Interview of Ambassador Ashfaqur Rahman

Interviewee: Ashfaqur Rahman

Interviewer: Reena Marwah

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Dr. Reena Marwah interviews Ashfaqur Rahman, the former Ambassador of Bangladesh to different countries including China. In the following transcription RM stands for Dr. Reena Marwah and AR stands for Ashfaqur Rahman.

RM. Before proceeding with the interview, could you please introduce yourself?

AR. My last assignment before retiring was as Bangladesh Ambassador to China. I was also Ambassador to Germany and High Commissioner to Singapore. I began my career as a journalist, then a teacher and then a civil servant. I switched to the Foreign Service from the home service. Therefore being in the diplomatic service I was not traditionally detached from the problems faced by our people and their aspirations. I come from Dhaka but as a member of the administrative service (like the IAS in India) I was posted in various districts of Bangladesh. My experience as an officer in a district started in 1970 when Bangladesh was East Pakistan. Today after retirement I write in the premier English newspaper here The Daily Star once a week. This is my introduction. What is yours?

RM. I am the Secretary General of the “Association of Asian Scholars”. The Association is an Asia wide network. Professor Singh and myself and the others, we were selected as Asia Fellows. Professor Singh went to China and I went to Thailand during the course of the Fellowship.

AR. Did you get selected through your University?

RM. No. We had applied for the Asia Fellow’s Award given by the Institute of International Education US, but later the award was transferred to an autonomous body known as the Asia Scholarship Foundation. Members of its Executive Council includes distinguished academics and in fact the former Vice Chancellor of JNU was also a member.
AR. Any one from Bangladesh?

RM. Yes we had Meghna Guhathakurta an Asian scholar and Mr. Iftikhar Ur Zaman of TIB. We also had other Asian Fellows like Leila Khondaker who went to China. Her husband was also an Asian scholar. We were 30 of us every year, who received the award through the scholarship program. As Alumni of the program, all Asia fellows living in other Asian countries came together and started the “Association of Asian scholars”. There was Sanjay Bharadwaj who visited Bangladesh and many others who came to study in India. Some of us also went to China. In this way all fellows lived in another Asian country for nine months and a few of us also learnt the local language. Finally in November 2005 we registered the Association in India under the country’s Registration Act.

Since then we had a conference in Fudan University in China and other forms of exchanges also took place. For instance we did an oral history project on China Studies in India, which has been published by the Cambria Press New York. We took 18 interviews of personalities like Natwar Singh, C.V. Ranganathan, Mira Sinha Bhattacharjea who was a diplomat to China and many others for the project, which was published by the Cambria Press last year. It is a major volume that contains these interviews and also a few papers on China in India. Similarly we are currently working on a project in South Asia called Studies of China for South Asia. For the project we interviewed from Nepal, Ambassador Mohan Lahiri, Ramesh Nath Pandey and Madan Regmi who has China Studies Centre in the country and Ambassador Shahid Amin from Pakistan.

AR. Do you focus on particular aspect in these studies?

RM. We were trying to interview people who had a long association with China. For example A N Tagore was completely bedridden when we interviewed him and Mira Sinha Bhattacharjea who is no more. We wanted to know about their experience in China during their various visits, dealings with China, understanding of the country and their views on Indo-China relationship. Basically our aim was to interview senior personalities who want to look back and relate to their experience in China. Thus we were aiming at both an academic and an international studies point of view.
AR. In my case, I was in Germany between 2001 to 2004. During that period I developed an interest in China. It all began the following way. In my office in Berlin I had hung a map of Asia just opposite my writing table. Every morning after I came into the office I used to sit in front of the map for five minutes and ponder about the location of Bangladesh vis a vis other countries in our region. What struck me in those days was that we were so close to this great country but there was no direct communication link. We had to fly from Dhaka to Bangkok and spend a night there and then fly via Hongkong to arrive in Beijing, the capital of China. It was a waste of time as well as expense. I always wondered why Dhaka our capital was not connected to China directly by air or even why not by rail or road. Luckily for me, my next diplomatic assignment was as Bangladesh Ambassador to China. I was then determined to change the situation.

On the second week after my presentation of credentials to the President of China, I along with other South Asian Ambassadors posted in Beijing were invited to a seminar in Sichuan university in south west China to speak on how China and South Asia could develop relations. In that seminar there were many Chinese academics, scholars and students. I took the opportunity to tell them that Bangladesh was a close neighbor of China although the distance between our two capitals were very far. It would only be rational to develop links by air or road or even rail between Dhaka and a city in south west China. I also offered that China could use Chittagong to bring in their imports and send their exports from this part of China. I was precocious to suggest that the Chinese seem to be sleeping and they could connect with South Asia easily. Now they had to travel over 3000 km from any place in south west China to arrive at their first port Guangzhou to send their exports to the world. Yet they could cut short their travel to 1700km if they establish a road or rail link to Chittagong in Bangladesh and then access the world.

While giving this new perspective to the Chinese I told them about our ancient links with China. Buddhist priests had travelled by foot over mountains and valleys in the past to come to China. Travelers seeking knowledge about our land and about Buddhism had come from China also. Today this region, consisting of south west China, northeast India, northern Myanmar and some regions of Bangladesh were less known to the outside world. The natural resources available there also remain untapped. In fact in many ways this is ‘the last frontier in the world’. Together we need to work to unearth all the resources for the benefit of the people there. Let us use the wisdom of our ancient people and know what is available there. The audience present were visibly excited.

Soon after, our Civil aviation minister came to Kunming on an official visit. During that visit in consultation with the local Governor it was agreed that a civil aviation agreement should be
signed to start air services between Dhaka and Kunming in order to establish the first direct communication link.

Two months later Prime Minister Wen Jiabao of China was going on an official visit to Bangladesh. Premier Wen in his unofficial capacity as a party man had visited Bangladesh several times earlier. It was reported that he relished eating Bangladeshi’ mud crabs’ which were available there. We suggested that during his visit this civil aviation agreement should be signed in his presence. Accordingly the agreement was inked in Dhaka at that time in 2005.

RM. Yes the Governors are always very proactive .

AR. Over lunch in Kunming the governor of Yunnan had agreed to our suggestion to start air connection between his capital and Dhaka. He agreed and gave his decision. A Governor of a province in China is authorized to develop bilateral economic and cultural relations between his province directly with a foreign country. They are indeed active and powerful in China when an agreement serves the interest of the people of his province.

RM. Obviously, no one must have spoken to him with such conviction like this before especially from a small developing country.

AR. Bengalis historically had close connection with the Chinese. Buddhism went to China via two routes. One through Taxila in what is now Pakistan. The other route was from the region of present Bangladesh and the adjoining areas. It is no wonder therefore that in the fifteenth century Bangladesh was the home of 36 Buddhist universities where knowledge was imparted on the religion. Students from China trekked down to study here. A great scholar of Buddhism like Atish Dipaker who comes from Munshiganj in Bangladesh were invited by the king of Tibet to come and reform Buddhism there. Atisha was earlier teaching in what is Indonesia and in north India. I had just taken the opportunity to put our historical relations in context and persuaded him to agree to an air link.

RM. Its true, we have no one from Bangladesh in our Buddhist conferences.
AR. Bangladesh was one of the earlier countries from where Buddhism spread. Later Hindu kings returned to positions of power here. In fact one king from the southern region of Bangladesh was sent on exile to Sri Lanka and had helped to spread Buddhism there. The late Sri Lankan President Jayawardene always alluded to the fact that he seemed to be at home whenever he met Bangladeshis because he thought they were close and related people. However today Bangladesh is a Muslim majority country. We have a small number of Buddhists. Perhaps the size of the Buddhist population and their meager resources inhibit their presence in large Buddhist conferences.

In the case of India, you too have Buddhists there. But they are a small community compared to the large numbers of Hindus and Muslims. But in absolute numbers the Buddhist population is large. The birthplace of Buddha and achieving Nirvana is inside India. So the presence of large number of Buddhists in Buddhist conferences in India is understandable. However India is a land of diversified culture and many languages. It is curious that English, a foreign language seems to be now the only language which is understood by the majority of Indians and is the median of communication.

RM. Yes English becomes the connecting language in many cases.

AR. I had this unique experience when I was Bangladesh High Commissioner in Singapore. I attended a cultural function in a Singapore park held to entertain workers from various countries especially from South Asia. At one stage a cultural item was to be performed by laborers from India. A Tamil speaking group went up to the stage followed by a group from Kerala. But they could not communicate among themselves because they spoke different languages. Then a Bangladeshi worker went on to the stage to help them communicate. He did this with his broken English which was understood by all three groups. The cultural item could at last be seamlessly performed.

RM. Our Vice President is so focused on India’s neighbors. According to him we don’t know our neighbors well.

AR. This is to a large extent true. Although Indians are aware of our culture and way of life as well as our economy, but they are not aware of our perceptions on many matters. This leads to misunderstandings and confusion. In recent months I had the opportunity to talk to the then
Indian Finance minister Pranab Mukherjee (who is now your President) over tea in Delhi. I suggested that India may like change its policy towards neighbors like Bangladesh. We together should work to implement ‘prosper thy neighbor policy’. By that I meant that India should not do anything that hurts the interest of Bangladesh and we as her neighbor should not also do anything that hurts India’s interest.

In this context I referred to sharing of the waters of our common rivers. We should look closely at each other’s needs and work out our share on the basis of this policy. Our water engineers should do their best to implement this policy. In the case of North east Indian states, their interest will be safeguarded if Bangladesh remains sensitive to their economic needs. Just as India should be towards the economic needs of Bangladesh. We should stop following the old policy of just looking at ones own interest. In India provinces like Uttar Pradesh, I am told follow their own interest ignoring the interest of neighboring province of Bihar, etc. This was the policy that was followed in the past. The policy of ‘prosper thy neighbor’ should support economic complementarities and push for economic prosperity for all.

In this context, in our relationship with China, Bangladesh should focus on how she and the south west provinces of China like Yunnan and Sichuan can cooperate economically due to their geographical proximity. We need not bother so much at this stage to link up so much with the provinces along the east of China as they are in case too far away from us and there are big foreign competitors like the US and UK and France who have invested heavily in those parts of China.

RM. You were talking about the air links. What happened to China Eastern then?

AR. China Eastern Airlines were asked by the Chinese Civil Aviation to start flights to Dhaka from Kunming and return. In the first instance they requested for 10 flights a week from us. We gave them permission for seven flights a week. Now they are allowed more flights than seven a week.

RM. All this happened in the first month itself?
AR. No. the China Eastern Airlines started their flights in two months time between Kunming and Dhaka. These flights took a large number of Bangladeshi passengers to Kunming. Trade in new products from China accelerated. Today our bilateral trade has gone up by leap and bounds. Last year (2012) the two way trade was to the tune of US$8 billion.

RM. But you have a very big trade deficit with China.

AR. Yes, but it does not matter. If you are able to import good quality things at a competitive price it is not of critical significance that you have a trade deficit with that country. However our trade deficit with China needs to be addressed by increasing exports to that country simultaneously.

RM. There is a good Indo-Bangladesh trade network?

AR. Yes but it needs to be further extended. We must first pick the low hanging fruits. By that I mean both the countries must take advantage of what is doable between them in trade matters. I do remember how Pakistan would disregard picking the low hanging fruits and dismiss the advantages it could have enjoyed if it joined SAPTA from the very beginning. You must be aware that India and Bangladesh were the first countries that agreed to join SAPTA. We waited for several months for Pakistan to join. Then we (Bangladesh was then the Chairperson of SAARC) arranged to meet in Islamabad to persuade Pakistan to join.

I remember in my first evening in Islamabad I had gone for shopping in a nearby market. I found to my amazement Indian dried fruits on sale there. I bought a few packets and came to the meeting the following morning and told my counterpart from Pakistan how could Indian goods come into the Pakistan market as there were no trade agreement between the two countries. He was total unaware. I suggested that these goods were perhaps smuggled in. I hoped that if Pakistan joined the SAPTA it could have got revenue for importing the same Indian stuff. Pakistan had in a small way lost out by not taking advantage of the low hanging fruits.

Today India has allowed more than 4000 items from Bangladesh duty free entry into their country. It is quite insignificant for India in terms of loss of revenue. But it will be helping
Bangladesh to export more to India and reduce its trade deficit. Trade between our two countries will also help to encourage us to import more from India in the future.

An item which India can export to Bangladesh in large quantities and value is beef. There are a lot of cows now coming into Bangladesh illegally. By allowing processing of the meat where under law slaughter houses are legal then bank letters of credit can be opened for sale of the item. India will benefit in terms of revenue and smuggling will also stop. Our bilateral trade today is about US$ 5 billion. We can enhance it by incorporating new items of import and export.

RM. How are Chinese investments in Bangladesh?

AR. The Chinese are a commercially minded people. It invests in those sectors where it is assured of high returns. The total investment, apart from public investment is still not very high. They are however keen to take advantage of the GSP facility enjoyed by Bangladesh with European countries and other countries. There are however difficulties faced by our entrepreneurs too. Language is a barrier to easy investment. I had once suggested to our Board of Investment (BOI) to see if we could have a special Chinese window for them. We need to have Bangladeshis to speak and understand the Chinese language and understand their way of thinking for more investments to come in. This is apart from improving our own poor physical infrastructure and investment services.

RM. Is the young generation inclined to learn Chinese?

AR. I think there is a fair interest in learning Chinese by the young generation. China in 2005 opened a Confucius Centre in a private University in Dhaka for this purpose. A large number of Bangladeshi students go to China at their own expense to study in their universities. Most of them can then speak the language.

RM. Does any university have a Chinese studies department in Bangladesh?

AR. There is no exclusive centre for Chinese studies in Bangladesh universities, not that I know of. However China is a close friend of Bangladesh. They have helped us in many ways especially
in building our physical infrastructure. So far there are seven large Friendship bridges built by them. But they can build more. Some Bangladeshis work in the jade extraction industries along the China-Myanmar border. Our people by having access into China are aware of developments within the country. Much of the knowledge about China is first hand. However a Chinese studies department is necessary.

The BCIM process which includes Bangladesh, China, India and Myanmar has great potentialities. But India is reluctant to upgrade the discussions to the governmental level. In that event implementation of some projects inside China could have helped our understanding of China better.

RM. Possibly, due to the apprehensions on both sides.

AR. True, but the basic question is why India and China have not been able to build confidence between themselves. In 1962 India and China had gone to war because of disagreement in determining the land border between the two countries. Ever since there has been over 16 bilateral meetings with the purpose of resolving the border between the two countries. But they could, as far as I understand had talks about how to build confidence. Nothing concrete has come out yet. So how can the two countries dispel apprehension of each other? It is time now to settle the border issue in order to move forward. Initiative should come from one or both.

RM. China does not consider India as its competitor. It considers US to be its main rival.

AR. China has an unique approach towards peace in the region. Throughout its history it sought peace to prevail inside the country and with her neighbors who in her parlance are ‘peripheral countries’. Her quest for peace is for a selfish reason. She wants peace in order that she is able to devote her time and resources for her own economic development. India as a regional power should also work for peace for her own development. Both the countries have greater possibilities before them for economic growth. India excel in services while China is good at manufacturing. So together they are in possession of the software and hardware for growth, if I may put them metaphorically. Indian neighbors in South Asia are keen to follow India’s lead in establishing peace in order to have economic prosperity.
This was aptly stated by the President of Sri Lanka Mr. Jayawardane at the opening session of the first SAARC Summit in 1981 in Dhaka. He had then said that ‘Today six small boats have tied to a big boat(meaning India). Let us see whether we float or sink.’ So in such matters India needs to play a lead role. Mr Rajiv Gandhi who was then the Indian Prime Minister and who I was accompanying in his programs referred to Jayawardane and asked me whether I concurred with his statement. I could not but agree and I did tell the Indian Prime Minister that we feel India has to take the lead role in peace building. In reply he told me at that time that it is perhaps God’s will that all the seven countries cooperate. He referred to the fact that all the major rivers flowing out of the Himalayan mountains did not flow north to south. The Indus flowed from India into Pakistan and the river Ganges flow from Nepal, India and into Bangladesh. So nature wants that these countries cooperate.

RM. What are the implications of China becoming the observer country in the SAARC?

AR. China is supportive of the objectives of SAARC. As an observer she would be in a position to carry forward some of the good work done so far. In reality South Asia cannot ignore such a big and influential power just next to it. She can contribute financially towards some of the vital projects undertaken in these SAARC countries. But China also has internal problems like stopping internal riots to addressing international tensions in the region. Do you know the number of riots that take place each day there?

RM. Sure more than 55 each day.

AR. From press reports we know that in 2007 alone there were about 80000 riots both big and small there. These conflicts mainly take place over possession of land. In China all lands belongs to the state. So when ever any land is acquired for foreign or local investment there is bound to be peoples reaction. In our country land are mostly private and whenever there is an attempt to acquire land, there would be writ petitions filed in higher courts, which take time to vacate. So riots over land possession are rare.

RM. Everyone we interviewed told us that the Chinese are very pragmatic.
AR. Indeed the Chinese today are pragmatic people. More pragmatic perhaps are the overseas Chinese. Even those who stay in Hongkong islands are very pragmatic.

RM. How do you see China-Bangladesh relations in the next 5 to 10 years?

AR. China was a very isolated country internationally in the fifties and the sixties. Their access to the world by air was through Pyongyang and Dhaka – Karachi airports. So we kept up our relations with the Chinese through the decades. There was a hiatus in relations with Bangladesh just at the time and immediately following our Independence. But later it picked up speed. It is deepening and widening further now. New areas of cooperation are being added each day. In the next 5-10 years there would be greater international, strategic, economic and cultural cooperation between our two countries.

RM. You celebrated 35 years of diplomatic relations.

AR. Yes in 2010. In these 35 years we have established an all weather friendship. That means the friendship last through ups and downs in our relationship.

But let me refer back to history. About 600 years back, an emperor from the Ming Dynasty of China sent a fleet of ships to Chittagong which is now the main port of Bangladesh. The admiral of the fleet was a Chinese Muslim from Yunnan called Zhang He. He came to our then capital in Sonargoan and made friends with our king. Gifts were exchanged. We sent an envoy to the Ming court also. Our diplomatic relations therefore precede this present diplomatic exchanges.

RM. Do the Chinese recognize these age old links?

AR. Yes they do and respect them in various ways. First, the visit of one of the greatest Buddhist teachers Atish Dipanker to Tibet on the invitation of Tibetan king to reform Buddhism there is gratefully acknowledged. In fact Atish died in Tibet many years ago. But we recently requested the Chinese to return his remains to his home in Munshiganj near Dhaka. They immediately obliged. But he is highly revered in Tibet. I myself visited Buddhist
monasteries where I was always given special attention because I represented the country from where Atisha came from.

RM. While you were an Ambassador in China do you remember any exciting instance other than the ones you have already related?

AR. There were many other instances.

RM. The 90’s was the time when China’s growth was at its peak.

AR. I do not think that China’s growth has reached the pinnacle. Its present pace of growth may have slowed down due to different economic factors. But the torrid economic rise of China is still there. There are two circumstances which may inhibit growth in the future. One is political instability from being a single party state. The other is of course the natural aging of its population. The ‘one child’ policy of the past has been a matter of long term concern.

RM. The Chinese people have everything: food, clothes, economic growth but political freedom is still missing.

AR. Political freedom in the conventional sense is perhaps not present as one should have liked. But China has travelled a long way from the political limbo its people were in the past. Today there are more than 500 million people who have access to the internet. Every day they are expressing their views on every political issue through the social media. These are seriously monitored by the concerned authorities and taken note of, for affirmative action. This does not necessarily happen in our country or even in India at all times. Through a careful calibration other political freedom are being introduced. The right to criticize the authorities at various levels are slowly being accepted. So the word ‘missing’ will not perhaps be appropriate. Political freedom is being allowed as circumstances permit.

RM. Thank you very much for sharing very interesting reminiscences on China and giving us important insights on Bangladesh-China relations.