

Dhaka University's Lost Glories

In 1921, the British government established the Dhaka University in response to the demand of Muslim League leaders. Built on land donated by Nawab Salimullah, the university was initially meant to be a residential teaching institution and planned to teach Arabic, Urdu and Persian languages. Established by the British Government, the university has today many departments and institutes and the government, through the University Grants Commission (UGC), bears all the costs of the university including salaries, tuition costs, accommodation for teachers, officers and employees and all sorts of establishment costs.

University education is not merely classroom teaching however and, across the globe, they achieve fame and recognition when they show their faculty and scholars have engaged in scholarly research and that their institutions are real centres of learning. However, in regard to our own universities, political interference and feuds have thrown them universities into a severe impasse that has brought academic activities to a halt. But universities like Dhaka University were once our pride and joy. Dhaka University earned so many laurels it was once called the Oxford of the East. Today a mere shadow of its former self.

Education at any university should be flexible and changes within the system and curriculum need to be kept in line with what is happening in the real world. But when university students do not concentrate on their studies and instead, busy themselves with politics, they are wasting the country's money that could be instead used for development of the rural society. Although they can be involved in the university's internal politics, they should not be allowed to poison the atmosphere by the politics-of-hatred propagated by political parties. If students give priority to off-campus politics and do not study, they destroy the effort to provide solid education. Whenever there is a political campaign, they are more than willing to lie, cheat and slander.

In Dhaka University, over 50 teachers and 70 other staff members have been recruited through political influence. This disrespect and aversion shown to otherwise eligible candidates is causing a brain drain and destroying the credibility of the institutions. No wonder Dhaka University now stands 4,922 among 6,000 in quality ranking. Yet when it began life on the model of Ox-Bridge it consistently maintained high standards. Until the late 1960s, these standards never faltered but later conditions so declined that many foreign institutions of higher learning began denying recognition of Bangladeshi graduates. Even the chairman of UGC, the country's higher education watchdog has observed how most of the state-owned institutions are now plagued with dirty politics, session jam and financial mismanagement. The lack of a proper monitoring system and corruption are he said, eating at the vitals of the higher education system in public universities. When he said we should bear in mind that we should think globally but act regionally, we applauded him.

Despite this, most of the public universities provided employment to the loyalists of the party in power bypassing existing regulations and the recommendations of the University Grants Commission (UGC). This is shocking for students, parents and the nation. Aside from violating existing directives and regulations, such employment modalities have had serious impacted the credibility of the public universities. The poisoned academic atmosphere is causing students and teachers capable of pursuing education and career abroad to leave the country. The government must not waste any more time in remedying the situation.

Many honest teachers had rightly diagnosed the vicious ailments within the universities but the authorities so far, have failed to ensure the restoration of quality and standards. If our graduates fail to gain acceptance abroad, it is a national shame as previously they were considered at par with local graduates. Such factors should have been eye openers but they were not and this is entirely due to the politicisation of students and teachers. The main aim of a university-going student is the acquisition of knowledge, values and skills. The Dhaka University takes in the best students and although such high quality intakes are supposed to have high potentials for quality learning, most quickly fall from grace as the distractions are far too varied for students to be able to give full time to their studies. The erosion of moral values must be arrested if universities like Dhaka University is to regain its lost glory. The public universities have all the right requisites - space, faculties and other physical attributes to justify their claim to being full-fledged universities, yet this seems to be not enough for maintaining previous high standards.