

Address Given by Kamal Ahmad
at the
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I am truly honored to have this opportunity to visit Kagoshima University and speak before you, especially in this beautiful hall showing the handiwork of a great architect and commemorating the memory of Dr. Inamori's parents. I had the privilege of meeting Dr. Inamori yesterday. His life and work and incredible achievements inspire all of us. I am also grateful to Mariko Gakiya and Kenichiro Oku who have not only extended to me and my colleague Tomoko Saunders the warmest hospitality, but have also demonstrated a deep sense of goodwill and solidarity with our own hopes and aspirations. We will carry with us a profound sense of friendship with Kagoshima and everyone we have met here.

I come here today from Bangladesh. Bangladesh is in the southern corner of Asia, bordering India, Myanmar and the Bay of the Bengal. It is perhaps most infamous for an almost uninterrupted array of natural disasters – floods, cyclones and so on. But it is also the home of nearly 140 million people – a bit larger than Japan's own population. The most important intellectual link between the Japanese and the people of Bangladesh occurred when Rabindranath Tagore, the greatest Bengali poet and the 1913 winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature, visited Japan in the early part of the twentieth century. Tagore would ultimately make a total of six trips to Japan. He was greatly moved by the deep aesthetic sensitivities in Japanese art and literature. However, in the period after the First World War, he was also increasingly troubled by the rise of militant

nationalism in Japan, perhaps in a premonition of what would ultimately ravage his native Bengal. For in 1971, long after Tagore was gone, Bangladesh became the site of one of the bloodiest civil wars in Asia, sending nearly 10 million hapless refugees into India and burying hundreds of thousands of others in a span of just nine months.

I had not quite turned six years old when the war started. For some reason, the tall windows in our house had been painted green. Over the years, some flakes of that window paint fell off, creating a bizarre green mosaic. I remember standing on a stool and peering through the green colored windows, watching the war unfold: people, young people, mostly students, were lined up and shot, and then their bodies were thrown into a freshly carved grave. Occasionally we would hear of miracles: some young boys fell before the bullets hit them, pretended to be dead as they were carried and buried with the real dead, and then somehow pushed themselves out of the shallow graves. I remember feeling my own heartbeat against the concrete floor as I lay face down in the darkness of many nights as the bombers flew over, teasing us with the threat of destruction. I remember that on the mornings after those long restless nights, when the planes were no longer flying above us, children my age from the slums would fill the yards and streets to collect anything that could be used as firewood, seemingly unaffected by the terror that had gripped us all only hours before.

I speak about the war because Ken and Mariko have asked me to speak today about my own life. And no matter how I reflect on more than four decades of this life of mine, the memories of war always appear as the starting point. It was then that I first felt the sense of fear. It was then that I first heard stories of extreme courage. It was

then that I acquired the word ‘death’ into my vocabulary along with ‘air raids,’ ‘sirens,’ ‘enemies,’ ‘blackouts,’ ‘MIG fighter planes’ and so on. It was, in other words, my induction into what we might sadly call the real world.

Albert Hirschman, the famed development economist, once profiled the lives of change-makers in Latin America. He discovered that in almost every case there was one experience that would forever change the preoccupation of these men and women. So, no matter what they did in their lives subsequently, they remained perennially engaged in a specific type of social change activity – and all this could be traced to one pivotal experience in their lives. The civil war in Bangladesh was my pivotal experience – a six-year-old’s awakening to the enormous cruelty, pain and suffering that man can inflict on other men – and a yearning to overcome it all was born.

As the war ended by the close of 1971, new demons were raised in the resultant chaos. By 1974 there was already a large scale famine in Bangladesh. It must have been an odd twist of fate for someone to have survived a horrific war only to be cut down helplessly by starvation. My father, a devoted biochemist and nutritionist, often spoke despairingly to his children of the grave conditions in the country. His research on the nutritional status of the people increasingly revealed the devastating conditions in which people, particularly those in the villages, lived. Thousands of children were going blind every year because of Vitamin A deficiency, and pervasive malnutrition was stunting young bodies. Children just like us were tragically robbed of their future.

When I entered eighth grade in 1978, I began to think of what I could do in this

climate of terrible deprivation. In most middle class homes, including my own, poor children my age worked as domestic servants. I began to develop an idea to set up a school for these children because they did not have any opportunity to attend school. I went from house-to-house in our neighborhood, conducting a survey to identify potential students and to discover how one might organize a school for them. I found out that several hundred children and teenagers were employed as domestic help in the community. I proposed to open a school in the neighborhood that would offer these young boys and girls two hours of schooling each day late in the afternoon when they were not as needed for chores in the house. In my meager English, I wrote up a proposal seeking \$3,000 from a Canadian development agency to start this school. Unbelievably, even to me, I received the grant, and soon I was running an afternoon school with more than ten teachers. At three o'clock every afternoon, lines of children would make their way to the empty car garages that we used as classrooms. It was incredibly delightful to see this happening. But then one day, quite unexpectedly, we found all of our classrooms locked up. The neighborhood welfare association decided that these schools for poor children were a nuisance, and they decided to shut us down! I did not know what to do. But I did not want to lose the students. So we met with the students every day under the open sky in the shade of a tree. Week after week, rain or no rain, our students sat on the grass during class, but they still kept coming back.

In the hope of building our own school house someday, I asked each of the children to bring a brick every day from wherever they could find one to our tree-side spot. We started to build a brick bank. I can almost still see the children balancing a brick on their heads as they would slowly make their way to our school under the tree.

Then, one day when our brick bank became sufficiently large, nearly 250 small children and the teachers and I took an extraordinary leap: we decided to build a school house with simple brick floors and bamboo roofs on the side of an abandoned road close to where we were meeting under the tree. We built it within two nights. This construction was such a powerful act by the children that nobody ever touched that school again. Nobody asked whose land we were occupying. Nobody asked who gave us permission to connect the street lights into our school rooms. The school continued for years to teach students who could not even dream of going to another school.

Recently, we have embarked on creating yet another school. A different place, for sure, but one emboldened by the same spirit. In the hills of Chittagong, Bangladesh – a city that has become famous as the origin of the Grameen Bank, the revolutionary microfinance movement pioneered by last year’s Nobel Peace Prize Winner Muhammad Yunus – we are building, from the ground up, a regional university for Asian women. Twenty-five percent of the students will be drawn from Bangladesh, and the remainder will come from other parts of Asia. When completed, the campus will have over 1.6 million square feet of space for academic programs and residential facilities for virtually all its students and faculty. In the emerging master plan, the proposed campus, with its rhythm of water, ridges and valleys, appears almost magical. The faculty, which will be recruited internationally, will be outstanding measured by any yardstick for teaching institutions. I hope some professors from Kagoshima University will also join us.

When all is done, some 3,000 women from all across Asia, unconstrained by their race, creed, language, possessions or lack thereof, will come to the Asian

University for Women for an education that aims to defy an almost endless series of preconceptions that may have at one point limited the students' life options. Here in this university dedicated to women, and women alone, they will no longer be the outsiders, the fetchers of other people's things. And, we hope that, in the wonderful tradition of liberal arts education that nurtures tolerance and fosters mutual recognition, our students will also come to value the enormous strength of the diversity that the Asian University for Women community will encapsulate. And the fear and the attendant hate mongering of the "other" that so often haunts us, that I think was at the root of the war that I witnessed as a six-year-old, and that negates the possibility of envisioning a larger community, will yield to an understanding and respect of others. Our students will leave the campus after five years of education that combines the liberal arts with graduate professional training in fields such as Engineering, Management and Information Technology. The underlying premise is that education at the Asian University for Women will be so transformative that its essential ethos will carry on in the lives of graduates no matter where they go and what careers they pursue. Invoking Hirschman again, we hope it will be a "crucible of life transformation."

Now, you may ask, "When there are such vast needs in the world, why start with a university?" We believe that the greatest impediment to social and economic change in the region is lack of effective leadership. We look at this university above all as an incubator of a new generation of leaders who will have not only the ability to envision large-scale change but also the capacity to create such change. By drawing students not from one country but virtually from every country in the region, we also hope to break the sense of powerlessness that may come from a sense of isolation and replace it with

the sense of solidarity and common purpose of a network. The notion of the University is embedded in the idea of knowledge as an instrument of liberation – liberation from the narrow perspectives that limit our focus on just ourselves. At the Asian University for Women, we hope a Buddhist Cambodian will live and learn and dream and develop plans for a life of service alongside a Muslim Pakistani, a Hindu Nepali, a Christian Indian and a tribal Bangladeshi. At a time when there is great strife in the region based on ethnic, religious or political differences, our university will stand as an example of the power of collaboration and the triumph of human spirit.

We also remember Michail Bakunin’s admonition from over a century ago about the dangers of a “reign of scientific intelligence” and a “world...divided into a minority ruling in the name of knowledge and an immense ignorant majority. And, then woe unto the mass of ignorant ones.”¹ At a time when the world’s educational inequities have become most menacing, the Asian University for Women will endeavor to make its own contributions to narrowing the knowledge gap that divides the North and the South of the world as well as divides men and women, rich and poor in the region.

We invite each one of you to join us in this journey. As one of my revered professors at Harvard, the child psychiatrist Robert Coles, wrote: “In this life, we prepare for things. We worry about wrongs, think about injustices, read what Tolstoy or Ruskin has to say... but then all of a sudden, the issue is us and what we have become.”

Thank you.

¹ *Bakunin on Anarchy*. Sam Dolgoff, trans & ed. Black Rose Books, 1971. Original text published in 1872.

