

Note for Record
January 19-23, 2011

By: Shoaib Sultan Khan
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Subject: **Invitation by Cherie Blair (CB)**

Last October in Pakistan, I received an invitation signed by Cherie Blair, Patron of the Asian University for Women (AUW). I suspected Dr. Shahida Jaffrey must have been the prime mover as I tease her that I don't need a satchi and satchi, you do a better job for me. She assured me it was not her, the initiative came from Dr. Kamal Ahmad, Founder of the University, located at Chittagang in Bangladesh. My emergency dash for London in the month of November due to my wife Musarrat's sudden hospitalization, had completely erased the memory of the invitation, till I received a return business class air ticket from London to Dhaka, from the USA office of AUW with hotel bookings at Dhaka for participation in the Conference entitled "**Imagining Another Future of Asia: Ideas & Pathways for Change**". I was supposed to be one of the speakers at the symposium.

Musarrat was still bedridden although she had come home after a month in the hospital including 15 days in the intensive care but she insisted on my not letting Cherie Blair down.

The conference turned out to be a memorable experience for me in terms of nostalgia and emotions. I was visiting Bangladesh after a decade since my SAPAP (South Asia Poverty Alleviation Programme) days. The affection and love I received from my friends who came to know I was there, was overwhelming. Professor Rehman Sobhan and his younger brother Farooq Sobhan, my ex-probationer in Civil Service Academy, Lahore who rose to be the Foreign Secretary of Bangladesh, took me from the hotel to have breakfast at Farooq's residence. My three probationers from Academy days Mofazzil Karim, Irshadul Haq and SAPAP Coordinator Badiur Rahman, although involved in organizing the biggest religious annual gathering near Dhaka, came to see me at 0700 hours in the morning. My two batchmates Sultanuz Zaman and Abul Hayat

Sadique contacted me and so did Mohit, a year junior to me in CSP now Minister of Finance. The Pakistan High Commissioner Ashraf Qureshi whom I had met years ago in South Africa, hosted a dinner for me and Prof. Riffat of Quaid-e-Azam University and so did the Second Secretary Arif Zulqarnain, who was also a former student of Prof. Riffat. It was indeed a journey through memory lane.

The inaugural session of the AUW at the Banglabandu International Convention Centre was a glittering affair with the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Cherie Blair, First Lady of Malaysia, ex-First Lady of Japan, Foreign and Education Ministers of Bangladesh and of course Kamal Ahmad, gracing the podium. The audience included hundreds of students of AUW who had come by train from Chittagang. They indeed added not only sparkle to the conference but they also asked most searching and insightful questions from the speakers during the discussion sessions.

The inaugural speeches were very well received but the First Lady of Malaysia, was absolutely stunning both in her talk and in her beauty. What a beautiful face of Islam she presented punctuating her speech extensively with quotations from the Holy Qur'an. Cherie Blair made a strong case for equality of women with men specially equal pay for equal work.

I had never heard of Dr. Kamal Ahmad, the Founder of AUW but what he has achieved in setting up of the AUW, is simply amazing where students of all the Asian countries come with full scholarship at US\$ 15,000 apiece per annum. How Kamal has mobilized the resources and support both national and international, speaks volumes of his dynamism, leadership and public relationing. I found him a most unique person yet extremely humble. The greatest joy I got was to see that there were 16 girls from Pakistan also but the pleasantest surprise was that ten of them were from Northern Areas (Gilgit and Hunza) who on their own through internet, had applied and got selected. The AUW offers an 18-month foundational course to prepare the girls for further 2 years of graduation studies in different disciplines. The basic aim being nurturing Asian women for leadership roles.

My presentation “**Social Mobilisation: A Key to Sustainable Development – South Asia Experience**” preceded presentations from Columnist of Financial Times Martin Wolf, Chief Economist of the World Bank, South Asia Region Martin Rama, Chief Strategist of Goldman Sachs in Japan Kathy Matsui. Dr. David O’Rear, Chief Economist Hong Kong Chamber of Commerce chaired the session. After my presentation, a girl student of AUW from Altit Hunza stood up and said “ I have no question to ask but I would like to say that our fathers and grandfathers used to tell us how poor they were and how difficult life was for them till the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) started working in the area and the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP) came that improved the economic status of the people. Today I am here because of these programmes and Shoaib Sultan Khan”.No questions were directed at me. The economists had to clarify the issues they had raised. I felt almost in the seventh heaven.

The next day an AUW Board Member, based in Japan, an American Lady (Catherine Watters) came to me choked with emotion with tears in her eyes and complimented me on my presentation. She also brought Meher Jabeen, the girl from Hunza, and took our photograph saying she wanted to write an article on what she had heard from me and what she witnessed in the statement of Meher. Even the AUW official photographer complimented me and said he was so happy he was covering the session as he was most moved. All the panelists also complimented me including the FT Columnist Martin. But the most flattering compliment came from the wife of David O’Rear who said to him comparing all the presentations of the economists , the presentation I made, was most touching. I was happy that Farooq Sobhan also listened to my presentation.

Shahida Jaffrey’s presence in Dhaka was a real boon for me. I had to do nothing she took care of all my logistical needs, be it transport, food or conference requirements. Her solicitude and affection for me is so overwhelming that I can never repay.

Prof. Yunus very kindly came to Grameen Headquarters’ office on a Saturday afternoon (a closed office day) specially to meet me, when I made a request to

his Secretary to see him. Despite the dark clouds hovering all around him, he was cheerful, confident and bright like the lightning. I shared with Yunus what Akhter Hameed Khan had to suffer. How a disgruntled employee of Orangi Pilot Project subjected him to tremendous pain and discomfort. How in Karachi he was arrested at mid night from his flat and again when he was staying in Islamabad, how a contingent of police came from Multan to arrest him and when Nawaz Sharif accepted my request to see him and I went with him, Khan Sahib spent one hour explaining the theory of development to Nawaz Sharif not saying a word about the blasphemy case against him. And how after the PM's orders for withdrawal of the cases against Khan Sahib in Karachi and Multan, the judge in Multan was so frightened by the persecutors that he refused to carry out PM's directives. The Lahore High Court had to transfer the case from Multan to Lahore and it remained pending till his death.

I reminded Yunus of what George Bernard Shaw had said on the murder of Gandhiji "**it is dangerous to be too good**". I assured Yunus he will overcome. He has done no wrong. The whole world is behind him. Everyone knows it is pure jealousy.

When I asked Yunus if he had any inkling why this was happening? He said none at all. Most of the time he is abroad propagating Grameen's philosophy. He was being persecuted for no rhyme or reason and harassed. Only a couple of days ago, he had to appear in a Mymensingh Court in a case filed against him for defaming politicians as two years ago, he had made a statement that in Bangladesh politicians come to politics only to make money. Yunus suspected many such frivolous cases being filed against him and he was ready to face them all.

I was a bit disturbed to hear that Grameen Bank was set up through an ordinance and out of 12 directors of the bank, 3 are government nominees including Chairman and rest are villagers as the shareholders of the Bank which in fact means the government can have complete control over the bank although they hold only 5% shares because the poor villagers will never be able to defy the mighty government if it coerces them to sign on the dotted line.

I narrated to Yunus what NRSP went through in early 1990s and it was only because of the independent and autonomous board that NRSP withstood the pressures for three years exercised at the highest level of the government including a midnight visit by the intelligence agents to my house, in my absence, to ransack my papers to find something incriminating, as I frequently used to visit India under SAPAP. I urged Yunus to get this rectified once he had overcome the present storm. Yunus said he had tried and the interim government had also amended the Grameen ordinance but the elected government refused to carry out the amendments

I assured Yunus of all my personal support whenever he required, he should not hesitate to let me know.

Yunus gave me a sheaf of papers including an article written by my friend Rahman Sobhan who served as Chairman of the Grameen Bank from 1997-2000 and Rahman's conclusion is a sad commentary on South Asia. He writes:

“Thus, when some fellow Bangladeshis choose to belittle Yunus and the Grameen Bank, we should keep in mind that we also dishonour ourselves by telling the world that what they thought was a great achievement of Bangladesh, was no such thing. In passing this judgment on one of our citizens we are thereby charging the Nobel Committee, the Indian Parliament, the US Congress, the US President, other presidents and prime ministers from around the world who have specially visited Bangladesh to learn about the Grameen Bank or have invited Yunus to educate them on his programmes, that they were a bunch of gullible fools who did not do their home work and permitted themselves to be deceived by a worthless programme”.

I wonder if any of these famous entities think of themselves as children or imbeciles or that their opinion of Yunus is at all likely to be diminished, because of his denigration by some of his own fellow Bangladeshis. More likely, they would be bewildered as to why a person and organisation which is not only honoured around the world but whose programmes are being replicated in many countries should be so dishonoured in their own country.”