

Book Review

Dhaka University's English Department: Centenary Perspectives (1921-2021)

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Dhaka University (earlier known as Dacca University), one of the oldest institutions of higher education in South Asia, has recently completed its hundred years (1921-2021). The English Department of Dhaka University has brought out a book, *Dhaka University's English Department: Centenary Perspectives (1921-2021)*, to celebrate the centenary of the foundation of the university as well as of the English Department. The volume is published at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic forced the world to go indoors. The editors must have faced an uphill task while compiling the essays as physical interactions had to be strictly avoided when the book was planned and preparations were carried out.

Serajul Islam Choudhury in his Foreword to the book observes, "English was the language of the state and also the principal medium of communication. The fledgling middle class for whose nurture the university was established needed skill in the use of English for its advancement. This class considered English as its window on the world – both material and intellectual" (p. vii). Naturally, the establishment of an institution for learning the English language and British literature was an urgent necessity at that moment in colonial history. At the end of his Foreword, Choudhury underscores the importance of an institution like Dhaka University at a time when "...people all over the world are confronting a situation in which togetherness, enlightenment and creativity, the very values on which a university is based and which the department of ours has inculcated, are being threatened and tested as never before" (p. ix). The publication of the book at such a crucial moment is thus a praiseworthy attempt.

The book has thirteen chapters including the introduction. The introductory chapter maps out the direction of the book as well as specifies the reasons for its publication. It is inclusive in its approach as it has taken into view the perspectives of teachers, students and alumni to project the evolution of the English Department and its contribution to multifarious fields. It foregrounds the political and cultural trajectories of British India in connection with the establishment of the Department of English. Later, it dwells on the changing identities of the Bangladeshis. The writers observe, "From a pan-colonial Indian identity, the religious nationalistic character of the newly independent Pakistan increasingly came to the fore" (p. 3). The chapter has also summarized the rest of the chapters to facilitate understanding of the organization of the book. The chapter sets the scene for the reader to appreciate the depth and breadth of the contributions of the Department of English and its alumni in literary, cultural and socio-political domains.

In Chapter 2 Fakrul Alam talks about his long-time association with the department first as a student and later as a teacher. He analyses the efforts of restructuring

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the English literature syllabuses from the year 1980 to 2021. He considers the English Department BA (Honours) and MA syllabuses of the early 1980s as traditional and backward-looking. But with the change in time, DU English curriculum began to change from the end of the 1980s. Alam provides an overview of the trajectory of the changing syllabi. It focuses on “the evolution of the syllabuses of the Department of the English from its inception to current times, and the modes of instruction and students’ learning experiences” (p. 22), thereby providing a complete picture of the evolving curriculum. The next chapter written by Nevin Farida and Begum Shahnaz Sinha has attempted to analyse the evolution of the syllabuses of the English Department as well as the modes of teaching-learning from 1921 to 2021. The chapter shows how both the British Council and the American Centre began to influence the curriculum policies of the department in the 1950s. After 1971, there were big changes in the syllabus. Continental literature was included in the syllabus.

Niaz Zaman in Chapter 4 connects the relationship between women, empowerment and the Department of English at the University of Dhaka. She talks about Leela Nag, the first female student of the university as well as of the department who was admitted to the MA programme. Initially, the university authorities were reluctant to admit female students, but an exception was made for Leela Nag. The scenario gradually changed as more and more female students got enrolled. Zaman goes on to recount the achievements of female students in different fields such as cultural activities, creative writing and so on.

In Chapter 5 Syed Manzoorul Islam and Tahmina Ahmed foreground the literary and cultural contributions of the English Department to the country. The chapter brings to the fore the hurdles the Muslims used to face in erstwhile East Bengal in attaining education. The authors rightly point out that the Muslims did realize the importance of education in raising their standard of living and making them active members of the larger community (p. 79). The essay has attempted to highlight the role of the students of the English Department in the anti-colonial resistance and later in anti-hegemonic movements during the Pakistani era.

In Chapter 6 Kaisar Haq and Sanjeeda Hossain discuss the memoirs of three different authors: A. G. Stock, Syed Sajjad Husain and Shamsur Rahman who happened to be part of the Department of English. The essay brings to light Stock’s views on the 1947 Partition and its aftermath, Hindu-Muslim relations in the university and lastly her cordial relations with her students. It foregrounds Sajjad Husain’s antagonistic views of Bengali culture and his fellow Bengalis, Hindu-Muslim relations in the university, his negative perception of the Language Movement (1952) and his relations with her students. Shamsur Rahman was a student of the English Department but he did not complete his MA. His memoir has highlighted the literary and cultural aspects of the campus life.

Chapter 7 recognizes the contributions of the teachers to the shaping of young minds. The authors, Bijoy Lal Basu and Farhanaz Rabbani focus on fourteen selected teachers who left a mark on their students’ lives through teaching, mentoring and their very presence.

Chapter 8 explores the evolution in teacher-student relationships. Ahmed Ahsanuzzaman and Anowara Rayhan Arusha have applied attachment theory to understand and explain the dynamics of teacher-student relationship at the university level.

Chapter 9 has sought to ascertain the contribution of the Department of English towards the improvement of English education in Bangladesh. Anjuman Ara and Sabreena Ahmed provide a contextual background to help the readers understand the scenario of the Bangladeshi English education. The chapter attempts to highlight the role of the Department of English in educational policy making, curriculum and materials development, the implementation of educational and research projects, teacher education and training programmes, and creative writing. It mentions the contributions of different associations for teachers' professional development like BELTA and recently formed, ATLEB. BELTA had the aim of providing opportunities for English teachers' professional development while ATLEB aimed to "create a platform for those who teach literatures in English at the tertiary level in Bangladesh" (ATLEB, 2021).

In Chapter 10 Syed Badrul Ahsan explores the contribution of the English Department to the media world. He laments the decline of the standard of writing in English. In his own words, "In reality, the richness which once defined the study of and writing in English in the 1960s and even till the mid-1970s does not happen to be the reality today" (p. 197). He emphasizes the presence of the graduates of the Department of English in several newspapers of Bangladesh which has been of critical importance for the media industry.

Chapter 11 traces the contribution of the Department of English to the national growth of Bangladesh. Mir Abdus Samad Al Azad and Iftekhar Uddin Shamim write that since its establishment in 1921, the Department of English has been significantly contributing to the improvement of the quality of public services of Bangladesh. The chapter provides testimonies from the history of the public services of pre- and post-independence Bangladesh. The writers have sought to dispel the notion that the study of humanities is an indulgence devoid of any practical purpose. They write, "The Indian Civil Service (ICS) and Central Services of Pakistan (CSP) used to recruit brilliant students from the Department of English and these civil servants proved their competence and went on to become influential figures in different cadres" (p. 206).

Chapter 12 attempts to explore the role of the English Department Alumni Society (EDAS). The association was formed in 1986. The chapter has sought to highlight the accomplishments of EDAS. It also explores the structure and evolution of EDAS, its regular activities, its major contributions to the needy.

Chapter 13 explores the current issues, challenges and future directions of the Department of English. It seeks to establish the fact that the English Department has played a consequential role in leading English studies in Bangladesh from the front. It also attempts to highlight that the Department of English has come a long way in its journey towards academic excellence, creating nationally discernible impact, whether it be weaving the literary and cultural fabric of the nation or producing graduates with liberal, creative, and critical orientations or contributing to English education policies.

The book has a huge archival value. It has many rare old letters and photographs of students, and teachers of the Department. It has some information which cannot be found elsewhere. The book has a list of martyred teachers and students from the English Department who gave their lives for their motherland. It has an exhaustive list of teachers who taught at the English Department and are still teaching. The book will be a valuable possession for those who want to study the history of the English Department because of its literary, historical, and cultural importance.

Works Cited

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