

# 100 years of Dhaka University

*Achievements of the past and challenges of the future*

FAKHRUL ISLAM

**D**HAKA University was born out of a struggle by the people of Bengal for asserting their regional identity. It reached its apotheosis through its leading role in the struggle for Bangladesh's nationhood. The year 2021 is significant for both Bangladesh and the University of Dhaka as both the entities will turn 50 and 100, respectively.

The proud history of Dhaka University's various political movements is intertwined with the history of opposing oppressors. The role of the university in 1952, 1969, 1971 and 1990 are examples of that. During these years, Dhaka University rarely departed from its commitment to scholastic standards, where advancement remained merit based. But now, most of its student bodies are dancing to the tune of the ruling party.

We have to understand that a university is a place of pursuing academic excellence. It is a place that is supposed to create new knowledge, store that knowledge and disseminate it. As proud students of the country's premier university, its students cannot stay insulated from the national agenda or politics, but over-politicisation has surely created many impediments when it comes to nurturing talent. It is now a common phenomenon for most university students to become obsessed with government administrative jobs. They now start studying for the BCS and other competitive exams from their university years. This is because the incentives of government service have increased manifold in the last few decades. In earlier years, students used to aim for academic excellence and try to excel in their respective subjects. The number of academic disciplines has increased, but the question remains whether their curricula have been updated.

The fact is that students of DU are not getting familiarised with the most up-to-date knowledge. Most employers in the competitive private sector are saying that they are not getting DU graduates with appropriate skills for the job market. A large chunk of people from the surrounding countries of Bangladesh are now capturing lucrative positions in Bangladesh's private sector.

The result is pretty evident, as we have seen Dhaka University rank very poorly in various World University rankings: i.e., QS (Quacquarelli Symonds) World University Ranking, THE (Times Higher Education) Ranking, CWUR (Centre for World University Ranking). In economics, there is a theory called Gresham's Law. It states that "bad money drives out the good money". Similarly, it means, if a system allows something bad to grow, then eventually it will drive out the good from the system. Dhaka University is suffering from something very much like that. But the university still produces a number of meritorious students—although the university



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PHOTO: STAR

itself perhaps no longer playing a big role in that.

Dhaka University—once an embodiment of Bangladesh's dream—a hundred years after its emergence is a mere shadow of its glorious past. If we look at the history of Dhaka University, we will notice that every few years it produces at least a few teachers of international calibre. Even today, there are very good scholars who are coming out from DU and publishing in the best journals and university presses and taking part in state of the art research. Of course, teachers could do better in terms of publishing their work internationally. And a committee should immediately be set up to find out why the more qualified teachers from DU are currently underperforming.

Certainly, many Dhaka University students are still in high demand. IBA graduates are doing exceptionally well both in our country and abroad. Many students from English, Economics, Sociology, Microbiology, Molecular Biology and Genetic Engineering departments are also doing fairly well. Students from various departments of the biosciences, the applied sciences and pharmacy faculties are also working both at home and abroad. So, there are quite a lot of success stories as far as employment goes.

Dhaka University's most significant contribution in the last 50 years or so has been to accept students who cannot afford to pay even a fraction of the tuition fees charged by private universities. Dhaka University

and the other public universities are doing a fantastic work in educating people who would otherwise not have been able to pursue higher studies. Many of these students go on to have successful careers and hold high-level positions. People who criticise Dhaka University most often ignore this point. However, there are valid arguments for tuition fees to be raised slowly over time and marginally. But what we have seen in the past is that every time the tuition fee is raised, the move tends to attract the wrath of the students, resulting in the administration often having to withdraw their decision to raise fees.

People have high expectations from Dhaka University, and rightly so. It has always strove to provide the best possible service to the country. It has also played an important role at key junctures of the country's history. But it must continue to do so and not compromise as far as quality is concerned. At the end of the day, quantity without quality is a sure prescription for disaster.

Nevertheless, we cannot simply dwell on the past. DU has come a long way in the last 100 years, but much more needs to be done if it is to live up to its reputation as "the Oxford of the East". The university has to evaluate its own performance on a regular basis and make changes when and as they become necessary in order to stay on top and become a much better university in the future.

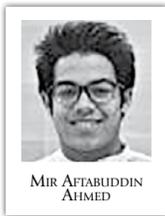
With the Fourth Industrial Revolution right around the corner, it is time for DU to once again play a pivotal role in leading the country when it comes to state of the art technologies and subject areas. In order to achieve vision 2041, we have no other option but to adopt the latest technologies that are out there, and DU must play a key role in leading the country in that department.

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## Storytelling through food

*Kishwar's rendezvous with Bengali cuisine*



MIR AFTABUDDIN AHMED

**B**ENGALI cuisine in its most primitive form is perhaps a paradoxical phenomenon worthy of deeper socio-cultural research. On one end, our food traditions have inherent roots ensuing

from everyday social activities such as the *neighborhood adda*—defined through punchy, subtle, tangy and spicy finger foods that complement that elusive cup of *chai*. On the other end of the spectrum, the *khandani* rich textures present across Mughal food represents the yesteryears of an elite class of individuals and their historical ties with *Nawabi* rule. The kind of food we eat often depicts the tale of the people who cook and consume it, in the case of Bengalis, it comprises of a history of survival, subsistence and simply buckling up and getting on with it—especially for the likes of labourers, farmers, fishermen or street vendors, versus another parallel history of the privileged *Zamindars*, landowners or a minority of educated professionals of a very different era. So how important is reflecting on this history when it comes to discussing our cuisine? The answer is pretty obvious—well of course it is important!

The convergence of these two strands of history has resulted in the development of a niche combination of flavour, spice, subtlety and richness—creating a unique but highly undervalued Bengali cuisine. Aficionados of different cuisines attest to this notion. Mobilising a conversation around this cuisine and its subsequent promotion by Bangladeshi diasporas internationally, is therefore a necessary step needed to truly pay testament to the idea of "Brand Bangladesh". MasterChef Australia finalist Kishwar Chowdhury has donned the role of doing exactly that—and for this, she deserves nothing but our unwavering gratitude. Some have argued across social media that the non-resident Ms Chowdhury tried to leverage

patriotism and emotion to drive her food to the very top of the ladder—well, I say good for her. As a society, are we seriously going to criticise a lady for tapping into the one sentiment that we as Bengalis have a history of misusing? But there is a bigger tale here—each of the dishes Ms Chowdhury presented in coherence with her personality, represented an itemised tale of the holistic Bangladesh story. And for specifically making this effort to be a narrator through her food, she won

that it was. Whether it be *Paanta Bhaat* or *Paan*, these are items which one is likely to see (albeit in a more rustic form) across villages and households that are often struggling to make ends meet—by giving power to the value that such individuals bring to the Bengali story, she presented these dishes in what is surely one of the most coveted culinary competitions in the world. Her other dishes such as *Jao Bhaat* and Mutton *Rezala* brought to light crucial strands



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my heart.

The *Panta Bhaat* and *Aloo Bharta* dish was bound to hit the core of our sentiments—such a simple yet heartwarming representation of the very fundamentals of Bengali cuisine! The story behind the history of this dish—that of poverty, struggle, oppression and famine is one that needs to be expressed. Kishwar's take on *Mishi Paan* on the other hand, resulted in the judges deeming it her *love letter to Bangladesh*—and

in examining the thesis of our cuisine—and she made it a point to elaborate on the story behind each item to the judges, for which she deserves applause.

There was one dish in particular however which truly blew me away. In our collective quest to celebrate the independence struggle of 1971 and the spirit of freedom, we often fail to reminisce, recollect and reflect on the fragile journey of the ethnic populations of our country. To comprehend the roots of our

cuisine, and in fact the foundations of all things that make us Bangladeshi, we need to reconcile ourselves with the indigenous populations of our country and pay tributes to their history. Their story is often untold and shamelessly sidelined—both by the state and citizens alike. Kishwar's *Rangamati Barramundi Curry* was an informed chef's homage to the capital of the Bangladeshi Hill tracks and home to the indigenous people of Bangladesh. How wonderful it was to see netizens have a genuine conversation in reaction to this dish, regarding the culture of indigenous groups in the country and what they bring to our story?

Residing in Canada I have often tried to seek inspiration from Bangladeshi immigrants who are making a credible impact and truly representing Brand Bangladesh here—there is little doubt that expats owe an immense gratitude to their motherland. And yes, when I see pockets of restaurants opening up in Toronto such as "Gharo" or "ADDA Bengali Kitchen & Catering" and proudly labelling themselves as promoting Bangladeshi food, I perhaps feel the same sense of pride which the owners and chefs do—but in more ways than one, a deeper sense of comfort perhaps. Comfort in knowing that if I miss home cooked food, I can always run over and feel at home. Comfort in knowing that if I want to give my non-Bangladeshi friends a glimpse of our local delicacies, I can take them there. For decades, Bangladeshi expats have been restaurateurs in immigrant hubs such as London, New York and Toronto—yet there was a seeming sense of discomfort in labelling their food as Bangladeshi.

We preferred to market our restaurants as Indian or Pakistani—in a way this was perhaps a manifestation of how we undervalued ourselves as a society or a reflection of the hesitancy to respect our achievements. Or perhaps, it was simply a way to avoid explaining to the average person where and what Bangladesh is. Today, our country can and should be proud of where it is—and I think it gives leverage to our citizens to be bolder and brighter in wearing that badge of pride more adeptly. Do not get

me wrong, our governments of the past and the present have been quick to jump on the development bandwagon and take credit for the modern image of Bangladesh as a thriving middle-income economy. Nevertheless, they forget to shine appropriate light on the daily achievements of regular citizens and expats alike—the true carriers of the story of Bangladesh. What Kishwar Chowdhury has done and the traction she has received during her time at MasterChef Australia, does in my opinion, provide a segue for us as a society to celebrate the successes of civic power and regular citizens—and in turn, inspire others, and importantly mothers and home cooks, to take ownership of playing their role in building Brand Bangladesh investing in their skills.

The *New York Times* carried a report way back in 2000 titled "The Star of Bangladesh; In New York, Don't Take Indian Food Too Literally"—indicating that around 85 to 90 percent of Indian restaurants in New York were in fact Bangladeshi. More recently in 2019, the BBC ran several reports stating that 87 percent of Indian restaurants in the UK were run and owned by British-Bangladeshis. So, when it comes to entrepreneurship and the culinary arts, Bangladeshi expats have invested time, money and effort in different communities across the aisle. With Kishwar Chowdhury's success, one hopes that Bengali cuisine gets further limelight internationally and is depicted as a vessel for telling the story of a history of a people, whose roots are as diverse as is their food. Soft power via civic power is often more impactful than political power—and in the Golden Jubilee year of our independence, Kishwar Chowdhury may just have nudged our cuisine in a direction where it can cumulatively play the role of being a platform to promote Bangladesh globally, while staying true to our roots. We wish her the best and hope to read her cookbook soon! You do not have to be in Bangladesh to be an ambassador of Bangladesh—and this principle I take to heart deeply. And I hope Kishwar does too.

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### QUOTABLE Quote



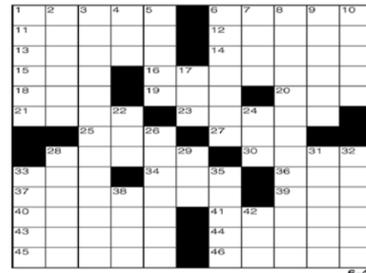
**ZOHRA SEHGAL**  
(27 April 1912 -10 July 2014)  
Indian actress

*Life becomes drudgery if you don't have a sense of humour. A good sense of humour makes you see the funny side of a tragedy.*

### CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- |                             |                                |                        |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------|
| <b>ACROSS</b>               | 30 Leafy vegetable             | 6 County separators    |
| 1 TV grouch                 | 33 Clinic cost                 | 7 Phone button letters |
| 6 Titus Welliver series     | 34 Joplin piece                | 8 Baseball position    |
| 11 Flower girl, often short | 36 Boston team, for 37 Blow up | 9 Friday finder        |
| 12 Met work                 | 39 Ram's mate                  | 10 Reviled             |
| 13 "John Brown's Body" poet | 40 Crest                       | 17 Work unit           |
| 14 Do further editing work  | 41 Oven feature                | 22 Family              |
| 15 Gallery fill             | 43 Staggering                  | 24 Penguin's cuisine   |
| 16 Token of love            | 44 Defeatist's words           | 26 OPEC units          |
| 18 Rage                     | 45 Parliament members          | 28 "Raging Bull" star  |
| 19 Smelter supply           | 46 Looks after                 | 29 Crone               |
| 20 Signal of approval       |                                | 31 Cheap               |
| 21 Escapade                 | <b>DOWN</b>                    | 32 Brings to bear      |
| 23 A+, for one              | 1 Out during trial             | 33 Wild                |
| 25 Little lie               | 2 Rugged range                 | 35 "Under stand?"      |
| 27 Long lunch               | 3 Baseball position            | 38 Like some cheeses   |
| 28 Alice's cat              | 4 Top pitcher                  | 42 Bar rocks           |
|                             | 5 Fashionably dated            |                        |

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### YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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### BETLE BAILEY

BY MORT WALKER



### BABY BLUES

BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

