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Remembering Professor Fazlul Karim-An Educator

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THE first death anniversary of our revered teacher Fazlul Karim falls on April 21, 2003. It reminds us the period he and my father Advocate Muezzul Islam known for his meticulous honesty in politics and profession lived in the same residential area near historic Shah Shuja Mosque in vibrant Comilla town. If we look at history we find Comilla was a centre of politics, education and culture, and forerunner of rural development, before and after partition of Bengal in 1947. They were in these movements from respective position in close cooperation and worked with zeal to attain common goal for emancipation and enlightenment of the country; when my father breathed his last on November 2, 1969 at the age of 70 years.

We were fortunate to have the affection and guidance of Professor Karim in the following years wherever we met, who enquired about our family wellbeing till his death at 92 years in National Heart Foundation Hospital, Dhaka on April 21, 2002. My two elder sisters- Ferdous Mohai Begum and Naznin Jahan Begum- were also his students at Intermediate and Degree level, who remember Sir with best regards. His eldest son Engineer/ Educator Aminul Kanim (Monzu) was my school & college mate in Comilla. Monzu left for higher studies in USA in 1962 as a lecturer of then Ahsanullah Engineering College now BUET. Since then he could not return to live and work in Bangladesh.

Professor Fazlul Karim joined Comilla Victoria College in 1938 to teach Political Science courses. This led to a thirty-four year successful teaching career. He was not only a teacher inside class rooms, but encouraged his direct students, family members and others to pursue higher education. He lived as educationist till his death, which welcomed everyone with open arms and tried to help people to the best of his abilities. He related well with people of different ages, whether be his sixty-year old son or student or his ten-year old grandson. He would discuss contemporary political issues with elders while getting up in the middle of night to watch a football match on TV with his grand children.

Professor Karim believed in equal education for women. He encouraged his wife to participate in women's activities including

participation in then All Pakistan Women's Association. His daughters are pursuing the teaching profession to carry on their father's legacy: Nazma Zaman is a Professor of BUET and Shamima Chowdhury is a Professor of Dhaka University. My sisters were his favorite students; especially Naznin Jahan Begum who was an elected secretary of College Union twice, first as I.A. and then as B.A. student, a practice of the lessons he imparted in the class on democracy as part of the syllabus. He was very happy to see my wife Laila Akhter in the Government Higher Education Service, a Professor in Eden Girls University College; and admired her mother Tabinda Akhter as a pioneer female educationist in this country.

At Qul Khwani of Prof. Karim held on April 24 last year, many of his students and well wishers were present. One of his students during 1940s, a retired Justice of the High Court, spoke his relationship with Prof. Karim and said he attended the second Janaza seeing the news in the paper. He lamented, over the last 20 years he had a desire to meet his teacher which did not materialize as he could not collect his address. Look, how far disconnected and isolated we are; although there is an association named 'Old Victorians' (ex-students of Comilla Victoria College) formed in early 1980s with objectives reiterated in the Souvenir published in the 2nd get-together of old Victorians. Everyone seems to be on the ego trip and crazy to be influential to catch the view of top leaders of main political parties by turn to go up in the hierarchy, commented an Old Victorian. If so, how respect for human relations would prevail in our society? At the end, who would be benefited? Experience shows none; death, the leveler and in the meantime society would gradually disintegrate.

Old Victorian Advocate Ali Akber called me to speak. As I started speaking I lost myself as a lot of events swarmed my memory. After Milad Mahfil Monzu reacted my speech saying it was ok. In 1955 we entered in Comilla Victoria College at Intermediate level. Monzu in Science group and me in Arts group. As such, I was fortunate to be a direct student of Prof. Karim who taught us Civics during 1955-57. I remembered a few of his lectures on State, Citizen and Nation which

imprinted my mind at that tender age, never to be erased. On the rights and duties of a citizen, he said, 'Well every right has a corresponding duty. You can not enjoy right without duty.' He asked us to think in terms of: I am a citizen of Comilla. I am a citizen of Pakistan. I am a citizen of the world.' The definition of State and Nation were clearly explained to us, for which while studying Political Science as a subsidiary subject at Dhaka University we faced no difficulty in understanding. I had the additional advantage to get the lecture notes on political science from my sisters, who were his students at degree level.

We do not know how many of his students involved in teaching Civics and Political Science did follow his mode of delivering lectures; coming to classes with preparation and making the points clear to the students with utmost care. There was pin drop silence in the class. That was the academic scenario in the college and no teacher came to take class without preparation, which was known to the guardians and students alike. Students practiced democracy through annual College Union Elections regularly, without any outside interference, till the end of 1960s. There was no petty party rivalry among teachers called politics which appeared in Public Universities and Colleges from 1970s and students' organizations reduced to fronts of parties' along-side-marring the traditional culture and academic atmosphere. How to come out of this vicious circle? It's the responsibility of the teachers in the first instance who mould the future to make attempts to break it, notwithstanding the primary duties of top party leaders to do it.

During undivided Bengal and following partition in 1947 the name and fame of Comilla Victoria College spread far and wide. Its high reputation was dependent on eminent Professors it had in all faculties. In Arts faculty we had professors like Fazlul Karim [Political Science], Jostna Moy Bose and Ajit Nandi [English], Bhibu Ranjan Guha [Logic & Philosophy], Abdul Momen [History-Islam & the modern world], Shudhir Sen and Ali Newaz [Bengali]. They had immense love for education, all students and guardians. Their commitment to the College and society around it was known to all; some even refused lucrative offer to stay here.

Those were past tradition which did not survive in the following generation, presenting an agonizing academic atmosphere. Why? Experts say proliferation of private colleges and indiscriminate nationalization of private colleges from end 1970s, providing government funds through MPOs to private colleges on so-called political grounds, etc., have broken the principles of education administration which gave way to politicization and corruption in appointments, transfers and postings as also ventilated in the media. It has been analyzed several times from different levels which did not bring in any constructive change and even the judicial enquiry reports on University matters went unheeded, report goes.

No doubt, we know, there are still honorable exceptions that are fighting against heavy odds; primarily politico-bureaucratic clutches, to keep academic discipline and dignity of teachers in Public University and Colleges, for which the society is surviving. We pin hope on them to turn around the agonizing system one day. It has assumed paramount importance to-day in the wake of war on Iraq as seeking admission in foreign universities and citizenship for progeny in the Western Countries would no longer be a panacea. I am told Professor Karim once predicted their inclination towards seeking settlement in the west cutting roots with the land of birth might not be beneficial in the long run. It is not ethical to forget one's own country which is quintessence of patriotism. He always encouraged me to go on working steadfastly, whatever might be the pains here, which would not go unrewarded.

As he taught us the relationships on Individual, Family and Society in the classroom, he demonstrated it outside. As a family head he is a successful man, all his seven children obtained advanced degrees in various professional fields from abroad. Over the years, many of his students, through his encouragement, advice and help have become highly successful professionals. It is now their turn to devise an approach to carry the message of Professor Karim to all levels and imparts civic education to every nook and cranny of the country. We wait to see and meanwhile offer our cooperation.

(The author is a senior politician and economist.)