

# The Daily Star WEEKEND MAGAZINE

## A LOOK AT THE LIBERAL ARTS IN OUR UNIVERSITIES

All the four 'General' Universities of Bangladesh have provision for the Humanities in their curricula. This, obviously, is a legacy of the British Indian model of University education introduced in the Sub-continent about the middle of the nineteenth century.

We have had by now more than a hundred years of University education in the Western sense of the term in this part of the world. The sub-continent is now studded with numerous universities. The territory now known as Bangladesh which had its first university as late as 1921, has at present as many as six, of which two are professional colleges raised to the status of universities. Between the universities of Dhaka and Rajshahi, there was a gap of thirty three years, between Rajshahi and Chittagong, of twelve years, between Chittagong and Jahangirnagar, of four years. It is some indication of the accelerating pace marking the march of university education in the country. It is a fact of some significance that in all these four universities, some of the earliest disciplines to have been introduced belonged to the Humanities. It should be remembered, too, that in the academic organization, the broad division was between the arts and the Sciences, and that generally the Humanities were not separated from disciplines now identified as the social sciences.

It will be stating the obvious to say that the modern universities of Calcutta, or Madras or Bombay had little in common with the ancient universities of Taxila and Nalanda.

Education, in India, unlike in Europe, does not represent a continuous tradition. During the Muslim period of Indian history, the idea of a university, of institutionalised intellect, seems to have been forgotten. The few theological colleges do not measure up to this idea. Even if places like Nalanda pre eminently provided for theological studies, as did many of the medieval universities of Europe, they at least resemble modern universities both in spirit and form. But Taxila and Nalanda were little more than memories when the first three universities were founded in India in the middle of the nineteenth century.

Naturally, therefore, the Humanities, the disciplines of Literature, History and Philosophy, as these were incorporated in our universities, were of western origin. Over the years the literatures of India, the Indian history, and Indian philosophy have gradually been accepted as part of the basic disciplines, and sometimes even as independent disciplines. It would be a fascinating story to trace the growth, the metamorphosis in later years, of each of these separate disciplines, their interpenetrations, their interpenetrations, the history of their cross-fertilizations, the growth and decline of their prestige and influence. But this is a subject quite beyond my scope. All I can hope to do within a brief compass is to outline the present situation in the universities of Bangladesh of the one discipline which can be regarded as the core of the Humanities, namely Literature. I will venture to suggest that what is true of Literature will generally be true of the disciplines closely allied to it.

### Western Origin

I shall begin by stating that the idea of the study of literature as *humanitas* is itself of western i.e. of Graeco-Roman origin. It is intimately connected with the concept of liberal education, a concept borrowed from the West. It is possible to argue that the system of education prevailing in the sub-continent was not necessarily illiberal or theological, since there was room for both Amir Khusrau and Tulsidas. All this is admitted. Medieval India was not medieval Europe. We had no such institution as Papacy or Inquisition. There

were not only various faiths being practised by people, new faiths were being preached and accepted, often with impunity. The scene suggests a state of religious tolerance, and of dogmatism very much in the background. On top of every thing, there seems to have been a complete *laissez-faire* in education, in spite of the fact that primary education was the responsibility of the Mullah or the Brahmin. The young scholar, starting off with a religious schooling i.e. with Arabic or Sanskrit did not of necessity matriculate into a theological college. Some did, but others did not, and the latter were probably more numerous than the former. It is a fair guess that the educated Indian in pre-British India, without the privilege, and the constraint, of a university education, was nevertheless a product of a kind of liberal education. He was well-versed in several languages, classical and modern. His education was largely self-directed, institutions of higher education being virtually non-existent. The decline of Buddhism in India removed the only organized



Students on DU campus, the TSC at the background

church with its monastic orders that could sustain places like Nalanda and Taxila. In a situation like this, the Humanities and the Sciences, as also the technologies of the West, must all of them have been very unfamiliar things as they were first introduced. For example, when English literature came to be studied in our Universities, it was probably the first literature, ancient or modern, Oriental or Western, to be studied in a comparable manner in the subcontinent. The same would be true of history and, perhaps to a lesser extent, of philosophy.

### Segregation

In the early years of western education, the disciplines of Sciences and Arts were not severely segregated. The separation came in later years. When the University of Dhaka was established (1921), the courses were organized on the principle of separation. There was little common ground between the Arts and the Sciences. The Humanities were all there, each single discipline being taken care of on the administrative plane, by a separate Department. All the three Departments could claim the services of some very distinguished professors, but, apparently due to a combination of circumstances, History prospered more than any other humane studies.

The Faculty seems to have been more talented than the

undergraduate body. And tough there were some very famous names in the Science Faculty— notably that of Prof Satyen Bose — no faculty enjoyed a clear superiority over the other, neither Science over Arts, nor vice versa. Law remained rather undistinguished and still remains so. Among the humanities, English maintained a decent standard in its teaching side. Research was confined mostly to History, and, to a lesser extent to Bengali. Partition, and the consequent migration of teachers, dealt a blow to academic standards from which the university has never fully recovered. All the disciplines suffered, and for years after the partition, the Humanities remained very weak. Both in research and in creative teaching, the weakness persists. Admission figures, which continue to swell, cannot conceal the hard fact that the academic pulse beats very feebly. The Department of Bengali, by no means lucky in the quality of its students, was more lucky in state patronage which enabled it, and its sister Departments in other universities, to bring

legislation, to meet regional demands, and not to embody new academic ideas. This situation may not be peculiar to the Humanities in our universities but perhaps exists in its acutest form in this area. Literature, too, suffers from this cult of the stereotype. Everywhere it is compartmentalized, English keeping haughtily off Bengali, Bengali suspicious of English, anxious to ignore Sanskrit, Pali and Prakrit, not caring too much about Assamese, or Oriya or Hindi or Urdu. It is a curious situation where two modern languages, irrespective of whether they belong to the same language family or not, irrespective, too, of whether or not they share the same cultural background, cannot come close to each other, and establish a process of transaction or of mutual enrichment. It can mean only one thing: in the academic sense, they are more dead than alive.

When an European scholar masters an oriental language, he discovers a new world, and writes about it, and usually leaves a number of translations. Centuries of Arabic and Persian Scholarship in this part of the world, by comparison, presents a picture of utter barrenness. A century and half of English scholarship has a better record, but only slightly. It certainly has set Bengali literature on a new course altogether, — which incidentally remains its chief glory. But when you consider that in all major European languages, you can study the best works of the other major languages, you realize where we stand. Incredibly little of the best

out sumptuous looking journals of research. A considerable volume of research, some genuine, mostly trite or pedestrian, was made possible through this governmental munificence. By comparison, there was little research in English, but students generally were of a better grade and showed impressive results in the Civil Service Examinations. Philosophy sunk into obscurity. Arabic, Persian and Islamic Studies followed their obscurantist courses. Arabic, in particular resembled more a department of theology than one of literature. Sanskrit remained a small adjunct of Bengali. History, it may be remembered, was early bifurcated when Islamic History succeeded from the parent department, which set a pattern for Rajshahi, and later, for Chittagong.

### Germ of Truth

A description of the Humanities in the Dhaka University, however general, however sweeping, contains, I hope, the germ of truth about that area of knowledge not only at one university but also in the other, newer universities. This is so because these universities are organized on similar lines and belong to the same brood. They are all state sponsored, and they are all federal in structure, with the single exception of Jahangirnagar. Also, Universities came into existence as a matter of

### Zillur Rahman Siddiqui

works of English has been translated into Bengali despite our long and close contact with the language.

Literature Departments in our universities have followed a closed door policy. Committees of Courses and Studies have met and dispersed without disturbing the courses, without changing authors, without touching hallowed texts for years on end; teachers have repeated the same teaching; paper-setters have set the same questions with monotonous regularity. From course planning to marking scrips, the routine activities have been marked by a

and dropped, due more to exigencies of situation or personal whim than any hard thinking pointing to a change. When Anglo-Saxon was dropped from the Dhaka Honours Course in English, the reason was not any argued objection to it, but simply the absence of a teacher who was interested enough to do the job if Philosophy is no longer a significant component of Bengali courses, the reasons probably are similar.

As one surveys the field of the Humanities, and confronts this picture, one is led to ask whether this is a sick limb of our body academic, or the body itself is as sick as this particular limb. Bangladeshi speaking, I do not know the answer. One can

hardly deny that fewer and fewer of our talented students are offering courses in the liberal Arts. As is well known,

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A demonstration at the Rajshahi University

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each year we have a large number of students being admitted to the Universities who do not have the necessary

qualifications for admission. Of this, a larger proportion apparently are drawn to the Humanities and Social Sciences than to the Physical or Biological Sciences. Also, for the very best there is less certainty of a first class in the Humanities than in the exact sciences, which keeps many an ambitious student from disciplines like English or Philosophy or Bengali. The fluctuation of fortune among the disciplines as far as quality of enrollment is concerned seems to be dependent not so much on the vitality of a particular University Department but on purely mundane Consideration like job opportunity.

The Civil Service courses in the past quarter century were so planned that students of History, English and Economics enjoyed some advantage over students of

resulted in the thinning out of available teaching talent, resulting in the weakening of all the Departments — a price we have had to pay because of the excessive 'Departmentalism' in our universities. No Bangladesh University has not yet been organized on the basis of Schools or Colleges representing larger areas of Knowledge like the Humanities and Social Sciences. There is a strong case for Schools of Liberal Arts, or Schools of Literature in preference to the existing Departments, each in its water-tight compartment, refusing to share its resources with others.



Prime Minister Khaleda Zia inaugurating the Khulna University

A concentration of teaching talents, a more open door policy in sharing each other's resources, a more sensible admission policy, are some of the measures well worth trying if we wish to infuse more life into the Humanities.

Another feature about the Liberal Arts in our Universities is the paucity of qualified teachers. In some disciplines like English and Philosophy, and to a lesser extent, in all other disciplines too, we simply do not have enough people to man our Departments. Thoughtless proliferation has

## Buddhist Heritage in Bangladesh

D P Barua

Lord Buddha is believed in religious legends as having visited Bangladesh.

Buddhism in Bangladesh is almost as old as Buddhism itself. The cultural heritage bequeathed by Buddhism during the last 2000 years is intricately interwoven in the rich mosaic of ancient cultural past of Bangladesh.

Lord Buddha is believed in religious legends as having visited Bangladesh. Buddha Gaya, seat of his Supreme Enlightenment and Sarnath, the sacred place where he preached the first Wheel of Dharma in neighbouring India and his birth place Lumbini in Nepal is not far away from Bangladesh. The legend is given credence by a pilgrim's account in 'Avadankalpalata' — a book of 11th Century that Buddha had preached his new doctrine in Bengal.

Buddhism spread to this region in the Third Century BC under the influence of Emperor Ashoka who had sent missionaries throughout the Indian Sub-continent as well as across the seas and lands in what is known as his 'Dhamma expedition'. Inscriptions found at Sanchi in Bhupal (India) in Second Century BC and at Nagaynikonda in Third-Fourth Century AD support prevalence of Buddhism in ancient Bangladesh.

Buddhism blossomed in this region now forming Bangladesh as the religion of the masses from the Eighth Century to Thirteenth Century under the patronage of Buddhist Pala Dynasty whose founder Gopala was elected King by the people during a period of great social anarchy in Eighth Century Bengal.

Under the patronage of Buddhist kings of ancient Bangladesh, great monasteries like Nalanda, Vikramshila, Sompuri, Odantapuri etc were built up as centres of learning of Buddhist philosophy and all other aspects of knowledge. The most significant of these monasteries was Sompuri Vihar whose massive site was unearthed at Paharpur of Rajshahi by British archaeologists. Constructed in Eighth Century and developed under the patronage of Pala Buddhist Kings from the Eighth to Eleventh Century the

monastery is described as the biggest monument, south of the Himalayas. Its architecture influenced style of Buddhist monuments in South East Asia. The monumental Borubudhur Temple of Java had been modelled after it. The architectural marvel of Omkar Wat Temple in

Cambodia is also said to be influenced by the fascinating style of Sompuri Vihara. Archaeological excavations in Matnamati in the Comilla district led to the discovery of a picturesque centre, locally known as Salvana Vihara, which is, in fact, the ruins of the historic Kanastupa Vihara. The ruins scattered along the 11-mile-long range of Matnamati Lalmai hills speak of a flourishing Buddhist civilization from the 9th to the 13th Century.

The ancient Mahasthangarh in Bogra was the seat of Jagaddal Vihar, also known as Agrapuri Vihara. A number of other monasteries referred to in Tibetan writings and travel diaries of Hsueh Tsang are the Vikramपुर Vihara of the Vikramপুর region of the Dhaka district, the Dhammarajika Vihara of the Dhaka district and the Pandita Vihara of Chittagong, the greatest centre

of Buddhism somewhere in Chittagong as the major establishment of the Tantric Mahayana School. Atish Dipankar Srijnan, the outstanding Tenth Century saint and philosopher, who had preached Buddhism in Tibet and another scholar-monk Tilopa or Tilopad of Chittagong who had preached Buddhism in Bhutan, lived and studied in this Vihara.

Atish Dipankar Srijnan responded to invitation from the King of Tibet to visit Tibet for revival of Buddhism there. He made hazardous journey on foot across the snowy Himalayas to Tibet, where he revived Buddhism and continued preaching the compassionate teachings of Lord Buddha to mould a new religion there until his death. He wrote more than 100 religious and philosophical books on Buddhism which are still preserved in ancient temples of

Tibet. Mahayana Buddhism in ancient Bangladesh had flourished in the mystical philosophical moulds of Vajrayana, Kalacakrayan and Sahajayana. Monks created a new form of Bengali language about 1000 years ago from the crust of prevailing Prakrit language. In the year 1906, great Bengali scholar Mohomohopadhyaya Haraprasad Shastri discovered this language in some ancient manuscripts which had been lying buried in the monasteries of Nepal.

Monks of those days known as Siddhacharyas sitting in the cloistered monasteries of ancient Bengal from 10th to 13th Centuries slowly but surely created this new language closer to the language spoken by the common folk which has come to be recognised as the first-ever germination of today's Bengali language. These Siddhacharyas in their lyrical verses expressed ideas about Nibbana, Bodhi Citta, Sunyata, Karma, Karuan, Prajna and such other Buddhist concepts. Side by side with these, they also described contemporary social life and made picturesque portrayal of riverine Bengal, clouds and sunshine in Nature's cycle of six seasons, happiness and woes of common folk as well as life around as seen by them.

This period witnessed the development of a remarkable school of art comparable to the Gupta school of art as manifested in the standing Buddha images of Mathura and the Gandhara images of Talla modelled on sublime Hellenic

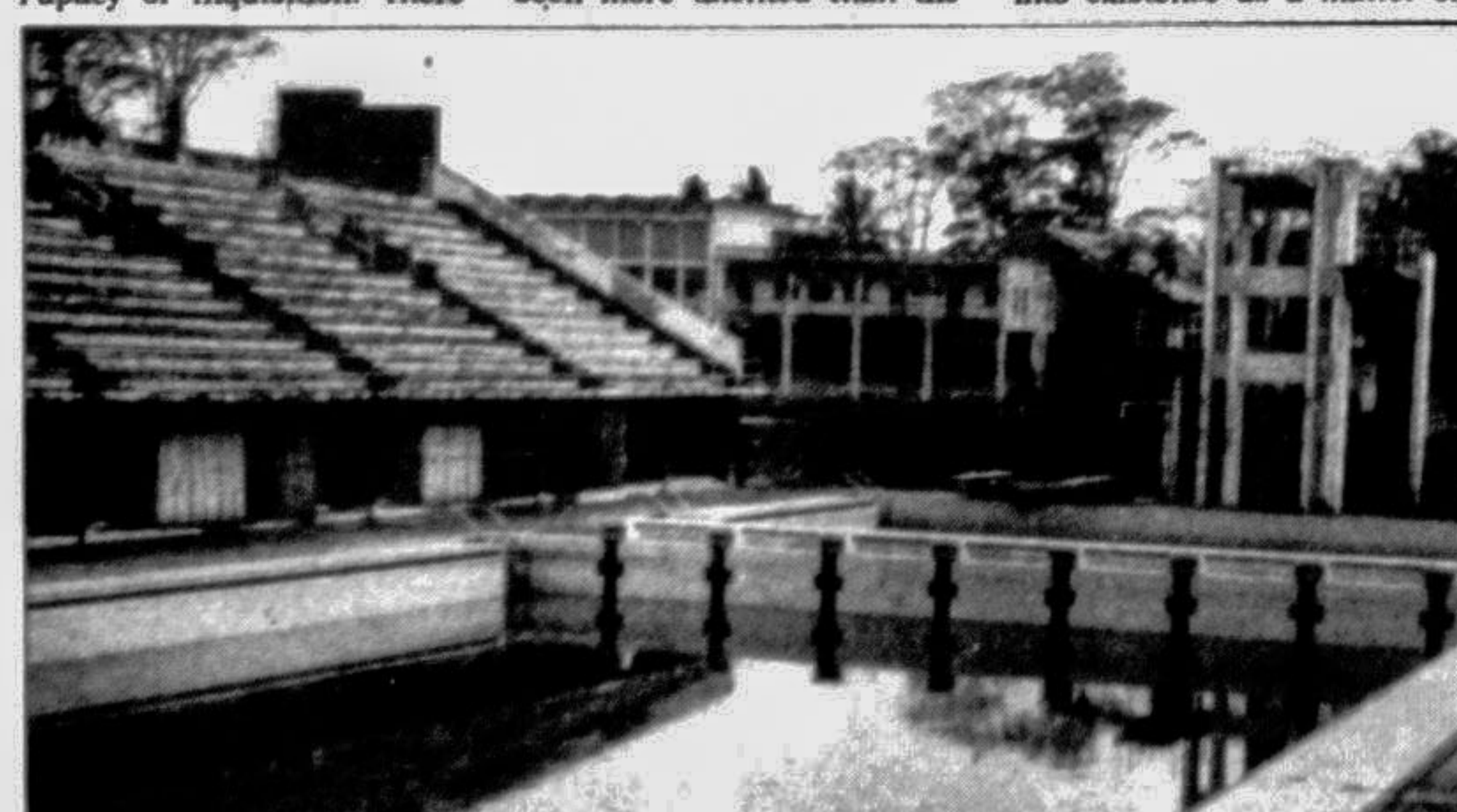
beauty. The Bengal School distinguished itself by the creation of Buddha images in meditation mainly in the 'Bhumisparsha Mudra' or earth touching attitude, with his right hand touching the Mother Earth as witness to his attainment of Supreme Enlightenment in the face of Mara's onslaught. Among the numbers Mahayana and Trantic gods and goddesses, 'Avalokiteswar' in particular inspired the artists who depicted him as the presiding Bodhisattva of the times looking upon mankind with infinite compassion and vowing not to seek Nibbana for himself until all human beings are liberated from the bondage of suffering. That was precisely how the Mahayana ideals were expressed in their art of ancient Bangladesh.

Buddhism was finally wiped out of ancient Bangladesh due to the masses converted into Hinduism while a microscopic section of Buddhists is believed to have survived under various camouflages in areas adjoining Matnamati ranges of hills of present-day Comilla and Chittagong closer to hilly areas. The surviving priests escaped into neighbouring Nepal and then across the snowy Himalayas to Tibet with their religious scriptures and literature. The Tantric Buddhist tradition survived in those countries for hundreds of years and were assimilated with indigenous beliefs and tradition.

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Buddhist temple at Cox's Bazar



The quiet side of the Dhaka University campus