air, and water. In the case of Bay of Bengal, now that the territoriality of Bangladesh is legally fixed, the urgency of water or marine security is greater than ever. Indeed, the vast oceanic area under Bangladesh needs to be protected not only from alien ships but also from the pirates and polluters. Given the current resources of Bangladesh the cheapest way it could offset the dubious forces from entering its maritime boundary and ensure security is by purchasing a few submarines. And that is precisely what Bangladesh did, the Navy added to its capacity and commissioned two submarines in 2017. Not sure why it alarmed the critics but I guess our Prime Minister responded rightly by saying, "Let us purchase two more!" Critics were quick to understand the merit of Bangladesh having a three-dimensional force. This is one area where BIMRAD can concentrate and support in developing Bangladesh's capacity, including in the field of naval or maritime intelligence. In the age of globalization when roughly 80 percent of global trade by volume and 70

percent by value are transported by sea it does not require too much intelligence to know the importance of maritime intelligence. A unit could be created within BIMRAD to focus and research on Maritime Security.

The four areas are not exclusive to one another, some of the activities could overlap. BIMRAD would do well if meetings of the members are convened quarterly to priorities the activities and see the progress. But let me conclude by saying one or two words on the subject of recruitment. It is quite natural for a new institution to lack in workforce, particularly in having qualified researchers. This problem could be tackled, as indicated earlier, by partnering with other institutions and carrying out joint research. At the same time, BIMRAD should start recruiting researchers for short and long-term, keeping the global practice in mind. Indeed, instead of providing tenure or permanent job, best would be to recruit for one or three years with a relatively high salary. Performance will ensure renewal, while BIMRAD will have the option of recruiting a fresh mind if research and activities demand so.

Let the work begin!