

Can BUET Remain an Institution of Excellence?

by A.K.M.A Quader

BUET has been striving hard over the years to remain an island of excellence in the abyss of mediocrity being loyal to its tradition of maintaining academic standard and discipline. However, a handful of students have always been engaged in activities undermining the discipline and rigour of its academic programme on one pretext or another while the majority of them have remained silent observers.

Over the years the degradation of academic atmosphere in schools and colleges in the country has continued unabated. Mass copying or what is called adoption of unfair means in examinations at SSC and HSC levels has been so rampant that the students at large find no wrong with it or are not ashamed of it. Some parents and local political leaders have reportedly assisted in the process. A number of sincere and dedicated teachers of schools and colleges while invigilating in the examination halls have refused to allow such copying. The result has been disastrous for many of them. Reports have it that a number of such teachers have even been murdered, many others maimed and assaulted by those so called students, their friends, the local political thugs and even some parents. In many places, the law enforcing agencies including the magistrates and TNOs have suffered similar assaults at the hands of these so-called students and their cohorts. The ministry of education or the government of the day has not come out with any significant exemplary measures to contain this menace of mass copying.

What has happened at BUET on the nights of April 25 and 26 in the name of protesting against the disciplinary action for impersonation in a class test is what a school teacher or a college teacher is subjected to year after year during the public examinations. The "cancer" of "unfair means" in examination has just crept into the heart of BUET. How on earth the stu-

dents at large can condone impersonation for any cause? Have they lost all their sense of ethics? The reasons are clear. Many of the students are used to malpractice while in schools and colleges. The rot is already there before they enter BUET. The adoption of unfair means in public examination has attained the notoriety of an epidemic. The prognosis is fatal and the education system is heading toward a disaster for all practical purposes. Though BUET admits students into its programmes on the basis of its own admission test, the students once admitted feel that they would one day leave with BUET's certificate whether they are fit for the programme or not.

In my own experience as a student of BUET in the sixties and a teacher for more than 25 years, I feel that a small section of BUET's students cannot cope with demand and rigour of the programme. Many of these students had poor schooling. They had been utterly dependent on private tutors and the notes prepared by them. In the process their natural talent and inborn capability have been retarded. They show little initiative and interest in independent studies at the university level. They are unable to withstand the demanding pressure of thorough study and hard work. Many of them lack problem solving aptitude which is the most desirable quality for any professional education like engineering, medicine or science. They find BUET an altogether different place of learning where one must work and study by oneself without any kind of tutoring. They are not at all accustomed to read text books and avail library facilities. They wait for the so-called preparatory leave before the examination. But when the leave comes, they naturally realise that their preparation is hopelessly inadequate. So, they look for the so-called student leadership to disrupt the academic schedule at any cost. This has been the case

at BUET for many years. Moreover, many of them simply do not have the professional aptitude and ability to become members of a professional community. These are, unfortunately, the students who are found as trouble makers at BUET right now has no means to get rid of these students. I cannot just seek a student to discontinue the programme even when I strongly feel that he must do so for his own good. A student must realize that engineering is not the only profession he has to take up; there are more appropriate alternatives for him.

The national dailies and periodicals have covered the violence at BUET on the nights of April 25 and 26 to a large extent. However, sometimes, analyses of events and follow-ups have failed to depict the behaviour of the students. The student leadership at BUET has over the past decades been associated with the weaker students who are least interested in academic matters, not to speak of their own studies and careers. If one would like to contest it, he/she please look for their transcript and grades. They are little interested in academic pursuits and have other worldly interests having no bearing on the learning or education. The present student leadership of BUET including the elected student body (EUCSU) have activated the recent violence in the campus. Their demand and insistence for withdrawing the punishment handed down on a student for impersonation was atrocious. By doing so they have incited the violence in the campus. They wanted to become the final arbitrator of academic discipline at BUET. Those who had faced them on the night of April 26, have no shred of doubt in their minds that the student leadership had led the thugs and they were there to protect them. Their behaviour was despicable and they were party to those criminal acts. They no more stand for scholastic excel-

lence and academic discipline; and do not have moral ethics or the strength of character as such.

What the student leadership was upto would rather be cleaner if I describe my own encounter with them on April 27 when at around 1 p.m. EUCSU leaders including some other students came to the VC's office to discuss the matters arising out of the violence on the night of 26. I was present there by coincidence. They were remorseless, unrepentant and almost without human face. They were there to justify the violence of the previous nights. Their minds were rightly depicted in their memorandum submitted to VC on the same day. Three of their demands are: The punishment handed down on the student for impersonation is to be withdrawn; those who committed violence on the nights of 25 and 26 April cannot be punished in any way and Prof. Azadur Rahman, who detected the impersonation, is to be dismissed from BUET. What a shame! These elected representatives of the students and student leaders of different student organizations are abettors to the crime! We must shun such leadership for the sake of ethics principles of a civil society. Are they after nullifying everything what is sacred at BUET and in the society in general? The parents of these students are humbly requested to face the stark reality and address their own wards and judge their behaviour and relate that to the values in their own life. They must by now realise what their so-called meritorious sons and daughters have become.

BUET has been closed sine die. A handful of thugs and their abettors have hurt this institution at its core. To restore confidence in the tradition and academic discipline at BUET, the thugs must be identified and punished. As I think about the violence and the students' behaviour at BUET, I find it hard to go back to the class

room and stand in front of them. Whom I expect to teach? For me the answer has now become simply "no". I had visited the ransacked room of Prof. Azadur Rahman, and I just could not believe the violence perpetrated there. In order to preserve my life-long collection of books and works, I must give up my career at BUET. I cannot think of having my office vandalized and burned down by the thugs some day. I will not be surprised if the thugs at BUET some day burn down its libraries like the medieval Central Asian invaders in Baghdad or Alexandria. The sign is there. They have already vandalized the teaching and research laboratories and damaged research equipment.

BUET alone cannot enforce discipline unless the civil society accepts its values and endorses the same. The politicians and the government have a definite and clear role here. They must abandon their policy of sheltering such thugs in the name of supporters in the campus. They have already given birth to many a Frankenstein, let them stop it now for the sake of this society.

Teachers do not need to be popular with students or any body else by giving up academic excellence, discipline and values. On these matters, there cannot be any compromise. I am a teacher at BUET by choice and I am living in Bangladesh also by choice. I worked for the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971 by choice and am proud of it and so my children are. Probably time has come to look into my "choice" more pragmatically by considering my personal safety and sanctity of my teaching career. If I cannot discharge my responsibilities with clear conscience and dignity, I should rather think otherwise.

I was in Canada and USA during the first two weeks of May. I visited a number of campuses and met faculties, our ex-colleagues and BUET graduates there. All of them including the faculties of the universities

were aware of the violence at BUET and the reason therefor. All of them just could not believe that the students of BUET could condone "impersonation" and perpetrate violence in the campus and deep into residential areas in support of it. They were simply shocked and expressed their utter disgust. That was the moment I felt ashamed to be part of BUET. The majority of the students representing more than 95 per cent at the BUET, by remaining silent have rather become abettors to the crimes and violence perpetrated in the campus.

The recent happenings at BUET are bound to affect their future and career adversely. Not only a valuable portion of their formative years are being wasted, opportunities for achieving excellence are also lost. The student leadership of BUET who have disgraced this institution and their followers apparently do not have the mission of life nor the vision of student and for that matter the devotion for sharing knowledge and ideas with teachers. These handful have become students by chance and seemingly have no interest for making a career as engineer, planner or architect. But the silent majority cannot remain silent any longer, for, by remaining silent, the students at large become abettors to the crime and criminals. The silence of the lamb must end. They must come out and speak out to drive away the 'predators' from the academic arena of BUET once for all. Their strength lies in the strength of their character. They must prove that they are BUET; they stand for this institution, have faith in its tradition, admire and respect its academic discipline and rigour. And yes, this is what we all look forward to — reestablishing and reinforcing students' faith in scholarly achievements, professional glory, satisfying career and a life so deemed.

The writer is Professor of Chemical Engineering at BUET.