

Students invoke the divine

The Lord of the Universe is always the last resort for hapless individuals. He it is — or shall we rephrase the term and refer to it as divine providence? — that steps in where institutions and governments fear to tread. The belief, among those who still have the belief that all morality, and therefore everything good, is associated with faith in the Creator was manifested yet once more the other day at, of all places, Dhaka University. No, it is not that the campus is to be divorced from questions of religion or spirituality. A man or woman, wherever he or she be, happens to subscribe to particular religious ideals and even passions. Then there are the agnostics, and also those who do not believe. It is all there, if only to illustrate the diversity of existence. But that is besides the point. What is to the point, now, is that the students of Dhaka University — M A final examinees, to be precise — have reached a stage in their long battle against untimely examinations where they must invoke the name of the Lord. One sympathises with the examinees, because they have already spent three extra years in the university. Not that they are the first group of students to have suffered so. But they are certainly one group that has had the nerve to inform all of us that things cannot go on as they have so far. They have done it, through what in more ways than one can be called an act of desperation.

The milad mahfil that the MA finalists arranged at Salimullah Hall of Dhaka University on Friday brings to the surface yet once more the sordid nature of things that prevail on the campus. It is not simply that terrorism stalks the campus, or that quarters having vested interests have all the wish in the world to thwart the objectives of the thousands of young people who happen to be students at DU, or for that matter any other university. The question is also one of session jams, postponed examinations and advancing years. Under the normal rules, a student entering Honours classes at the university is logically and naturally expected to come out of the institution in four years, with a Master's degree as one of his most prized possessions. But these normal rules do not exist anymore, and there is even a chance that

the student who goes to the university today, tediously and endlessly, will honestly go through a willing suspension of disbelief — to use the phrase made famous by English Romantic poetry — when told that his elders left the university in the fifties and even the sixties in the stipulated time. He cannot comprehend the truth that back in those days, the purpose of education was really the pursuit of excellence within the unity of time. How will this student, today's young individual, take it when he sees his years go by with no sign of examinations around the corner? It might be that he will leave after seven or eight years — an MA degree holder at last. But at what cost! The degree will probably be what Browning once called the petty done. The young man — there is a good chance he might be losing his youth too — who finally steps on to the threshold of the world before him will be quite dismayed by the undone vast. The world will have passed him by. What better way of knowing this than by going back into the experience of recent years, when students have emerged free of the university but then became captive to unemployment?

These are the thoughts — or call them nightmares — that led to the milad mahfil at Salimullah Hall. It is in one way a good sign that our young still care about the need to seek out the divine in their meanderings through life. In quite another way, it is also cause for embarrassment since the students have made it clear that they have no trust in the ability of mortals to help them tide over their crisis. It is perhaps time for the Almighty to step in. But there is also the great truth, as revealed in the Holy Book, that the Almighty only helps those who help themselves. Are the men and women responsible for higher education, as also those entrusted with ensuring the security of educational institutions, ready to help themselves? We the citizens, on our part, will only inform our young friends at Dhaka University that we join them in their prayers. We also have a prayer to the temporal authorities: may we entertain the fond hope that some day soon there will begin to be signs of a return to normal examinations in normal timeframes?