

Note from the Editor

The publication of this issue got delayed by longer than I expected or can rationally explain. Yet again, the reasons are personal failures. On the last day of last year I ended my contract with the Eastern University and stepped into the unknown. Although planned earlier, the end felt rather abrupt and the disruption got compounded by the change of my residence within the next weeks to another part of the city more than ten kilometres away. Perhaps, both these factors took their tolls on me physically and particularly on my psyche. In my changed setting I found it difficult to concentrate on the rather taxing job of editing an academic journal. My apologies, once again.

That I shall be ending my teaching career was hanging on me for sometime now. Most of my cohort, here in Bangladesh and elsewhere in the world, has already called it quits from their jobs. But a teacher is always a teacher, there is nothing called a “retirement” for us. Many of my “retired” colleagues are continuing their teaching, albeit in a temporary capacity, teaching a course here or advising a graduate student there. As much as I hate the title of a “part-time” teacher, I too may at some point in the future take to temporary teaching, if only for keeping myself involved in the university setting. But for now, after 43 years of teaching, I need the rest.

I got to teaching almost by default. Because of my rather “good” performance in the university examinations, it was more or less expected that I would pursue a career in teaching. Nor was I given much of a choice as on the very next day after my Master’s results were published the Head of the Sociology Department wanted to know if I would be interested in teaching. Without having time to give much thought to it, I agreed. Little did I know at the time that I was committing “my life” to teaching!

Nor was I in any way aware of the economy, politics or even the sociology of such a commitment, not what it entailed for me, my life, my work, my family, friends, community or even the country. Probably no one is, at such a juncture of life. That one’s life would revolve around just an unthoughtout commitment is rather a scary deal. These days few stick to “one job” for life. But in those days one was considered very fortunate to land a government job and a job at the government funded University of Dhaka was among the top jobs on the list. Indeed, a teaching job at the University of Dhaka was not only very prestigious but it also opened other doors and for some it was just a prelude to a more lucrative job of a civil servant. So, well thought out or not, it was not a bad choice after all, other options still on the card.

I was somewhat familiar with the culture of teaching. Teaching was not unknown in my family, my father taught for a while in a college, two of my uncles taught in schools, and I had previously tutored a few school students during my undergraduate days so I thought that I would blend in easily. But the sociology,

economics or even the politics of teaching caught me totally unprepared. The sociology hit me first, and continued to ruffle me for the rest of my life.

Even before I received the first month's salary, the sociology of the job was all over me. In a society where teaching has been one of the most, if not the most, respected professions, I was suddenly elevated to a high status. Even in my family of teachers, I was the first "university teacher" and that put me on a higher pedestal, even in the eyes of my father who was till then little impressed by my other "achievements". But my first sense of dignity was bestowed on me by my friends, a few junior friends I used to hangout with. Within days of my appointment one of them told me point blankly to stop hanging out with them. I was shocked till they explained the reason, "You see, we cannot smoke if you are around." Such respect in my society is reserved for the elderly, parents, uncles, "teachers" and all grades of senior people. These friends who were often using obscene language even yesterday suddenly became very formal and respectful.

That respect in those days was plentiful in the society at large. Wherever I was introduced as a teacher of the university and that too of the University of Dhaka, the oldest and most prestigious, a certain amount of reverence would always follow. I remember situations where in a bus or on a train people, total strangers, even older people, would offer me their seat. But with that kind of veneration also came a host of expectations. Let alone speak foul language, I even had to refrain from the colonial and native accents and begin talking in a very formal language both in and outside the class room; walk straight, head high, exude confidence, look scholarly, whether I had it in me or not; family, friends and the community expected the same from me and I had to live upto it for the rest of life, a slip would not be excused.

The most demanding place was the classroom where beside the fact that from day one I had to be the scholar, who had studied all there is to know for fifty years and ready to answer all questions. I was expected to be the role model for students who were barely a few years younger than me. "The scholar" or not, fortunately, this is where I excelled. I was not their "teacher", I did better. Even in the last class I taught, I was their "friend". I participated in sports, performed on stage, went on picnics and study tours and was always ready to "hangout" with them. I was never annoyed, never lost my cool, never shouted at any one in the classroom. Not that I was a saint but forced myself to suppress all such emotions and offer a smile instead. I was often surprised by my own stoicism. Yet, perhaps, because of the cultural norm, students always maintained a discrete distance and the admiration and veneration was always there, even when I was "one of them." Generations upon generations of students and in classes in diverse settings, in and outside the universities, or in different countries, I succeeded beyond my own estimations to connect with the students. Hundreds, if not thousands of my students, often publicly, express their "debts", that I made a "difference" in their lives. That, undoubtedly is the only reward a teacher ever wants and I have had plenty of it!

Of course, these came at a tremendous cost. Hours spent in the library, rush for publications, days spent in seminars, conferences and giving my heart out to the university exacted their price. That my family life suffered beyond telling, was only part of the predicament. Two marriages failed, children got estranged and finally I ended up living all alone for twelve years, an incredible occurrence in my culture. But that's another phase of my life I had to endure quietly, though could not much hide from the public gaze. The light at the end of the tunnel is the unimaginable kindness of an expatriate lady who has of late so graciously decided to stand beside me as a life partner.

Over these many years my life got increasingly confined to the campus and I generally went out of circulation, lost friends and acquaintances while my circle of relatives dwindled down to the siblings only. Today, I know very few people outside the academic settings and few, if anyone, in the external world knows me. Being disheartened by the politics in the country (more on this later), I stopped reading the local newspapers and watching television a long time ago, so that when colleagues talk of "dignitaries" or of "major happenings", even scratching my head does not produce any knowledge of them. I have concealed myself inside a cocoon and live a blissful life all on my own, as far as that is possible.

The economics of my career hasn't worked out any better either. No one, anywhere, expects to make millions by teaching but at the beginning of my teaching career, as noted above, it was not considered a bad job. With a couple of bonuses at the start, I was earning a handsome salary. Salary was the only source of income for nearly all professionals then and the cost of living at the time allowed a comfortable living. But the economy was changing fast and by the 1990s that salary began to feel inadequate. More importantly, salaried jobs were no longer the coveted occupations, businesses of all sorts and jobs with the multinational companies were soon offering much heavier purses, which was fine for the country, except that the cost of living continually soared beyond reach for me and living was no longer comfortable as most goods and services went beyond my reach. Living single then helped but not by much.

The most unfortunate factor of this new economy for me is that "money" has become the standard bearer of life in this society where only fifty years ago pursuing money was considered to be a very lowly act, only people of "lower class" engaged in money making. Nor was there much money to be made either. There was very little outside of petty tradings. Business people were not considered worthy of companionship or social association. The educated and the professionals were the ones at the top of the status ladder in the country. Earning a few extra bucks through consultancy was always on the card but I would rather spend that time in my own studies and I did manage my accounts at some respectable level for a while. But by the end of the last century all had begun to change rapidly, social position began to be allotted in terms of economic positions, if you do not earn in the higher brackets of six figure or even seven figure salaries, if you do not own a house, an apartment or a car, preferably a factory or a large business, you are an object

of pity in most circles today, even to the lower classes! As one of my acquaintances once noted, "If you do not own a car you are a proletariat." At the end of my teaching career, may be I am. My new landlord was visibly perturbed by my "retired professor" status in renting out the apartment and was shocked to learn that I shall not be using the car parking space that came with the apartment.

The politics of the profession was an equally daunting challenge that, I feel, I also failed to live upto. That I had to be part of the politics on campus was not a part of my early realization. During the student days I managed very well by not indulging in what passed for "student politics" then but joining the faculty almost automatically propelled one to have and express a political opinion. In those tumultuous early days after the independence of the country a university teacher was "expected" to "have a say", at the very least to "take a position" on any issue of national importance. I tried to stay away from all that, not because I was not aware of the expectations, or lacked an opinion but my studies took precedence at the time and soon left for higher studies abroad. Completed my PhD from the USA and unlike the rest of the 99% who goes abroad, I returned to the country. But upon my return and by the mid 1980s I could not ignore the plight of the nation under a military dictator and like the rest of the community often took to the street to protest and finally got entangled in the in-campus politics as well.

As enunciated by Edward Said and others, and as I wrote elsewhere, the role of the intellectual is "oppositional", to oppose injustices wherever they may occur. The dictum served me well to legitimize my own position in campus politics. The nation soon overthrew the dictator and democratic practice ensued from the 1990s, a very fortunate happening for the country but it drew the intellectuals of the country to their demise as hoards upon hoards, largely lured by the few lucrative positions on campus, even a promotion or a scholarship, and often getting rewarded, simply divided themselves up into pro this or pro that party and began towing "their" government lines, as the two major political parties alternated in ruling the country. Today, there is hardly any one left to perform the "oppositional" role of the intellectual. For a while I tried to stand against the tide, failing which I withdrew completely, forsaking my own role as an intellectual. Another failure on my card!

Student politics on campus also took a similar turn. Though pockets of sanity may still be detected among the student community (and, perhaps, a few teachers) the whole academic atmosphere has been seriously tarnished by now. Some students seek to make a career in politics and the universities are their training grounds. They too get remunerated for upholding and fighting (often physical battles) for the government and eventually get inducted into the national politics, which has its own rewards, financial and others. There is, thus, much incentive to become "full time" politicians on campus rather than full time students.

What added to the disintegration of the academics further was the transition to Bengali as the medium of instruction at all levels, which has left whole generations of students without the functioning knowledge of

English. The transition is definitely laudable for the country where people have given their lives for the language. But the country was illprepared, there was hardly any plan to sustain such a move and little was done to build the requisite resources for university level education in terms of translating books and imparting knowledge in general, as a result, much of the world knowledge, now easily available on the internet, remains outside the reach of these students. Hundreds of thousands of books in the university library, written in English and were acquired for an earlier generation of students and teachers, are now gathering dust as successive generations of students, even those who take up teaching, have no need for these. Even this journal, the only one representing sociology in Bangladesh, is unread. I was, hence, not much surprised when during an oral examination of over two hundred sociology Master's students, some of whom would soon become teachers, unashamedly confessed that they had not read a single book!

Some serious students, of course, stay out of politics and do learn English but then they leave for higher studies abroad, never to return. For the majority of students, however, attaining a degree to get a job seems to be the only objective of higher education, acquiring knowledge in the process has become an outmoded concept. The jobs are also mostly in the business sector and require little or no knowledge of science and technology or even of the arts and humanities. Teachers have also given in to accommodate such demands, increasingly compromising their standards or level of expectation. Those who failed to comply found fewer and fewer students taking their courses, which turned out to be my fate. The more serious students, afraid that they will get a bad grade, would skip my course while the poorer ones who had no choice but sit for my courses were not good enough to rise to my level of challenge, often 80% or more failing my course. So that, I made little or no contribution to their careers.

As a result, and as a colleague once put it very succinctly, I had become "redundant"!

This redundancy, more than politics or transition to Bengali, prompted me by 2006 to quit teaching in public universities. Fortunately for me, options had opened up in the private sector. As a few dozen universities had opened up by the beginning of the 21st century and I was invited to teach in one of the older and better organized ones. The medium of instruction was English and politics had no room there so I found the situation ideal and to my liking. I also found some better equipped students who had English medium schooling and had passed exams under London or Cambridge university. Some of my graduate students there were far better than any I had taught at the University of Dhaka in the past fifteen or twenty years. So I put my soul to it and with the active support of the then Vice Chancellor, who unfortunately, died too soon thereafter, I was able to build up a school of arts and the social sciences. I thought I had finally found my niche, but it was not to be! Unknown to me, the university had by then passed a law which restricted contractual appointments to four years and I had overstayed my welcome by two years already.

At this juncture of my career, at a rather late age, I joined a research organization, thinking that I had enough of teaching. But the "office environment" there proved to be so alien that within weeks I decided to

move out, although after completing one year of my contract. Another private university, aware of my success at the previous university, invited me on a three year contract to set up a social science faculty there. I accepted the invitation whole heartedly and set up the curricula for the faculty with three social science departments, including sociology, and a general education cell. But redundancy soon caught up with me there too as due to some technical difficulties the university could not acquire permission from the government and the subjects could not be opened to the students.

Within months I found that I had no courses to teach, other than an introductory sociology course, required by some “business” students. Responding to the supposed “demand of the market,” most of the nearly hundred or so private sector universities today teach primarily “business” subjects. Eighty percent students, or more in some universities, read only these subjects. Few, if any of these universities have a fullfledged department of physics, chemistry, history or political science, let alone the humanities or the arts. Some are opening up sociology departments but with only a handful of students opting for it, far from making them “viable”. Sociology did not make much of a headway in the public universities and there does not seem to be any immediate prospect in the private universities either. I, therefore, decided not to extend my contract any further and quit.

So, redundancy has not only crippled me, it has engulfed sociology in Bangladesh too. I hope to write more on this in the next issue. And, though I began my teaching career with, so to say, a “bang”; with lots of promises, expectations, aspirations, and a dream of being “the scholar”, “the intellectual”; it ended with a whimper and I stepped into my “retirement” ever so quietly, far, far away from the clamour of the intellectual world. I did achieve some measure of success, opening up departments, changing the curricula, promoting sociology wherever possible, and beside my own development I did mentor some students, not the many I expected to, but by the end of my career, I had no promising student to teach, nor did the discipline reach any perceptible height. Failure seems to be the order of the day. This journal is the only beacon of success both in my life and career and of sociology in Bangladesh!