

Some Memories of the Department: 1967-1972

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I joined the department as a student in 1967. I cannot honestly say that it was always my "ambition" to be a student of the English Department of Dhaka University. Yet I ended up being a part of the department for forty-six years, six years as a student from 1967 to 1972, and forty years as a teacher from 1973-2013.

In a way, I became a student of English because I had nowhere else to go. In school (Class 9 and 10) I was in Science and the accidental winning of a science prize in a nation-wide science fair in 1963 (with Mujahidul Islam Selim as my co-participant) led me to get enrolled in Science in college as well. In college I displayed a spectacular lack of interest and aptitude in Science. I was discollegiate in Physics, Chemistry, Mathematics, and just managed to scrape through with a first division in my HSC. I knew only one thing for certain: that I did not want to study any subject that dealt with Mathematics and that involved laboratory work. Also, I did not want to become an engineer; my father and two brothers were engineers, and two more brothers were to follow suit. Luckily, nobody at home tried to make me change my decision. Studying English therefore became almost a default decision for me. Also, the fact that I had read a bit of English fiction during my school and college days made my choice of English almost automatic. There is one more factor that I feel I should narrate here, just for the record. In a Mathematics "test" for our final HSC exam in Dhaka College, I failed miserably. Ten minutes after the exam started I called the invigilator and told him that I wanted to leave the room. Professor Harunur Rashid, our English teacher, was the invigilator, and he was a little surprised. He wouldn't allow me to leave the exam hall before I had stared at the question paper for one full hour. Eventually, I submitted an empty script and left. Predictably I got a zero in Mathematics, but I had rather good marks in English. Months later, I met Professor Harunur Rashid and he told me that I might consider studying English in Dhaka University. And I did. Harunur Rashid sir left Dhaka College first to join Chittagong University, then Jahangirnagar University; he was also DG of Bangla Academy for a few years. I never lost complete touch with him. Now in his eighties, Professor Harunur Rashid is my friend, virtually. Everyday he dispenses little gems of wisdom about Islam that he himself learned from his beloved Murshid. He surely does not remember that nod towards the English Department, but I never forgot it. Thank you sir. Now back to the department.

English was my only preferred subject and I got in without any admission test. In those days, there was no admission test for English: if your HSC result and marks in English were good, you got in. There was some kind of an interview but I have zero recollection of what questions I was asked. I do remember seeing a man in a dark suit who I was told was the Head of the Department, the one and only Dr. Syed Sajjad Husain (hereafter known as SSH), a dreaded figure with whom I never spoke during the two

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years he was there before he left DU to become the VC of Rajshahi University in July 1969. However, I felt quite at home in the department: a few of my childhood friends from St Gregory's School were there—AFM Jamaluddin, Sirajul Haque Sipi, and Syed Maudud Ali—and I made other new friends quickly.

But I have more stories about SSH. Rain or shine, hot or cold, winter or summer, I don't remember ever seeing SSH without his dark suit and tie, and a black umbrella. It has been rumoured that on a truly hot day he had been sighted taking off his jacket in the back room of the Head's office, a room which I had the privilege of seeing for the first time when I became a teacher myself.

First year

As first year students, one of our most memorable experience was the "Matriculation" ceremony where we all—12 girls and about 40 guys—walked down the stairs of the Arts Building wearing black convocation gowns, paraded through the street, passed the TSC, rounded the public library, crossed what was then College of Arts, to finally gather in a hall in Hotel Shahbagh, now a hospital. There, seated solemnly at tables, we listened to even more solemn speeches; we raised our glasses of water as a toast to our future in the department. I don't remember having anything to eat, but do remember wondering about the significance of Matriculation when we had already passed our SSC and HSC. In those technologically primitive days I had to look up a dictionary to learn that Matriculation involved "the act of enrolling in a college or university." SSH with his experience of English universities knew exactly what he was doing! It is not surprising that all other departments looked at us in awe.

Dr. Husain taught us *The Iliad* in first year. He was a good teacher and I remember listening to him with more attention than other teachers. At least part of his appeal had to do with the outrageousness of some of his views I think. For instance, he was a stickler for the correct spelling and pronunciation of the Arabic names of the Muslim students of the class. One day during roll call in class, he asked a student his name. "Muzibor" he said, and he spelled it out: M-U-Z-I-B-O-R. SSH was furious. "No, your name is Mujibur" said SSH, putting special emphasis on the letter "j." He spelled it out for the student. I have a vague memory that he threw Muzibor out of the class for mispronouncing and misspelling his own name. He certainly humiliated him in front of the whole class. I can well imagine the late Dr. Husain turning in his grave in holy wrath if I told him that in the list of Rajshahi University VCs on the internet, his name is spelled thus: Sayed Sazzad Hossain. One day I remember SSH spending an entire class talking about Achilles's great sulk and trying to make us understand what "sulk" meant. I imagine him now relapsing into an eternal sulk.

Dr. Husain also taught us phonetic transcription and I remember having some difficulty understanding it. It appeared too "mathematical" for me. The first class test on phonetic transcription that we had as first year students was given by SSH. I was not adequately prepared and got only about 45 out of 100. A girl from Badrunessa College got the highest marks (in the 80s I think) and my "manly" pride was more than a little pricked; in those days when I had not read anything about feminism, my reaction was clearly sexist. This experience put me in a competitive mode for the first time in my life.

I began to study a bit, particularly books from the "Reading List," (in addition to texts and authors from the regular syllabus) which would be the basis of our first year promotion exam.

I think this "Reading List" which included mostly novels and plays, mostly European writers in translation, was Dr. Syed Sajjad Husain's greatest contribution to the English Department. We read Dostoyevsky, Andre Gide, Moliere, Balzac, Flaubert, Rostand, Racine, Baudelaire, and some authors whose names I can't recall now. I read all the books in the list with great pleasure, and tried to read as many books by the same authors as I could lay my hands on. I did rather well in the first year promotion exam, beating the girl who got the highest in the first class exam held earlier. This reading list that SSH introduced had a profound and lasting effect on my subsequent life as a teacher in the department. Professor Munim, Professor Ahsanul Haque, and Professor Husniara Huq were some of our other teachers in the first year. Shirin Hasib was the youngest teacher, and I, like half the class, was smitten by her.

Second year

By the time we started our second year classes, I think SSH knew most of us my name but I don't remember him ever calling me or any of my class friends by name. Once, he summoned a class friend of mine to meet him in the Head's office because he, Taufique Mujtaba, had been sighted playing chess in Room 2080. SSH properly chastised him, and lectured him on the impropriety of playing chess in empty classrooms. My friend was not much disturbed by the rebuke as he was by the fact that Dr. Husain recognized him by name. We found out later (from the unforgettable Md Rafique who worked in the department for more than 40 years as a peon), that the Head used to have a register on his office desk with passport size photos and names of all students. He later identified students, if he found them smoking (or playing chess) or doing something improper, by just going to his register and matching names with faces. I have known more than a dozen Chairpersons—I myself became one—after Syed Sajjad Husain's departure in 1969 and not a single one kept a register.

In second year we also had Professor Khan Sarwar Murshid (KSM), Professor Jyotirmoy Guhathakurta (JGT), Professor Serajul Islam Choudhury (SIC) who had recently returned from the UK, and Mrs Inari Hossain. Meanwhile, Shirin Hasib got married and left the department, leaving many of us bereft. Jyotirmoy sir or JGT as we used to call him, was the friendliest of all the teachers, and my favourite. In one of his tutorial classes he told me one day that if I studied a bit more and spent less time hanging in the corridors of the department, I might actually do well. For the first time I began to actually feel the stirrings of an ambition to "do well."

Just months before SSH left DU to become VC of Rajshahi University, his office was ransacked by a bunch of young NSF hoodlums, and the manuscript of a dictionary that the Head was compiling was burnt. This was supposedly in retaliation to SSH's refusal to allow the girlfriend of an NSF leader to sit for her Honours Final Exams because of her poor attendance in class. Even the then VC, Dr. M.O. Ghani intervened on the girl's behalf, but Sajjad Husain did not relent. This does say something about the nature of Dr. Husain's "principles."

Third year

1969-70 were exciting years for the DU campus. While anti-government agitation began to move towards a culmination, we third year students struggled to prepare for our Third Year Honours Final Examinations scheduled to start in January/February of 1971. By this time I had become serious about my studies, and devoted much of my time and effort towards the fulfillment of the ambition that JGT had generated. I wanted to join the English Department as a teacher. I became studious, spent most of my time in the central library, and survived on Sharif Mia's tehari.

One of my strongest memories of English Department involves my Honours Final Exams. If I remember right, we completed six papers by early March 1971 and we were getting ready for the 7th Paper (Victorian Literature) scheduled for March 6. Failure of talks between Yahya Khan and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman led to the postponement of all examinations and shutdown of all offices and universities in East Pakistan. Interestingly, on March 3, 1971 Syed Sajjad Husain became VC of DU just as the university closed down *sine die*. On March 25, 1971, the genocide began. My favorite teacher Dr. Jyotirmoy Guhathakurta was dragged out of his university flat, shot several times, and left dying in a pool of his own blood. Meanwhile, Syed Sajjad Husain, now VC of DU, continued to believe in a unified Pakistan (as he did for the rest of his life), and championed the cause of Pakistan at home and abroad. He was as much a Pakistani regime man as I was opposed to it.

For me, as indeed for many others, the world crumbled all around us. My personal ambition to become a teacher evaporated. In the early months of April and May 1971, a few friends and I decided to stay put in Dhaka, and began taking typing lessons in Nilkhet. Our ambition? With the future uncertain, and no BA degree to our names, we naively prepared for possible careers as glorified typists and stenographers. In July or August 1971 when the administration decided that a degree of "normalcy" had returned under the occupied Pakistani regime, the 7th and 8th papers cancelled earlier were held.

As far as I know (university records should make this clear) all my classmates appeared in these scheduled examinations in July/August 1971. Only two students refused to collaborate with the Pakistani government: the girl who got the highest in the first year class exam in phonetics, and myself. This was clearly not an easy decision because we had prepared hard for the exam. At the same time, in our state of youthful intransigence it seemed to be an inevitable decision. Now, in hindsight, almost fifty years later, it appears almost like a heroic act, even if I say so myself. I remember going to SIC for some advice on what to do, and I remember how quiet he was. I do not blame him for his silence. I think I understood his silence. I had to do what my conscience dictated, and I did.

The consequences of our act were predictable. I got zeros in both my 7th and 8th paper, my total was averaged out of eight papers, and I scraped through with a miraculous Second Class Second Last position. My other class friend, who also refused to collaborate, secured the glorious last position in the Second Class, having also received zeros in the last two papers. Professor Munier Choudhury, Dean of Faculty of Arts at the time, at the request of his youngest sister who was the other student who did not appear in

the examinations, found out from the Registrar's Office, much to my simultaneous feeling of joy and sadness, that we both had very high marks in the six papers in which we did appear.

Luckily for me, just months after Liberation, in February 1972, our earlier exam results were cancelled. Not surprisingly, by January 1972, SSH was also removed from his VC-ship. When the new government of a newly-liberated Bangladesh took over, our BA Honours Exam results were re-calculated on the basis of the six papers held before March 1971. From Second Class Second Last, my position was recalibrated to First Class First, and my other class friend was Second Class First. This was poetic justice in real life!

MA, the end game

In 1972, in the heady atmosphere of a newly-liberated Bangladesh, we began our MA classes under the Headship of Professor Serajul Islam Choudhury. For the first time in the history of the department we had democratic elections in the department to elect office bearers for the newly-constituted association of the department. Syed Manzoorul Islam, then a third-year student, became the first General Secretary of the Association. Ziauddin Bablu, now a leader of the Jatiya Party was the first Cultural Secretary. I was elected the first VP of the Association.

By this time, SSH was publicly humiliated for his role during the nine months from 25 March to 16 December 1971, and was later incarcerated in Dhaka Jail up to 1975. It is appropriate that I end my story with Dr. Syed Sajjad Husain. I never met him after he left the department in 1969.

I do not remember much of how quickly we finished our MA classes during 1972-73. Professor Kabir Chowdhury first joined the department in part-time capacity and was soon to join the department as a full-time professor. As students we had spent six years in the department from 1967 to 1973. "Session jam" thus began with us. I had no regrets about the extra time spent in the department, and for the nine months of excruciating uncertainty that we all had to live through. I was only sad about the fact that JGT was not there to be my colleague. Rashidul Hasan who joined as a lecturer in 1967 was also killed by the Pakistani army just two days before liberation.

In August 1973, just days after our MA results were announced, SIC offered me a position as an ad-hoc lecturer in the department. The girl, by this time almost a lady (Rahela Banu) also joined the Institute of Modern Languages later as a teacher of Linguistics. I was finally home.