

STORY OF UNIVERSITY OF DHAKA

EDITED BY IMTIAZ AHMED AND IFTEKHAR IQBAL

(DHAKA: PROTHOMA, 2016)

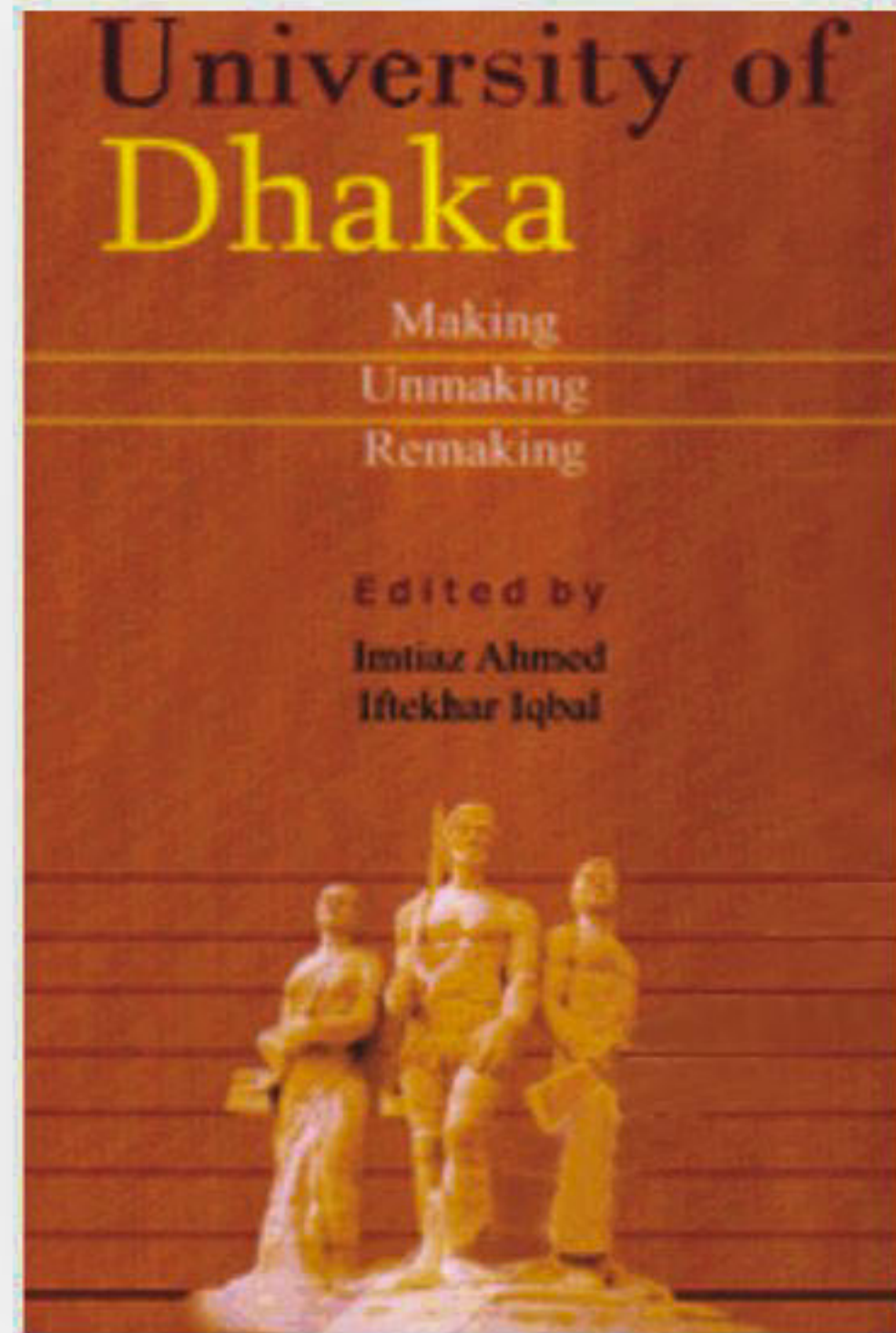
REVIEWED BY PROFESSOR FIRDOUS AZIM

I would like to begin by congratulating the editors Imtiaz Ahmed and Iftexhar Iqbal for bringing out this timely volume of essays *University of Dhaka: Making Unmaking Remaking*. As this institution which is the alma mater of many of the people who will be reading this book room reaches its centenary it is to be hoped that many such volumes are in the making and that we will see a republication of older histories and memoirs centred around the university. This volume refers to many of such older publications. The ones that caught my attention were the collection of convocation speeches edited by Professor Serajul Islam Chowdhury or the memoir of Philip Hartog, the first vice-chancellor of the university. I do hope our centenary celebrations will feature such a collection of books memoirs and reports pertaining to the history of the university which will also be a record of the history of country and society.

Let us come to the volume under consideration. The 14 articles are arranged under 5 sections, each of which looks at different aspects of the university as it exists today. While most authors bemoan the academic decline of the university, there is an outline for the remaking of the university. Were we to put all the recommendations in the various articles together we could come up with a comprehensive set of recommendations for the remaking of Dhaka University. The recommendations range from looking at the 1973 ordinance, thus concentrating on the policy level, to budgetary considerations or the financing aspects to the administration of both faculties and residential halls, remarking on the social and political aspects that govern the lives of students and teachers both.

I would like to the first look at the political. There is a dual, conflicting and contradictory attitude towards the political life of the university. As many of the authors refer to, and as is completely foregrounded in the articles by Amena Mohsin and Iftexhar Iqbal, the founding of the university itself was done with political considerations in

mind. Founded as a sop or a consolation to East Bengal and specifically Bengali Muslims after the dissolution of the first partition of Bengal, the university had to grapple with an underlying sense of communalism. However the university began and continued to function as a place of secular education from the beginning, as the Hartog memoir, quoted in the last article, amply illustrates. In fact, the stress on science education and research was prominent at that stage.



While there is a general glorification of the role of student politics as it emerged in Dhaka University and its impact on national life, from the 1952 language movement to the 1990 democracy movement, there is a consensus that present-day politics is in the hands of party political goons, which vitiates both academic life and social life on campus. However, there is also an indication that this tendency itself has historical roots which can be traced back to the founding of NSF by the Pakistani authorities in the '60s. The articles in section 2 – 'Student Politics

and Youth Mobilization' – bring out this aspect clearly. The piece by Anu Mohammad in this section places student politics in a larger framework, and sees the rampant corruption and decline as part of the broader political framework. However he also points out the various other movements that have sprung out of public universities, specifically the anti-sexual harassment movement in Jahangirnagar University, which went beyond party political lines and had a national impact. It is in this sense that one wonders whether it is at all possible to separate the political life of the university from the national sphere as has been suggested in many articles.

The articles in section 4, looking at campus life, become pertinent and important in this regard. The rampant lack of control due to politicization in the residential halls is indeed to be decried, and a way out of this morass has to be envisioned. Depoliticisation can be the only way forward one feels at this stage. Coping with the increase in student numbers with the construction of more residential facilities has been part of the efforts made to ameliorate the situation. But given that this is the most difficult part of the university administration, we can perhaps think of even more drastic measures. We can perhaps take a leaf out of British universities, where residential facilities are available only to first-year undergraduates, after which they seek shared lodging facilities in the surrounding area. As many students already live in messes, perhaps we can curtail the use of residential facilities to the first years only, as they find their feet in Dhaka.

The importance of elected bodies under DUCSU and in the halls have been emphasized both in the light of the past role that DUCSU has played in national life, as well as in the transformation of the halls from political to social and cultural spaces. The politics that will emerge from this reformed elected body of students may be more conducive to student welfare.

Articles in section 3, under 'Pedagogy and Curriculum', based as they are on close

research and analysis, contain wonderful debates on the purpose and nature of tertiary education. Concentrating on the arts and humanities and social sciences, the sense of a liberal education is clear. New approaches to education through new technologies and so on are adequately highlighted. What is missing – I suppose reflecting the academic affiliations of the editors – is the science component. As science education is being replaced by a stress on technology, an emphasis on the study of basic sciences would have been welcome and would have added to the richness of the volume and the recommendations coming out of it. This also has historical relevance. As has been pointed out, Satyen Bose's contributions were one of the first achievements of the DU faculty.

While going through the collection, I was struck by the absence of the female component. After all, DU is and has always been a co-educational university. There is no sense of what it was like to be a female student or when the first female graduate or faculty member became part of the university. I know that Professor Abul Kasem Fazlul Haque has done research on this subject, and that some of this information is available in the references that authors have used. It is with this sense of 'absence' that I came across the wonderful article by Lailufur Yasmin on the changing patterns on dress. As we change from saris to shalwar-kameez to the hijab, Yasmin's article shows how this is a reflection of the changing patterns in our cultural life. While the Bengali-Muslim identity has often been seen as in conflict, she shows how the diversity of women's dress in the DU campus is a way of combining these two adjectives, separating them (as we do) and inhabiting them together. Women's dress thus becomes a reflection of the changing social and political scene.

What does one miss in this volume? I missed an article on the library. While Mohammad Atique Rahman does talk about e-resources, the DU library already has a rich repository of documents that need to be better preserved. There is a foundation of a

research library, but which has not been replenished or looked after properly. We do need to think more about this. One of the very creative policy considerations that was mooted was to think of the university as a research one. Iftexhar Iqbal has pointed out how this was the original basis of recruiting teachers. We have all been beneficiaries of this policy, as the university through the UGC provided scholarships for Ph.D.s and gave us adequate study leave to pursue doctoral and post doctoral research. But the development of research in the university does need concentration on research material and facilities. In the sciences again, a larger budgetary outlay would be necessary to bring lab facilities on board.

While there is a large stress on political activities, most of the articles have not gone beyond reiterating a glorious past and a dismal present. However changes in thinking and ways of being have emerged and need to continue to emanate from the university itself. Existing cultural activities and ways forward could have been included, with inputs from the Institute of Fine Arts, the Drama and Music departments and now the Film and Television department.

Finally, I would like to add a word of criticism. In the preface the editors talk about the few editorial mistakes that remain. I would think that the adjective few do not describe this. Greater attention needs to be paid to editing, both stylistically and in the matter of proof-reading. While the remaking of Dhaka University should indeed envisage it as a bastion of higher education not only in the country but internationally, greater attention to detail and commitment to the task at hand is required to reach the heights that we desire. This very valuable contribution needs greater care and I hope that subsequent editions will look into this matter.

Congratulations are indeed due to the editors and contributors of this very valuable and timely volume.

The reviewer is a faculty, Department of English and Humanities, Brac University.

Finding home halfway across the world

AUTHOR: MUSTAFA CHOWDHURY

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REVIEWED BY MD. MAHAMUDUL HAQUE

In this book author Mustafa Chowdhury has reconstructed the story of the first contingent of 15 war babies who were sent off to Canada in July 1972 for adoption and outlined the outcome of their adoption in Canadian homes after 44 years – something that no one in Canada or Bangladesh has addressed ever before. His research is based on an examination of primary documents pertaining to adoption formalities pieced together, analysed and interpreted gathered both in Canada, where the author lives, and in Bangladesh where he traveled to. The varying tones of exasperation are noticeable in the endless questions that went through Chowdhury's mind: Where are the mothers? Where are their babies whom they had abandoned? What happened to those war babies who made it to Canada through adoption? The two most vital questions that the author kept asking himself persistently throughout his research were: What is the evidence for this? What is the documentation for this?

Having followed up on the first 15 war babies destined for adoption in Canadian homes, Chowdhury explored the well-being of these children who are now in their early forties; and their personal views of their own notion of their identity in Canada where they grew up. As the 592-page book progresses from one chapter to the next, readers will learn about the story of the war babies' journey from Bangladesh to Canadian homes; and their life in Canada that illustrates human relationships which developed and matured into deeply satisfying experiences for both the adopters and the adoptees with fascinating anecdotes centering the lives of the war babies in their country of adoption.

Through his Preface and Introduction, Chowdhury familiarizes his readers with how the war babies were looked at by Bangladeshis back in 1972. The discomfort and disgust that tended to embroil the issue were that, despite peoples' innate protective feelings towards the newborn infants, the war babies were viewed by people with derision. Chapter One sets the historical context, giving a short account of the War of Liberation in terms of the military atrocities and the on-going repression of the Bengali citizenry which included soldiers using sexual violence as a means of control.

Chapter Two is an outline of the state of orphanages in Canada and Bangladesh and laws pertaining to adoption and guardianship. He also touches on the traditions of taking care of orphans by the

extended family members without going through a process of formal adoption. He described the Bangladesh Abandoned Children (Special Provisions) Order, 1972 that was enacted to legalise adoption.

In Chapter Three Chowdhury describes the Bangladesh Project conceived by the Families For Children (FFC) and welcomed by both the governments of Bangladesh and Canada. It outlines how, having fought the intransigent opposition or resistance, especially from certain officials in the government of Ontario, the adoptive parents worked through the strangling red tape of provincial and federal governments in Canada and the government of Bangladesh. In Chapter Four he describes the war babies' odyssey from Bangladesh to Canada, their arrival, their joyous reunion and their formal adoption in Canada. It outlines behind-the-scenes work, logistics and coordination with respect to the exact departure and arrival of the first batch of 15 war babies from Bangladesh to Canada, via New Delhi and New York.

In Chapter Five Chowdhury outlines how, for the resolute adoptive parents (who were nor infertile by any means) it was not a matter of quality of life but the opportunity to life itself. The miracle of finding a few Bangladeshi war babies safe in their bosom without a mother and raising them triumphantly make the ordinary Canadian couples extra-ordinary.

Being surrounded by diverse multiracial family members in a strong, supportive and loving environment from childhood to adulthood, all of the war babies had followed a similar developmental trajectory of self-awareness that had helped them grow up with human dignity they deserve, something for which today they are counted as citizens of the world.

In Chapter Six we get to read the testimonies of the adoptive parents – joys and pains of parenting. Parents frankly talk about their experiences of raising children of diverse backgrounds and recalled many anecdotes that they have treasured in their mind.

Again in Chapter Seven, the testimonies of the war babies reveal how these infants born in extremely difficult conditions were able to develop and adjust socially and psychologically under a completely different environment.

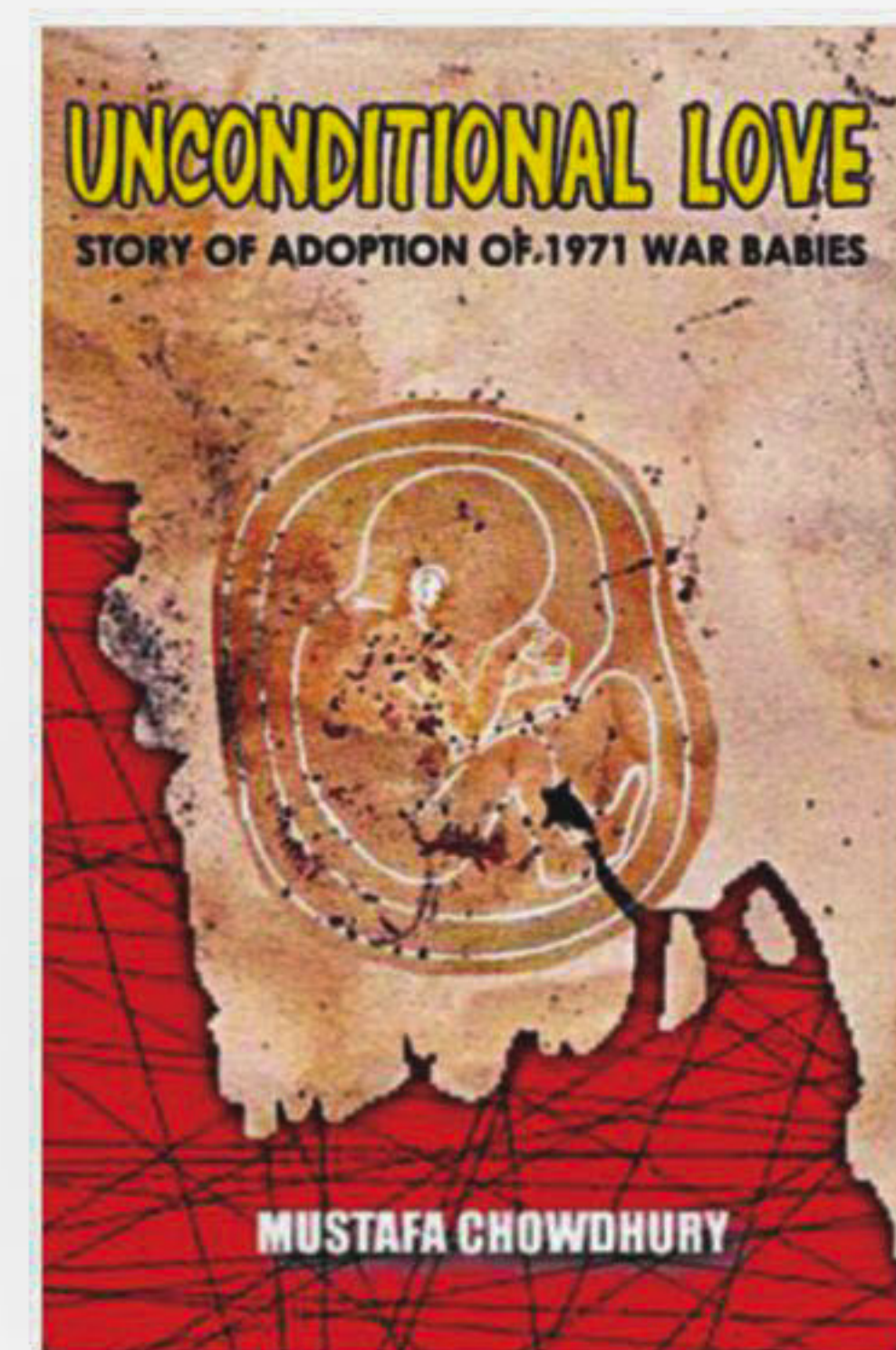
It's an important chapter in that it touches on a volley of questions: Is there, in the minds of the adoptees, a feeling of loss from their country of birth? Or, while growing up in a

multiracial family, did the adoptees fear a risk of losing a sense of how they present themselves to the world? Such questions made Chowdhury wonder what kinds of questions they might have in their minds as to who they were and from whence they came, including not only their race but also the politically unsettled question with regard to their Pakistani/Bangladeshi origin. For all practical purposes, the war babies, whose actual lives began in Canada, needed to know about their realistic beginnings (culture and ethnicity) in order to have a sense of who they were and to feel connected to the world both genetically and environmentally. When very young they saw themselves as being different, at least look wise. As a result they were confronted with questions along the following lines: Who am I? Why was I adopted? Why was I not placed in Bangladesh? Why in Canada? Here Chowdhury explores the war babies' attachment to their country of birth and presented them through their own narratives.

Ryan Good, who grew up in Copetown, Ontario, says how confused he had been

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while he stayed in Bangladesh for a year when he was 27. He talked about two countries and two mothers - a Bengali mother who gave birth to his body and an adoptive mother who gave birth to his soul without any hesitation. "My name is Badol. I have two Mothers - one calls me Ryan, and the other calls me Badol. The one who calls me Ryan, I have known all my life. The one, who calls me Badol, I have never met. I was born in Bangladesh to the Mother who calls me Badol. Three weeks later, I was back in Canada to the Mother who calls me Ryan. A



Pakistani soldier raped the Mother who calls me Badol. I am a war baby," wrote Ryan calling a spade a spade.

Chowdhury found that they do not have, what might be considered, a "group identity" perhaps due to the fact that they grew up in different parts of the country under different social environments. Each family's notion of a "family" having "children of mixed backgrounds" had helped create a "bond" among family members that had overridden any kind of divisiveness or differences due to their sense of ethnicity.

Chowdhury noted that no one exhibited any feeling of confusion about one's own identity and self-image which are usually reflected in low self-esteem and often in the development of behavioural problems. They neither disassociated from other visible minorities nor rejected their skin colour. The adoptees simply formed an identity of their unique situation within the eclectic families in which they were raised. In that sense, they are much unlike many adoptees who have a devalued sense of self-esteem - not knowing who they were and having a low opinion of their own being placed in a state of "confused" identity. Certainly this was not the case with the present group of adoptees.

In Chapter Eight having summarized the findings, Chowdhury considers this incredible bringing-home-war-babies-initiative to be counted as a "success story"

of a group of babies who were badly in need of care and protection. The author concludes with the statement that if one considers adoption as a means of providing a permanent relationship between the adopting parents and the person adopted, the adoption of the war babies stands out as an outstanding story that illustrates complete adjustment of the Bangladeshi war babies brought to Canadian homes.

Whether the war babies grew up in Canada or anywhere else in the world, at the heart of the core issue of adoption is the deeper understanding of adoption as a way of making a family by embracing them as one's own children, observes Chowdhury. With the unfolding of their life-story, there emerged an important point - that adoption begins as a lifelong, inter-generational journey that touches the children, their siblings and both biological and adoptive parents.

The present book is not only a fascinating read, but also a collection of testimonies that fills in a gap in the historical narrative of the War of Liberation of Bangladesh. Thus far, all we have heard about the war babies is through a mere citation in the history books dealing with the independence of Bangladesh. Chowdhury, for the first time, has painstakingly described the birth, abandonment and adoption of the war babies in general and the adoption of a number of such babies in Canada with the adoption outcome. No one to this day has attempted to fill in this gap in the historiography of the Bangladesh's War of Liberation. Viewed from this angle, the present book marks a new dimension in the historiography of the Bangladesh's War of Independence.

Since the new generation of Bangladeshis is desperately looking for authentic history to complete the gap in the historical narrative with reference to the story of the Bangladeshi war babies, this book would be a new addition to a subject that has not yet been addressed by the historical establishment. Judged from this angle, this book is likely to be the first reference book on the war babies of Bangladesh. It should be recommended for students across the country so that they may familiarize them with the hitherto unknown story of the war babies of Bangladesh.

The reviewer is a senior journalist of The Daily Star and author of the book, "Sangbadikota: Offline Online".