

#EDUCATION

Towards regaining Dhaka University's glory

The esteemed University of Dhaka just celebrated its centenary less than a week ago, and love, respect and tributes to this beloved alma mater of thousands of alumni have been rightly expressed these few days. However, as we celebrate the once towering centre of learning, it is also time that those of us associated with it take a deeper look at what concerns plague the university, and how to go back to being the proverbial "Oxford of the East."

Dhaka University, in the larger context, remains one of the best things that had ever happened to this part of Bengal. It was established following the same residential model as the University of Oxford, and that, as well as the respect it earned in academia is why it is often referred to as the Oxford of the East.

P. J. Hartog, the first vice chancellor of DU, was a former registrar of London University, and thus experienced, he believed that ultimately the quality of the teachers determines the quality of a university. To that end, he restructured the existing salary scale of teachers in the subcontinent, and offered salaries much higher than those of Calcutta University, the closest, regional and established competitor of DU. Dhaka University thus advertised for the Professor post with the salary scale of 1000-1800 and for a Reader 600-1200 rupees. This gained Dhaka university a cache of esteemed names like Ramesh Chandra Majumder, Satyendra Nath Bose, K.S. Krishnan and others as faculty.

An early pride point for Dhaka University was definitely the birth of quantum statistics in 1924, also known as Bose-Einstein statistics. K.S. Krishnan of Tamil Nadu, and C.V. Raman, at the Indian Association for the Cultivation of Science, Calcutta, worked on the Raman Scattering, for which C.V. Raman was awarded the Nobel Prize. Building on that, S.N. Bose,

then the head of Physics at DU, sitting at Curzon Hall, far from the then epicentre of knowledge of physics and particularly quantum mechanics in Germany, made history by pioneering quantum physics.

Dhaka University was blessed to have many other renowned teachers like Dr Mohammed Shahidullah, Kazi Mutahar Hossain a close friend of S.N. Bose, Govinda Chandra Dev and many more. In its history, it has produced scholars that have led the country in various fields, including economics, finance, governance and of course, the sciences.

Dhaka University experienced the pinnacle of its academic glory between 1924-1945. It suffered immensely during the partition of India, as many scholars like S.N. Bose left for India. However, due to the good momentum, it still continued to maintain its standards.

The teachers and students of Dhaka University played a leading role over the years from 1952-1971 and the birth of Bangladesh. But gradually, as the university got involved more and more in politics, the very purpose of its existence started to get neglected. The exodus of Hindu scholars to India, and the murder of numerous teachers and students in the Liberation War, made things even worse.

Despite DU's fabled role in the independence of Bangladesh, no government except Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's did enough to revert it to its lost glory. Out of respect for the teachers of the university, Bangabandhu gave autonomy to the university through the now famous '73 Act. However, many teachers of Dhaka University took that as an opportunity to get more involved in politics rather than in teaching and research — a clear breach of the sacred trust of teaching. After 1975, the university became fertile grounds for political parties either trying to grab power or unseat the one already holding

it. During the 80s and 90s, although to the benefit of the country, revealed the worst of this for the university. After the fall of Ershad in 1990, the university, once famous for its anti-establishment role, saw its teachers and students becoming soldiers of the same.

A steady process of quality degradation started since, and has accelerated in recent years. Higher education is very expensive. No matter where the money comes from, the point is that the flow has to be constant. Today, one of the most crucial problems of the university is the fund crisis. Students must be given simple but decent residential halls with at least a bed, a study table and a wardrobe, along with common cooking and toilet facilities. This is the minimum a student can ask for! Instead, we see 40-60 students stuffed in the so called "gono-rooms" that should accommodate no more than four. These are mainly first year students, for whom, getting a seat in the hall is almost impossible otherwise; preference is given to senior students. The older the students, the higher the chances to get a seat. But in the rest of the world, first year students are given top priority since they are the most vulnerable. Political parties exploit these youngsters, as freshmen are forced to kowtow to political student leaders in return for forced participation in rallies and such. Most of them spoil their life right there.

Dhaka University is sliding downwards in world rankings. In 2011-12, it was at number 551, in 2014-2015 at number 701 and this year, it is between 800-1000. Such a fast sliding is unheard of and yet, there is no soul searching. Departments have been opened without even thinking whether they are relevant for the country, whether there are qualified teachers, adequate accommodation for the added students etc. On the other hand, the budget allocation,

considering the increased number of students, teachers, officers and inflation, has actually decreased proportionally.

Dhaka University has failed to evolve on a survival instinct. Changing with time is the essence of improvement. The university's questions patterns and answer script evaluation process are still the same as a 100 years ago. Tuition fees have not increased although prices of everything including people's salaries have increased manifold. Essentially, government allocations have decreased, while the number of universities have multiplied.

Today, the first order is to improve the living conditions of our first- and second-year students. You will see a miracle. Appoint 100 world-class post-docs and engage them to work with the best researchers of the university, so together, they can produce world-class home-grown PhDs. Establish income-based tuition fees according to the equity and not the equality principle. Most good universities in the world do that. Essentially, every student will pay the same amount but poorer students will pay the amount from the scholarship they get from the university. Any extra earnings can be used for other essential facilities. In that way, university would lessen its dependency on the government, thus the party in power. Money could also be collected from alumni donations. In western countries, especially in USA, Canada, Australia, universities receive huge sums of money from alumni as a tribute to the university for making them who they are.

The path to lost glory is not simple, but sustained and pertinent actions based on honest and deep soul searching will surely get us there.

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