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DHAKA UNIVERSITY

CAN IT STILL LEAD US?

Professor Dr. A A M S Arefin Siddique, Vice Chancellor, University of Dhaka, talks to Amitava Kar about how the spirit of Dhaka University remains intact despite many limitations

How have you managed to get rid of the session jam and campus violence?

Teachers, officials and students have done it together. Since 2009, we have made sure that no class is suspended due to political unrest. Even when people were being burnt in the name of political programmes, we did not allow classes and exams to be interrupted or postponed. During hartals we allowed non-resident students to stay in hostels so that they could take exams. Now in many departments the four-year degree is completed within three and a half years.

We have adopted a zero tolerance policy on violence. We have expelled those who have been involved in any kind of violence. As we speak, some student leaders are under suspension. This has acted as a deterrent. We think that if regular students are in leadership positions of student wings of political parties, campus violence can be eliminated further. What steps have been taken to improve the capacity of the central library and living conditions in hostels?

When the university was established the number of students was 6 to 7 thousand. That number has grown up to 35,000. A lot of regular students or ex-students use the library to prepare for entrance exams for jobs. That's unfair to students who want to study. We are thinking about shifting the library to a high-rise, more spacious building. But that's going to take time. In the mean time we are giving priority on digitizing the library. Accessing books and journals online is no longer a problem. But it will not be possible to solve the space problem without establishing a new library. We need special allocation of funds for that.

The number of students residing in dormitories is three times the capacity. Dhaka University is situated in the centre of the city. There is no space left around here. We are thinking about replacing 4-5 storied buildings with 20-25 stories buildings. For example, in the place of Zahurul Haq Hall, a three storied building, a 25 story building can be established. There is a pond and playground in front of it so it won't be disproportionate. The construction of an eleven storey women's hostel called 7th March Bhaban is almost complete. When it's done, women students will have no problems at all.

To what extent is the accusation true that many teachers do not often show up in classrooms to teach in private universities? I do not think we have reached a stage that we need to worry about it. A teacher is per-



Professor Dr. A A M S Arefin Siddique

mitted to teach part-time at two private or public universities while being a full-time teacher at DU. It serves two purposes. First, the salaries and benefits teachers get are far from handsome. If they can supplement their incomes by giving a couple of lectures a week at another institution when they are free, there is no problem with that. Secondly, there is a shortage of teachers at most private universities. So if teachers of DU teach there once or twice a week, those students will be hugely benefitted. It is our children who are studying there. As the premier university of the country, we have a responsibility towards them too. But if any teacher fails to show up at a class and students informs the department Chair, we will take actions. And they are always welcome to see me. My doors are always open to students.

Is it true that some teachers manipulate the grades of students on political and ideological lines?

I don't think it's a common problem. But even if one incident happens, it is not acceptable. A formal complaint has to be launched through official channels. We take drastic

actions if complaints are made. There have been occasions where a teacher has been suspended for more than 5 years from his or her duty to act as an examiner. About 5 out of 10 graduates in Bangladesh are unemployed. What programmes does DU have to close the skills gap? Through HEQEP (Higher Education Quality Enhancement Project), a world bank sponsored project, we are working on academic development and skills development of the students. We are going to establish the Innovation and Incubation Lab (i-Lab) to promote innovation and entrepreneurship.

The problem is that a new education policy has been formulated so late-in 2010. To implement an education policy we need at least 10 to 15 years. Education is a very slow process. A lot of graduates are underemployed. A clerk does not need a Masters degree.

We are establishing links with the private sector. Our business faculty is well connected with the corporate world. Our science and bio-science faculties are establishing links with relevant industries. But a culture has not

yet emerged where a top company will sponsor a programme or a research project. We are working on the concept of academia-industry collaboration.

Why has DUCSU been inactive for so many years now?

It is true that it has been inactive since 1990. Students, civil society and we feel that it needs to be active again. DUCSU will have to be led by student leaders who are regular students of the country. Student wings of some political parties are led by non-students.

When we reopen DUCSU and initiate the election process, all political parties will have to create an environment of coexistence. All parties will have equal opportunities. But who will we give equal opportunities to? Non-Students? If we want to give them equal opportunities, conflicts will arise.

We need DUCSU. But creating and maintaining an environment conducive to academic activities is more important. We urge all political parties to reach a consensus that they will be run by current students. They will be regular students, who will engage in political activities, rallies, etc and then go back to their classrooms where they belong. This is how it was done in the past. During the military governments, student organisa-

tions were misused and abused. We want to see DUCSU active again and we hope that the political parties and the civil society will come forward to achieve this goal.

But I must mention that even if DUCSU is inactive, many activities of DUCSU are ongoing—cultural programmes, games and sports, debate, discussions are being organised on the initiative of students. They have also set up the DU film society, DU photography society, DU tourism society, DU mountaineering club and DU IT society.

Does DU still have the moral strength to lead the nation in times of crises as has been the case throughout history?

I believe so. We have many limitations. But our strength lies in the fact that both the students and the teachers of DU love the country. DU has proved that time and again. During disasters—man made or natural—our students are always on the frontline. During the military-backed 1/11 government, when teachers and students and politicians were being arrested, who raised their voices first? It was the students and the teachers of DU. They did it during the Liberation War, against the autocratic government of Ershad and then very recently, during 1/11. So DU still has that moral strength.

Students of DU have always taken a strong stand on the war crime trial issue. So the spirit is there. We have to nurture it. We have to teach students about morality. That is the highest education of all. Education is light. It's good to score GPA 4.00 in the exam. But we also encourage students to score GPA 4.00 in patriotism and honesty. Do not compromise with truth.

Dhaka University has recently severed ties with all universities in Pakistan. Why now? We had academic exchange with many universities in Pakistan. But when the Pakistan government said that no genocide took place in 1971 and Pakistan is not associated with any genocide, it was not possible for DU to accept that claim. The genocide started at DU and ended at DU on December 14, 1971. How can we sit here with our mouths shut? That would be accepting a lie. That's why DU has taken this decision.

These decisions will always inspire students to follow the path of truth. Where does moral strength come from? It comes from the pursuit of truth. I believe our students love the country unconditionally and that's where our strength lies.

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