

Golden Jubilee of Notre Dame College

The Spirit of Notre Dame

A Brief History of Notre Dame College

This brief history of Notre Dame College is a combined effort. **Fr Charles Gillespie** wrote a history for publication in the USA. It was expanded by the previous principal, **Fr. Peixotto**, then revised by the present principal, **Fr. Benjamin Costa**.

NOTRE Dame College is situated in Motijheel Commercial Area close to Dhaka's central railway station. There is something special about this college. The gentleman sitting next to you on the Dhaka-bound train, bus or plane might tell you that he was a student of Notre Dame. He owed his success in life largely to the training he got at St. Gregory's High School and Notre Dame College. He might mention that a good number of the nation's cabinet ministers and high dignitaries and national figures were from Notre Dame and that the Constitution was written chiefly by Notre Dame's former student, Dr. Kamal Hossain. Often guardians will proudly say, "My son reads at Notre Dame." The driver of the bus from the airport and the rickshaw driver in the commercial area will know the location of Notre Dame. And if you could speak to the little girl in tattered clothing in the commercial area carrying lunch pails to an office, she might flash a big smile and say, "I read in the school at Notre Dame."

Forty-five years ago many questioned the wisdom of the college Fathers when they moved St. Gregory's College to this new location out in the countryside area named Motijheel. Almost half the property was in a swamp. There were only a few houses in the area and a narrow dirt road in front bordering the college property. Today it is probably the most valuable land in the country. And you will see that the college, now named Notre Dame, provides an island of beauty in this commercial center, like a park full of trees, shrubs and buildings where children and young boys and girls come to study or play. Most people will say that the best of all college education is offered there, and that one finds there students of all types, rich and poor, Bengali and tribal, Muslim, Christian, Hindu and Buddhist. At the same time, hundreds of poor children come day and night to the three schools where they learn to read and write, to make furni-

Catholic colleges in East Bengal.

In November, 1949, two years after independence, the Holy Cross Fathers opened St. Gregory's College for boys. The following year, the Holy Cross Sisters opened Holy Cross College for girls. The original plan was to begin the college for boys in the fall of 1948, only a year after the new country came into existence. The person chosen to lead this effort was a veteran missionary, Fr. John Harrington, with the help of an older missionary priest, Fr. Raymond Switalski, and two newcomers, Frs. Gerald McMahon and Robert McHugh.

The Beginning — St. Gregory's College (1949-54)

From 1876 to 1888, the Benedictines founded St. Placid's High School in Chittagong and another school in Dhaka which they named after the famous monk-Pope, St. Gregory the Great. In 1918, the Brothers of Holy Cross had taken over the direction of St. Gregory's. Down through the years, the school built a reputation for excellent education unequalled among other schools in Dhaka. So the college founding Fathers had the great advantage of the reputation of St. Gregory's to start with. They simply moved into the same building and proclaimed that they intended to build on this ten-year high school course offered by the skillful and dedicated Holy Cross Brothers and extend it through another two years of intermediate level college. The high school classes began at 10:00 AM, so college classes were scheduled early, from 7:30 to 10:00 AM. St. Gregory's College began the first classes on November 3, 1949.

The new college began with two sections, eight students in Arts and eleven in Commerce, for a total of nineteen students, with four priests: Fathers Harrington, Martin, Switalski and McMahon, and four other dedicated teachers to complete the teaching staff. In November 1950 two more priests, Father Harry Burke and Charles

enrollment, conditions once more became hopelessly crowded. The new quarters acquired in 1950 actually were intended only as a temporary measure. So in 1953 the search began for a larger property. Fr. Harrington and the new superior, Fr. Joseph Rick, spent much time in various parts of Dhaka city and its suburbs looking over prospective sites. The government finally made available seven and one-sixth acres in the Motijheel area, just north of what was then the city. The area was completely undeveloped, largely under water and was approachable by a dirt road from one direction only. But it was apparent that the area would develop in the ensuing years. It has since developed into the main commercial area of Dhaka and the nation and the present college is buried among multi-storey office buildings and residential flats.

Construction of the new building began in 1954 under a local contractor who was also

building the new Holy Family Hospital in Dhaka, to be staffed by the Medical Mission Sisters. Fr. Rick served as a supervisor for the college construction. After one-and-one-half floors were finished, a snag was discovered. Dr. Desa, the engineer friend who had been living with the Fathers, discovered that the construction as planned would not be strong enough to support the weight of three stories. The government architect suggested that the contractor be required to tear everything down and start over again at his own expense. But Fr. Rick took pity on him and allowed the plans to be radically changed in order to rectify the fault. Large pillars were erected in the physics lab, library and administration study. The plans for a large open lecture theater had to be

leges was officially open, in compliance with orders from the existing government, but in fact it was closed in solidarity with the civil disobedience campaign of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his Awami League. From March 25, when the Civil War began, the extreme risk for students to come for classes was so obvious that there was no longer need to pretend the college was running. Still some of the fathers had to stay there in case any military should come to inquire. The government insisted that the college remain open, for they wanted all institutions to continue normally in order to give the world the impression that the uprising in the country was of little consequence. But most students of college and university age had learned to deal with adversity, to adjust and carry on. There was the consolation that they were winning respect for their fine efforts and continued success in formation of students. They were not doing as well as they had years before, but were "less bad" than what they observed all around. So with that spirit of perseverance, of doing their best and leaving the results to God, they moved ahead into the next phase of their history.

The government college level examinations could not be held as scheduled in April and May, but were rescheduled for September. Only a few students appeared, and they did so in vain because after the formation of these examinations were declared invalid.

Post-War Concessions to Students

After Independence classes did not resume until March, 1972, and even then attendance was thin.

Although a whole year had been lost, the missed

examinations were rescheduled.

And an extraordinary

concession was made: students

were promoted one year auto-

matically in order that they not be penalized for the year they lost in fighting for the indepen-

dence of the country. So two

groups of student had to be ad-

mitted into college at the same

time, those who should have

admitted in July, 1971, and

those due to begin in July, 1972, but had lost their last year of

study. Moreover, the colleges

were asked to make all ar-

rangements possible so that

they could accommodate double

the number they usually admitted.

And the two year interme-

diate college course was con-

demned into one year; at the

end of that course students were re-

quired to appear for only five

major examinations instead of

the usual ten. These moves seri-

ously disrupted, or even de-

stroyed, the standard of educa-

tion in the country. They helped

foster an attitude among stu-

dents and many teachers that

certified and degrees could be

attained without going through

years of regular and serio

is study. This set the pattern that

has carried on throughout the

country, continued involvement

of students in politics, which interferes seriously with

proper conduct of educational

institutions, neglect of regular

study, crash preparation for

exams during the last mont's

with the help of tutors, and

widespread cheating in exams.

Also, the government set

college fees at the compulsory

rate of Tk. 10.00. Before 1971

Notre Dame College had

charged Tk. 25 for Science and

Tk. 15 for Arts, which was just

enough to meet expenses. The

new fees on the average were

less than half. Notre Dame ap-

plied for government grants but

streets after college from

thieves and robbers. One of our

teachers got stabbed on the way

home from college.

Notre Dame College students

were required to study the entire

syllabus, complete all the labs

assigned and prepare properly

for examinations. When they

went for government or

university final examinations

they were serious about writing

what they had learned, while

students from other colleges

were cheating. Such was the

atmosphere in which the col-

lege was proceeding. But the

administration and teachers

did not fall into discouragement.

They had been through a war

and many other severe

problems, they had learned to

deal with adversity, to adjust

and carry on. There was the

consolation that they were

winning respect for their fine

efforts and continued success in

formation of students. They

were not doing as well as they

had years before, but were "less

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all around. So with that spirit

of perseverance, of doing their

best and leaving the results to

God, they moved ahead into the

next phase of their history.

The college union almost de-

stroyed the college early in

1974. Some students who had

gotten into college in 1972 after

automatic promotion from

high school found that after a

year of "study" at Notre Dame

they would not qualify in the

college examinations and

would not be allowed to appear

for the government HSC exami-

nations. They decided to solve

their problem by taking over

the college union and demand-

ing they be allowed to appear.

During the union election early

in 1974 matters got completely

out of hand: police were called in, politically motivated people

managed to drive the police

away, hoodlums came on cam-

pus and caused extensive dam-

age and looting. At first this ap-

peared to be a victory for the

perpetrators of the effort to take

over the union. But serious stu-

dents reacted and boycotted the

union elections, this brought

the crisis to an end. The follow-

ing year students of each class

showed little interest in electing

representatives to the col-

lege union, but finally did so af-

ter being urged by the college

to participate. But the union

that year also was very disrupt-

ive. The following year nobody

even suggested that union elec-

tions take place, neither the

students nor the college. Thus

the nine year experience of

student politics at Notre Dame

College.

Sometimes around 1985 the

principal received a govern-

ment notice that colleges are to

have union elections by a speci-

fied date. The principal spoke to

the DG of Education saying "In