

PART CXXIII

The symphony of our times



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NATURALLY, the new arts building of Dhaka University in Nilkhet also accommodated all the humanities, including history, Bengali, English, etc. The commerce faculty, too, was shifted there. The building impressive as it was also happened to be located over spacious lawns covered with green grass and shady trees. For us the young teachers, the principal attraction was the allocation of separate rooms for each of us. Being lecturers, we were at the lowest tier of the teaching hierarchy. Hence, it was highly rewarding for us to have individual office rooms. My room in the north-eastern corner of the ground floor was equipped with a large secretariat table with blue cover and a number of sturdy wooden chairs. These were evidently meant for tutorial students and friends and visitors during off hours. The only thing that I missed was an easy chair. I had been to my father, Mr BM Rahman's offices in the Writers Building in Kolkata and in the Eden Buildings (Secretariat) in Dhaka as a child and adolescent. Since the British colonial times, government offices of gazetted officers were equipped with a mirror in wooden frame over a basin and a deck-chair made of wood and cane or an easy chair in which, instead of cane, there would be strong canvas. The idea was that, since the

office hours were from 10:00am to 5:00pm, it was assumed that the officers concerned would wash their hands before and after lunch in the basin. Thereafter, they would take short rest reclining on the deck or easy chair. In 1965, I was no government officer. But the right to a single office room of mine inspired me to have an easy chair. I first tried to obtain it from the engineering department of the university by urging class friend Jahangir Jasim to help me in this endeavour. After all, his father was the chief engineer of the university at that time. My efforts, however, failed as the engineer at the executive level rightly said that it would open the flood gates for other lecturers to demand easy chairs for their room. A crestfallen Jahangir said that what I wanted was beyond the possibility of realisation. Hence, I spent a part of my hard-earned money to have an easy chair built and put in my office room. Reclining on it in leisure hours made me feel like a king!

More serious and, at the same time, humorous events and happenings made life in the new arts building attractive and memorable. One day while I was having a cup of tea with colleagues in the teachers' canteen, school friend Masum Ahmed Choudhury came rushing to discuss what was an evidently important and emergent matter. He was out of breath and I calmed him with a glass of cold water, sandwich and a cup of tea. Since what he wanted to tell me was of a private nature, we went to my room. Masum (later in life an ambassador of Bangladesh) was at that time a lecturer in history in Jagannath College in Old Town of Dhaka. He had rushed all the

way from there to relate his predicament and seek my help. He said, 'In the morning class, today I was teaching the Battle of Plassey (1757) and tragic defeat of Nawab Siraj ud-Daulah in the hands of the East India Company because of the treachery of his commander-in-chief Mir Jafar and other generals and courtiers like Yar Latif, Rai Durlabh, Omichund and Jagat Seth. The students were listening with wrap attention but a rogue student stood up and said, "Sir, we have always heard that Nawab Siraj ud-Daulah was the grandson of Nawab Alivardi Khan. But no one ever tells us his father's name. Will you please tell us what the name of Siraj ud-Daulah's father was?"'

I looked at Masum and said, 'Did you tell the name?' Masum replied, 'how could I. I don't know and I doubt if anyone knows. Do you? I have come to you for help.' Instead of answering him (as I also did not know the name), I asked him, 'What did you do in the class?' Masum said, 'I just closed the book I had in my hand, took off my glasses and, looking terribly hurt, told the students, "I am very sorry that you don't even know such a simple thing. I feel sad and disturbed and cannot teach you any more today." I want you to find out the name and tell me tomorrow. After that I left the college and came to you for help.'

As the age of the internet had not yet arrived, I said, 'The library is closed now and I cannot find the name before tomorrow.' Masum looked sad in dark disappointment and went away. Next day I got the name and told Masum over telephone. The name of Siraj ud-Daulah's father is Zain ud-Din Ahmed Khan. I also asked him whether the

naughty student had come with the answer. Masum said, 'No! Indeed, that was my good luck. He also failed to find the name and did not turn up in the class!'

Interaction with senior teachers enriched my experience. I always had difficulties in getting up in the morning as I was a 'night bird'. During my days as college and university student, I used to keep late hours. Most of my textbooks and extracurricular materials were read mostly in the night sometimes up to 2:00am or 3:00am. The habit died hard. It did not change even when I became a teacher. Most of the classes assigned to me were after midday. Once during winter, I was assigned a class at 9:30 in the morning. Despite passing a virtually sleepless night out of anxiety, I could not reach the university before 10:00am. It nearly created a crisis situation. However, our senior colleagues and former teachers were extremely affectionate and understanding. Professor GW Choudhury who was then the head of the department of political science, said, 'OK, since it is difficult for you to take classes in the morning, I shall take that class.' Needless to say, I was relieved beyond measure.

To be continued

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