

An invigilator's experience at DU

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Some time ago, I had the misfortune of being an invigilator at a number of honours and masters course final examinations at the University of Dhaka, where I have been a teacher for over four years. I am compelled to use the term "misfortune" because what is now happening within the examination halls of Dhaka University is an insult to the noble profession.

A significant minority of students are securing academic certificates effectively through the threat or use of physical force rather than brain power, or by means of blatant cheating, and they get away scot free with all this.

During honours examinations, the students of my department (International Relations) were allocated to share a large hall with the students of a Department in the faculty of arts. As soon as the question papers were distributed, the students of the other department raised a hue and cry, as they felt that they had not been provided a sufficient number of "common" questions.

What this means, bluntly, is that the question paper did not tally with the "suggested" questions supplied by the course teacher to the examinees long before the examinations are held: this tactic, with the passage of time, has become a tradition.

The endemic sessions jam and postponement of examinations, the desire of teachers to avoid mass failure (which would lead to loss of personal prestige),

the extended presence of the aging students on the campus, the need to bid farewell to the old in order to make way for the new: these are some of the factors that conspire to create an atmosphere of dubious close cooperation between teachers and students.

If a course teacher springs a major surprise, and does not set the expected questions, the automatic response is a boycott.

Anyway, back to the hue and cry of that day. After 15 minutes of pandemonium, I was becoming annoyed because my students were being disturbed. This affair was aggravated by the fact that both the course teacher and the chairman of that department were absent from the examination hall, shirking their responsibility.

I approached a senior teacher of that department, suggesting that either those agitated students should quietly sit for the exam or leave the hall. He retorted harshly "Don't show your temper to me!" He would never dare to speak to a student in that manner.

I had no doubt presented my suggestion strongly, but he thought I was angry with him, when it would have been obvious to any mature person that I was annoyed because of the disturbance created by the students. Then the leader of the agitating students, seeing me losing my temper, came to apologize to me for inconvenience caused to my department. The contrast between the politeness

of the student and the rough behaviour of the teacher was a surprise to me.

After another fifteen minutes of diplomatic negotiations among the students as well as between the latter and their teachers, interspersed with shouting by males and crying by females, they eventually all shuffled out of the hall, leaving us finally in peace.

The same episode was repeated one week later, when they again boycotted their examination after seeing the question-paper, demonstrating the failure of the departmental teachers in maintaining public relations.

ANOTHER CUP OF ROTTEN TEA

The masters final examination, as I have discovered from bitter experience, is quite another cup of rotten tea. By the time the students reach this stage, they are mostly fast approaching the age of 30 years and have spent the greater part of a decade on the campus.

They are worried about employment and marriage, and are eager to leave: their teachers are equally eager to get rid of them, no matter how. The political "mastans" and committed cheats have by then become sophisticated veterans, recognizing the power of their collective strength, the weakness of the invigilators, the desperation of the situation, and the clear path to an undeserved certificate.

As all the students of my department are well-disciplined and they never cheat, I had an opportunity to find out what was going on among the students of other department during the last masters examinations. One hour before the end of the first three-hour examination, I noticed one young lady writing an essay that was being dictated to her surreptitiously, by a male neighbour who had pulled his desk next to her desk.

The desk in front of her was empty, and I sat on it facing her, at a vantage point from which I could keep an eye on many other students. She had thought that I would be too embarrassed to sit in front of her for long, but she was wrong, because I stayed put there until the end of that exam...and she did not write one single word in all that time!

The next day while I was on invigilation duty, I noticed a young man going to the toilet twice within five minutes, which naturally aroused my suspicion, and sure enough he was referring to extra sources of information. I requested him to stand up and empty his pockets, and so he threw a bunch of papers on the floor behind him, placing a cigarette packet (with notes on the inside cover) and a dirty prayer cap on the desk.

Then I realized that he is a pious cheat!

(To be continued)