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EAST-WEST CENTER ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Ekram Ahsan Interview Narrative

4-4-2006 interview in Dhaka, Bangladesh

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The **East-West Center Oral History Project** strives to capture the Center's first 50 years as seen through the eyes of staff, alumni, and supporters who have contributed to its growth.

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Abu Ekramul Ahsan

4-4-2006 interview in Dhaka, Bangladesh

Personal Background

I have a long name. It is, Abu Asgar Mohammed Ekramul Ahsan. But, as I went to East-West Center, I had to fill in different forms, and the normal format was as follows - (i) last name,(ii) first initial, and (iii)middle initial, something like that. So I had to reduce my name size and because I had to follow the given format, and I could not accommodate all five parts of my full name. Therefore, my name became Abu Ekramul Ahsan. That is how I was recognized at the East-West Center.

Of course in the American culture and in the Western society, one is always called by the first name. In my case it was Abu, and formally I was called Mr. Ahsan. This is about my name.

I was born in Calcutta in 1942. At that time Calcutta was part of British India. So if I want to mention my citizenship, I was first British Indian. Then in 1947, India was partitioned into two states, one is Pakistan, another is India, and my father opted for working in Pakistan, so I became a citizen of Pakistan, i.e. a Pakistani. As you know, Pakistan had two parts: one is in the Western side of India, which at that time was known as West Pakistan. The other one was on the eastern side of India, which was called East Pakistan. We moved to East Pakistan in 1947, and since then I had been staying there as Pakistani till the time I came to Honolulu for higher studies. Subsequently however, East Pakistan became an independent state named Bangladesh on 16th December 1971 and so, since I became a citizen of Bangladesh. I clearly remember the migration situation. My father used to work with the government. His services were officially transferred from

the Government of British India to the Government of Pakistan and specifically under the Provincial Government of East Pakistan. We traveled from Calcutta to Dacca (now spelled as “Dhaka”) by train and steamboat (we call “steamer”).

We had to send all our household belongings (furniture, clothing and other things) from Calcutta to Dhaka. My father printed some kind of label with his name and address at the destinations (Dhaka) and pasted on all the boxes, packages, etc. All these were sent to Dhaka by railway and transshipped by steamship as unaccompanied luggage. The whole family traveled separately. The family consisted of my father, mother, six brothers (including myself), two sisters and my grandfather. We all traveled from Calcutta to Dhaka, partly by train on the land part and then by steamship, over the river Ganges (locally named Padma).

So, I do remember, East Pakistan had a different kind of rural setting, lot of rivers and their tributaries, more trees and jute and rice fields. In and around Calcutta there was not much water and hardly any jute field. Also I found the language was quite different in the Eastern part of Bengal (known as East Pakistan) from that in West Bengal (part of India), although both are Bengali. This had been quite a bit of experience and I do remember this at the time of migration.

I only read in the papers and other books later on that there was some political and racial violence at the time of partition of British India which caused large-scale migration of Muslim population from India to Pakistan and Hindus from Pakistan to India. However, I do vaguely remember about some activities during the World War II. The Japanese bombers were flying over Calcutta, and my mother used to take us to the bomb shelter. I

remember blackouts at night when the doors and windows were kept closed with minimum light inside the rooms so that light is not visible from outside.

My father was in government service. Starting at a relatively low level of the ladder of the government's system, he went up to the highest level position in the government set-up. The position is called “secretary” to the government which is the top executive position in the system. During his entire service period, first he worked in the Government of British India and then worked partly in East Pakistan under provincial government and the remaining part of his service life he spent at the capital of Pakistan (Islamabad) under the Central (federal) government. My mother was a purely housewife. My elder brother was a graduate in commerce, and soon after he got his master's degree in Dhaka, he went to London (U.K.) for higher studies. He stayed back there and he became a citizen of U.K. and worked under Her Majesty’s Royal Taxation Services. I have two sisters. Both are married and both are purely housewives. One lives in Japan now with her husband who works at an international organization. The other sister lives in Dhaka. Among my brothers, one lives in Australia as an immigrant and others are working in Bangladesh.

I only started one year of education in Calcutta. But then we moved to Dhaka and continued studying at a school known as H.E. School, as H.E stands for High English. But it was not really an English medium school with the present-day concept of English medium school. English medium school is now linked to some Western style of education, like O level and A level in British system. But when I studied in the “High English” schools the system was not necessarily linked to the British system of O level and A level education.

English was one of the subjects among others and the medium of instruction was also not English only. It was a high school, meaning that we could study up to Grade X and obtain high school graduation called matriculation. At the college level (11th and 12th grade), English was the medium of instruction and we had to study all subjects in English. The college with 11th and 12th grade was named as intermediate college, which was a two-year course. Now of course, the education systems have been changed, and school goes up to 12th grade, including junior high and senior high grades.

Then I studied the technical subject of agriculture, under the University of Dhaka. It was a three-year, we call honors course. I got honors degree in Bachelor of Agriculture, from the Dhaka University. Then again I got a master's degree in agronomy from Dhaka University. Agronomy is a specific field of agriculture subjects. Then I went to East-West Center and studied first at the University of Hawai'i and for one semester at the University of Maryland to get my master's and Ph.D. degree in agricultural resources economics from the University of Hawai'i.

Life Before EWC

I did not apply for East-West Center, (laughter) to receive a scholarship. I applied for Fulbright fellowship. And that time, East-West Center was not known here. There was a newspaper advertisement made by the U.S. Education Foundation in Pakistan for a Fulbright fellowship and I applied. I was interviewed by the committee for Fulbright scholarship. The U.S. Education Foundation located in Islamabad processed the scholarship program and I was informed that I was selected. I was mentally getting ready to join the Fulbright Program.

One fine morning I received a letter from the U.S. Education Foundation saying that there has been a policy decision for distribution of scholarships under the Fulbright program and the East-West Center Program, both being the activities under the U.S. Department of State. Those who have been qualified for Fulbright fellowship for higher studies in technical subjects like agriculture, engineering, etc., their fellowships were transferred to East-West Center programs and those who were in the humanities, language, other kind of non-technical type subjects, they were kept under Fulbright Program. I was shocked because to avail the East-West Center fellowship I had to study at the University of Hawai'i but I was interested to study in one of the reputed universities in the mainland USA.

I was so shocked that, first I thought of not even accepting the fellowship and not go to Honolulu because many people said, "Oh Hawai'i! This is not place for higher study, people go there for enjoyment, recreation." (laughter) Some of my senior people, who visited Hawai'i before mentioned to me that Hawai'i is very attractive for its natural beauty with blue ocean, beautiful beaches and green mountains. So I was in a dilemma what to do. For several months I did not respond to either to the East-West Center or the U.S. Education Foundation accepting the fellowship offer. But later on I decided to accept the East-West Center fellowship offer and decided to go to the University of Hawai'i first to start with the hope that I shall be able to study in other reputed (U.S.) mainland universities as well.

In this process, I was one semester late in coming to the East-West Center and attend courses at the University of Hawai'i. Of course, I now regret my delay because I missed the opportunity to travel by ship from Hong Kong to Honolulu. *[Editor's note: In the*

'60s, EWC student orientations were aboard the ship bringing new participants to Honolulu.] This is how I got East-West Center fellowship.

Life at EWC

The Mid-'60s

Well, frankly speaking, I was shocked to learn that I had to study at the University of Hawai'i, because this university was not known in our society. I wanted to go for higher studies in one of the reputed mainland universities like Harvard, University of California and the like which were better known and respected in our society. But I have already described how I landed in Hawai'i at the East-West Center and the University of Hawai'i. The second point that I may mention here that my travel from Dhaka to Honolulu was very long and tiring. I took the PanAm flight from Hong Kong to Honolulu sitting on the same seat of the same aircraft. The aircraft landed at the Tokyo Haneda airport but we were not allowed to get down from the aircraft. We had bad luck because when we took the flight from Hong Kong, there was already cholera outbreak in Hong Kong. So Tokyo airport authority did not let us get down from the aircraft. We stayed inside the aircraft and the whole aircraft was fumigated with some kind of insecticide. It was not pleasant and comfortable at all. I arrived Honolulu about noontime but the date was one day earlier because I crossed the International Date Line during Tokyo-Honolulu flight. As I traveled toward East I gained one day and therefore I arrived one day earlier.

As I did not see the big tower at the Honolulu airport first, the surrounding looked like villages and very *[un]*impressive. The immigration services were located at tin-roofed small sheds and not impressive at all. My first cultural shock was at the time when I saw from distance legs of people using the toilet, and even their pants down. (laughter) Such

a scene was really a cultural shock for me coming from a traditional conservative society of the East and as I was not at all aware of this kind of culture. During the process of immigration and health formalities at the airport, I faced another problem. The person at the health desk did not clear me first as he discovered a spot on my X-ray plate *[and]* he thought it a case of tuberculosis. However, the health certificate from my Dhaka doctor (who was a recognized doctor of the U.S. Embassy in Dhaka) clearly explained this spot on the X-ray plate was an old calcification and posing no future problem about tuberculosis. However, after long delay I was cleared at the airport with a yellow card and on condition that I had to report first at the University Health Center the next day. This took quite a long time and the people came to welcome me at the airport had to wait for long hours. As I came out, to my great surprise, I found one young girl gave me a lei, and kissed me. It was another kind of cultural shock, because I never expected that I would be greeted with a kiss from an unknown young girl (laughter). For a while it was a shock, but then I adjusted to that. (laughter) I later on found that she was another grantee from the East-West Center, and came to the airport to welcome the newcomers. So it was very nice, which later on, I appreciated very much. I saw hula dance at a distance performed by some young girls.

Host Family Experience

A family termed “host family” was waiting outside as well. The family took care of me and drove me to their house from the airport. I had some time to rest and relax together with good food. Before this I never visited an American family at their house. So I didn't know exactly how to behave. Initially, I had problems in understanding their language. They had some typical accents. The family was from mainland USA. The

family had two kids. They are nice. They are trying to be very friendly with me, showed me their toys, games and different other things, and so I could communicate with them rather easily. They also took me outside to see around.

I spent almost the whole day with this host family. In the late afternoon they took me to the university campus at Manoa. As I was driving through the downtown Honolulu, my initial impression about the city of Honolulu was not appreciative. The downtown was not impressive at all. The houses and the buildings were low and mostly tin roof sheds and not good-looking. There were not many high-rise buildings at that time. My image of modern American city was like New York City with tall skyscrapers. So I was disappointed to see the downtown Honolulu.

UH/EWC Campus, Mid- '60s

Now, of course, Honolulu is full of high-rise buildings, tall towers and many skyscrapers. As I was very close to Manoa campus, near the Moiliili crossroad I saw a small two-storied building called East-West Building, and somehow I thought this is the East-West Center. On the other side of the road was the Star supermarket (laughter). There was a marketplace named the University Square and the adjacent road was University Avenue. I thought that is all about the East-West Center. I was so disappointed and just waiting to see the University. As I entered the campus, near the Manoa, I saw the gate (university gate), the campus was nice with green lawn and rows of beautiful trees on both sides of the streets and I started feeling good. As I approached the East-West Center, I found very nice environment.

I checked in at the Hale Manoa, the male dormitory of the East-West Center. Through the window of my room at the 9th floor I saw people playing volleyball. I was so tired

and sleepy that I did not feel like coming out to enjoy the outside environment. I just went to bed and slept for long hours and got up the next day in the afternoon because of jet-lag.

My academic interest was to obtain higher degree in the field of agricultural economics. As I wanted to go for the highest possible degree, I applied for Ph.D. degree. But, the departmental evaluation recommended me for a master's degree first, before I go for Ph.D. degree. I think the evaluation was correct as I was not adequately prepared for direct Ph.D. program. According to this recommendation I was enrolled in the master's degree course. My contract with the East-West Center also referred to "master's leading to Ph.D. degree." My grant was for two years, and that was not adequate for Ph.D. degree. I was, however, told that there is a possibility that East-West Center might extend the grant period.

But actually what happened, unfortunately again, when I was about to complete two years, and almost finishing my requirement for master's degree, and my performance was fairly good with "A" grades in almost all courses, I requested the Center to extend my academic program to Ph.D. program. My professor also recommended very strongly in favor of converting my program into Ph.D. program. East-West Center in general, was very sympathetic, but there was a change in rule again at that time not to extend grant period. The Center had, however, no objection to pursue my Ph.D. program with proof of adequate financial support.

It was, I think, 1969. I was, then again very upset, but my professor, supervisor and chairman of the department were very supportive. They asked me not to worry. They assured me that they would find a way to get financial support for my Ph.D. program.

So, they gave me encouragement and provided moral courage. Eventually that happened. My professor tried with different foundations that provide this kind of support to the students for higher education and I was able to get a fellowship for my Ph.D. program from Rockefeller Foundation. The East-West Center also agreed to continue sponsoring my visa. So there was no problem anymore.

Marriage at EWC

Initially I was in Hale Manoa for few years. Then, I married a Bengali grantee in Honolulu who came to the Center in early '71. She was staying in Hale Kuahine. After getting married I moved out of Hale Manoa and started living in a Waikiki studio apartment under University Housing arrangement for married students. As my academic program already converted from M.S. to Ph.D. program I continued working for Ph.D. degree, I really did not obtain my M.S. degree. It is interesting to note that after I obtained my Ph.D. degree, the Graduate Division of the University of Hawaii found that in this process I had also completed the requirements for my M.S. degree. So I once again obtained my M.S. degree after I obtained my Ph.D. degree first.

Best Memories

There are many good things and good memories of my living in Hawai'i. First of all, I really liked the natural setting of the University of Hawai'i, Manoa campus as such -- very beautiful. Hawai'i as a whole, is very beautiful. I always like to go back there. All the islands are unique. And I did visit these islands many times, on official program as well as individually. Second, Hawai'i in general and the East-West Center in particular was a kind of melting point where you meet different people from different cultures and ethnic background. Not that I like everything of everybody, but it was wonderful

mixture. And frankly speaking, I liked specially Japanese, Chinese and Filipino, as they were easy to communicate and to understand. I had some difficulties in understanding Americans (called *haole*) speaking English with typical accent. I had friendship with multi-national, multi-cultural kind of friendship group. It was good.

Asia-America Seminar

Another matter I would like to mention in this context is the requirement of participation in a seminar course named “Asia-America Seminar” consistent with one of the objectives of the East-West Center, to facilitate cultural inter-change. In this seminar sessions we really discussed our cross-cultural issues and experiences, and we enjoyed very much and learned many things of other cultures. That is really a good memory.

Seeing the active volcano erupting like a fountain, flow of red hot lava as river and also red hot crust in pond-like crater (*Halemaumau*) have been fascinating. I could see all different types of volcanic eruptions. These are all very good memories.

Life After EWC

Rice Research in Bangladesh

I got my master’s degree with East-West Center Fellowship and the Ph.D. degree with a fellowship from the Rockefeller Foundation both from the University of Hawai‘i College of Tropical Agriculture. My field of specialization was agricultural resources economics. As the Rockefeller Foundation funded the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) in Philippines I had a commitment to work in research for development of rice in my country. My country has been in chronic food deficit and rice has been the most staple food for the people. Therefore, after I get my degree, I started working with rice research program in collaboration with the International Rice Research Institute for development of rice.

I was the chief economist at the Bangladesh Rice Research Institute and provided leadership in planning, designing and implementing research relating to social, cultural and economic aspects of rice production and marketing. Then I was promoted to a much higher level, i.e. national level as the chief of national agricultural research program in the apex research body named, Bangladesh Agricultural Research Council (BARC). I was the chairman of BARC. Subsequently to help strengthen research and human resources development capacity of national civil service training and research organization in the country, [I joined] Bangladesh Public Administration Training Center (BPATC). I took the responsibility of strengthening the research capacity of the institute and eventually worked as the head of the organization. The position was termed “rector”.

Establishing a University

Subsequently the government wanted me to help develop a new institution for higher agricultural education and research offering master's and Ph.D. degrees in different agricultural fields. This new institute named Institute of Postgraduate Studies in Agriculture (IPSA) was co-funded by U.S. and Japan government with the Bangladesh government. I was appointed as rector of IPSA. The institute subsequently upgraded to a full-fledged university and the position of rector was renamed as vice chancellor of the university. So I established that university and, therefore, I feel proud of that.

After completion of my term there I took responsibilities of looking at the multi-facet problems of jute cultivation, manufacturing and jute trade. The International Jute Organization (IJO) is located in Dhaka and many issues relating to jute needed to be addressed. Being a professional in agriculture economics, I was asked to help the jute sector and I was appointed as director general of Bangladesh Jute Research Institute,

from where I finally retired from the government service. I retired voluntarily much earlier than my retirement age as I was offered a job of a very high status and authority by the European Commission, to evaluate their food- and agriculture-related programs in Bangladesh. I was the food security advisor of the European Commission's Food Security Program. The European Commission has been the largest donor in the specific area of food security issues. I have been working with the European Commission.

Partnerships and Networks

I attended many such short (EWC) programs after coming back from Honolulu getting my degrees. I was a member of a number of international and regional research programs of the East-West Center. I was also a senior fellow of the then East-West Food Institute and Resources System Institute. We have programs involving India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Japan, Thailand, Guam and other countries of the Asia Pacific region. The concept of regional program actually started at that time. Through these regional programs we tried to address common problems. These have been very good things. The credit goes to the East-West Center first.

EWC's Impact

On Personal Life, Career

First of all, East-West Center helped me by giving the fellowship that helped me in attaining my higher level of professional attainment -- my higher academic degrees. Frankly speaking, if I had not studied in U.S. universities, no matter what position I would have been in Bangladesh, I would not have knowledge and skill to do good research and provide guidance for quality research. So definitely the opportunities to

obtain higher level of education in my professional field have significantly contributed in my professional achievement with higher skill and efficiency.

Then, of course, I had opportunities to establish communication with scholars in U.S. and other countries to expand horizon of my knowledge and understanding. Another contribution of the East-West Center during my period at East-West Center is that the grantees were offered different kinds of opportunities through travel grants and other facilities for participation in seminars, conferences in the Asia-Pacific region as well as in the mainland USA, which provided opportunities to participate in the trans-national and regional research of common interest and importance. The Center supported my visit and study programs in the mainland USA also.

I was able to participate in academic programs in renowned universities like Harvard University, University of Maryland, Texas A & M University and University of California at Berkeley. In addition, I was able to visit almost all over the mainland United States. And that is tremendous experience. This has increased my professional competence and confidence. I was recognized as a knowledgeable and capable person to guide activities in this line. I was involved in development of agricultural policy. I think it has all started because I had the higher study made possible through East-West Center program support. So definitely I recognize that as a turning point of my career and professional achievement. I appreciate the contribution of the Center to my livelihood and profession.

During my stay at the East-West Center, dealing with different kinds of people was not really big issue because as I mentioned earlier Hawai'i in general and the Center in particular has been a melting point to facilitate pleasant and successful cross-cultural

integration with people with different ethnic background, values and attitude. I found the officials of the East-West Center very cooperative and pleasant. They were all very nice people. I always remember with respect and honor Mrs. Sumi Makey of the Center, Dr. Jack Davidson, professor at the University of Hawai'i, and many other such nice people. They were so nice and so supportive.

I was elected general secretary of the Graduate Student Association there. So I had some student activities there. I enjoyed my involvement with many kinds of people. So, my dealing with other cultures and different type of people was not at all a problem. The environment as such has been so friendly which definitely helped me understanding other cultures, other people. This also helped develop capacity to adjust with as well as understand, honor and appreciate different views, different opinions, diverse feeling, and things like that. I think, indirectly that was very helpful which I could attain through learning at the East-West Center.

It certainly helped me personally, there is no doubt about it. And through me, I think it helped my country, particularly my institution program, country's agricultural sector program, and in particular in human resources development of the country. I told you that I was exposed to very broad-based activities. And everywhere my learning at the East-West Center and the U.S. universities have been very helpful. In fact, my experience was so positive, that I feel that many people from our country should be able to go to the East-West Center, but unfortunately it is not happening. The people from Bangladesh should have opportunity to participate in different programs of the East-West Center which among others include academic degree program, professional development aspects through short training, seminars, joint research, etc. Those are all helpful.

Well, once again I said before that my period of stay at the East-West Center and the University of Hawai'i is to be remembered most and I am proud of my accomplishments which have been the result of several events that I took part in Honolulu. This has changed me from what I was to what I achieved nationally at home and internationally. I always recognize the period of my stay at the East-West Center and at the University of Hawai'i, as the most valuable part of my personal life, family life, and professional life. To mention the events of significance in life, (i) I obtained higher degrees (M.S. and Ph.D.), (ii) I got married there, (iii) I started my career as a professional researcher at the University of Hawai'i and (iv) I had been able to make several professional publications based on my research with [UH] Water Resources Research Council, [US] Sea Grant Programs and at the East-West Center (Food Institute and Resources Systems Institutes). I am most proud of my accomplishment in the professional life which started in Honolulu. First obtaining the highest professional degree, i.e. Doctor of Philosophy in Agricultural Economics, my research work relating to economics of tuna fishing (published by the University of Hawai'i) which was the first of its kind on tuna fishing and, therefore, remained as a reference for long time [*Costs and earnings of tuna vessels in Hawai'i,* UH Sea Grant Program, 1972]. I am also proud of my work as senior fellow at the East-West Food Institute when I wrote a *Handbook on Research Methodology* and then many other research publications of the Resource Systems Institute.

All these involvements made me proud and eventually shaped my career and professional life later on.

And, therefore, the sweet memories of the East-West Center and the University of Hawai'i are my valuable treasure and I always remember them. I miss the East-West Center very much.

Time at EWC:

1967-69 Institute for Student Interchange (ISI)

1976-77 Food Institute (FI)

1978-91 Resource Systems Institute (RSI)