

The 1971 martyrs of Dhaka University : some recollections

by Dr. K.T. Hossain

Most of the martyrs of the Dhaka University campus were known to me. Some of them were quite close to me. When I joined the university as a teacher in 1954, the university was not as large as it is now. The number of Departments, the number of Faculties, the number of teachers and the number of students were all much smaller than they now are. As a result, teachers of different Departments were mostly known to one another.

I particularly remember some of those friends of mine who were senior to me and guided me in various decisions about my career. One such friend was Mr Santosh Bhattacharya of the History Department. One day I met him at the southern gate of Azimpur New Market just accidentally. He came forward and asked me about my decision in respect of my joining Rajshahi University. It was the year 1965 when I was working in a government department on secondment from the university. At that time I got an offer from Rajshahi University which offered me a higher pay and position than I had at Dhaka University. He urged me not to leave Dhaka University for joining Rajshahi University, since Dhaka

University, in his opinion, had better academic facilities (including library, facilities). He cited the example of Poel Valmiki of the ancient days who had expressed his determination not to leave his place of striving for achieving something great even if he had to undergo untold sufferings. Of all my friends who urged me not to leave Dhaka University his arguments seemed to me to be the strongest. I was persuaded to stay on at Dhaka University, which I joined later at the end of my sojourn in the government.

During the difficult days after March, 1971, I met him often at the teachers' lounge at the University Arts Faculty building and exchanged our experiences in the rural areas of Bangladesh (East Pakistan of those days). He told me that he had stayed for some time in the kitchen of a rural family which had also the family Dhenki (wooden husking machine) in the same room.

Dr. Govinda Dev was another senior friend with whom I had the fortune of

being quite close. He was an eminent philosopher who had also a high position in the Pakistan on Philosophical Congress. As far back as in 1956 he had organized the annual meeting of the Congress at Dhaka very successfully. Noticing my regular attendance in the sessions of the Congress he once jokingly remarked that I should have belonged to the Philosophy Department of the University. Later, in 1962, he asked me to become a member of the Philosophy Association and I later complied with his request. He loved good meals and I know of an occasion when he had managed to finish as many as eight good-sized "koi" fishes, to the smiling acquiescence of his host who resided in the flat just next to mine. Never did he and I fail to meet without saying something pleasant to each other. His deep religiosity and universal humanitarian spirit that surpassed all

bounds of the details of religion and community-bound ritualism was universally admired, appreciated and followed in the academic community of the Dhaka University and the other universities of his time in the country.

Dr. Mohammad Mortaza was the Medical Officer of Dhaka University. He was my neighbour. We lived in the same area of Fuller Road. His particular weakness was the servants. While we sent an ailing servant to him rather hesitantly since the servant did not, strictly speaking, belong to our families, he used to prepare prescription for them, saying that they deserved special care, since they are poor. He always went forward to help the poor. During the 1971 days when students everywhere had to sustain injuries on account of the policy of oppressing them followed by the then Pakistan Government, Dr.

Mortaza's doors were always open for helping students, particularly those involved in the war of liberation.

Dr. Abul Khair and Dr. Giasuddin of the History Department were particularly distinguished scholars in their subjects. They greeted everybody in the campus with a smile and were involved—we learnt later—in the serious work of secretly helping our freedom fighters.

Most of the other teachers who were picked up by the Pakistan army or their agents during the war of liberation were reportedly involved in the same way in the war. Their misfortune of being picked up by the Pakistan army for slaughter was due to this reason.

It is reported that the Pakistan army had prepared a list of people to be done away with in order to leave the then East Pakistan crippled for want of stalwarts among intellectuals. If this was the case, the wisdom of it was certainly questionable. The session of a part of a federal state from the federation is

a matter of natural right whether it is enshrined in the constitution or not. The injustices done to East Pakistan (Bangladesh) for about a quarter of a century were impossible to make people forget simply by the use of force. This is a prime instance of a logical fallacy (argumentum ad baculum) being unsuccessfully used for gaining some political objective. It seems inevitable that the inevitable reaction in the minds of the people always shows itself whenever an injustice calls for redress at the national level. Whether such a situation arises in this part of the world or another, the same result seems inevitable.

Slaughtering intellectuals causes a huge loss not only to the country involved but also to human civilisation as a whole. This heinous activity of ancient times was as much a loss to civilisation as in modern times. Sometimes the names of kings were associated with this crime. In modern times, there are no kings. Whose purpose then does it serve? It seems that the answer to this question is that it serves nobody's purpose. It is a total loss to everybody. It is a pity that it happened in 1971 possibly with full knowledge of its consequences.