

The Daily Star WEEKEND MAGAZINE

Witness to History

My Days as a Vice-Chancellor: Challenges and Lessons

In this new series, prominent personalities will look at events of the past which shaped their lives, often learning behind experiences, grim or pleasant, to learn from.

by Khan Sarwar Murshid

MUCH has changed in the country since 1972 when I took over as Vice-Chancellor of Rajshahi University which was to begin with not my University and became a significant part of my life later.

I had taught at Dhaka University for about two decades and a half, with gaps of the usual kind, but there I was, a Dhaka man, named Vice-Chancellor of Rajshahi. I distinctly recall my doubts about myself and the place I was called upon to serve. I remember the dahlias in the garden of the Vice-Chancellor's official residence were glorious in their bloom but rather cold on my arrival. Next winter it was different. And when I left in mid 1974 the flowers in my garden were friends whom I knew I would miss along with the palm trees and the blue shadows of the sky in my pond and much else in the form of shared perceptions and endeavours. It was my privilege to realize at Rajshahi that a University was a cause and that it required for its fulfillment a vision backed by intellectual and human solidarity on the part of its members.

On the morrow of independence, that is, the time I am speaking of, there was one advantage, among many disadvantages, namely, that it was easy to be optimistic. Fellow human beings seemed capable of exceeding their little frames and doing slightly bigger things than usual. It is true that the University Campus at Rajshahi was used as a cantonment by the Pakistan army of occupation and that students, as they came back to the University after liberation, had few personal belongings and were often hungry. Parts of the university were shambles; furniture and laboratory equipment were rifled or destroyed; which compounded the problem of general scarcity and disruption. Nevertheless, there was a strong sense of community and purpose which enabled academics and administrators alike to have a sense of more than the contingent and immediate. That I thought was important — a sense of the long term goals or vision that Universities ought to have. This is a thought I wish to return to in the negative context of the present times. At that historical moment my col-

leagues at Rajshahi, I may say in passing, created 'the Institute of Bangladesh studies, a modest initiative really, in response to a vision of the future as well as a way of relating to the beauty, pain, and sacrifices through which an identity was discovered and consecrated by the Bengali nation.

The first problem that a Vice-Chancellor, even an elected one, has to face on assumption of office is that of acceptance. He has to be accepted by most members of the campus community, namely, the students, teachers and the administrative staff, and has, in addition, to have a relationship with the government sensible and constructive enough to be workable. The last has always been a difficult problem and is now thornier than ever, as it has got to do in the final analysis with the political culture of the ruling groups in society. While at Rajshahi I worked hard to have the nation accepted by all concerned that I was Vice-Chancellor of an institution called Rajshahi University and not that of the Government which appointed me to the position. I thought it was important to have this distinction clearly grasped, but my success was marginal. If the highest authorities did not question my attitude, MP's did and, as events were to prove, it was their perceptions that prevailed. He would indeed be a courageous man who would claim that the quality of the political life of this remarkable nation has undergone any spectacular improvement since 1974 when I relinquished office at Rajshahi. If anything, its tone is much darker and more depressingly cynical than ever before.

I recall the time the national dailies carried headlines such as these: 'Rajshahi University Students Clash with Class III employees and villagers: one dead and a hundred injured including the Vice-Chancellor'; 'Clashes between rival groups of students and bomb blasts at Dhaka University'; 'University examinations postponed'; 'University teachers go on strike nationwide' — reflecting every aspect of the disorder, disharmony, and discontent characterising the Universities. Hardly the milieu where a Vice-Chancellor could conceive and sustain a



With French author-philosopher Andre Malraux who was conferred Honorary Doctorate by Rajshahi University, in 1973.

long term vision or think and feel in terms of a real community, the present being patently destructive of both, leaving no room for any concern other than survival from one day to another. What is the public understanding of the office whose challenges we have been called upon to discuss? Traditionally, the office of the Vice-Chancellor has been regarded as a high office which confers much on the incumbent and to which the incumbent too brings a good deal or is expected to. Public expectation and the office itself demand that he be a learned man, a leader and an able administrator. Another expectation is that as a savant he would display independence of mind, integrity, a certain disregard of the world, and an ability to make solemn, at times, critical public pronouncements. All this gave the office some awe and a lot of

dignity, public imagination and the performing individual collaborating to create a role for the Vice-Chancellor which was played out between reality and myth. Not all the men who served as Vice-Chancellor at Dhaka — Professor Langley, Sir AF Rahman, Dr. RC Majumdar, Dr. Mahmud Hussain come easily to mind for their noteworthy qualities — possessed all the abilities mentioned above. They however contrived to create a composite image of the Vice-Chancellor which was one of great prestige and had yearly ratification in the public eye in the annual convocation ceremony (a ritual, alas, now lost) — a ceremony in which once upon a time even colonial Chancellors representing the imperial power of Great Britain used to humble themselves before the idea of the university and found it possible to speak with respect and courtesy of the actual



Discussing students' problems with the representatives of Rajshahi University Central Students' Union (RUCSU), in 1973.

The office of the Vice-Chancellor is now gravely imperilled, if not destroyed. No decline is sudden, but if one is to set a date to the slide one must identify it with the authoritarian regime of Governor Monem Khan, an uneducated man who was the local tough and errand-boy of dictator Ayub Khan.

University they presided over and the academics who worked in it.

The office of the Vice-Chancellor is now gravely imperilled, if not destroyed. No decline is sudden, but if one is to set a date to the slide one must identify it with the authoritarian regime of Governor Monem Khan, an uneducated man who was the local tough and errand-boy of dictator Ayub Khan and who in the 60's organized support for Ayub's Government in the campus of Dhaka University largely with the help of criminal elements among the youth. The deadly assault by these elements upon a teacher who had gone to court for the redress of some grievances he had against the University and the compromises and moral ambiguities resorted to by the University authorities following the incident, along with its inability to condemn the violent act, caused the first serious erosion of public confidence in the office of the Vice-Chancellor.

Obviously, Vice-Chancellor are expected to stand up to authoritarian regimes under which they serve, and in this some succeed, some do not, and others do not try. In more recent times grave charges of abuse of office and irregularities of conduct have been brought against Vice-Chancellor in a spirit of unmistakable vendetta. A total lack of faith in the process and people pronouncing the judgement upon men who were Vice-Chancellors made such judgement odious and yet left room for the palpably venal to parade martyrdom. None of these things has helped Vice-Chancellors.

It will not be fair to press the comparison with the past too far at the expense of the present, for the office of the Vice-Chancellor must be seen in terms of the problems and realities of the present. The Vice-Chancellor inherits the disadvantages of a situation not of his own creation, is unfairly tainted by lapses of predecessors

without sharing in their credit, if any, and judged against an image that continues to have power. He is unlucky in that there isn't any longer a campus community — instead there are several communities, none of which sees much good in the others.

This is not so much because of the fragmentation of intellectual culture and absence of shared academic values as divisions based on differences over issues of recent and current political history as well as individual and group interests. While authoritarian regimes in seeking to control the Universities try to turn the Vice-Chancellor into a 'yes man', the factions within the campus try constantly to cause schisms in his soul. He is clearly unable to solve problems of students, for many of them have their roots deep within social and economic circumstances which do not obey mere Vice-Chancellors. For instance, he cannot with best will in the world prevent the kind of politics in

the campus which degenerates into problems of law and order resulting in serious violence, even death. Nor can he, it may be pointed out, pretend for a moment that the end-products of all his endeavours, that is, his scholars, have the right or adequate qualifications for meaningful employment or that even if they had those qualifications they would find such employment on leaving University. He looks on as the government for its own ends forces prolonged closures on his institution, students go on strike, teachers and administrative staff suspend work while the logjam of academic sessions and examinations assume nightmarish proportions. In an environment of total partisanship the elected Vice-Chancellor finds it difficult to be, or prove that he is, objective and fair. A perfectly Hamlet-like situation, this. In such unpropitious times the Vice-Chancellor is called upon to restore the credibility of his office through intellectual and moral leadership, through administrative efficiency and rectitude; in short, to take on forces that seek to reduce him to impotence. A tall order indeed; and yet he must rise to it, for that is the challenge. He must play his proper part in a social and corporate process which seems to bypass him or get the better of him. (To be concluded next Friday)

* A noted educationist and a political thinker, Prof Sarwar Murshid has made his mark in a number of fields during his chequered career, covering more than four decades. He has successfully served as the Professor of the Department of English, Dhaka University, the Vice-Chancellor of the Rajshahi University, an ambassador for Bangladesh and the Assistant Secretary General of the Commonwealth. While working at the Dhaka University, Prof. Murshid also edited 'New Values', a journal on contemporary issues, from 1949 to 65. The article published here is based on a recent talk given by the writer at the Dhaka University Alumni Association.

SECULARISM is the least understood and the most misunderstood word in Pakistan. Though not apparent to the casual observer, secularism versus religion in politics is the most important current problem in our country. Its correct appreciation is the most pressing need of the hour. Ignorance by itself is bad enough but ignorance of ignorance is definitely worse. We seem to be utterly oblivious of the evident injury we have been causing both to our people and the country on the one hand and our religion on the other by pitting religion against worldism as equals. This has occurred mainly due to our unthinking rejection of secularism as a principle of ethics of our political life. How defective our political thinking will be evident from the fact that none of pure political parties, whose number, Maqsood Ali, is far from inadequate, have found it necessary to speak out in support of secularism. On the contrary, all the parties, including those being leftist seem to be anxious to conceal their inclination towards secularism from public gaze.

This is so because political thinking in Pakistan is deductive rather than inductive, opportunistic rather than creative, more plainly, commercial rather than industrial. All politicians, active and inactive, including politically thinking section of the intelligentsia, are under the spell of the very engrossing notion that people of Pakistan in general are strongly averse to the idea of secularism. So, unless they openly profess and overtly protest their unflinching devotion to Islamization of politics they would lose their popularity and also the votes. This has,

Secularism Versus Religion in Politics-I

Abul Mansur Ahmed

therefore, become the conventional way of doing politics in our country.

Secularism evaluated
Secularism, however, does not merit the treatment it has so far received in the hand of politicians of Pakistan. It has, wrongly and unjustly, been pitted against religion. There is nothing inherently inimical between the two. History abounds with instances where deeply religious-minded statesmen and philosophers have advocated secularism in politics.

Secularism is neither anti-religious nor irreligious. The worst that can be said against it is that it is not pro-religion. In fact it is neither for nor against any particular religion in a very limited sense. Secularism in full of moral and ethical principles of its own many of which are akin to religious injunctions. This is what is generally overlooked. It is generally believed, at least in our part of the world, that secularism is sheer materialistic opportunism for achieving worldly gains by whatever methods without any regard for moral and ethical values of life. The secularists are, therefore, regarded as those who do not believe in any religious moral or ethical principles of life and so are not to be tolerated.

This misunderstanding is entirely due to bad definition. To define secularism as simple 'worldliness' or 'mundanism', to coin the to point words, would create a confusion because religion also belongs to and governs our worldly life. To try to

distinguish between the two by pointing out the moral and spiritual side of religion would have made the darkness of confusion all the denser, because secularism also has its moral and ethical side. So we remain where we are! Just as anything that is not secular is not ipsofacto religious and spiritual, so what is not moral or religious is not ipsofacto secular. Therefore it is safer to describe rather than to define secularism. Better still to understand it.

Understanding Secularism
In layman's phraseology secularism is nothing more than separation of practical religion from practical politics. This predicate 'practical' is necessary because there are many things common to religion and politics in their theoretical and academic aspects. Now, this separation has taken place as a result of human experiences gained through centuries. Let us open a few pages of history to see how it happened. Since the dawn of history monarchs used to be both temporal and spiritual heads of their subjects. It then suited every body because the rulers and their subjects belonged to the same faith, the kingdoms were compact geographical areas and the statehood was very simple autocracies. With the growth and expansion of trade

and commerce colonization became the order of the day and building up of empires followed. With this complications arose. Subjects of the kingdoms and those of the empires could not be expected to be of the same faith. On the contrary they were normally of different faiths. So naturally the necessity of the emperors' declaration of impartiality in religious matters arose in the interest of empires themselves.

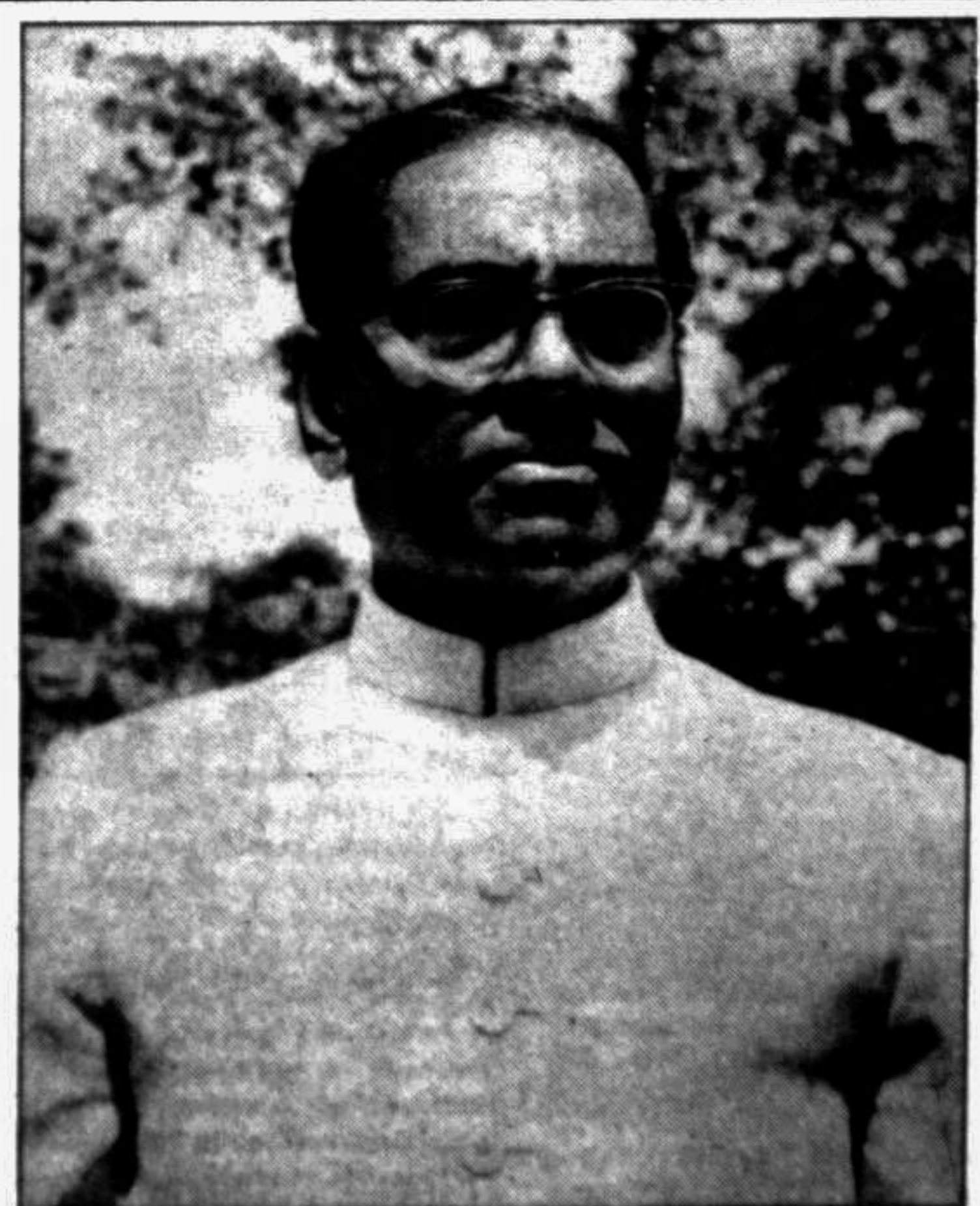
State Vs. Church
With the spread of learning and expansion of rational thinking pontifical infallibility and divine authority of the monarchs started cracking. The motazillas of Islam, the leaders of Reformation and Renaissance of Christianity and Neo-Confucianists of Buddhism threw a challenge to this irrational practice. Rivalry between the Khalifas, quarrels amongst the Popes of Rome and Avignon, hastened the process. England fully and France partially went out of Papal jurisdiction. Quarrel between the State and the Church started. The French Revolution gave birth to the sense of nationalism and the conception of nation-statehood. Papal authority sitting at Rome and exercising extra-territorial jurisdiction on different nation-states like France, Germany and Italy,

very naturally divided the loyalty of the subjects of these states.

This division of loyalty inevitably produced recurrent contest and clashes between the Popes and kings and the Church and the State which at last came to a head in France, Germany and Italy during the latter half of the nineteenth century. In France the Third Republic under the leadership of Gambetta and Waldeck-Roussieu first took away the Education from the control of the Church and completed the process by passing the Law of Association and the Separation Act in quick succession between 1901 and 1905. The Pope of Rome had to accept it.

In Germany the Prussian Emperors under the influence and guidance of Bismark with a view to stopping German Catholics from looking up to an outside authority for guidance and challenging the infallibility of the Pope, broke the ties with the Vatican and passed an apostate law making civil marriage compulsory and also took away Education from the control of the Church. Here also the Pope had to compromise.

In Italy the subduing of the Pope had to be more direct. When Italy was liberated from the bondage of Austrian imperialism and unified under the leadership of Mazzini, Garibaldi and Cavour the Pope would not recognise this independent and unified Italy under the kingship of Emmanuel I. Italian Government had to seize Rome



Abul Mansur Ahmed (1898-1979)

to make the Pope see reason. Ultimately a compromise was reached on the formula of 'a Free Church in a Free Italy.' The Pope was guaranteed the sovereign right at par with the king inside the Vatican City and inviolability of his person and property.

It may be mentioned in this connection that all these compromises in the three countries were actuated by the same self-interest because they all had to face at that time a common enemy in the Marxian socialism which had been growing in strength with the

ever-increasing industrialization of these countries.

Khalifat vs Imamat
As regards the Muslim world the combination of the temporal and spiritual headship in the Khalifa practically ended with the first four Caliphs known as Khalifa-i-Rashidin. After that the Church and the state tended to fall apart into Khalifat and Imamat. The great Imams fought with their life for the independence of the Church from the interference and influence of the temporal monarchs. Imam Abu Hanif was imprisoned, Imam

Malik was flogged, and Imam Jafar Sadiq was threatened with death and his property confiscated by no less a Caliph than the illustrious Khalifa Mansur and all this for the simple offence of not agreeing to surrender their religious belief to the whims of the temporal lord. The Imams suffering bore fruits and the Imam could maintain at least a semblance of its independence from the interfering hand of the most autocratic of the emperors. Later on the Ottoman emperors tried to regain spiritual authority over their subjects but their success was nominal.

Even that nominal sovereignty over 'Muslim Church', if it may be so called, came to an end with the advent of the nineteenth century wave of Renaissance in Europe which penetrated into the Muslim world through Lebanon and Egypt. Arab and Egyptian nationalism rapidly grew as an inseparable adjunct of their struggle for independence from the yoke of Ottoman, British and French imperialism. This was quickly followed by the rise of nationalism in Turkey, Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco. The common ground underlying this rapidly growing nationalism was the basic concept of separation of religion from politics. Mustafa Kamal gave this idea a practical shape by dismantling the institution of Khalifat for god.

Separation with Mutual Consent
Lastly, the problem has been similarly solved in the Buddhist world. Of the two varieties of Shintoes (path of God) viz. State Shinto and Sect Shinto the first is the political and the second is the religious