



# MADHUR CANTEEN

## The story of an eatery and Bangladesh

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If one says Madhur Canteen and Bangladesh's history is inextricably interlinked, will it be an exaggeration?

The eatery has etched its place in Bangladesh's national politics due to its association with various political movements that originated from Dhaka University.

Since 1921, the year Dhaka University was founded, and particularly from 1948 onwards, many national movements had their origins in Madhur Canteen, as noted in Dhaka: Smriti Bismritir Nagari by Professor Muntassir Mamoon.

The canteen, named after Madhusudan Dey, lovingly called Modhu da, played a key role in shaping Bangladesh's history. Over the decades, the canteen has witnessed countless historic events.

It was the starting point for significant events such as the Language Movements of 1948 and 1952, the 1949 protests by fourth-class university employees, the student revolt against the university's "black laws" (kala kanoon), and the 1969 mass uprising. During these times, it served as a hub for student leaders and activists, the architects of these historic movements.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS



### History of MADHUR CANTEEN

The canteen was founded in 1921 by Aditya Chandra Dey, Madhuda's father, who received permission from the university authorities to open a food business on the university grounds when Dhaka University was established.

At that time, the present-day Medical College was part of the Dhaka University campus. When the police barracks near Palashi were vacated, Aditya purchased two thatched houses from the British police for Tk 20-30.

One house was used as a shop, while the other served as his residence.

In 1934-35, when Madhuda was around 14-15 years old, he began helping his father in the canteen.

The canteen later moved to its current location after the arts faculty was shifted to its present location near the Nilkhet area.

The canteen's location used to serve as the Durbar Hall of the Dhaka Nawabs. In addition to being used for formal and informal meetings, the hall was a skating rink and ballroom for the Nawabs' enjoyment.

Construction of the building began in 1873 and continued over several years. In 1906, a conference sponsored by Nawab Bahadur Sir Khwaja Salimullah of Dhaka was held in the building, which led to the formation of the All-India Muslim League.

After the death of Madhusudan, his son Arun Kumar Dey took over the responsibility of running the canteen.



The canteen's significance was underscored during Operation Searchlight on March 25, 1971, when it became one of the first targets of the Pakistani military.

After the Liberation War, the canteen played a vital role as the "melting pot" of all ideologies. It is in this canteen that student leaders, who later became national ones, of different ideologies met and greeted each other, paving a common ground for political harmony.

This harmony later came in handy during the anti-dictatorship movement against late president HM Ershad.

The canteen's role in all protests and movements since the restoration of democracy in the 90s – from anti-government protests to Gonojagaran Mancha – remained as important as ever.

In 2013, the first protest rally against a court verdict that sentenced war criminal Abdul Quader Mollah to life imprisonment (instead of the capital punishment) came out of this canteen, according to Gonojagaran Mancha activists.

Indeed, the cafeteria has been a popular starting point for processions. In the July mass uprising against the Sheikh Hasina-led regime, several press conferences were held at Madhur Canteen.

However, it is not just a political venue. It is a cultural melting pot too. Renowned writers, cultural icons, political leaders, and social activists have frequented it.

Eminent scholar Professor Ahmed Sharif, known for his free-thought movement, described it as the birthplace of national ideas and aspirations.

"For nearly half a century, all forms of youthful thought, consciousness, resolve, and struggle in our national life have emerged – and continue to emerge – here at Madhur Canteen.

"Initiatives, enterprises, and movements have taken shape. Everything began here. For this reason, Madhur Canteen deserves recognition ... as a centre for the nation's political, cultural, and literary thoughts, ideas, and aspirations. It is sure to hold a significant, permanent place in our national history as the birthplace of many movements," he was quoted in the book Dhaka: Smriti Bismritir Nagari.

The book also included several recollections of Madhur Canteen by other notable individuals.

The famous poet Buddhadeb Basu, a student of DU when the canteen was run by Aditya Chandra Dey, the father of Madhusudan Dey, also reminisced about the canteen.

"At one end of the university compound was a tin-roofed building. Inside, beside worn-out tables, there were long, bar stools. This is where we would quench our hunger and thirst, as there wasn't another tea shop in the entire area. Aditya's menu was very limited; on most days, he couldn't offer anything with the tea except for the sweets he made by hand. But that didn't matter to us.

"We would call out one order after another to Aditya. 'Put it on the tab' was all we used to hear," the book quoted him.

"I left Dhaka without fully paying off

Mujibur Rahman and Tajuddin Ahmad also frequented the canteen.

Eating on credit became a tradition at Madhur Canteen. Students would accumulate debts, but Madhusudan Dey, affectionately known as Madhuda, never pressured them for payment, said students and people who knew him.

Many repaid their debts after establishing themselves in life, and Madhuda even supported needy students financially.

Mujahudul Islam Selim, a former student of Dhaka University and former president of the Communist Party of Bangladesh, said that

met Madhusudan on March 25, 1971.

"The following day, Madhuda was killed by the Pakistani military. I could never have imagined that ... We didn't speak much on that day, but sometimes, when I close my eyes, I can still hear Madhuda saying, 'Selim Shaheb kemon achen [How are you doing Mr Selim]!,' he recalled.

Raisul Zilani, a current student at DU, said that the Canteen is one of the best places for adda as it feels special considering its rich history.

Arun Kumar Dey, Madhusudan's son, took over the responsibility of running the canteen after the Liberation War.

Recalling the massacre of his family, Arun said his father and other family members were killed in front of him.

"I was in the fifth grade then. In 1972, I took charge of the canteen," Arun said.

On March 26, 1971, the Pakistani military stormed Madhusudan's house in the early hours and killed his wife, son, and daughter-in-law. Madhusudan was injured, arrested, and taken to the Jagannath Hall playground, where he was executed along with many students.

Recalling the days after the Liberation War, Arun shared, "Many people came to me to settle their dues. While paying, they would say, 'I had some dues to Modhuda, but I couldn't pay them at the time.'"

Some even came from abroad to clear their dues, he said.

"I can still recall my father discussing political issues with student leaders. My father had a wonderful relationship with them, and I have continued to maintain that connection with the current students," he said.

In 1995, Toufiq Hosen Khan, a student of fine arts, created a sculpture of Madhusudan Dey, which still stands in front of Madhur Canteen today.

The renowned poet Shamsur Rahman also wrote a long poem titled 'Madhusmriti,' which is engraved near Madhusudan's sculpture.



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