



# Conversation

## The Vice-Chancellor of Dhaka University, Dr Maniruzzaman Miah, "the Man on a Hot Seat," talks to the Star on problems facing this premier seat of higher learning, ranging from campus violence to the relevance of the curriculum of the institution to the needs of the country, from continuing resource constraints to the move to set up a private university in Bangladesh.

**W**HILE the entire educational system in the country, especially the seats of higher learning, have been in turmoil for past several years, no institution has suffered more than the University of Dhaka which, only a few decades ago, had the reputation of being a centre of excellence throughout South Asia.

Now, a victim of campus violence which has taken a heavy toll of lives, continuing politicisation of the entire gamut of student union activities, session jams, brain drain and even corruption, the university is today no more than a pathetic shadow of its former self. By all accounts, the institution faces a near-collapse. In both physical and spiritual sense, unless the country as a whole, and the government and political parties in particular, rise to the occasion and cry a halt to the drift which has set in.

At this moment, no one in the university is in a better position to see the crisis than its present Vice-Chancellor, DR MANIRUZZAMAN MIAH who, last week, joined The Daily Star in a frank conversation, against the backdrop of an all-party meeting presided over by Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia on the campus violence, a move that Dr Miah regarded as a "good start." We all agreed that the meeting was only a beginning and a great deal more needed to be done to help restore the university to its former glory. At the same time, the Star was also curious to know more about the whole range of issues facing the university, from the relevance of its curriculum to the country's needs to the level of research, from the financial situation to possible areas of administrative reforms. The current move to set up a private university in Bangladesh also figured during the 90-minute long discussion held at the 80-year-old residence of the Vice-Chancellor, while 19 former vice-chancellors gazed down silently from portraits hanging on the wall.

Dr Miah, now 56, did his Masters in Geography in 1957 and earned his doctorate at the prestigious Sorbonne in Paris in 1966. Ten years later, he attended a post-doctoral training programme in what is obviously an area of great importance to Bangladesh, Water Resources Development, in the University of East Anglia in the United Kingdom.

Dr Miah brings to his work as the Vice-Chancellor his varied administrative experience.

self look at this breakthrough?

Vice-Chancellor: Well, I am happy that honourable prime minister thought it appropriate to call a grand conference of all the political party chiefs and get them to agree on a thorny question like campus violence. More so because this is what I have been harping on for quite some time now. I have been saying all the time — not only since I became vice-chancellor, but even before that when I was a member of the syndicate — that campus violence can come to an end only through a national consensus.

Now, who can bring about a national consensus? That is the question. As you know I made an effort myself, but that failed. But definitely, once the prime minister has taken the initiative, I congratulate her. But at the same time, I would not say that there has already been a breakthrough. There has been a good start no doubt. But the reports of this grand conference have not come out in full in the press. But by piecing together all the bits of information in various newspapers, it appears to me that no one has actually said in plain terms — which I wished they would have said — that, "Our students, or the student group attached to my political party, will shun the politics of violence from now on, and anybody who takes to arms from my group of students will be expelled from my party."

I wish that could have been agreed upon. There are people who say that could not be achieved in the first meeting. But I do not understand why, because if that is what we want, then why could the political parties not say that they want an end to the violence? In fact, as I read in one of the reports in the Communist Party of Bangladesh, Mr Saffuddin Manik brought up this question. He wanted other people to say that everyone must categorically denounce violence as a means of extending spheres of influence in politics on the campus.

DS: But the very fact that they reached a national consensus that the student violence must end, now doesn't it imply that they are also denouncing violence by their own respective parties?

VC: From the newspaper reports — unless they have come out only partially — it doesn't appear to me that there has been any denunciation of violence as such. Violence has been identified as one of the problem areas of the campus. Not that there shouldn't be any violence and that I will prevent my student organisation from taking to violence on the campus. There should be a categorical statement like this. Why not?

proposition to begin with: that, all of us agree violence on the campus is detrimental to the national interest. It is detrimental to the future development of the country, and we denounce it, and at the same time we will restrain our boys from taking to arms.

Secondly, although we still have a presidential form of government, the prime minister for all practical purposes, is the leader of the nation and therefore the responsibility that falls on her is very great indeed. She can tackle this problem from the law and order angle too, because she is in charge of the home affairs also. As everybody has said in the last few days, the police has a list of violent students and those who have taken to arms in the past, and it is not a very long list. If they could be arrested and put behind bars, that would have some effect on it. And if all of them could not be arrested, if police was a bit more active and put them on the run, I think that would also help the situation.

DS: How do you recover the arms?

VC: Arms recovery has to be there. Here lies another problem. This is a big problem, I do not know if the government has any knowledge about it, but we, who are not in government do not really know where the arms come from. Sometimes these sophisticated arms really alarm us. We don't really know from where the boys get these modern automatic weapons. This is a big mystery, to me and many other people on the campus.

DS: Do you think the police could have been more active? How do you rate their role?

VC: Here lies another aspect of the problem. I would not like to blame the police for one reason at least. If the government asks the police to tackle a law and order situation, let us say somewhere where there is armed violence, outside the campus, they can perhaps swoop down on the violence-mongers straight away and they can also go for shooting, firing tear gas and using all other means as their command.

But the university is a very sensitive place. Any action that the police takes might be misunderstood, and the death of a student, as you know, means a lot. If he dies as a result of police firing, it would become a very big political issue. Therefore for the police also, it is very difficult to determine what would be their action, over-action or under-action.

In my opinion preventive measures would be better than curative ones. By that I mean arresting trouble-mongers, recovering arms which are not always on the campus but outside the campus here and there, and then there are the thugs and murderers who are brought in when there is campus violence. It is not always the students, in fact the number of students that take part in shooting and gunning down their opponents may not be large in number. Police must have a list of them, they can prevent them, arrest them, bring them to book. Arms can be recovered.

DS: Do you think violence on the campus and people involved in it are now linked-up with criminal, gangster elements outside, who may now be irritating the violence?

VC: Yes, you see this campus violence has several aspects from smaller dimensions to bigger ones. One of the problems we have to grapple with is the extortion of money from the contractors that are involved in construction work on the campus, and extortion of money from shopkeepers around the campus. These are also done by the arms-bearers. These people, who have perhaps passed out as students or perhaps in the middle of their student careers, find it a very easy means of earning a lot of money — 10 times more than perhaps I earn in a month. This is one of the reasons of campus violence.

Now, arising out this, another question comes in. Another problem of the campus is the employment prospects of these young men.



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These young men who are passing out of the university, don't really see any bright future for themselves. Employment prospects being so limited many of them are not going to get jobs. So what do they do? Many of them have been trapped into the process. Some of them were, to begin with, probably asked to do political work for some party and were given some small arms. Later on they became thugs and extortionists.

DS: This is definitely a very serious problem, and I think it was addressed by many governments in the past, the problem of employment of graduates. But generally speaking Mr. Vice-chancellor, the university we see in 1991 is almost a shadow of the university that we knew in the past. It's so different. Apart from the violence, what do we do? Will stopping violence alone solve the problem, or do you have other things in mind? How do we restore the university to the glory that it once was?

VC: Linked up with this is the issue of session jam, which is actually sapping our energy, and taking a lot of our time. Teachers cannot plan their year, they cannot plan when to work, when to teach, when to examine scripts when to do their research. This arises out of violence, because violence has brought in unscheduled closures and that in its wake has brought in session jam. These two are the major problems of the day, but there are other problems too.

As you know this university started with a student population of 868, and now that number has grown to 28,000. So we have grown 30-40 times. Of these only 25 to 30 per cent of the boys and girls can be accommodated on the campus, and this is another aspect of the problem. Some people say that, since we have lost our residential character, we may not accommodate all our students on the campus. But in a society like ours there is no such system like the digs in Oxford for example. We don't have a system like lodgings of earlier days, those systems are also gone. Since the larger proportion of students come from outside Dhaka, they have got to be given good accommodation, nutritious food, and a good environment at the library, laboratory and classrooms.

But the number of students has risen so high, and resources are scarce. This particular university is passing through a financial crisis. The University Grants Commission

higher education. Therefore, the solution lies not only in not expanding this university, but in having other institutions of higher learning. There should be more.

DS: There is lot of talk in the international arena about administration of universities, and particularly of resource management. It has been found that many of the universities that have run their affairs along traditional lines are in fact wasting their resources. Do think there is any case to be made for a more efficient use of your limited resources?

VC: Yes, I agree on this. Available resources have been wasted to some extent in the past, but I am not prepared to accept that we are doing that at the moment. For instance, when the allocation was made by the UGC last year, we found it very difficult to manage our affairs within those limited resources. Even then we did economise on several elements of the budget. Even after that, the deficit was to the tune of 2.5 crores takas. I didn't know where to find that amount, and we were looking forward to getting the additional amount in the revised budget. And again, that was also not available. At the same time we economised and managed it in such a way that at the end of the year — now the fiscal year has ended, I can tell you — we have managed it well, and actually made up the deficit. But that only at the cost of starving some of the pressing needs in the academic sector. Unfortunately whenever we have to cut, we have to cut it on the academic components of the budget, because salaries cannot be cut or stopped.

We could not realise some expansion programmes that we had; new posts created in some departments could not be filled; then we could not open a new department of computer science that we had planned to open; and some programmes such as the Delta Research Center had to be delayed till the end of the fiscal year. So some of the programmes which we thought were in the national interest could not be taken up in hand.

Unfortunately in the past, there have been lop-sided development in the university. In one department for example, there are 54 teaching posts, but there are other departments in the same university where there are only 15 positions — all taken together, professors, associate professor, assistant professors and lecturers. Fifty-four in one department, to me personally, is too many, we really do not have enough work to give to all the 54 for teaching. On the other side, 15 is much too less.

DS: Do you think it will be a good idea to increase the fee students pay?

VC: Well, this is another sensitive issue. You see, there are two schools of thought about this. The students' fees have remained as they were in 1921 when the university started. Fees have never been enhanced, because of two reasons: as a matter of policy because no university Vice-Chancellor would dare do that because that would invite trouble for him.

Apart from that, there is another school of thought within the academic community also which says, that after all why increase the fees? Increasing the fees won't get us much money, it would be only a small amount. On the other hand, increased fees may become a disincentive towards higher education, and since academics on the campus believe we still have to expand higher education, they don't think it is a good idea as a matter of principle to increase the student's fees.

VC: With the value of the taka sliding, perhaps you are spending more money collecting the fees than you are earning from the fees?

VC: In a way you could say that. In fact, I was proposing to some of the student leaders at one time, that I wouldn't take any seat rent from the students if I didn't have to give any light bulbs to them, because we spend more on bulbs than we realise as seat rents. But then, if I don't give them bulbs, they would say, here is a Vice-Chancellor who doesn't

want his students to study at night! So how dare do I do that?

DS: This general crisis you see at the university has its effect on every aspect of university life. How is the university today being rated by universities in other countries, how do they look at Dhaka University? Do you see any change in the rating of Dhaka University by any of the great universities to which you had been? Secondly, do you see much quality research work being done by people at Dhaka University? And the third is, of course, how is the teacher-student relationship — do they have the beautiful relationship that we had, in the '50s? Drop in at the teacher's house, have a piece of cake and a cup of tea and discuss what you were going to do in your tutorial, that sort of thing.

VC: I would say that the top layer of our students that pass out from this university even today, are as good as before. They can be rated as meritorious, brilliant students capable of doing higher studies and researches in any university of the world. But you might say, how about the average student? Average students, of course, may not be rated very high, but here is a question of numbers. At one time, the student-teacher ratio was very favourable, and because of individual contacts between teachers and students, and also because of the facilities they could provide both at the library and laboratories, a student's quality on average could be higher.

DS: Would you like to put a figure on the student-teacher ratio, what it was, and what it is now?

VC: Overall, the average is one teacher per 28 students; within that in the Science Faculty the average is around 17/18 students per teacher, while the ratio is one teacher per 40 students in the Arts Faculty. Ten years ago, the ratio was more or less the same, but the number of students was much less and the atmosphere was much healthier.

Going back to your previous question, may be we have lagged behind unfortunately in the field of quality research. We don't produce many Ph. Ds.

A university has two basic functions: teaching, definitely, and research. The latter is done by teachers and also those doing doctoral work or other work involving research, at the Masters and M. Phil level. But the number of Ph. Ds we've been producing is much less than it should have been. This is because of the fact that many of our younger teachers get a chance to go abroad and do their doctoral work in a more congenial environment, so they are not attracted towards doing any Ph.D here.

VC: Yet, I mentioned development science which should encompass much of the social sciences. Definitely we should have researches into social sciences, particularly economics, sociology, and also as an independent country, international relations. There should be lot of scope for area studies such as South Asia.

DS: Do you have a periodic revision of the university curricula, is there a time-frame like two-year, one-year.....

VC: Normally it is being done every year. But then we keep more or less the same set. And unfortunately, — of course some of my distinguished colleagues in other universities may take exception to this — but I have a feeling that the syllabi that have been drawn up in other universities of the country are more or less copied from here. And we have copied from abroad. Very few give thought and imagination to it.

DS: Is the criticism that university education as it stands today, is not relevant to the needs of the nation, valid?

VC: I would say there is room for improvement.

a university is after all a university, it has its own, traditional function of producing cultured men and women, but I do not share that view very much. I do share that view to a certain extent because that is definitely one of the functions of a university. But then the courses and curricula have to be tuned to national needs also.

Having said this, unfortunately our universities are perhaps not tuned towards that. That is because imaginative people have not shaped the things that should be done here. I wrote an article back in 1978, about opening a department of development science. At that time my idea was that it should be a department where students would be given a comprehensive idea about all problems connected with development. That it should be an inter-disciplinary department.

Unfortunately, I was much too young at that time and I couldn't get the academic community to agree to that type of thing. They go for basic research as they call it, fundamental research as they would love to call it, and not applied things. I am one who thinks that all our researches, all our efforts must have some applied aspect to them, otherwise really we cannot serve the community. That is why I have been trying to say that our research thrust should be in the areas for example of energy, environment, bio-technology, development, delta research, computer, oceanography etc. These are some of the areas which I would like to develop here.

DS: And you don't have them now?

VC: We have a centre for energy research, and a centre for bio-technological research, but none of the others. But the existing two are also suffering from shortage of funds.

DS: You didn't mention any social science faculty, is it your view that they are well-attended to the development needs of the country.....

VC: Yes, I mentioned development science which should encompass much of the social sciences. Definitely we should have researches into social sciences, particularly economics, sociology, and also as an independent country, international relations. There should be lot of scope for area studies such as South Asia.

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DS: Assuming that the university has overgrown and we cannot expect it to grow any further, how do you view the move to set up private universities in Bangladesh? Would it take the pressure off your university, or will it — I shouldn't answer it myself! — create an elitist institution?

VC: It would do both, in fact you have replied to your own

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having served in virtually all statutory bodies of the university. He has a number of publications to his credit, including "Floods in Bangladesh."

One of the first questions put to the Vice-Chancellor was rather an obvious, if not a particularly pleasant, one: "How do you feel being on such a hot seat?" Dr Miah simply smiled and said that despite all the problems he faced, he enjoyed the "privilege" of being the Vice-Chancellor of the Dhaka University. From then on, he maintained his calm posture and a sense of cautious optimism, never giving the impression that he feels defeated or let down, in fighting the forces he alone cannot control.

The conversation was conducted by the Editor of The Daily Star, S. M. ALI who was assisted by the Executive Editor MAHFUZ ANAM and Assistant Editor, SABIR MUSTAFA.

DS: To what extent is it a law and order problem, and to what extent is it a political problem, and how do you get the two things together?

VC: It is in the first place a political problem, and arising out of that is a law and order problem. It is a political problem to the extent that, somehow or other, politics in this country has not been on the right track over a long period of time. In the absence of a democratically-elected government in this country, from time to time, I think some of the parties thought it appropriate to take to other means. That is one aspect. Another aspect is, of course, which has never been proven nor do I have any concrete evidence to prove, but it is generally believed that some governments in the past have encouraged violence themselves.

DS: If you were sitting in the prime minister's office, and she were to say to you, "All right vice-chancellor, give me your advice, what am I going to do now?" What would you say?

VC: I would say that, now that she has taken the lead, she should have got the political parties to agree to this

*"...the problems I inherited were enormous... for several years, many of the important committees did not meet, and many of the problems remained unsolved, for five, six, seven years"*

