

Upholding the spirit of Bangladesh in a foreign terrain

Christopher Columbus went to America to spread the words of God and found gold. A heterogeneous group of twenty Bangladeshi university students went to the land of opportunities to personify the land of rivers with its unparalleled cultural legacy and found the spirit of their existence and identity. The cultural exchange department of the American Centre selected these twenty candidates to participate in the student leader exchange program in USA, funded completely by the state department, from a pool of three thousand applicants.



After eight weeks of I-don't-know-much-about-the-program I found myself embracing the golden opportunity of going to America. Of the twenty a formidable six candidates were from BRAC University, three from North South University, three from BUET, three from Jahangirnagar University, two from Dhaka University and one each from IUB, Khulna University and Rajshahi University. The six BRAC University entrants were myself and Salzar Rahman from the Architecture Dept., Naufela Nafisa Ahmed and Tamara Zaman from the English Dept. and Sadia Prianka and Mahanaz Nazneen from the Economics Dept. Once we all were in America the label of different universities tarnished in our effort to represent Bangladesh.

On the 2nd of July we found ourselves in Seattle, Washington after a backbreaking, bottom aching journey from Dhaka. We were to spend four weeks of the five weeks program at Green River Community College, GRCC and all this while we were taken under the guidance of American host families. The idea was to form a holistic perspective of USA from class-room based activities and host family based interactions. The academic part comprised of lectures regarding American politics and cultural landscape; leadership development skills and excursions. Needless to say, we learned a lot about the country and its political system and in the process tried to educate the lecturer on matters related to Bangladesh. Most of the lecturers came forward with unbiased opinions and absolutely no preconceived notions related to Bangladesh. Our excursion included trips to downtown Seattle, Tacoma, University of Washington, Tillicum village, a Native American village and Kent Senior Centre. Towards the end of the program we involved ourselves in voluntary activities where we prepared and served food to the homeless. We also had a university sponsored I-max experience, a chance to relish a foot-long hotdog while experiencing a not so exciting baseball match at the Safeco field (the largest baseball stadium in the world) and be among the five thousand who packed the indoor stadium at the Tacoma dome (which happens to be the largest geodesic dome in the world) watching mechanically propelled dinosaurs enacting the tales of the Jurassic Era.

The interaction with host families could exemplify our take on cultural shock. While most of us had families who were very caring and supportive it was hard for us to accept some of the alien concepts of American culture. Our frustration can be encapsulated under the idea of a salad being nothing more than lettuce leaves, the concept of dinner at six pm, the notion that salt and pepper are the only probable spice in a culinary delight and the theory of health consciousness with a diet coke along with a double-cheese burger! Aggravations apart we hailed and relished the trips to Mc. Donald's and Burger King; the hiking trips and the super fast internet. I must admit that I learned most from my host parents. I got a taste of American lifestyle and they got a taste of Bangladeshi cuisine that I prepared myself. Each of us did the same for our respective host families.



While they racked their brains as to why someone would add so many spices to a single dish they literally licked their spoons and forks while they gobbled down Bhuna murgi with polau and a proper salad with cucumber and onions dressed with vinegar and the very American salt and pepper! We did our best to leave a lasting impact on them regarding Bangladeshi lifestyle. While most of them had no idea about Bangladesh when we first met by the time we were packing our bags we equipped them with answers to the FAQs regarding the geographic, political and cultural aspects of our country. The care and attention that they showered upon us helped erase the notions that Americans don't care. As it turns out they really do and probably that is why one of us had no hesitation exclaiming in front of an august crowd at Washington DC that a mother is a mother, be it American or Bangladeshi!

The first four days of our last weeks included trips to the most scenic parts of Washington State and overnight stays at the most exquisite lodges and hotels. We went to the Olympic peninsula, Port Townsend, Fort Warden and Lake Quinault. We window-shopped at port Townsend and went crazy exploring the shelves of a bookstore that houses the best collection of historic and modern books in Washington. At Fort Warden we stayed at a beach side resort, which was previously an army bunker. Later, we went to see the Olympic Mountain range. The stimuli of the natural sights were so great that we were often overwhelmed. After four days of living royalties we set off for Washington DC.

At DC we got to meet participants from other countries. There were a total of 180 students from China, Bangladesh, Turkey, Pakistan, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Ecuador, Guatemala and Venezuela. The first day at DC consisted of a warm reception where we got to socialize with the other institute participants and a memorable tour of Washington DC. We went to the White House, The Capitol where we saw a bill passing session at the House of Representatives, the Washington Memorial, Lincoln Memorial and the Vietnam War Memorial site.

Probably the icing on the cake for the whole trip was the Cultural Night at DC. Each group had a cultural booth and was dressed in their respective traditional attires. During the cultural concert we, the Bangladesh group stunned the audience with mesmerizing numbers including tomar ghore bash kore and nitol paye rinik



jhinik. Each group presented their culture the best way possible and I must admit that we felt equally mesmerized when the other group performed. At the end of the show we actually realized how the entire program had succeeded in achieving what it hoped to do. The crowd went crazy snapping photos and we embraced some we didn't even know. We hugged one another irrespective of cast and color and danced to the tunes of songs we barely understood. We connected so well with all the people that night that even now, months after our life changing experience we are in regular correspondence with our friends from overseas. You ask how it feels. Imagine receiving birthday greetings from Kenya, Turkey, Venezuela, Guatemala and Pakistan.

We were stunned by a couple of Pakistani participants apologizing for the 1971 war, and getting interviewed by a national American daily. While we prepared ourselves for the life back home we realized how we have been able to embrace the similarities and celebrate the differences and we understood while we sang the national anthem at DC how proud we were for being Bangladeshis. We don't know how we have changed or for the matter whether we have changed at all but we definitely felt the spirit of our culture and our custom and we tried our best to serve justice to it in every possible way. In the end I guess we can safely presume that we were uniquely Bangladeshi!!

Department of Architecture, BRAC University