

# **Status of International Relations Teaching in Bangladesh**

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## **I. Introduction**

International relations (IR) as a field of inquiry has been, until recent years, often engaged worldwide in unremitting struggle to apportion for itself a position as an independent or separate discipline. It was frequently asked whether IR is at all independent discipline. Like all other relatively new fields of inquiry and studies, finding a place for IR as a separate department had almost always been subject to conditions such as fund allocation and/or availability of resources or constraints such as opposition/academic jealousies from the related disciplines. In case of IR the difficulty must have been a little too intense, as there was a tendency to view the discipline as a 'bundle of subjects' rather than as an independent field of inquiry or discipline. In the mid-1930s when some of the universities in the western world started to offer IR the question was still whether the discipline is to address solely inter-state relations and/or diplomatic-strategic interaction between and among states. Equally it was asked whether the discipline is to include inter-personal relations, international social behavior, encompassing the very many different activities such as international communications, legal conventions, athletic events, business transactions, religious-missionary propagation, scientific-technological conferences, educational exchanges etc. (Dougherty and pfaltzgraff, Jr., 1971: 1-10). Despite raising this sort of questions there had been steady development of IR as an independent field of inquiry and many of the world's leading universities started to offer IR as a discipline.

The world has been changing swiftly since the Second World War and the global change from that time onward involving Cold War and Detente, post-Cold War events, scientific and technological developments have made the study of IR still more vast and complex in scope. The inception of the age of globalization and the huge networking impacts of the new technological innovations has their ramifications for the discipline. The paper appraises in sections II-IX the status of teaching of IR in Bangladesh since the last days of the British *Raj* and also offers in the concluding section some suggestions and thoughts for reflection for all those who feel concerned about the status of IR teaching in Bangladesh.

## **II. IR Studies in Bangladesh: The Early Journey**

While keeping up with efforts of the concerned specialists to appraise and address the multifaceted issues of shifting societal relationships across the globe, the academia in Bangladesh committed and devoted to the teaching of IR have been striving hard to cope with the emerging challenges facing the discipline and the changing conceptual-theoretical dimensions and analytical interpretations offered. Though known as a relatively new country and a young nation teaching of IR in

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Bangladesh had actually predated similar efforts in any other country of South Asia.

Indeed, the initiation of endeavors to offer IR as a separate discipline in South Asia had its origin in Dhaka back in the late 1940s before the region's current politics became independent. The Department of International Relations, Dhaka University (DU), had its early journey in July 1947 while the subcontinent was still part of the union of territories under the erstwhile British Commonwealth and Empire. That perhaps conferred it a unique distinction of being the first academic department in the entire region of South Asia to offer the subject of international relations and in that it may lay a claim to pioneer IR teaching in the subcontinent.

### **III. IR Teaching at Dhaka University: The pioneering of Masters Program**

From its very inception the department was committed to prepare skilled personnel primarily for diplomatic, political and international administrative/business services. The government was quite supportive. A distinguished historian, Dr. Mahmud Hussain (who happened to be the younger brother of the late Indian president Dr. Zakir Hussain), was the first Head of the IR Department who later also successively served the then Central Government of Pakistan as a Deputy Minister in the late 1940s and early 1950s and the University of Dhaka as its Vice-Chancellor in the early 1960s. Professor P.C. Chakravarti, the third Head of the Department moved to Kolkata in 1952 and was one of the pioneers of the IR department in Jadavpur University, India (SAARC Education Tour, '94).

The DU IR department admitted students to Masters program in IR from the academic session 1947-48. At that initial stage the department was part of the arts faculty, with teachers drawn from the departments of history, economics, political science and commerce. Thus from its very inception the department emphasized interdisciplinary orientation of its faculty members and the courses offered were also multi-disciplinary in scope and nature. There was, in addition, an emphasis on language studies. Every student completing his/her degree was required to take one of the modern languages. Indeed, as an ancillary of language requirement of the department a language institute was also later set up by the university under the overall direction of the department. That is still a compulsory requirement, though the said language institute is now fully developed as a semi-autonomous Institute of Modern Languages (IML) of the university and the department's present links with the IML is somewhat tenuous. Currently the department under its new four-year integrated Honors program also introduced a compulsory course of English language for all its students at the first year level. For over two decades the department only admitted Honors graduates from the related social science disciplines to Masters level program for a one-year degree in international relations. Besides this, there was already a two-year program of Master in Social Science (MSS) for students completing their Bachelors degrees from colleges (SAARC Education Tour, '94).

### **IV. Launching of DU Graduate Program in IR**

The DU IR Department's graduate program is also one of the oldest in the subcontinent. Students to Bachelor of Social Science (BSS) program were

admitted from 1969 onward. Students completing their intermediate/higher secondary education are admitted into the program. The two-year MSS program in IR had been discontinued, as the university itself by a policy decision in the mid-1990s decided not to offer one-year preliminary Masters degrees. The BSS Honors program in IR has been attracting brighter students over the years and the discipline has emerged as one of the top choices for the admission seekers, perhaps because of the better job prospects offered for IR graduates in foreign missions, inter-governmental organizations (IGOs), banking and financial institutions, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and various government services (SAARC Educational Tour' 94 (1994).

The course programs of the department at both BSS and MSS levels went through several phases of transformation, as it bifurcated itself from the faculty of arts offering disciplines under liberal arts to the faculty of social science. The department used to offer a two-year subsidiary program to students from liberal arts as well as from social science disciplines. The subsidiary course load included IR fields of general nature such as principles of international relations, international relations since 1945 and Bangladesh in world affairs. The subsidiary program has been discontinued after the introduction of four-year integrated BSS Honors program in 1998. Currently the department admits approximately 120 students each year in its four-year BSS Honors Program and one-year MSS Program as part of the faculty of social science of the university. The courses now offered by the department include fields of conceptual and theoretical concerns, contextual/empirical developments, cross-cultural issues of wide-ranging interests, foreign policy and international law as well as area studies.

At the earlier phases when IR theories were viewed to be less rigorous a course under the caption of 'Principles of International Relations' was offered. That went through some transition in terms of both caption and contents. Similarly, considering the Cold War context of ideological rivalry between and among the major world powers, a course under the caption of 'Ideology in World Affairs' was offered. With the ending of the Cold War that course has also been discontinued taking into account the post-Cold War changes in the policy perceptions of the major powers. The students are currently offered wide-ranging courses like research methodology, international law, foreign policy analysis, Bangladesh foreign policy, strategic and security studies, economic concepts and issues, geography in world affairs etc. Some new courses with contemporary relevance like environment, women studies and development have been offered for the last few years. The area studies at Masters level encompass the foreign and security issues of the regions like South Asia, Middle East and Central Asia, East Asia, Southeast Asia, Latin America, West Europe, East Europe etc. (University of Dhaka, 96).

The department has plans for further expansion of its current course programs. As part of the regular process of updating and/or moderation of course contents regulation of the university the department reviews its course program every three years. However, the existing syllabi at both Honors and Masters' levels are also being constantly updated to keep up with the swiftly changing patterns of

international relations. A Center for International Studies is also being planned to offer certificate and diploma programs to wider segments of interest groups. A plan is underway to expand the library and seminar of the department with additions of research materials and information equipment.

The department offers research program at both M.Phil. and Ph.D. levels. Students with multidisciplinary interests are drawn to these programs from any discipline as long as they fulfill the requirements of a research design of advanced degrees in international relations, though at present the research students are quite fewer in number.

#### **V. The DU IR Faculty and Research Interest**

The department currently has a sanctioned post of 24 teachers, though not always they are around or available for teaching. Almost every year a few teachers leave for higher studies abroad either for Masters or Ph.D. degrees or go abroad availing fellowship for scholarly research. Most of the faculty members have obtained higher IR degrees from western universities. Many of them authored books, both vernacular and English, and also contributed research articles to national and international journals as well as analytical pieces to national and international dailies and weeklies. Most have also been lecturing occasionally at the Foreign Service Academy, National Defense College and the Defense Services Command and Staff College, both primarily catered to meet requirements of higher studies of the defense personnel in Bangladesh.

#### **VI. IR and Peace and Conflict Studies at Dhaka University**

Apart from IR department the DU has started a new department of peace and conflict studies (PCS), admitting students to one-year program at MSS level from the academic session 1999-2000, and also to four-year BSS Honors from the academic session 2000-2001. The purpose of the department is not different from the overall purpose of the field of IR itself, as it professes to contribute to the advancement of a peaceful world through interdisciplinary studies and research into the conditions of peace and the causes of war and other forms of violence, internal as well as external. With these objectives in mind the department has also introduced M.Phil. program from the current academic session (University of Dhaka, 2001). While there is an overlapping in purpose and disciplinary approaches of the IR and PCS there is very little interaction or cooperative exchange between the two departments, although they sit under the same roof and belong to the same faculty of the university.

The PCS department has also outlined in its statement of purpose an ambitious three-fold aim: provide academic education in peace, conflict and human rights issues; advance research in different aspects of peace, conflict and human rights; and most importantly, disseminate research findings as a consulting institution for public and private bodies at both national and international levels. However, the syllabuses of the department offer very little detail of its course content. Whatever it mentions about the course programs at either level of BSS and MSS there are no references to help students and/or guide researchers. The syllabus towards the end only casually mentions that the respective course teachers will provide the

references (University of Dhaka, 2001: 7). While human rights are emphasized as part of the syllabi the course content does not reflect the causality in relations to peace and conflict studies. The course on armament and disarmament is so farmed as if there is no other major thrust whether theoretically and/or empirically.

Similar lapses are also noticeable in the framing of other courses being offered by the PCS department. There is also the failure to offer a specific course on conflict management, either at regional, subregional or national levels, though it may be viewed as a very important instrument/process that precedes any effort towards conflict resolution or peacemaking. Nor is there any paper on international peacekeeping, though it hardly need saying that it has emerged as the major mechanism for promotion of international peace.

Finally, while there is an overt commitment on the part of the PCS to make itself available as a consultative institution at both national and international levels presumably for conflict resolution or peace promotion, there is very little in the current undertaking of the PCS to suggest that its academia and/or students would be offered any scope to develop their perspectives as conflict managers and/or peace practitioners in real life situations. Indeed, the syllabus itself throws very little scope to appraise or evaluate critically important international/regional/inter-state/intra-state conflict situations that over the years have had threatened peace.

In this context one may also question whether the DU library is yet well equipped to facilitate study and research in such a specialized field of inquiry. There are very few relevant journals available even in the country. The required theoretical-conceptual literatures are barely available. Indeed, for developing right perspectives it is imperative that both the department and the DU library procures the relevant periodical and theoretical literature for the benefit of both the faculty as well as that of the students and researchers.

## **VII. IR Teaching at Jahangirnagar University**

The teaching of international relations at Jahangirnagar University (JU) at Savar as a separate discipline is a relatively recent development. For a fairly long time the departments of History, and Government and politics of the university offered some IR courses at Masters and M. Phil levels. IR as an independent or full-fledged department emerged at Jahangirnagar from the academic session 1998-1999. Three streams of students, numbering around twenty, have already been admitted into the graduate programs of the university. Of the three, the first two batches of students are in the three-year Honors Program, but the last batch of students taken in March 2001 are admitted into a four-year integrated Honors Program.

While designing the courses a conscious effort has been made to structure program on LSC (London School of Economics) model, as is viewed by the founding chairman of the department. The approach is one of 'soft landing' and then move towards harder or more difficult areas international concern. Courses at the first year level include structure of international society, political ideas of the west, history of western art and painting, political and administrative development in South Asia, history of Bangladesh (from earliest times to the present). The first

year level program also include field work, a non-credit program that takes the students to historical sites as well as to locations for understanding diplomatic functioning, operations of the non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

At the second year level the courses offered include international history since 1914, IR theory, nationalism, strategic studies, international law, jurisprudence (that includes theories of law etc.). At the third year level the students are largely introduced to area studies. The areas include international politics of Europe, Africa, South Asia, Latin America and Southeast Asia and the Pacific region (Interview with Khan, 2001).

While course like structure of international society does carry a lot of sense, it seems difficult to understand why the course on political ideas has been confined to the west only, although historically civilizational contributions of the Asian nations are known to be greater than those of the west and even the vision of internationalism had originated in an Asia country, viz., China. Similarly, by limiting the scope of learning on art and painting to the west only is the IR department at JU is poised towards modernism or post-modernism? Moreover, the syllabuses contain very little detail of the course contents or they seem rather sketchy, while the booklists or references are few and far between. For a new department in a dynamic field of study such problems are not uncommon and hence may be corrected and further developed in the years ahead should there be determined/collective effort. However, the JU IR department's non-credit program on field visits as emulative and may perhaps be fully developed as part of regular program of internship for all IR students in all the universities where IR or similar disciplines are being offered.

### **VIII. Teaching of IR as part of course curriculum in other disciplines**

Most of the public and private universities of Bangladesh, including the engineering and technological universities, offer courses on IR related issue areas from their particular dimensions. The Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET) in Dhaka, for instance, has a department captioned 'Water Resources Engineering' offering courses with international dimensions of the water and environment related issues. Besides, most of the liberal arts and social science disciplines, including history, political science and economics offer courses on international relations with comparative perspectives from the angle of their respective disciplines. At Dhaka University the departments of History and Political Science take special care to offer courses somewhat closer to IR courses at BSS/BA Honors, MSS/MA and M.Phil/Ph. D. levels.

At JU there is still a greater endeavor to integrate IR fields into the curricula of the departments of History, Government and Politics. The History Department offers courses on IR both at Masters and M.Phil levels. The Department of Government and Politics makes still greater effort at all levels to cover IR fields into its course program, offering at the second year level fundamentals of international politics and at third year level political history of modern world. It offers contemporary international politics and world order, security studies at fourth year level while at MSS level it offers foreign policy of Bangladesh, gender issues, environmental issues and problems. At the M.Phil. level it offers international politics and world

order, analysis of international conflict, contemporary South Asian politics covering ethnicity, inter-state conflict, South Asian regional cooperation and security. It also admits students at Ph.D. level with interest in similar fields (Interview with Hasanuzzaman, 2001). The faculties of IR at Dhaka University as part of mutuality in exchange in ideas and knowledge have lent their services available to facilitate an expansion of IR studies at Jahangirnagar University.

The public/government supported universities in Rajshahi and Chittagong also have departments such as Political Science and History that offer courses on fields related to international relations at Honors, Masters and higher levels, though there is no independent department offering IR in either of the universities.

Private universities in Bangladesh are relatively recent phenomenon, though over a dozen of them are already in existence. Most of them are oriented towards more lucrative job-oriented teaching programs such as computer and information technology, management and development studies etc. Some like North-South University, Independent University of Bangladesh, and People's University of Bangladesh based in Dhaka offer courses with comparative perspectives on issue areas like environment, gender and development, principles of IR, Bangladesh foreign policy etc. The Queens University (Dhaka), however, tends to take some students for a program christened International Development.

### **IX. IR Teaching in Bangladesh: Coping with Challenges**

An expansion of teaching of IR program in Bangladesh has not picked up, as was expected of academia and the policymakers in an independent country, since the country even under the colonial period had pioneered the introduction of the IR as a teaching discipline at the university level. The government's subsequent attitude in the expansion of IR teaching in Bangladesh may best be described as apathetic, while the private or non-governmental sectors are unconcerned about promotion of the discipline at the higher level of education. The teaching of IR at Jahangirnagar University is a recent phenomenon and is still in the process of development. The University of Dhaka continues to be viewed as the country's premier institution for higher education and learning, and teaching of IR at this university has numerous positive points in terms of output that merit attention and replication. However, even at Dhaka University level there may also be area of criticisms provoking thought for self-reflection.

Let us, first of all highlight the positive sides. The graduates of the department are very well placed in almost every branch of the country's administration, business establishments, civil service, diplomacy, as well as in international organizations. After the country became independent in 1971 one of the Department's graduates became Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs twice. The current Head of State President Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed, a former Chief Justice of Bangladesh who as Chief Executive of the caretaker administration in 1990 steered the country from autocracy to a democratic system of governance, is also a product of the department. The department also produced graduates from some other countries of the region as well as from overseas. A good number of past graduates are now teaching in the western universities.

There is an **International Relations Alumni Association (IRAA)**, closely attached to the department. An **International Studies Association, Bangladesh (ISAB)** has also been in operation since the late 1980s and remains in close touch with the department. For about a decade now the department has also sponsored a bi-annual academic journal, **The Journal of International Relations**, and is being regularly published every year since its inception. The students of the department under guidance of the teachers also publish their own journal, **The Nations**.

However, there are areas that provoke criticisms and thought for self-reflection. As already mentioned, there has been almost continuous effort towards recasting the existing course programs of the department both at the BSS and MSS levels, taking into account the swiftly changing pattern of international relations. On occasions the initiatives came from the sitting chairs and excellent ideas were deliberated that would serve as blueprint for future expansion of IR studies, but very little efforts went to the fruition of those ideas. Attention may, particularly be drawn to the efforts that went towards expansion of the department in the last decade but in the long run came to nothing.

At first a twenty-five years expansion plan was drawn, beginning with additional Masters courses to be followed by additional recruitment of teachers in the newer areas of inquiry and then steadily moving towards creating four new departments under a common faculty of international studies. The plan was actually placed to the higher university authorities for consideration and the DU administration took a positive view of the plan, but the department itself simply shelved the whole plan for unknown reasons. Later a modified plan was adopted with a decision to open two new departments captioned Department of Asia Pacific Affairs and that Defense and Strategic Studies. Again that went astray, as there has not been any persuasive effort to follow it up.

Ideas currently are in the agenda for recasting the department's MSS syllabus, with a greater emphasis on conceptual-theoretical developments. Accordingly it is expected the debate would be carried forward to a definitive direction and fruition of thoughts so that there may be further expansion of international relations programs and faculty, overcoming the state of current relative stagnation.

The research degrees, such as M.Phil and Ph. D. offered by the department have also proved to be less productive. So far the department produced only two M.Phils and no Ph.D. Only a few Ph.D. students admitted in the 1990s have either discontinued or are languishing years together unable to show their productive commitment or research output. The causes for such an appalling state have not been addressed and appropriate solutions were never sought in right earnest. One point is certain: the department itself can offer little incentive either in terms of research facilities or funding so as to attract full-time research students with professional commitment.

### **X. Concluding Remarks**

While IR as an academic discipline has generated an immense interest among students, teaching and research of IR in Bangladesh still faces a great deal of



constraints and challenges, the points that may perhaps be relevant to all South Asian universities. The IR graduates in Bangladesh have very limited opportunities for teaching and/or research assignments, with only a couple of universities offering IR as a separate discipline. There are, too, severe resource constraints, including the availability of relevant literature-both in conceptual-theoretical and covering those in empirical fields-and necessary information equipment to pursue higher studies in international relations in Bangladesh. Students and researchers have very limited scope for internship and/or field visits so as to equip themselves better in coping with the changing dynamics of international development and dimensions of international behavior.

A number of steps at the very level of teaching may be suggested that should help promote the prospects of IR graduates and ultimately those of teaching the discipline in the region. In an age of swift globalization and market economy none of the Bangladeshi universities seem to offer international business management as part of their curriculum. Secondly, in an age of information revolution it is equally pertinent to introduce information technology (IT) as an integral part of IR studies. An introduction of international business management and IT as compulsory fields for IR students would enable them to fully exploit the intensely competitive job market to their best advantage and at the same time should enable them in better appreciation of the shifting pattern of international relations.

Finally, there should be some exchange program between the South Asian universities offering IR discipline in order to encourage researchers to learn from their mutual experiences. The concerned government departments and ministries as well as the regional entity of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in cooperation with international agencies of similar nature may be approached to promote such cooperative endeavors and exchange programs.

The IR specialists of the region, including Bangladesh, have to shoulder a great deal of responsibility in building consensus and communication network if South Asia is to have a sense of revival and renew the civilizational linkages. Therefore, all IR specialists should build interpersonal networking and cross-institutional links so that the current communication can be carried forward and collective contributions be made towards building a shared regional consensus among those feel concerned. The existing ISAB network may be revitalized and strengthened so as to develop cross departmental/institutional linkages.

As an immediate follow-up of the present initiative an extensive communication and dialogue at the level of a national conference/seminar on IR research may be sponsored so as to assess the state of IR research and studies in the country. The purpose may be two-fold: an appraisal of conceptual and theoretical developments in the research undertakings and scholarly works done in the country covering the contextual perspectives on inter-state affairs, regional and international relations as well as dissemination of knowledge and theoretical insights gained so far that may guide the decision-makers in their policy thinking and at the same time motivate the conscientious segments of South Asian societies in harmonizing the relations between their entities.

Subsequent follow-up efforts should include lobbying for an expansion of international relations teaching in the country at the higher levels of education, both private and public sectors. It seems quite an irony that most of the universities in the country do not offer IR courses, while the university colleges offering degree and Masters programs seem not even aware of a discipline called International Relations, although in all public service examinations and even in admission tests of students at the degree and Masters levels the students in most colleges and universities are required to answer questions on issues of foreign affairs and international concerns. Such an anomaly in the prevailing system of acquisition of knowledge and learning should not be allowed to continue indefinitely in the greater interest of the future of the nation in a swiftly changing international system. Therefore, the community of learners, researchers and scholars in international relations fields should put their efforts together and unite under single banner so as to meet the challenge facing the discipline in Bangladesh and the region of South Asia in the age of globalization.

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