

Fifteen days in the life of a Dhaka University professor

FAKRUL ALAM

Wednesday 17, 2002

I go to my third year B. A. Hons. class in the afternoon to teach *Robinson Crusoe*, a text I have been teaching for years. This time, partly to bring more variety in my teaching, and partly because I have come to feel that my classes should be more interactive, I have asked a number of my students to do presentations on selected themes. Today it is Asma's turn to do a presentation on *Crusoe's island*. A couple of days ago she had asked me what exactly I would like her to talk about. I had given her some suggestion about the island *Crusoe* lands on, its topography, etc. But today I am in for a surprise! Instead of a straight-forward presentation with a map, Asma has got a group of her class friends to dramatize *Crusoe's arrival* in the island, his peregrinations in it, his encounter with cannibals, Friday, and pirates. It is all brilliantly done. I am delighted at the creativity of Asma and her friends and also a little humbled. After all, I have been underestimating my students' abilities for some time now and berating them at every opportunity for not being creative enough!

Thursday 18, 2002

My wife and I have been invited to dinner at one of her colleague's house. The ambience is upper class, our hostess gracious, and the company cosmopolitan. But as is often the case in such situations, whenever I am introduced as a Professor of English in one of these gatherings, I have to face the inevitable questions: "so how is Dhaka University these days?" And "rare classes being held regularly?" These questions invariably provoke me, not only because I have been hearing them for years, but also because the last time the university was shut down *sine die* was in 1990. Also, except for some turbulent months in the early 1990s, and for the two months of unofficial closure during the last caretaker government, and the occasional shut-down because of strikes called by

this or that party, the university has been operating according to its academic calendar for years and years now. But I guess bad news travels fast and good news and Dhaka University are no longer synonymous. Also, I reflect sadly, what do these people know or care about Dhaka University? They might be asking me these questions just to make conversation, but their children study abroad and they are, as a rule, not bothered about what happens to ordinary people in the country. And only ordinary people now send their children to Dhaka University or care about its future!

Friday 19, 2002

I am in another party this night. There is a new talking point here now that the education commission has filed its report. According to most of the people present, the government has come up with a sensible proposition by deciding to ban student politics. Once again, because of my position, everyone asks me about my opinion on the issue. I tell them that I entirely agree that student politics as it now exists in Bangladesh should go, but

ask them if they are aware that what goes on in our universities nowadays has nothing to do with student politics. The cadres involved in student politics have no interest in issues that concern students, have not been elected democratically by them, and are only interested in serving their political masters in the two leading parties of the country and in making money for themselves. I stress that we can only label student politics, politics about student affairs, and call only those students student politicians who are democratically elected by students and who discuss issues relating to student affairs. I point out that this is always the case with students participating in student bodies in the West. Why should that sort of student politics be banned?

Someone asks me if I condone teacher's politics. I tell them that I do believe that we have unhealthy teacher's politics and that a section of teachers have become lackeys of the two major political parties. I tell them that I have no doubt that the autonomy act should be thoroughly revised since it has led to partisan

politics. Also, it is based on the mistaken assumption that a university should be run like a democracy whereas I believe that a university should really be organized as a meritocracy.

Another person present in the party, an elderly gentleman, asks me about my department and then without bothering to hear me respond compares the present faculty unfavorably with past ones. I am on the point of telling him that judged by the criteria used to evaluate academics everywhere -- academic qualifications, research publications, international/regional/national reputations, etc. -- we have a faculty more accomplished than the best in the past, but then say nothing. What is the point of talking to people who have made up their minds about Dhaka University because it is always in the news for one negative reason or the other? There is a kind of smugness about Dhaka's elite when it comes to Dhaka University that I have now taken for granted, although I must admit that it hasn't made me a whit defensive on all

these issues.

Monday, 22 July

I go to my 4th yr. B. A. Hons. Class today to teach the great American writer Thoreau. I wrap up the discussion on Thoreau's classic text, "Resistance to Civil Government" and point out how relevant are his ideas to our present situation: "That government is best which governs least"; "I ask for, not at once no government, but at once a better government," "But a government in which the majority rule in all cases cannot be based on justice, even as far as men understand it"; "Action from principle -- the perception and performance of right -- changes things and relations; it is essentially revolutionary,"; "Unjust laws exist: shall we be content to obey them, or shall we endeavor to amend them, and obey them until we have succeeded, or shall we transgress them at once?"

My 4th yr. Class is a small one; yet I enjoy teaching it not only because I love the writers of the American Renaissance, but also because the class contains some of the brightest students I have come across

recently.

Wednesday 24, 2001

As usual, I begin my day by skimming through *The Daily Star*. One headline says, "Ban on student politics planned". But I look down the front page to another caption: *Students stall JCD bid to oust DU Hall Provost*. Obviously, the government that has been planning to ban student politics has also been working overnight to dislodge the Provost of Shamsunnahar Hall through its student *mistiness*. I am not depressed by the rest of the story, though the news that "general students" "chased the JCD activists" (which I know mean thugs) and "brought out a procession in the hall chanting various slogans against the undemocratic move to oust the hall provost" cheers me up. Besides, according to the report, the VC seems to have assured them that he would look into the affair. Here perhaps was a VC who would be willing to rise above party politics and do what is right!

But the moment I enter the University I am in for one shock after another. As I go into the Arts Build-

ing, I decide to drop by and meet my friend, the Dean of Arts, Mesbah Kamal, as Assistant Professor of History, comes into the room and tells us that a few of his students who reside in Shamsunnahar Hall had come to the Department with bags and baggages early in the morning because they had to flee it at one point, and that a Police force had entered the Hall late at night and had roughened up many of the students aided by some JCD "activists". He relates also how quite a few of the students had been rounded up by the Police and taken to jail. "Shades of 1971," I quip, but because I have a class in a few minutes I leave the Dean's office.

As I am about to enter the English Departmental office on my way to my class, Asim stops me. "Sir," he says, "they have beaten up Nilima and her sister and taken them to jail. And they have a warrant out against Tanushree!" I react incredulously. How could such a thing take place? I know both girls well, and certainly they never struck me as the sort who would ever end up anywhere near a jail. Nilima, in fact, is the first student of her class and was one of the top three students of Comilla Board in both the S.S.C. and H.S.C examinations. And Tanushree has always struck me as the quiet sort. I rush to the Chair's office to discuss the situation with him. He is on the phone, trying to get through to people who could help. "Shawkat Bhai," I tell him, "let's do something, let's all go to the Thana if necessary, or call an emergency meeting of the Academic Committee." He nods his head in agreement but continues to phone people in his bid to do something. Since it is time for my class I leave, telling him to contact me if necessary.

As I start teaching, I can hear the sound of processions approaching. I myself am emotionally too upset; I can't focus on my lecture. Suddenly, there are processions everywhere, even in the corridors, which is unusual, since student groups no longer use the corridors for processions. The atmosphere is electric, and I realize that I will have to dismiss classes. Most students rush towards the Registrar's office to protest, but soon I see some of them beaten back. From the English Department office I can see BCL students being attacked by the police. As they run away a few of

them throw stones at the cars parked behind the Arts Building -- unlike general students, they, like their JCD counterparts, have by now mastered the art of breaking vehicles to perfection!

Our Chair has returned by now saying that the Police has released Nilima and 17 other girls but that the cases filed against them and Tanushree and others haven't been withdrawn. Meanwhile, the protest cries of students outside become deafening. I am told that in the Teachers' lounge faculty members are gathering signatures to protest the police action. Everyone I meet -- teacher or student -- is bewildered by what has happened. Every piece of information that is now being added to the story of the midnight raid horrifies us: How could the police brutalize so many innocent students? How could the university administrations act so mindlessly?

I go home for an hour and then return to the University at 1 p.m. since I have invigilation duties at 1.30 p.m. On my way, I meet two of my students who tell me how the police had systematically beaten up general students who were trying to stage a peaceful sit-in in front of the Registrar's office. They also tell me that the JCD forces were aiding the police in beating up general students. I go to the department only to hear that the examination had been cancelled. The teachers assembled trade more horror stories of police action. All of us wonder: have the authorities lost all sense? We discuss with each other what can we do in this horrible situation. There is a petition campaign on to protest police action; another one to call a requisition meeting of the Teachers' Association to discuss the events of the day.

I go home in a daze. The road in front of the VC's house is by now full of policemen, their vans, and even a Fire Brigade truck. The events of March 26, 1971 once again come to my mind. But surely, I think, our own government, our own police, our own administration will not be terrorizing our students like the Pakistani army did then!

(To be continued)

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Police action on the campus



FILE PHOTOS: STAR

Student politics : Barking up the wrong tree

MANZOOR AHMED

THE capacity to be outraged have reached the limit. Nothing seems to faze anyone any more. It takes blazing guns fired by goons masquerading as stalwarts of student organisations belonging to whichever regime is in power and finding an innocent bystander as a fatal target to draw public notice to the mayhem on the university campus.

Assault on fellow students and even teachers, extorting payments from providers of services on or around campus, brandishing lethal weapons, occupying dormitory seats illegally, locking up administration and faculty offices to express displeasure of "student leaders", and damaging university property and a few vehicles are routine shenanigans that hardly attract any attention.

It takes an innocent life to be lost, such as the death of the BUET girl student Sony last month, for the politicians to make sanctimonious noises and talk about a ban on student politics. Few are willing to confess their own role in criminalising

A moratorium, by definition a temporary one, on student politics is not the central issue at the moment. In fact, to restore calm on campus, to rebuild the academic environment, and indeed to bring back normal and healthy student politics to the campus, the government may very well take the lead to mobilise public support and gain a consensus on a period of "time out" from campus politics. Such an initiative will have credibility and will have a chance of success only if the government simultaneously strikes at the roots of the problem

the campus environment and aiding and abetting the crimes that pass for student politics. Who have installed non-students and known criminals as leaders of front student organisations? Who have protected thugs and criminals on campus? Who have removed and appointed administrators on campus purely on the basis of partisan loyalty? Who have used police to chase and attack dissidents and assist or look the other way from the loyal thugs on campus? The issue is criminality on campus, not student politics.

There is plenty of blame to go around across the political spectrum. But it is the height of hypocrisy to make student politics itself the villain rather than pointing at the

causes that have criminalised student politics. All aspects of our political culture -- from elections to exercising influence in small and big decision-making of the government -- have become corruption-ridden and criminalised. So much so that citizens seriously ask if democratic politics in its Bangladeshi incarnation serves the people well. But I doubt that anyone in his right mind will ask for a ban on democratic politics in Bangladesh.

Minister of Education Osman Farruk is a decent and intelligent man. He has brought a degree of sophistication and openness in discourse to the job of the Minister of Education not seen for a very long time. I believe he understands the difference between student politics and the criminalisation of campus life and how this has come about. He has tried to say the right things and assuage emotions without pointing fingers. He has also attempted to take the right steps to control criminality and corruption in education -- such as to bring some order to the charade of secondary school certificate examination.

In other areas his efforts seem to be not showing results -- e.g., scandal about buying equipment and books for language labs, school libraries and PTIs; and printing of textbooks. Some of these areas are the purview of the Primary and Mass Education Division, but the Cabinet has a collective responsibility. There have in fact been some retrograde steps. Removal and appointment of personnel on a partisan basis and sometimes in a highhanded way has continued. An education committee appointed by the government, largely consisting of ex-officio education personnel -- and, therefore, tinged by partisanship -- have submitted a report for education reforms to the Prime Minister about which the public has no knowledge. A recent directive of the government requires "political" people and nominees of local MPs to be the chair of governing bodies of educational institutions. This is hardly the way to inspire confidence in government pronouncement of ridding the campus of politics. Minister Farruk must be caught between a rock and a hard place. He cannot correct the ills of decades, especially if the political support from the ruling coalition is only lukewarm. He will earn the gratitude of the nation if he can take a principled position and persuade his political colleagues to take the steps needed to bring back sanity to our campuses. If he fails to convince his colleagues to stand with him, he should quit.

In the sordid tale of campus

criminalisation, most unprincipled and shamelessly mercenary roles have been those of university administrators and teachers. I regret to say, having belonged once to this benighted group in Dhaka University. It is difficult to say if it is only a minority that has been the willing pawns in the hands of evil politicians and has sullied the reputation of the majority. If the majority of the faculty have remained uninvolved bystanders, then they too are responsible. The episode last week of the removal of the provost of a girls' residential hall, police raid of the girls' dorm in the middle of the night and the role of the university administration in it, going by press reports, illustrates the level of moral and professional degradation of people holding the highest offices in the university.

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1. Disband unilaterally the front organisations of the ruling coalition (JCD and Shibir) and ask other parties to do the same;
2. Instruct university administrators to enter into a dialogue with

4. Police should be used on campus under strict guidelines, not for breaking up peaceful demonstrations or to favour or oppose any student group; but only against criminal activities by students and non-students on campus.

5. A moratorium should be imposed for a year against removal and new appointment in university administration unless there is a legitimate vacancy.

An administrative order or a legal ban will not solve the problem of criminality on campus. If the government proceeds with goodwill and sincerity, students, teachers and the public will soon find out and will support the government effort.

Dr Manzoor Ahmed, a former student and teacher of Dhaka University, also served as the Senior Education Adviser at Unicef headquarters.

Dr. Rubaiul Murshed

All health information to keep you up to date

Around the World

HIV : Beware of public places

In the next ten years, it is predicted that more people will die of 'AIDS' than died in all the wars of the 20th century. Because dangers of this global killer are still largely ignored. Here is something really alarming regarding HIV which happened in Paris. In a local cinema hall, a woman sat on something sticking that one of the seats. When she got up to see what it was, she found a needle sticking out of the seat with a note attached saying: "You have just been infected by HIV". The information about the Paris incident was sent by the ville d'Issy Les Moulinaux Police and to departments of Ile de France who transmitted this news to all its cities. The Disease Control Centre (Paris) reports many similar events in many other cities recently. All tested needles are HIV positive. The Centre also reports that needles have been also found in the cash dispensers at 'public banking machines'. All public chairs should be inspected with vigilance and caution before use. According to them a careful visual inspection should be enough. Recently, one doctor has narrated somewhat a similar instance happened at a cinema hall in Delhi to one of his patients. A young girl engaged and about to be married in a couple of months was picked up while the movie was going on. The tag with the needle has the message "Welcome to the World of HIV+ family". any way, we all have to be careful at public places, this is very important.

HIV: What does it mean? HIV stands for 'Human Immunodeficiency virus'. This virus attacks the human system, the body's defence against disease. A person with HIV may feel completely well and have no symptoms. However, over a long period of time, the virus may damage the immune system. As a result, the body may develop certain rare illnesses. When this happens, the person is said to have 'AIDS' (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome). A person with AIDS is likely to enjoy periods of good health between bouts of serious illness, but his/her immune system will gradually become less able to fight disease.

Next: ABC of diabetes