

# Fifteen days in the life of a Dhaka University professor

FAKRUL ALAM

Continued from Tuesday  
Thursday, July 25 and  
Friday, 26, 2002

The truth is coming out; the pages of *The Daily Star* are filled with stories of the tense campus, the unjust police action, the partisan action of the university authorities, the barbaric force used by the police, and the rage of general students because of the events that happened the previous day. The front-page photograph of the blindfolded Aparajeyo Bangla figures symbolizes the situation graphically: there is no justice anywhere!

Two other items in *The Daily Star's* Friday edition attract my attention: one is a front-page story captioned, *Hall Attack Irks BNP*. The Prime Minister and some of her ministers have been apparently shocked by what has happened. Evidently, there was talk of dismissing the Home Minister, punishing the police, and forcing the VC to resign. Could this all be true? But the campus itself is like a city under siege, and police and BDR troops are everywhere.

The other item that captures my attention is a letter to the Editor. Written by someone who prefers to hide behind the name of Thor, it no doubt articulates the feelings of a section of our elite: "I have no particular sympathies for the DU students in general because they do appear by and large to be rampaging thugs. Frankly I am also impressed with the ferocity of the females amongst them." I wonder what kind of a cretin this Thor is and try to conjure up an image of him. I have no doubt he and his kind applauded the Pakistani forces on March 26 and condemned the Mukti Bahini then. He must also have been one of the cronies of military governments who were outraged when students took to the streets to dislodge them. And he must be a sexual pervert, aroused by the sight of protesting women, the kind we read about in fiction dealing with Gestapo torture narratives, a mean, sneaking coward hiding behind a "law-and-order" conservative philosophy.

A few of my colleagues – all of them neutral and apolitical – have

been in touch with me. All of us decide we must go to the Teachers' Association meeting tomorrow to do what we can in this situation.

Saturday, July 27, 2002

The campus increasingly looks like a cantonment. But students seem undaunted; they continue to bring out processions, although they are being assaulted again and again by the police and the JCD "activists".

In the evening we have our meeting in the Faculty Club. As usual, the party "activists" of the "Blue" (pro-Awami League) and "White" (pro-BNP) teachers take up positions inside the meeting room. I myself have come to a teachers' meeting after years. But what amazes me in this overflowing atmosphere is the large number of young and apolitical teachers who have turned up.

As the meeting starts, there is the usual acrimony and jockeying for position between the "blue" and "white" teachers that made me stop coming to these meetings some time back. But then Mesbah Kamal narrates his experience so far, Tasneem Siraj Mahub, an Assistant Professor of English, describes how she found our students locked up like criminals in a cage, and Zahed Chowdhury, an Assistant Professor of Political Science, urges everyone to rise above the bickering that have polluted relations among teachers and brought things to the boiling point and resulted in the students' plight. Their speeches change the atmosphere dramatically. The "White" teachers are silenced and the "Blue" teachers realize that they would look bad if they did anything to take advantage of the "White" party's discomfiture.

At the end, the resolution taken is unanimous: we condemn the events that have taken place in the campus till now and will register our protest by taking out a silent procession the next day.

Sunday, 28 July, 2001

As I drive my wife to her school in the morning I come across a dismal sight: scores of students stranded in the road, waving desperately for rickshaws, or moving slowly down

the road, weighed down by the weight of bags. I remember 1971 when I saw people streaming down the Dhaka-Chittagong Highway in a similar situation! Obviously, the frightened university administration has forced students out of the halls in a bid to contain the student movement. I pick up as many of the girl students as I can in my car and drop them off and return home, bracing myself for more horror stories perpetrated by the VC and his henchmen.

At 9 a.m., Professor Anwar Hossein, Chair of the Biochemistry Department, rings me to ask if I could come in front of Rokeya Hall where students were staging a peaceful sit-in so that teachers could form a "buffer zone" between

them and the police, who were threatening to force them out. I rush to the spot. There are about 20 of us teachers there and about 200 students. We are told that all roads to the university have been blocked for everyone except the JCD "activists".

The students are orderly but the atmosphere is tense. Some police personnel move towards us and I discover one of my ex-students among the Mohila police. She tells me that I should persuade the students to leave. I tell her that the students are peaceful and that it is the police who should keep away.

Nothing happens for a while. Then the teachers' procession comes and we all join it and end up in Shaheed Minar. I am heartened to see some teachers of the "White"

group join us. Encouragingly, we are all rising above party bickering in our common cause against police brutality and unjust administrative actions!

On my way back, I meet about 20 students who plead with me and one of my colleagues to persuade the police to allow them to join the Rokeya Hall demonstrators. I agree to talk on their behalf and discover that the police officer in charge is another ex-student. I ask him if there is Section 144 or any other law being invoked to prevent students from moving in the campus. He is shame-faced and has no answer. I wonder if he attended my classes on Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant" where we read about a British colonial police officer in front of a

Burmese mob acting senselessly and shedding blood even if he is totally against what is going on because he is serving a totalitarian regime!

In the evening I go to the faculty club and hear teachers bitterly tell stories about how they were being denied entry to the campus by the police. I come home and find a letter from the university authorities requesting us to make I.D. cards. Shades of 1971 again when no one could move in the campus without "danty" cards!

July 29, 2001

I decide to stay home and work today. But early in the afternoon I get a call saying that Professor Anwar Hossein had been hospital-

ized after being beaten up by the police in front of Rokeya Hall. I am also told that a few other teachers trying to defend students against the rampaging police have been hurt. I go to the Medical College with a senior colleague where many other faculty members have come. All of us are aghast: has it come to this? As in 1971, are Dhaka University teachers as well as students being systematically being targeted? What should we do now? But Professor Hossein is wheeled out of the O.T., composed and dignified as I have always found him to be, despite the pain he is in. We decide we will call another requisition meeting. Then a number of us go to the Shaheed Minar, where students have reassembled and have begun a fast in protest against the attack on them and their teachers. In the evening faculty members meet in the club again to decide on a course of action. But what can we do against such brute force?

July 30-31, 2001

All of our focus is now on the Shaheed Minar. My colleagues and I return to the Minar again and again. Like them, I feel compelled to go there and be with my students. Such energy, such indomitable spirits, such resolve against injustice! I am introduced to one student on hunger strike, who has only one kidney, and who has been requested by a visiting physician and his own brother to break his fast, and who refuses to do so. I meet one of the brightest students of the Economics Department who had stood first in his Board and who had been beaten up badly by the police on June 29, and who, undaunted, had showed up again to join in the protest, despite his wounds. I come across my young colleague, Moshir, of the Sociology Department, who had been bruised by the police when he was with Professor Hossein, and who has come to the Minar to show his solidarity with the students. I see students falling sick, and becoming hospitalized. But obviously they are not going to give up. I am amazed by the creative means by which students are keeping up their vigil – their skits, mock trials, slogans,

songs, and processions! And they are all so articulate and passionate in talking about their cause.

I should feel depressed, but am actually inspired. I get the answer to the question I asked myself last night – "what can we do against such brute force?" – as I sit with my students in the Shaheed Minar. Looking at them, I feel the force of what Thoreau teaches us: "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?"

July 31, 2001

The VC and the Proctor resigned this afternoon. In the late afternoon the fasting students have been persuaded to end their fast. I read in the paper that President Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan has said "sorry" after 31 years for "excesses" committed in 1971. How long will it take for our administration to regret the excesses that took place in the Dhaka University campus this week? Who will save our campuses from our politicians/administrators/partisan teachers? When will the Autonomy Act be amended to curb excessive politics and to install a system where VCs, Pro-VCs, Provosts, Proctors, and House Tutors are selected on the basis of merit and not because of their affiliation to the ruling party? When are our leaders/elite/intellectuals going to learn to honour our students, and not castigate 99 per cent of them because 1 per cent of them have been recruited by our "leaders" to do their bidding? When are we going to realize that in a country where corruption and violence have become the norm, and where the conscience of most people at the top have become callused, the students of Dhaka University still have a lot to teach us all about principled and just action? (Concluded)

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Students on hunger strike



FILE PHOTOS: STAR

## Barbarity at its worst It's time to wake up to the danger

MD. ASADULLAH KHAN

**B**EATING, rape, murder, acid burning of school and college going girls or even young housewives are the images of violent crime generally associated with the most depraved individuals in the country. Because of the increasing and sickening frequency, no one is shocked any longer to hear of such atrocities committed by mobsters, drug pushers or psychopaths.

It is hard to believe and harder still to comprehend, but it is true: Some atrocious crimes are being committed by those who should be the most innocent – the young. Recent weeks have brought news of two particularly brutal acts: Trisha, a ten year old girl, a student of class IV at Gaibandha Madhyapara Govt Primary School was chased to death by some mobsters who had been teasing her although the last few months on her way to school. Sensing a fear that this time these hoodlums desperate with some devilish design were chasing her, she chose the nearby pond to escape the brutality and jumped into it. And weary of breath she had gone to her death. Known in the locality as a tender, sober and beautiful girl, she found no safe abode. Put in the rhymes of great English Poet Thomas Hood:

"O! it was pitiful  
Near a whole city full  
Home she had none."  
(The Bridge of Sighs)

Alas! In Gaibandha town, Trisha, could not find a home to live in dignity.

And in the fathomless watery pond she plunged boldly and perished gloomily spurred by cold humanity and burning insanity.

But the real story here, the real horror chronicled in painful detail in the media was the aftermath: sympathy turned immediately from victim to murderers, four known hoodlums of the town. It is now alleged that three of the accused hoodlums have been chargesheeted under section 302 and they will come out of the charge through the loopholes of law since it was not a direct murder and surprisingly, another accused, son of the Pouroushava Chairman has been let off because of his connection. It is now clear that

more tears have been shed for the killers than for the victim. Later story through the confessional statement of three alleged criminals reveals how hardened these hoodlums are! When one of the offenders wanted to get into the water to rescue Trisha who was desperately crying for help, he was restrained because that would expose their criminal deeds. The beastly act done, the gangsters melted away in the darkness. But the shock generated by such nefarious design that ultimately killed Trisha is far from ebbing even days after the incident. With such dastardly act so far confined to big cities, making its ugliest appearance in a rural outback of the country, the nation went numb with horror and shock. As the wave of condemnation rattles the whole

defecate in the home, rape young girls or house wife, in some cases torture them to death and then often burn the house before leaving. In Barguna (Greater Barisal), a young housewife was raped by some identified hoodlums after they had tied her husband against a tree. In Balla Union of Chandpur district a 15-year old girl was going to one of her relative's house by rickshaw when she was allegedly attacked by four terrorists and was later gang raped. All these statistics show an upsurge in the most violent types of crimes mostly by teens. In Feni, two housewives were gang raped by a group of 15 hoodlums after locking their mother-in-law, the lone member present in the house in a separate enclosure.

Reports published in the

homes, the secret becoming more public. What is chilling about many of these young criminals is that they show no remorse or conscience. Youths brag about their exploits and shrug off victim's pain. What distinguishes these boys is not their anger – who is without it? – but their lack of moral faculty. Acts of rage are usually followed by reflection and shame. In the cases described above, these characteristics appear to be entirely missing.

The boys were not angry. They were "wilding". Wilding is not rage, it is anarchy. Anarchy is an excess of freedom. Anarchy is the absence of rules, of ethical limits, of any moral sense. These boys are psychic amputees. They have lost, perhaps never developed that psychic appendage we call

**Moral vacuums produce moral monsters. While we observe that the rest of the world is now in fast-forward mode, we in Bangladesh seem to be moving inexorably backward. How else can we explain the drowning of Trisha in Gaibandha or raping and then killing of Jamila in Pabna? Why are none of our leaders able to control a handful of hoodlums who seem determined to impose their medieval barbarity on us? Sadly true, in Bangladesh it is now barbarity and gangsterism that appear always to win.**

country, people describe this "wilding" that drove tender and tiny Trisha to death, as a "monumental aberration" of the time-tested rural model of peaceful living. Not even the harshest words could measure up to the indignation felt in the nook and corner of the country.

Yet another report circulated by "Prothom Alo" in the last week that seems to be the most ominous development and profoundly shocking indicated that a 10 year old girl Jamila in Sathia thana of Pabna was gang raped by a group of youths aged 14 to 16 and then murdered. The atrocity committed on this young girl by the monsters beggars description. When Jamila got unconscious because of the pounding assault by these human beasts, they gouged her eyes, cut off her fingers and left the place after making sure about her death. These crimes have awakened the country to the beast that has broken loose in some young people even in rural Bangladesh.

Juvenile crimes appear to be more widespread and vicious than ever before. In earlier days burglars used to rob a house and run away. Now they urinate and

newspapers of late suggest that more and more teenagers, acting individually or in gangs are running amuck. In an interview, young toughs said that they were "wilding", which apparently means marauding with no purpose in mind but to create havoc, disruption, panic and hurt people.

To be sure, teenagers have never been angels. Adolescence is often a troubled time of rebellion and rage. Admitting that adolescents have always been violence prone, even then the sheer magnitude of the horrendous crimes being committed by these mobster gangs appall people inured to such incidents. These youngsters are "damaged", explains forensic psychologist Johnston. They are in pain inside, act out their pain on innocent victims. The crime wave flows across all castes, classes and lifestyles. But most of the offenders are between ages 14 and 30. Admittedly, the horror of such violence has always been with us, a persistent secret, silent and pernicious, intimate and brutal. But today it is spreading like an epidemic to more and more

conscience.

There are innumerable reasons for such stunted growth. Loosening family ties, the growing influence of money and the burden of increasing competition are some of the changes that are pushing these youngsters into the "fast lane" of life. A lack of communication, near absence of guidance on moral values and diminution of proper raring are compounding the derailment. Most parents think substituting time and loving care with money is adequate compensation for a child's needs. This is incorrect and it is time parents woke up to this fact. Most correctly stated, it is the parents of these youngsters who should be taken to task for instilling or allowing to be instilled the wrong values in their children. They get too much money and too much power at a young age. It is high time, the sensible citizenry woke up to the menace of young criminals often backed by rich and influential parents, running amuck in our society. Because of their contacts, mostly political, they consider themselves to be above the law. This encourages them to

break the law. As stated earlier, in the charge sheet submitted in the case of Trisha's killing by drowning her to death, the name of one of the four alleged accused, who happens to be the son of the Gaibandha Pouroushava Chairman, has now been written off through manipulation because of connection. It has been reportedly learnt that one of the accused, "Modern's father has long been involved in Phensidly smuggling business and his mother in Indian saree business." Shockingly, all the three alleged hoodlums so far arrested are school dropouts.

Teenagers often get their values from peers. Then just think, what these values are? In our society at large to-day emphasis is less on caring for others than on getting money and instant gratification. If a big shot can take what he wants often by illegal means then a teenager may think he should be able to grab the spoils in the only way he knows how. So says Harvard psychiatrist Coles, "Our culture accentuates instinct instead of inhibiting it". And we must all assume our responsibility for being indifferent to the circumstances that breed crimes of this sort. Strangely true, communities are taught to find blame everywhere but in themselves. Taking the cases of Trisha of Gaibandha and Seema of Narayanganj who took their lives in protest of societal indifference, sensible citizenry now understand that there is a rather large difference between suicide and homicide. For some the distinction is not obvious. They must be taught. If not taught, they grow up in moral vacuums. Moral vacuums produce moral monsters. While we observe that the rest of the world is now in fast-forward mode, we in Bangladesh seem to be moving inexorably backward. How else can we explain

the drowning of Trisha in Gaibandha or raping and then killing of Jamila in Pabna? Why are none of our leaders able to control a handful of hoodlums who seem determined to impose their medieval barbarity on us? Sadly true, in Bangladesh it is now barbarity and gangsterism that appear always to win. So welcome to the middle ages!

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## Profits, politics and policy in the gas sector

NURUDDIN MAHMUD KAMAL

**B**Y August 2002 the natural gas export issue has almost reached its climax. The honourable State Minister for Energy appears to be under duress now. He said that the government will have to give the Asian Development Bank (ADB) a decision regarding gas export soonest and for that the committee's report is needed immediately (DS 4 August, 2001). The ADB insists that a government decision is necessary now to process the US\$250 million Western Region (30 inch dia 500 km) Gas Pipeline project (hopefully this is not the same WRIP proposed earlier by Unocal). Incidentally, ADB's condition for exporting gas is not a new development, rather it tagged the condition with the clear support and assistance of bureaucracy and politics when the project was formulated. Thus, the new attack on a new front is taking its shape. But, to a common man gas export is considered unreal. And to most experts in Bangladesh it is a nightmare. Nevertheless, Unocal and the Ministry of Energy are the topics on everyone's tongue.

When I asked an old Dhaka rickshawpuller at Mahuttully (near Armentolia Government School) if he thought gas export was necessary, he snorted derisively, "Who do you think you're kidding? Most of the people in the country do not have access to gas. The country's only natural treasure cannot be sold to India. The oil companies already got what they wanted – highest profit with least investment. That's what that was all about". With the dicey ADB proposal the oil companies want to draw down and export a substantial portion of gas for little or no benefit to the nation. This, in my opinion, summed up, for most Bangladeshis, the scenario of the gas export. In fact, the people believed it from the beginning to what is seemingly the end.

The news item further reported that the visiting ADB mission informed that they would be compelled to cancel the 250 million dollar western zone gas pipeline project if the government of Bangladesh didn't go for gas export. The height of audacity of ADB is that they asked the government to let them know its decision by end August 2002. On this pressure tactics of ADB, the willing state minister reiterated his previous statement while speaking as the chief guest at the launching ceremony of Wesfarmers Kleenheat Elpinj (WKEZ) project on LP gas held on 1 August, 2002 in Dhaka.

Referring to the present controversy in gas reserve of the country, the State Minister made an interesting comment, "At least eleven countries in the world extracted two to three times higher amount of gas than the estimates done before exploration and drilling works." Such hypothetical assertions may carry some sense of comfort for him and his political colleagues. But in the real world things are different, particularly in Bangladesh. Through the courtesy of our media people by now have read and heard that the proven gas reserve estimate do not even cross the double digit figure!

The Daily Star on 3 August 2002 quoting UNB, Dhaka, reported, "ADB presses again for gas export". The delegation led by Mr S Chandar

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even hinted to discontinuation of aid to Bangladesh. He also handed down their condition for expediting gas export from Bangladesh. I tend to believe that this is pure compelling. In reply, I wish, the government could also boldly say we don't need such foreign aid. However, this is not the first time the ADB coaxed Bangladesh on the same subject. Reportedly, Mr Chandar, the ADB mission chief, has a reputation for coining his words very cleverly. He said, "You can call it a condition. But we say it is the requirement of the country".

The oil companies in Bangladesh understand these gimmicks. Yet, the present gas drama is steadily increasing with multipoint attack on Bangladesh. Luckily, this drama has not yet become box office for Bangladesh

audience. As we squeaked through every energy crisis, and while prices, along with volumes of energy imports, continually rose, we kept putting the wrong carts before the wrong horses: The syndrome of warnings of an impending gas supply crisis, a price rise that lent itself to the simplistic diagnosis of conspiracy. Oil company earnings and windfall profits (particularly from Jalalabad gas field) continued to virtually go up and up, yet they are not content. They now plan to kill the goose that is laying golden eggs.

As an ordinary citizen may I ask whether the situation has become such that the government cannot even exercise its right and face a donor institution? The IOC announcements on inflated gas reserve seemed to have hypnotised the government, particularly the State Minister for Energy. To many, it provides circumstantial evidence of collusion between the donors and the IOCs which has reached the height of a mountain in the past nine months since October 2001. If it continues to deteriorate any further, the parties would be flabbergasted by the avalanche of public wrath against them. In trying to explain what would happen, they would be as frustrated as the people waiting in the gas-connection queue. None of the IOC press conferences, newspaper advertising campaigns would make any difference. Now it is time to lift the curtain of secrecy which enveloped the government-IOC-donor relationship concerning natural gas, leading to the far reaching suspicions in the public mind. The secrets will soon turn out to be not all that secret. Public discussions on the gas assessment and utilisation reports will help develop a great deal of significant information concerning the need for the government to formulate a comprehensive policy concerning gas supply, prices and appropriate utilisation in the greater interest of the people; and also what should be the respective roles of the government, international oil companies and the donors in future. In the final analysis, the checks and balances of our system must operate. It has not served our country well so far. We hadn't done much, but at least we shouldn't do anything overly foolish. Our options are still open to learn what the real issues are and we must make judgments about them in a calmer atmosphere based on a more accurate appraisal of facts.

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