

Lack of policy on language effects academic standard

Prof M. Miah

Prof Moniruzzaman Miah, Dean of Faculty of Science, DU talks to our Correspondent of Education Affairs on university's autonomy, teachers preoccupation with private consultancy jobs, academic calendar, session jam and many other issues here.

N.N. Why did you switch over from pink to white panel? do you view your success?

Prof M.M. I must confess you have really put me in a very embarrassing situation. by asking me this question. Our conception of University Autonomy does not merely consist in keeping the university insulated from all pernicious external influences but also ensuring a decentralised and democratic administrative system within the university itself. I firmly believe this is indispensable for academic freedom. Election are a natural corollary to the process of democratization. We also take part in elections but, we always try to keep electioneering at a low key. This is entirely our internal matter.

However, since you have asked me, let me tell you that we, the whites, believe that there is ample scope for ameliorating the entire gamut of the administrative machinery of the University; but our association with pink was, we felt, acting as a positive hindrance to doing our bit and contributing towards that. Hence we had to part company.

As regards our success, I am quite pleased with the result of the recently held Senate election. Although we got 11 seats and the blues bagged 22, qualitatively we are no inferior, for, five of us are among the top ten vote getter, and the total percentage of vote cast in favour of all our candidates is only slightly less than that for the blues.

N.N. Do you think grouping among teachers effect the students too?

Prof M.M. No, I don't think so, although individuals, teachers and students both may try to take advantage of a situation like this. But so far such matter has not come to my knowledge.

N.N. With your academic calendar will it be possible to streamline session jam at your faculty? How many years will it take? How do you plan to adjust unscheduled closures due to flood or other reasons?

Prof M.M. I do believe that session jam can be eliminated within a span of three years, provided we plan to do so. An academic calendar of the type we are trying to follow in the Faculty of Science provides only the framework within which to do the planning. But this itself cannot streamline the session jam. What is needed is our commitment towards achieving this goal. But students also should realize that demanding shifting of dates of examinations for one reason or the other or closing down the university on flimsy grounds do not serve their interest even the least. It is time they shunned their politics of pressure on the administration.

Unscheduled closure has been the bone of our academic life, so to say, in the university. While I don't wish to hurt anybody's feelings, may I say that we Bengalees are a very emotional nation. Let me elaborate. When Churchill died all our educational institutions were closed down; but there was no holiday in Britain! When Princess Margaret was going to get married, Her Royal Highness the Queen



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used her prerogative to declare a day's holiday so that the British people could enjoy the matrimonial pageantry. This was a very exceptional occasion and no one else than the Queen could do it. And here? If some bigwig dies you have a holiday, if you win a cricket match you close down, and if there is a freshers reception in one department you have a day off. This practice must stop. Students should also be more responsible not to interfere with the administrative decision of the university.

Yes, the closure due to flood has put a spanner into our scheme of things for the current academic year. Soon I am going to consult the departmental chairmen to assess the situation and find out ways and means of adjustment to the proposed calendar.

N.N. Your idea about the standard of education at DU— is it better than the 60s?

Prof M.M. Well, today we have many more academically better equipped teachers than during the 60s. But the freshers we are admitting to the University seem to have a poorer background than before, particularly their proficiency in language is inadequate for receiving university education. This, of course is due to poor schooling. Meanwhile there has been a tremendous knowledge explosion, particularly in the Sciences. There is therefore a wide gap between what the university lions would like their students to learn and what they actually acquire. Students have very genuine grievances too, particularly, about their inadequate and squalid living conditions and the low nutritional value of the food they are served in the dormitories even then I would hazard a guess that the achievement of the top one-fourth of our boys and girls when they pass out of here is better than that in the 60s, at least their horizon of knowledge is wider.

N.N. There is a saying that 'a professor must publish or perish but at DU we do not see much in terms of publications why?

Prof. MM. Look, a university teacher's publication are not like baubles. Most of these are published in professional journals and therefore one may not come across them always. In fact, I am sometimes surprised by the number and quality of the publications of some of our younger teachers. And I would reckon that our teachers are putting out quite valuable researches, and a sizable number of the DU teachers now have a niche in the academic world. However, if all of us could not fully exploit our potentialities and put forth our best is due to the fact that we are caught in a vortex, so to say, of heavy teaching load further compounded by the session jam, uncertain academic calendar, administrative duties of a large university, paucity of funds for research and lack of institutional and infrastructural support. No less important is the prevailing politico-socio-economic climate of the country which has remained in a state of flux and which touches everybody.

N.N. People say that some teachers of DU are extremely busy with private consultancy do you agree?

Prof M.M. Yes, it is true. But they are tempted to do it for several reasons. One, since funds for research are not easily available, consultancy offers them an opportunity of doing some research. Two, the extra income earned helped them to lead a more comfortable life to which every human being would normally look forward. Please permit me to mention that the country also benefits from the work of the local consultants, because, the same job done by a foreigner would cost ten to twenty times more with no better result. However no teacher should be allowed to do any consultancy job at the expense of his duties and responsibilities at the university. The DU Syndicate has taken note of it and has constituted a committee to frame rules and regulations in this regard.

NN: The present atmosphere of DU is not at all conducive for studies. How can it be improved?

Prof MM: Arms rattling and frequent unscheduled closure of the university do seriously impale our work and create an atmosphere of uncertainty and panic.

DU is a national institution and it is in the national interest that it should be allowed to function unhindered from any quarter whatsoever. The University is itself or we the teachers are not the political adversaries of anybody, be it the government or opposition.

I therefore fail to understand why the political battles be fought on the campus and not elsewhere. It does not really serve anybody on the contrary's it goes against the country's interest. This is not

to suggest that I am against students politics. It is for them to choose their own course of action but, time has come. I believe, to evolve a national consensus on one issue. And it is that no one should do anything as would lead to closure of the University and everyone concerned should see that it continues to function without let or hindrance.

N.N: Should University Order of 73 be amended by the Govt without consulting the teacher? What about autonomy of the University?

Prof M.M: After 15 years of experience since the Dhaka University Order, 1973 began to be implemented many of us feel that certain provisions of this piece need improvement. But any unilateral decision on the part of the government without prior consultation with the University Teachers Association will simply serve to create bad blood between the government and the teachers. In any case nothing should be done at the expense of autonomy of the Universities and academic freedom of the teachers.

NN: Should teaching of English be reemphasized? How can it be made effective in the absence of trained teachers?

Prof MM: If academic standard has suffered at any stage of our education system and if I am asked to identify the single most important cause of this, I would say it is the firm national policy on language. Can there be any two opinion that our mother tongue should be the medium of instruction at all stages of our education system? And should we differ on the point that English for historical and various other reasons be taught as the second language at the secondary schools? But only fulsome announcements have been made in this regard since long and therefore not much progress has been made. In any case, I believe there is no alternative to planned and sustained efforts towards tackling a problem. That is how I look at this problem too.

NN: Should university education be selective in the context of our job market?

Prof M.M: Since University education is expensive there is some merit in the argument that we should import such knowledge to our graduates as would benefit the society at large. However, the size of our student population in the Universities has not yet reached a level which calls for any restriction in number. If the job market has not expanded, that is due to the failure of our national planning process and mechanism. Mind that we do not have any manpower planning. In the absence of an appropriate manpower planning and an well-defined job market any restriction on number of entry to the Universities will only serve to put back the clock of development and retard our march towards the 21st century.

Interviewed by Sameena