



## BIRTH CENTENARY OF A UNIQUE UNIVERSITY

The University of Dhaka, better known as Dhaka University (DU), was born under the British colonial rule in 1921 for the intellectual growth of the Eastern part of Bengal—finding its place in the nationalistic aspiration of the people of East Pakistan during the period of 1947–1971, and finally emerging as the country's intellectual backbone after Bangladesh's independence. The first hundred years of DU encapsulate a people's quest for cultural, economic and political self-assertion as no other institution in the country.

DU's history can be broadly divided into three parts. Its first 26 years during the colonial period saw its consolidation as an institution and emergence as a centre of excellence. By the time the subcontinent was partitioned in 1947, DU was producing some of the best scholars in the subcontinent. The second 23 years under Pakistan saw DU becoming the epicentre of our nationalist movement and the last 50 years of an independent Bangladesh saw DU expanding itself into one of the biggest centres of learning

in the country.

A resounding "No, no" in 1948 by DU students in response to Pakistan's founder Muhammad Ali Jinnah's declaration that "Urdu and Urdu alone will be the national language" of the just formed Pakistan transformed DU's fate forever, especially for the next 23 years. In addition to being a centre of learning, it became the very heart of the struggle for an independent Bangladesh. If ever the story of a country's freedom struggle became one with that of a single university, it was so in the case of Bangladesh and DU.

During the last 50 years following our independence, DU continued its political legacy of fighting for democracy by defeating the military regimes of Gen. Ziaur Rahman and Gen. H.M. Ershad and restoring democracy in 1991. In the post-independence period, DU expanded significantly in terms of the number of new faculties and teachers as well as the size of the student body. The period also gave rise to

serious questions as to whether the quantitative expansion was accompanied by a similar rise in the quality of education imparted in the university.

The political consciousness that made DU the heart of our nationalistic aspiration during the fifties, sixties and seventies also made the university a prisoner of partisan politics that became the norm in the later years.

The pertinent question of the moment is whether the 100-year-old DU is equipped to prepare our youth for the unprecedented AI- and IOT-driven transformations that are already revolutionising the world economy. Will the DU be able to lead Bangladesh in the world of knowledge, data, information and ideas that the future will demand?

We wish we could give a resounding answer in the affirmative.

**Mahfuz Anam**  
Editor & Publisher, The Daily Star



## The political legacy of Dhaka University

**PARTHA PRATIM BHATTACHARJEE  
AND ASIFUR RAHMAN**

March 19, 1948.

The founding father and the first governor general of the newly created state of Pakistan, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, had arrived in Dhaka on this spring afternoon on his first visit to the country's eastern province, which was turning increasingly restive over the language issue.

Five days later, he addressed a special convocation of Dhaka University at Curzon Hall where he made it unequivocally clear that "Urdu and Urdu alone" would be the language of the state of Pakistan. His remarks did not go down well with the audience as loud protests of "No, no!" were heard in the hall. Unaccustomed to people defying him, Jinnah stayed silent for a few moments

students who brought out a procession from near the then Arts Building (currently the Dhaka Medical College gate) on February 21. Eventually, they met with police crackdown.

Salam, Barkat, Rafique, and Jabbar were among those who died when police opened fire on the protestors.

The movement, spearheaded largely by the university students, slowly became a broader agenda of cultural and ethnic assimilation. Dhaka University eventually emerged as the ultimate hub for all subsequent progressive, social, and cultural movements and political struggles of the people. It has played a significant role in becoming an intellectual powerhouse and has been at the forefront of all the successive movements including 1962's education movement, the six-point demand in '66, the mass upsurge in '69, and the liberation war in 1971.

The university has produced many charismatic student leaders like Tofail Ahmed, Muhajidul Islam Selim, Rashed Khan Menon, Sirajul Alam Khan, ASM Abdur Rab, Matiya Chowdhury, Nur-e-Alam Siddiqui, and Mahmudur Rahman Manna, who led different democratic movements in the country.

After independence, DU took the stir in the anti-Ershad movement. HM Ershad assumed power in 1982 and eventually had to step down in the face of the protests, resulting in the restoration of democracy.

A century after its journey, the university's most enduring legacy lies in tatters now. Since the restoration of democracy, student organisations have not been able to play a constructive role in developing democratic political systems.

Instead, a large number of student leaders have concentrated on financial and personal political benefits, amassing wealth through various illegal activities like extortion and tender manipulation. Some of them even got engaged with repressing opposition men and drug trading.

Political analysts and academicians say that student politics at the university have gotten delinked from institutional discipline, social problems, and cultural ideology since the resumption of democracy in the 1990s, when all the ruling parties started using student bodies

for their respective purposes. As a result, the quality of student leadership has gone down.

An analysis of the newspaper reports on student leaders reveals a dismal picture: over the last two years, most of the news reports published in newspapers were about internal conflicts between student bodies.

On the other hand, experts believe that general students have a lack of interest in raising their voice against any injustice until any unjust hits individual interest. Former student leaders believe that such derailment of politics happened as the student bodies bowed down before political parties. Partisan sycophancy has decayed the uniqueness of student bodies. Due to an absence of talented leadership, the student bodies in many cases are now run by non-students, they said.

Dr Anu Muhammad, Professor of Economics at Jahangirnagar University, opines that student politics are now controlled by money and power, though it was controlled by patriotism and ideology before the liberation war.

"The most significant [period] of Bangladesh's student politics [was] post-liberation when the anti-Ershad movement was waged unitedly," he said.

But the unity of students died down immediately after Ershad was ousted. Since then, either the Awami League-led alliance or the BNP-led alliance has ruled the country, and the pro-ruling party's student body has controlled the educational institutions each time.

This only paused for around two years during the army-backed caretaker government. At that time, clashes were triggered between DU students and the army between August 20 and 22, 2007.

To better understand the university's political decline and its role in nation building, The Daily Star spoke with former student leaders Muhajidul Islam Selim and Nur-e-Alam Siddiqui, as well as political scientist Dr Shantanu Majumder. They shared that turning the student bodies into the "front organisation of political parties" is the main reason behind it all.

The Representation of the People Order (RPO) was revised in 2008 with the provision that no student body would act as the front organisation of any political party. The RPOs' revision was followed in

the documents of political parties, but it was not implemented.

On the basis of the amendment of the RPO, Awami League and BNP brought some changes in their parties' constitutions. As per the changes, Awami League termed its student body, the Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL), as its "fraternal organization" (Vatriprotim), while BNP termed its student body, the Jatiyatabadi Chhatra Dal (JCD), as its "unique associate organization".

Both the student bodies consider their party chiefs as leaders of their organisations.

"Those who were involved with student politics in the past believed that student politics was the torch bearer for national politics. But later, in phases, student politics turned into order-bearer organisations of political parties. As a result, student bodies have lost their uniqueness and independence," Nur-e-Alam Siddiqui said.

Muhajidul Islam Selim said, "In the past, patriotic persons got priority in politics. Honesty, patriotism, and ideology were the basis of politics. But now politics have become polluted and unhealthy. We can see its reflection in the educational institutions."

"Along with the decaying quality of student politics, the quality of academic performance is also deteriorating in educational institutions," Selim added, "I think Dhaka University would be able to overcome the situation if the government, the ruling party, and university authorities meddled into the university affairs."

DU Political Science Professor Dr Shantanu Majumder highlights three main reasons for the worsening state of student politics.

Firstly, students during military regimes would fight together against autocratic rulers; but there is no such common enemy now. Secondly, the government does not have any crisis of legitimacy. And finally, students are now more interested in remaining busy with smartphones instead of getting engaged with politics, he said.

Left-leaning student bodies used to play a vital role in different movements in the past, Dr Majumder recalled, but they could not hold on to their position—this is yet another reason behind the

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before resuming his speech.

The debate over the state language of Pakistan had been going on since the creation of Pakistan. By this time, Tamaddun Majlish, an Islamic cultural organisation, had been founded to build public opinion for the Bangla language. To promote the cause, university students organised protest rallies and processions with leading Bengali scholars and academics arguing why Bangla should also be made a state language.

The movement gained momentum in 1952 after the Pakistani leadership reiterated that only Urdu would be used as the official language. The declaration caused an uproar in East Pakistan. Students called for a protest march on February 21 at Dhaka University, prompting the government to impose section 144.

The section 144 was violated by