

As a news junkie, I read a lot of news stories and feature articles everyday online. But recently there was one particular news that got me all worked up. It happened last month in the heart of the capital. The incident has been widely publicized and by now, it is old news. A small group – a man and two young women on a visit to the Dhaka University (DU) campus were assaulted by a student gang.

On November 5th, Rubaiya Ahmad, along with her younger sister Saba and their uncle, Imtiaz Alam Beg, a prominent photographer of our country, were attacked by some students at the DU premises. According to media reports, the attack was sudden, vicious and unprovoked. The reason behind the attack – the visitors had the audacity to sit and relax on Dhaka University grounds where they were not students. This shocking incident has been vehemently condemned in the local media and many different circles. In this particular case the students were caught and suspended promptly by the university administration.

The first thought that came to my mind after reading the report was – thank God, the women were not raped and the gang was unarmed! We have become so accustomed and apathetic to violence in our everyday lives that simply escaping death or major injuries is considered a blessing. When a person is mugged at gun or knife point we immediately think that at least the criminals didn't kill him. Just being alive is precious in this country, where law and order exists mainly "on paper" and crimes are rampant. It happens everyday, you read the front page of any newspaper, and invariably there is a report of a blatant criminal act that takes place somewhere in the country. People are mugged, robbed, kidnapped and raped in broad daylight, at times in the presence of terrified witnesses. And nobody rushes to the victim's rescue simply because they know the hooligans will attack them too. Recently a woman was literally dragged to her death

in the streets of Dhaka; when muggers mercilessly snatched her handbag between Dhanmondi Rapa Plaza and the Sobhanbagh Mosque area that resulted in her fall from a rickshaw and led to her tragic demise. The bad news is non-stop. It is enough to make people feel nervous and helpless.

We live in a culture of perpetual fear – fear at every corner, every turn we take, fear to speak up and protest, fear to walk after dark, fear to travel alone and so on. Fear has gripped us and grimly taken control of our lives. From our childhood, we grow up with warnings, restrictions and cautions. "Come home before dark", "don't go anywhere alone", if somebody makes an obscene or objectionable comment, just quietly walk away and avoid confrontation. Instead of speaking up for citizen's rights and trying to remedy the circumstances that lead to this culture of fear, we have hopelessly accepted it as an inevitable part of our life.

There is not enough protest or measures undertaken to counter these crimes. As it turned out, the peaceful protest organized by the victims of the DU assault on November 12th was foiled by a large number of supporters of the students who attacked them. According to media reports, the students belong to Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL), the student wing of the ruling Awami League party. Whatever the visitors were doing that day most certainly did not justify the attack by these self-appointed guardians of the university. Nothing justifies an unprovoked act of physical violence. These student activists and others who claim to be affiliated with main political parties cannot treat the university as their personal property.

The way student activists typically abuse their power using their political clout is disheartening. Student activism can be a much needed powerful tool for social change in our country – and students have, on many important occasions in the history of Bangladesh taken the lead to fight tyranny, injustice

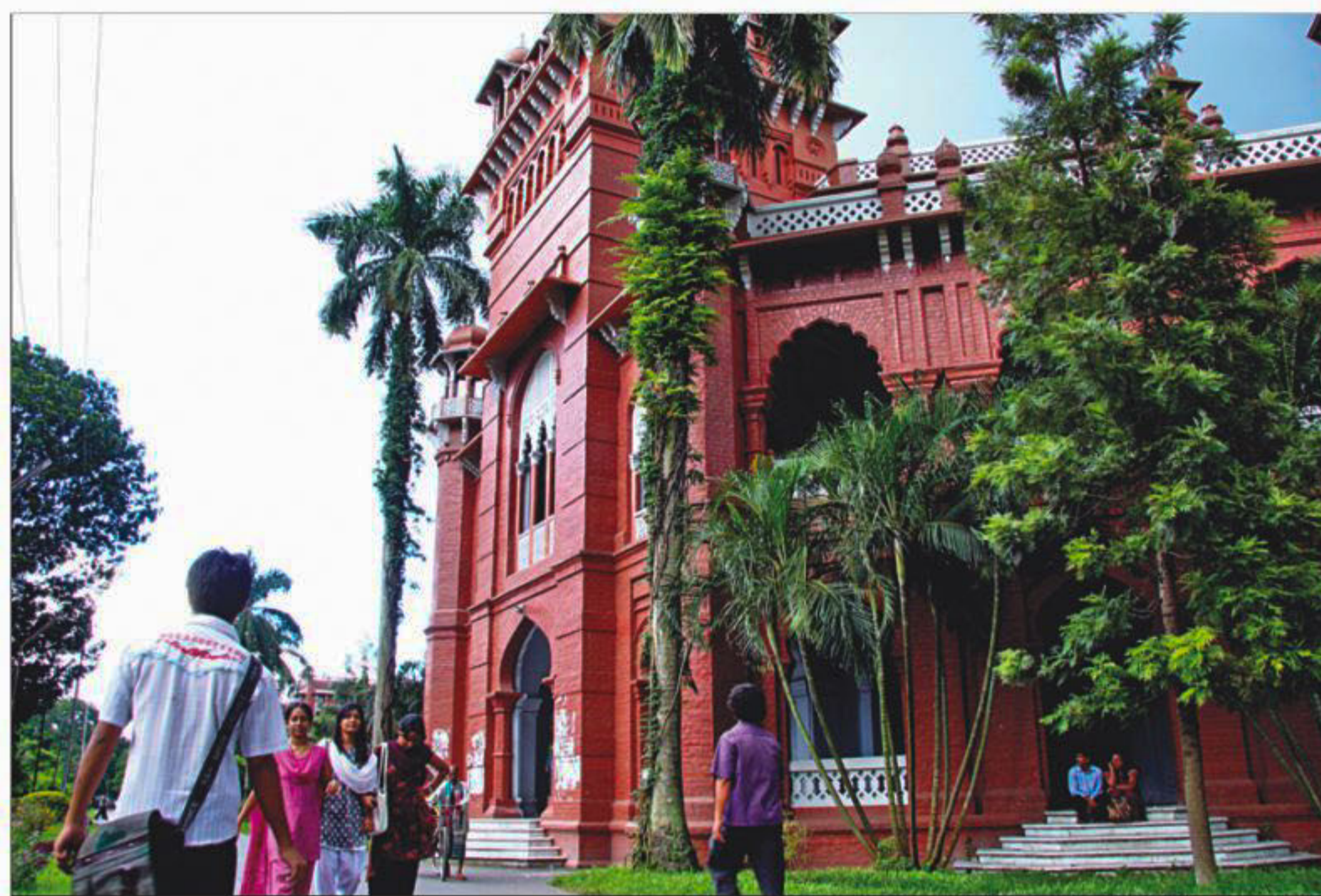


PHOTO: ZAHEDUL I KHAN

LIVING IN A CULTURE OF FEAR

LAVINA AMBREEN AHMED



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and oppression, i.e. - during the Language Movement of 1952, Independence War in 1971, the fight against the autocratic military rule in the '80s and most recently the Shahbagh movement. But this glorious image unfortunately does not reflect the daily activities of student leaders on our campuses these days. It is frustrating to see student political activists throw their weight around and engage in anti-social, aggressive behaviour rather than doing anything constructive like organizing campaigns for positive change.

As a former student and lecturer of Dhaka University, I have to admit I am not blind to all the faults of this prestigious institution once known as the "Oxford of the East". But like many other alumni of DU, I am also very proud of the heritage of the university. When this incident happened, I thought about the many times I've been to DU after I graduated in the 90s. I went there with friends simply to attend events, hang out or cover stories for the newspaper I used to work for. Never, did I feel I was 'trespassing' and needed permission to enter the campus. From my student days, I have regarded parts of DU - such as, the Aporajeo Bangla sculpture, TSC (Teacher-Student Center), Curzon Hall, Modhur Canteen as some popular "tourist sites" where people from all over the country and all walks of life would come to visit.

Dhaka University is a major part of Bangladesh's rich political history and culture. Former students would often bring their kids and relatives to proudly show them their departments and classrooms and

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other places. As a young student, I was often amused at the fascination and nostalgia of these visitors. They always looked so happy to revisit their beloved institution, reminisce their student days and pose for photo sessions. It is only now, so many years after I left the campus that I realize why these memories are so precious to visitors. DU is an alma mater to some fortunate Bangladeshis who can get admission to study there, but it is a place of historic significance and cultural pride to everyone else in the country.

This shameful incident of November 5th, is a wake-up call - a call for protest, a call to address problems, so that student activists and their cohorts cannot intimidate and terrorize us. So that we do not have to live in constant fear, afraid of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Conscientious citizens everywhere in the country must unite to fight these crimes from our educational institutions and elsewhere. Let us strive to build a safe Bangladesh, where the citizens can live with dignity, guided by rights that protect us.

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