

Snippets From “A View from the Ladies Common Room, Dacca University”

GHAZALA SCHEIK AKBAR

DU. How those letters conjure up a sense of awe and bittersweet memory. Always in the vanguard of political, progressive movements... Language (1952), Constitution (1962), Democracy (1968/69) and Independence (1971)... but distinguished too, for its intellectual environment and academic excellence. Dacca University's endless graffiti marked corridors were a daunting place for me, a teenager and a female, in the politically momentous years of the late 1960s.

At DU we did not receive, nor did we expect any preferential treatment either from the Administration or our Professors. Apart from a few 'reserved' seats in the first few rows of lecture rooms all students were deemed

democratically and biologically equal.

There was however one exception, where female autonomy and independence was guaranteed: the Ladies Common Room. Located on the ground floor of the Arts Faculty building, it was our special quarter, our *Zenana*. Men had their Modhu's canteen and jointly we could fraternise at the TSC (Teacher Student Centre) but the ladies common room was our personal space.

No man could enter its portals. Not even the Dean, Vice Chancellor or the Governor himself... except the teenage boy from the canteen. Deferentially the blushing lad would enter and with lowered gaze, take our orders for *Singhara*, *Aloor Chop*, *Roshogollah*, and *Cha*.

Just two wide rooms and a central pathway

buzzed with constant chatter and bonhomie. Old acquaintances were renewed and new friendships formed that still survive. It was a place where we could literally let down our hair, refresh, play table-tennis, read newspapers or take forty winks on the armchairs; a place of interaction where we exchanged ideas, gossip, confirmed or denied rumours.

This is where we escaped when 'Rag Day' colour festivities became too riotous or hid when the fearsome twosome 'Khoka' went walkabout with his pet snake and knife-wielding assistant 'Passpartout.' (Aptly nicknamed as he had not passed beyond part two of any educational institution!) Suffice to say, they were not fellow students but professional gons sent by the Government to terrorise the student body. But even Khoka, snake and sidekick did not dare enter the Ladies Common Room.

This was the era of the Vietnam War, Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia, Paris student uprising and the Sino-Soviet split. Revolution was on the doorstep. Even the fiery Tariq Ali, came all the way from London to address us under the *Bot Tala*...the Banyan tree. There was hope, idealism and a feeling that the 'times-they-are-a-changing' like in the Bob Dylan song.

Surprising as it may sound, in the midst of these distractions we did manage to attend classes, tutorials, visit libraries and receive an education. But as later events testify, this was the calm before the storm. Earth-shattering, epoch-making times were just round the corner. Not just the November 1970 cyclone but a major political hurricane was brewing in the country. Twice the authorities closed the university *Sine Die* with no date for resumption. Hostels were emptied, students went home. It was a portend for darker days that lay ahead when DU would become the eye of the storm.

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From Memoirs of Dacca University 1947-1951

BY AG STOCK

I have described this disturbance as I saw it happen, an unedifying affair, confused and inconclusive, as a symptom rather than a causative episode of the growing friction between East and West Pakistan. The causes of friction were there. This was the spark they kindled in 1949 and this was how it flared and went out. It might have been more adroitly quenched, but the will to dominate and the will to resist would not have been quenched and would have struck fire in some other way. We needed no special political acumen to see that it was meaningless, apart from a deeper conflict to which there was no end in sight. Submission was psychologically impossible, victory not rationally foreseeable, and there was no sign of that creative vision that calls into being a future not deducible from the past. Re-reading my own thoughts, which must have been in the main a reflection of thoughts around me, I find myself guessing gloomily at the future, and the guesses, so far as they are correct, are retrospectively shocking in the light of their fulfillment. One foresees consequences without apprehending their meaning in terms of living experience. But this is how it looked at the time.

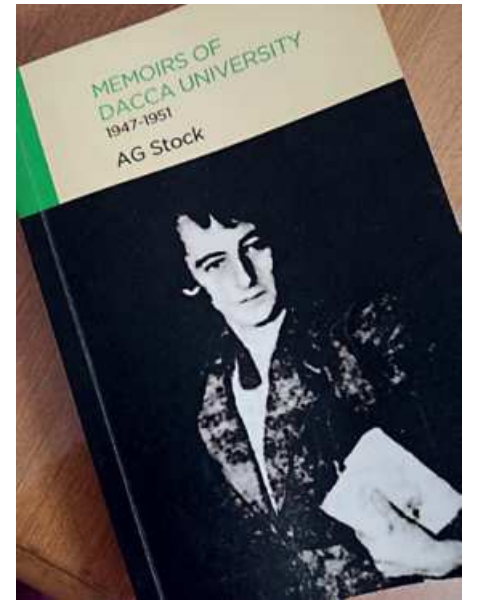
April 27th
Nobody likes the government, as far as I can see. Students regard themselves as the spearhead of public opinion. But they haven't, and are not likely to have, the shadow of suggestion of a constructive alternative.

Considering the general discontent, rather than the somewhat foolish issue in which it is expressed, what is the position? What do people want?

To rejoin West Bengal? No, I can't find any such serious thought.

To be an independent state? No, they couldn't defend themselves, probably couldn't feed themselves.

To be annexed by Burma? No. Some communists may have that as an ultimate aim, but it's not practical politics even to talk of it unless and until Burma finally goes their way.



Meanwhile, East Bengal can be kept in subjection by Punjabi troops and police. If they had a practical plan to offer, it might be worthwhile making themselves troublesome till it was listened to, but there seems to be none. To me, it looks as if we may expect this kind of trouble to keep on recurring until either— which looks unlikely— the government does something constructive enough to win the people to its side, or the local problems are swallowed up in a revolution or 'World War III'.

Within the university, the best thing we can do is to attempt to carry on teaching, and withhold the students' energy from the struggle till they are till they are old enough and know enough to make a constructive contribution. But as far as the university is concerned the likeliest outcome of this storm is a far tighter control by the government— a bad thing absolutely.

A.G. Stock was a visiting professor of Dacca University, East Pakistan in the immediate aftermath of the Partition. Her memoir is a classic portrait of a new nation in search of its identity.

The University of Dhaka and the Birth of Bangladesh

FAKRUL ALAM

In *Dhaka University: the Convocation Speeches*, a volume compiled with an introduction by Serajul Islam Choudhury in 1988, we read that DU was established by the British as a "splendid imperial compensation" for the Muslims of East Bengal (Choudhury, 26). They had wanted the current rulers of India to make up through it for the loss they felt they had suffered because of the reunion of Bengal in 1911. Delivering his inaugural speech as the Chancellor of DU in 1923, Lord Lytton had not only made this point but had also expressed the hope that it would soon become "the chief center of Muhammadan learning" in India and would "devote special attention to higher Islamic studies" (26). However, Lytton had ended his speech by urging graduands to conceive of the institution "as an Alma Mater in whose service the Muhammadan and the Hindu can find a common bond of unity" (Choudhury, 29). The subsequent history of the university reveals that while some of its future students would view it as a site for cultivating Islamic values and consolidating the Islamic heritage of the part of Bengal in which it was located, others would claim it as a space where a democratic and secular notion of being Bengalis could be disseminated.

DU started playing a decisive role in Bangladeshi national identity formation almost as soon as the Islamic state of Pakistan was born. It became the center of the movement that would lead to the creation of the country born out of the ashes of East Pakistan in 1971. The key issue here was language and the catalyst was the insistence by the central government of Pakistan that Urdu should be the lingua franca of the country, regardless of the fact that only three percent of Pakistanis actually used it in their everyday lives. For two successive days on 5 and 6 December 1947, teachers and students of the university demonstrated on campus and the streets of Dhaka against the government decision and in favor of Bengali. The Pakistani government, however, paid no heed to the protests and went ahead with its decision to impose Urdu

as the sole official language of the country. In response to this ruling DU students mobilized on 26 February, 1948 to form an "All Party Language Committee of Action." Not daunted, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the Governor General of Pakistan, and identified as the "Father of the Country" by the official media, reiterated publicly while on a visit to Dhaka on the 21st of March that "the state language of Pakistan is going to be Urdu and no other language" (Islam, 224). When he made the same point in addressing the DU Special Convocation on the 22nd of March, Bengali students present at the convocation protested. On March 11, 1950 the Dhaka University Language Action Committee was formed. In essence, the movement that was being spearheaded by university students and that soon spread across East Pakistan, ultimately led to the break-up of Pakistan, a state built entirely on Islamist nationalism.

A direct outcome of the language movement was that the government that had been held responsible for bruising the Bengali consciousness was voted out of power in East Pakistan in 1954. Instead, a short-lived but popular coalition government that was viewed to be pro-Bengali took over up the administration of the province. Students had played a major part in the election and the tradition of student activism in the cause of Bangladeshi nationalism became very noteworthy in national politics from this point onwards.

In retrospect, we can see the Pakistani period was one which had witnessed a continuous tussle between successive Pakistani regimes wielding state power to curb Bengali rights and impose an Islamist state at the expense of Bengali language and culture and Bengali nationalism. In the confrontation, DU teachers and students played the crucial part. It was mostly because of them that the Pakistani state apparatus failed to suppress Bengalis and prevent them from expressing themselves. The campus was at the heart of activity that promoted an awareness of secularism and brandished democracy as a goal to be achieved



in national life.

It was to be expected, then, that when the Pakistani state made one last desperate attempt to suppress Bengalis clamoring for full autonomy and democracy on March 26, 1971 they would do so by targeting DU and attempting to mow down Dhaka university faculty members and students ruthlessly. When the Pakistani government decided to postpone the National Assembly meet where the Awami League had got an absolute majority and where they were in a position to claim self-rule for East Pakistan and dominate Pakistani politics for the first time in that nation's history, the campus broke out once again in loud protest. On the 7th of March, when the Awami League's chief Sheikh Mujibur Rahman gave his historic speech claiming full autonomy and threatening to launch an armed movement that would drive away the Pakistanis from East Pakistan forever, DU student leaders were at his side as he spoke in Ramna Park, which borders the university.

What happened on 26 March was

nothing less than a calculated bid to blast DU to smithereens, murder student leaders and selected faculty members, and drive out all students from the campus for playing leading roles in the movement against the Pakistani state. The Pakistani Army was nothing short of murderous in attempting to neutralize dissent. Inevitably, DU bore the brunt of their initial fury. Anybody found in the university that night was mowed down and dorms, faculty residences and the DU Teacher's Club were shot at indiscriminately. The Shaheed Minar was razed to the ground and Bangla Academy was subject to artillery fire. Even university non-teaching staff and cafeteria officials were not spared. Madhu's canteen – the favorite haunt of student politicians throughout the sixties – was attacked and Madhu – the benign owner of the cafeteria – was murdered. The huge *bot tree* which provided the shade under which student leaders delivered speeches and from which they had given the declaration of independence on one of the turbulent March days – was

blasted out of existence. It was clear that the Army had decided that DU was the ultimate symbol of the unacceptable form Bangladeshi national identity formation was assuming. As Professor Serajul Islam Chowdhury observes in "Ekattor O Dhaka Visva-Bidyalaya," the university ambience encouraged people to not merely dream about freedom and equality but to create conditions where the dream seemed to be coming close to reality. Also, the University had been consistently a site of resistance in its efforts to impose a theocratic or monolingual state on Bengalis, as on-campus happenings from the time of Jinnah's 1948 declaration about making Urdu the only state language and the protest movements of the fifties and sixties that culminated in the month-long protests of March 1971 demonstrated. The six-point program proposed by the Awami League for financial and political autonomy had been drafted by DU professors.

In the nine-month liberation war that followed the Pakistani

army crackdown on DU and the rest of Bangladesh, the university once again became a microcosm of the country in that almost all of its entire faculty and students fled it. Academic activities came to a standstill and it became a campus bereft of students who had deserted it along with most of their teachers since they were unwilling to kowtow to the Pakistani design to create a quiescent institution run by quislings and were not inclined to impart or acquire education in line with proto-Islamist and/or totalitarian concepts of nationalism. Many students died in the course of the next nine months fighting for liberation or suspected of doing so. When the birth of Bangladesh seemed imminent at the end of the year, the Pakistani Army and its local collaborators carried out a systematic search of faculty members on, and outside, the campus to murder the ones still around, holding them largely responsible for the breakup of the country they had not been able to prevent from cracking up.

When independence finally came to Bangladesh on December 16, it was fitting that the Pakistani Army would surrender in the open space adjacent to the university known as Ramna Park. The many teachers and students who had been murdered since March 26 as well as the resistance put up by them were later commemorated with structures erected all over the campus, the most prominent of them being the "Aporajeyo Bangla" or "Invincible Bengal" sculpture in front of Kala Bhabhan or the Arts faculty building, the martyrs plaque put up opposite the central mall, and the sculpted figures of the freedom fighters erected in front of the Teachers-Students Centre. December 14 became from then on the day when the DU Liberation War martyrs were to be ceremonially remembered and December 16 the day when DU faculty and staff joined the rest of the country in celebrating Victory Day.

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