

The Rape Of Khairpur University

by

Dr. Pervez Hoodbhoy

An invitation to lecture on physics took me recently to Shah Abdul Latif University in Khairpur, deep into the backwaters of rural Sind. What I saw was a phenomenon so amazing that it might one day get into the Guinness Book. A brand new university campus, spread over 900 acres of land and with about 30 nearly completed buildings, has been abandoned even before a single class could be held in it. The visibly lop-sided and crumbling buildings stand in silent testimony to a heinous crime against education and the people of Khairpur. Ninety million scarce rupees have been brazenly looted from the public but not a single person has been punished as yet. Apart from some vague ideas about changing the campus into a cement manufacturing complex, no one has any idea of what to do with it now.

Before my visit I had been dimly aware of something having gone amiss somewhere. However my hosts, some angry young university teachers who had recently returned from abroad, did not allow my state of ignorance to persist. On their insistence I, somewhat reluctantly, agreed to visit their newly constructed campus. A 16 mile dusty drive along a narrow, largely unmetalled, road brought us to an especially arid, treeless, and virtually uninhabited part of the desert. In the merciless, blazing heat of the sun it comes close to being hell on earth. A more unattractive and hostile environment for higher learning is difficult to imagine. Here, next to the shrine of Shadi Shaheed, stands the ghost campus. We ventured into the abandoned buildings.

It was like visiting a town in the aftermath of a violent earthquake. The first building you encounter was intended as the university guest house. This building doesn't have a roof; it obeyed the call of gravity shortly after it was put up. The other buildings are more fortunate but it is not clear how much longer they will be able to keep their roofs. The woodwork had rotted even before it had been installed. Everywhere the walls go in different directions and are slanted differently. The "Roman" pillars, which are supposed to bear the building's load are, in fact, just gutter pipes filled with earth. Enormous cracks run from ceiling to floor -- some are so wide that you can see the other side. I kicked a wall and the plaster came crashing down, revealing the rubble which had been used instead of bricks. A hefty second kick could have brought down the wall, I feared.

Standing inside the collapsing buildings of Khairpur University, I learned from my hosts how it all happened. It was the same sad story told so often throughout our land -- a story of greed, avarice, ambition, deceit, and the single-minded pursuit of wealth by stealth.

Way back in 1989 a site had been selected for the new campus. It was well located, had water, was not too close to the National Highway, and said to be generally reasonable. But the site was mysteriously changed when there came along a certain deputy secretary from the chief minister's secretariat in Karachi. He had some barren, un-irrigated, land at Shadi Shaheed to get rid off. And so, with the approval of the chief minister, Qaim Ali Shah, and at many times the market price, the land was sold to the university. The new choice proved fatal.

It was usual, my hosts explained, for the soil to be tested for its load bearing capacity. Indeed, laboratory testing had clearly showed that the soil at Shadi Shaheed would expand unevenly when wetted, making it unsuitable for construction of buildings by ordinary means and with usual materials. At this stage the site should have been immediately abandoned. But of course it was not; there were too many vested interests in the game now. The former vice-chancellors, Ibrahim Shah Bukhari and Abdul Hameed Memon, the project consultant, Dr. Alvi, and the university's project director, had much at stake. Therefore, the report was twisted around and interpreted as saying that all would be well if water was kept away from the foundations! And what if it rained and the water seeped down? It was left to God to change the laws of physics as and when necessary to prevent a calamity from happening.

The inevitable happened, and it happened very soon. The first cracks started to appear in 1992, and they began to spread uncontrollably. At this stage it should have been clear that the already constructed buildings would be short-lived. However, the construction of identical new buildings continued unabated. To conceal from view the ever-growing cracks, a thin layer of plaster was put over them. The hope was that the buildings could hang together long enough to be formally handed over to the university. But even this limited goal proved impossible to achieve because it rained heavily in the summer of 1994. Thereafter the walls went higgledy-piggledy in almost every building, the pillars disassociated themselves from the ridges, the plaster crumbled, and chunks of masonry fell to the ground.

Amazingly, in spite of the visible collapse of the campus, construction still continued and money continued to be shelled out to the various contractors. The university's senate approved a report that nearly ninety percent of the work had been satisfactorily completed. Perhaps still more money would have been spent. But then the old vice-chancellor was booted out and the present one, Bashir A.Sheikh, took charge and forced the project to a halt. It was then that the skeletons started falling out of the closets. An official investigation was carried out in March last year by the Provincial Ombudsman, Justice Salahuddin Mirza, and a report of the new vice-chancellor; the facts in this article are derived from these two documents in addition to my personal observations.

The reports are all very well, but many crucial questions remain to be answered. First, why has no legal action been taken against the former vice-chancellors, project director, consultant, and others responsible for this unmitigated disaster? It is simply astounding that one of the former vice-chancellors, Abdul Hameed Memon, now heads the Sindh Textbook Board in spite of his being accused of serious corruption charges. The project director, Khamiso Khan Memon, has absconded but everyone seems to know where he is; he is apparently enjoying his ill-gotten wealth and has the protection of a powerful political family. Not a single person has been charged with defrauding the state although the former Sind Governors, Mahmood Haroon and Kamal Azfar, had made televised visits to the site at different times and made noises about bringing the culprits to book.

One can also ask why the monitoring teams sent from Islamabad at various times to report on the progress of the project wrote positively after their visits? Blindness, stupidity, or temporary insanity could be one reason. A hefty cut could be another. Certainly, without their approval of the construction work, the disbursement of further funds would have been frozen. It will certainly be interesting to see from the records of the University Grants Commission or the Ministry of Education which individuals were in these teams.

It is common for scoundrels to put the blame on God when their misdeeds are exposed. Indeed, in March 1997 the Federal Secretary of Education wrote to the Governor of Sindh saying that the responsible persons seek to absolve themselves on the grounds that "*this incident should be seen as an act of God which mere mortals could do little to prevent*". The Secretary, fortunately, has not bought this argument and has asked for an enquiry to be initiated against the culprits. Will this actually happen, and the crooks be brought to justice? We shall

all be waiting to see if this government delivers on its promises to enforce accountability.

The author is professor of physics at Quaid-e-Azam University, Islamabad.