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FOUNDER EDITOR
LATE S. M. ALI

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Murder on the Buriganga

The launch capsized was no accident

YET another launch capsized, another very large number of casualties, many left orphaned, many parents left to mourn the deaths of their children, deprived of their company for the rest of their lives. Reportedly, the capsizing was caused when a bigger launch, Moyur-2, rammed the smaller one, Morning Bird, while reversing. So far, 32 bodies have been recovered. It was carrying more than its capacity, according to media reports. Reportedly, a novice was allegedly at the helm. And we learnt from the horse's mouth that the incident seemed preplanned, carried out intentionally. The State Minister for Shipping went so far as to suggest to reporters that it was murder.

The accident is a reenactment of most of the previous launch disasters, where either the quality of the operators, or the lack of fitness of vessels have led to such capsizes. Various descriptions of the events leading up to the disaster suggest that the bigger vessel was being handled by raw hands. For one thing the errant launch, as reported, was being steered by a novice. And the unfortunate launch that capsized, we are told, had some structural weakness, but was yet allowed to operate with certain caveats.

It is unfortunate that river travel and transportation, which was once a pleasurable, safe and sure way of travelling, has come to be plagued by gross mismanagement, poor oversight and a general state of disorder. While a large part of our population are dependent fully on this mode, and more vessels have been added to the river fleet, unfortunately, the cycle of accidents and casualties remain unending. The Tk 150,000 for the family of each of the dead is an *ex-gratia* payment, but no amount of money can be enough recompense for the loss of one's child, parent or sibling. The owners of Moyur-2 must be brought before the law, punished severely and made to pay for the lives lost. But more importantly, it is time for the river transport authorities to pull up their socks and do something quickly to stop these horrible accidents that continue to occur *ad nauseam*.

Doing a little extra for the poor every day

Initiatives by students, volunteer groups give us reason to hope

THE world has perhaps never been hungrier. Even as lockdowns are being eased in many countries, the ravages of the coronavirus continue unabated, with global cases exceeding 10 million and global death toll exceeding half a million this week. For vulnerable countries like Bangladesh, where the vast majority of populations were already poor and vulnerable to food insecurity leading up to the pandemic, this means the challenges are greater than ever. In Bangladesh, the numbers of infections and deaths are growing every day. And the government's desperate move to reopen the economy has been of little comfort as a rising number of the poor and newly poor are being forced to leave cities, stripped of basic income opportunities. Against this backdrop, citizens-led humanitarian initiatives besides the official programmes have emerged as vital to saving lives.

One such initiative is an on-campus feeding programme by a group of students of the University of Dhaka, which reportedly came to a close on Tuesday, after a 100-day run. Led by a former member of the DUCSU, these students have been providing food to the poor every day since the beginning of the nationwide lockdown on March 26. In their bid they were assisted by friends, teachers, alumni as well as politicians. Now that the lockdown was lifted, they announced an end to the feeding project but vowed to continue their work in other ways. We congratulate the students for their noble effort to serve the underprivileged groups. This is a great example of community service that deserves to be duly emulated. As the pandemic continues to shine a bright light both on nobility and on ugliness, such initiatives by students and other volunteer groups show us that while there is a lot to grieve over, there is also a lot to be hopeful about—the selfless courage of those on the front lines, the quiet, unacknowledged help being extended by ordinary people.

But the pandemic is far from over and the government's lifting of the lockdown didn't have its desired impact, as the employment sector shrinks and those in the informal sector continue to suffer without food and necessary supplies. This means there is a continued need for such initiatives by individuals, associations, voluntary organisations and student bodies, and all should come forward to overcome this huge humanitarian crisis facing us today. Even simple initiatives like cooking a little extra for those in need, or organising over social media to initiate more coordinated efforts, can go a long way in alleviating the sufferings of the needy. We urge the affluent sections of society to come forward in this regard.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Plastic use on the rise

Since the easing of the lockdown, many businesses, as well as the ever-popular tea stalls, have reopened. Tea and coffee are being served in plastic cups instead of the usual glass or ceramic cups to prevent the spread of infection. Apart from the increase in the use of disposable cups, a variety of products are being marketed in plastic containers. According to research, components used to make plastic are harmful to the human body. Moreover, plastic is not perishable, posing a grave threat to the natural environment. Earlier, the high court directed to stop the use of one-time plastic materials, and under our existing environmental protection laws, the use of plastic materials is strictly prohibited. But due to lack of awareness, easy availability and lack of proper supervision of the administration, the use of plastic continues to threaten public health and the environment. I urge the authorities to be more vigilant in this regard.

Abu Faruk, by email



The 1912 Dhaka University Committee.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

99 YEARS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF DHAKA

The road to DU's opening day



FAKRUL ALAM

IN these pandemic-plagued times, ceremonies commemorating the beginning of the University of Dhaka (or DU) that were to culminate in July 1, 2021 have been scaled down drastically; the chances of alumni and well-wishers of university students and faculty members thronging the campus on July 1, 2020 to inaugurate the year-long events have all but gone. Nevertheless, for many in Bangladesh, it may be well worth the while to travel back in history to retrace the steps that led to DU's opening on this day, 99 years ago. Like many such momentous occasions, DU's birthday has a long pre-history. A good place to begin is on February 22, 1923. The university's first Chancellor, Lord Lytton, declared then that DU was "Dacca's greatest possession". He went on to say emphatically that it was "a splendid Imperial compensation". Although he doesn't say explicitly what this "compensation" is all about, the context must have been self-explanatory.

The first Bengal partition, announced by Lord Curzon on July 20, 1905, was annulled by Lord Hardinge in Delhi on December 10, 1911. Faced with stiff resistance from influential Hindus in Kolkata, the British resolve to give Muslims of East Bengal autonomy crumbled swiftly, especially after *swadeshi*-incited violence. The promise made to Muslim leaders of the province was broken; the university was a sop offered or, if you like, a salve applied to heal the wounds in Bengali Muslim psyches by their British overlords, now headquartered away from violence in Delhi.

But the pre-history to the immediate history is relevant too. The "compensation" was also for the way the British had favoured Hindus of West Bengal at the expense of the Indian Muslim rulers they had displaced years ago. The Muslims, for their part, cocooned themselves from British culture and education, having been displaced by the East Indian Company. In contrast, well-off Hindus, especially in Bengal, embraced the British warmly. Subsequently, the British adopted a policy, to quote from Thomas Babington Macaulay's 1835 *Minute on Indian Education*, of creating a class of Indians "who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect." A consequence was that in the year of the Sepoy Mutiny, the University of Calcutta began operating in January; the University of Madras opened its doors a few months later in June 1857. Mumbai got its university in 1877, Punjab in 1882 and Allahabad in 1887. All would be graduating mostly Hindu students. Of course an education in English was a conduit for enlightenment ideals as well—something that would eventually make a lot of graduates clamour for self-rule!

As the nineteenth century ended, however, the British had largely succeeded in their goal of getting good Indian "subjects", at least partly because of these universities. In Bengal, the beneficiaries were overwhelmingly Kolkata-based Hindu Bengalis. On the other hand, William Hunter, in his 1871 work, *The Indian Muslims*, noted the inevitable outcome of the combination of Muslims withdrawing from public life and harbouring resentful feelings, and British suspicion and neglect of them: "Nowhere else in the subcontinent were Muslims as worse of [as] Bengal, just as, paradoxically, few other communities derived as much benefit from British rule as the Bengali Hindus". Modern education, or the lack of it in their community, now became

something for progressive Muslim leaders of Bengal to think about.

A source of inspiration no doubt was Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and the Aligarh Movement. It led first to a school, then a college and eventually a university there in 1920, all orchestrated predominantly through community initiatives. Here was inspiration for people like Dhaka's Nawab Khawja Salimullah and Dhanbari, Tangail's Nawab Syed Nawab Ali Chowdhury. The two clearly noted how between 1905 to 1911, Muslims had advanced rapidly in the province they had been given then, especially because of the availability of financial aid for Muslim students and greater possibilities of their recruitment in educational institutions.

Late Dr Sufia Ahmed, who passed away this April was Professor of Islamic History and Culture at the University of Dhaka and a National Professor, has written succinctly about the road to DU, initiated to a great extent by the two Nawabs in "Origins of the Dhaka University", a paper published in *The Dhaka University Studies* March 1984 issue. I will now summarise it to indicate how the two Nawabs and like-minded Bengali Muslims pressed the British to compensate them for the annulment of partition with a university of their own.

The first move was Nawab Salimullah's. On December 20, 1911 he sent what Professor Ahmed calls a "historic letter" to Lord Hardinge, urging his administration to prioritise education for East Bengali Muslims. The Viceroy responded by preparing a minute the next day for a meeting of the Viceroy's Council so that it could deliberate on, among other things, "the creation of a University at Dhaka with Mahomedan hostels." Sir Harcourt Butler, the Education Member of the Council, underscored the Viceroy's request, pointing out how Calcutta University policies marginalised the education of East Bengalis. Butler also

Viceroy pointed out that the institution the British were thinking of opening in Dhaka would accommodate Hindu as well as Muslim students in its halls. Professor Ahmed indicates in her paper a number of other points worth noting. First, not all Hindus drawn into the controversy were against a Dhaka-based university. Second, some North Indian Muslims of North India and "nationalist Muslims" were for their part not warm about an idea that might hamper their

and related issues till then. On March 18, 1919 the Commission submitted its report, agreeing that Dhaka needed a university and noting that the University of Calcutta just could not cope up with the demand for university education in Bengal anymore.

Things developed swiftly from then on. The Dhaka University Bill was approved formally on March 23, 1920; July 1, 1921 was to be the day when it would start functioning under the leadership of the

Sir Harcourt Butler, the Education Member of the Council, underscored the Viceroy's request, pointing out how Calcutta University policies marginalised the education of East Bengalis. Butler also suggested that not only was the creation of a university in Dhaka desirable, but also that there was scope for a new kind of university in Bengal—one that was a residential as well as a teaching university, as opposed to the essentially collegiate ones sanctioned till then.

bid to open a university in Aligarh. Third, Sir Ashutosh Mukherjee, the powerful Vice-Chancellor of Calcutta University, initially led the opposition to DU's creation, but later decided to withdraw his opposition if his university could be compensated anyhow. A few other Hindu Bengalis eventually welcomed the idea of a secular and residential institution in their part of Bengal.

Approval came on April 4, 1912. The Secretary of State agreed in principle to the idea of DU and decided to ignore Kolkata-based cavilers. The British government in Delhi asked the Bengal one to provide details of the university to be set up, emphasising that it be a teaching and residential one and stressing the need to admit students

distinguished and experienced ex-Registrar of the University of London, Philip Joseph Hartog. Land was found for DU in Ramna and buildings that once housed Dhaka College and officials of the by then aborted government of East Bengal and Assam. The lush green space there and buildings such as Curzon Hall combined to give the university area distinction. Academic staff was quickly recruited, mostly from Dacca and Jagannath College, although Hartog also managed to woo distinguished scholar-academics from the University of Calcutta. There would be three faculties and 13 departments, including the departments of Arabic and Islamic Studies, Persian and Urdu, and Sanskrit and Sanskrit Studies (but no Department of Bengali!). The new university would be self-governing and residential, though dependent on government funding. Students would have to live either in the three halls set up or be affiliated to any one of them. From the beginning, the emphasis would be on maintaining high standards. Teaching would be through tutoring as well as lectures.

The university that opened its doors on July 1, 1921 seemed to have begun well. Lord Lytton could thus claim on February 22, 1923 that the university was Dhaka's "greatest possession" and a "splendid institution". He could also stress then that it was following the requirements of a "residential university", one set up on a very different model from Kolkata's one. He urged administrators present in the convocation to tailor the university now to meet the region's needs, and to never forget that it was meant to be "a seat of learning" and not a "mere employment agency". He emphasised too that he knew students wanted to facilitate "the development of a political consciousness" for their country's sake but urged them to also develop "a community consciousness" and "a university consciousness" and to forge links against caste, class and creed.

To what extent has DU been able to live up to the expectations it generated among its founders? And to what extent did it enable the kind of consciousness Lord Lytton envisaged? How well has it been fulfilling the ideals that led to its birth? In the centenary celebrations that will certainly start as soon as the pandemic's threats have receded, all well-wishers of DU can contemplate these questions and think about what has been achieved, about ideals discarded and goals squandered. We need DU to move to July 1, 2021 and beyond, seeking new directions for a much loved, but also much abused and even maligned institution.

Fakrul Alam is UGC Professor, Department of English, University of Dhaka.



Curzon Hall (1952).

PHOTO: CLARENCE W SORENSON

suggested that not only was the creation of a university in Dhaka desirable, but also that there was scope for a new kind of university in Bengal—one that was a residential as well as a teaching university, as opposed to the essentially collegiate ones sanctioned till then. When Hardinge came to Dhaka in January 1912, he would meet a 19-member Muslim Bengali delegation organised by the two Nawabs. Talking to its members, Hardinge assured them that the "Imperial Government" realised that education was "the true salvation of the Muslim community." He told them unequivocally that he would recommend to the British Secretary of State, among other things, the establishment of a university at Dhaka.

Two things, however, delayed DU's birth. One was the angry response of a few Kolkata-based Hindu politicians, writers and men who felt that they would be adversely affected by a Dhaka-based institution. To their objections, the

of all faiths, although greater Muslim participation would be a desideratum. A Faculty of Islamic Studies was another thing recommended. The Government of Bengal responded by constituting a 13-member committee headed by Robert Nathan, a senior bureaucrat who had worked for the Universities Commission. Its recommendations would be in line with the Delhi government's suggestions; it was not surprising that they were soon ready to approve them.

As luck would have it, the First World War broke out at this point; this was the second reason why work on DU was delayed. Committee work would continue intermittently but when Nawab Salimullah died in 1915, it was left to Nawab Syed Nawab Ali Choudhury to organise others from this part of Bengal to pressurise the British to refocus on building the university as the war ended. In 1917, the Calcutta University Commission reviewed the work for DU