

# Tributes to the founder of



IUBAT



## Dr. M. Alimullah Miyan - Visionary and Pioneer of Private Universities

Professor Dr. Abdur Rab

The day was like any other in 1988. A group of 10-12 people entered the brick-wall, tin-roof restaurant. Minutes later, came the sound of breaking chairs, tables and glasses, as well as a hue & cry. People dashed out of the restaurant and ran away. There was an 'all quiet' in the restaurant. About an hour later, leaders of a mob chanted very loud slogans calling on their followers to attack the restaurant, which was stormed with pebbles and bricks from three sides – a three-pronged attack by hundreds of people. Several rounds of gun shots came from inside the restaurant. Despite this, the mob marched on and got closer to the restaurant. Suddenly, people came out of the restaurant and tried to run away. But in vain. One by one they were chased, caught and beaten. Then the attackers helped the injured onto rickshaws and paid the rickshaw pullers – perhaps to take them to a hospital. The attackers entered the restaurant as victors and soon it was humming with loud voices and laughter.

From the second floor of a building adjacent to the restaurant, two professors observed the scene with despair. Their institution was closed and nobody knew when it would reopen. One professor asked the other, "when will student unrest and university closures come to an end, and a normal learning environment prevail?" "Never", replied the other; "political parties will never cease to use the students for their partisan benefit."

The conversation continued.

**Professor A:** *"Does this kind of unrest take place in the non-government colleges?"*

**Professor B:** *"There are very few such incidents in non-government colleges."*

**Professor A:** *"How about private universities?"*

**Professor B:** *"What private universities?"*

**Professor A:** *"Interesting question. I don't know either, but let us find out."*

They pulled up a list of universities in Bangladesh and, to their surprise, learned that there were no non-government universities in the country. University of Dhaka was established in 1921, Rajshahi University in 1953, Bangladesh Agricultural University in 1961, Bangladesh University of Engineering (BUET) in 1962, Chittagong University in 1966, Jahangir Nagar University in 1970, and so on. Each government university was established under a separate act.

**Professor A:** *"There are many private colleges. Why is there no private university?"*

**Professor B:** *"Perhaps because setting up a university requires a huge investment. Or maybe, no one thought to do it."*

**Professor A:** *"Well, we can think of doing it! There is no law preventing us. Let's set up such a university."*

The restaurant in this story was Modhu's Canteen in the Arts Faculty campus of Dhaka University in Nilkhet, the famous Canteen where the language movement meeting was held in 1952. At the time, it was located where the emergency block of the Dhaka Medical

College is now standing. The Canteen is an important institution in the history of Bangladesh; it is where many political movements originated, including discussions leading up to the Bangladesh liberation movement.

The adjacent building is home of the Institute for Business Administration (IBA) at Dhaka University. Professor (A) was Dr. M. Alimullah Miyan; professor (B) was me. We were colleagues at IBA and worked together on research studies, training programs – and the private university project. We organized several meetings on how to proceed. First of all, we wanted to know how such universities have been set up and managed in other countries – particularly in our neighboring countries. We found that there were no private universities in SAARC countries.

We got an opportunity to observe and study how American universities are managed under a World Bank Fellowship. Dr. Miyan went to Kansas State University, and I to Michigan State University. Dr. Miyan asked me to look for and visit one or more private universities in Michigan and learn how they were set up and managed. He asked me to collect whatever documents on administrative matters were available. While staying in Michigan, I came to know the University of Michigan as one such university. I visited and discussed with its Vice President (Administration). I collected documents and brought them to Dhaka. Dr. Miyan actually signed a cooperation agreement with Kansas State University to assist in the process of setting up a university. In the last leg of my visit to US, I had an opportunity to visit the University of New Brunswick in Canada to explore potential collaboration with IBA. Nearby, I found a small private university, founded

by a Catholic order, which offers liberal arts undergraduate degrees. It did not fit the kind of university we were planning.

We came home and shared our experiences. One day, Dr. Miyan called me to see him immediately: “You said there are only public universities in Bangladesh. But I noticed the sign board of Darul Ihsan University in Dhanmondi, which is not a public university”. I was surprised. After his visit, he reported that Darul Ihsan University offers Masters level courses and, under an agreement, the degree is granted by Mecca University.

Another aspect was simply a lack of university seats. Every year, after admission tests of the public universities, we received calls from friends, relatives, colleagues and alumni: their children, although good students, could not get admission. When parents could afford overseas education, their sons studied in UK, US, Australia, Thailand, Malaysia, and India. In India alone there were 32,000 Bangladeshi students studying in schools, colleges and universities. But many parents of daughters would not send their daughters abroad for higher education. There was a serious need for alternatives to public universities. The case for non-government universities became obvious.

First, we had to choose a name. We finally settled on ‘University of Business, Agriculture and Technology’. No country can prosper without business and, as business teachers, we had a preference for this discipline. However, we also concluded that education and research in agriculture (specially research in rice cultivation) were crucial for a country with a growing population and a need to enhance food production. Also important is promotion of new technology to increase productivity and

the ability of Bangladesh to compete with other nations. We later added 'international' to address the emerging issues of globalization. The name reflected our ideas about the university's vision, mission, values and strategies. When it came to choosing a logo, we used the first two letters of Indiana University (IU), where both of us had earned MBA degrees.

The next task was selecting degrees and programs, and designing curricula. Dr. Miyan requested that I design the Bachelor of Business Administration (BBA) and Masters (MBA) curricula. A Rotary friend of Dr. Miyan, an engineer, designed the initial engineering program. Another friend of Dr. Miyan, a professor of Bangladesh Agricultural University, designed the agriculture program. After designing the draft BBA curriculum, we organized a seminar attended by business educators and management professionals for review. Attendance in the seminar exceeded our expectations; the auditorium of the Planning and Development Academy in Nilkhet was full. We received many practical suggestions, which we incorporated in the final BBA curriculum. Thus was born the first BBA curriculum in the country. Later, it was adopted by IBA and other universities.

We projected student numbers and manpower needs. We also prepared job descriptions for each position. The university was initially located in Dhanmondi in a rented building. Only later, the university moved to its permanent campus in Uttara. We attended to details such as classroom furniture. We made a financial projection to determine the level of tuition fees. The fees had to cover all costs and leave a surplus for future development of the university. We estimated total fees of Tk.

one lakh per year for the BBA. Fees for other programs reflected additional cost involved.

Dr. Miyan met with the Secretary of the Ministry of Education and presented the project. He acknowledged that it was an impressive case, and that he would present the file to the Minister of Education with a strong positive recommendation. Before the week was out, the Secretary called Dr. Miyan to his office. The Minister had showed interest, but finally did not approve the project. Disappointed but not discouraged, Dr. Miyan told me, "This government may not agree but the next government will agree." I was less optimistic: "There is no sign of change of government." He replied, "You never know when and how governments will change in this country ... Change may be very near."

One day he asked me, "Do you know anybody who can arrange a meeting for us with the leader of one of the two opposition political parties?" I had a student related to the General Secretary of one of the parties. I contacted the student and his relative arranged a dinner party with the party leader. We had a brief meeting with her, and she was favourable. She invited us to meet her party secretary in charge of education. Dr. Miyan met him and was reassured: since his party leader had accepted the idea, it would be considered positively if and when his party came to power. However, Miyan reported, we do not know who next will come to power. So, Dr. Miyan went to meet the leader of the other major party. He reported back that she too was positive, although she had a preference for public universities.

Two years later, the the first leader we met came to power and the party secretary in charge of education became the Education

Minister. Dr. Miyan managed to meet him the day after he was sworn in as Minister. A lawyer by profession, the Minister reassured Miyan that he would enact a law enabling private universities so that our proposed university would have a legal foundation. He asked the Education Secretary to take necessary action. He in turn replied that the Ministry of Law must draft the law, which may cause delay. Dr. Myian volunteered that he had already drafted a law, which may speed up the process. He handed the draft to the Secretary. Meanwhile, a former minister of education, a former secretary, and others joined the movement for private universities. The ball had started rolling. In 1992, The Private Universities Act was passed. Dr. Miyan's vision became a legal reality.

While he pursued a legislative foundation, Dr. Miyan did not wait for the vagaries of change of government and passage of legislation. He went ahead to set up the university. By 1990, he had signed an agreement with Assumption University in Bangkok to mount Business and Computer Programs via IUBAT. If there was no legislation, students would receive their degree from Assumption. When

IUBAT classes started in 1991, the first private university in Bangladesh became an actual reality. After passage of legislation, new private universities followed IUBAT's example. Subsequently, Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka and Nepal also followed. So, Dr. Miyan was not the visionary and pioneer of private universities in Bangladesh alone; he was the catalyst for private universities throughout SAARC countries.

— Prof. Dr. Abdur Rab  
Vice Chancellor (Designated)  
International University of Business  
Agriculture and Technology  
Former Professor and Director, IBA,  
Dhaka University

## **Eulogy for Md. Alimullah Miyan, Ph.D.**

Founding Vice-Chancellor IUBAT

I came to know Alimullah Miyan in 1992. He had recently resigned a prestigious academic position in the University of Dhaka and had launched IUBAT, the first Bangladesh university operating under legislation enabling non-government universities. At the time, he was touring Canadian universities to learn about university administration and to make connections. I hosted his visit to my university, Simon Fraser University in Vancouver. Knowing very little about Bangladesh but intrigued by his enthusiasm, I accepted an invitation to visit his home and his university. I have been visiting IUBAT ever since, at least once per year. I have come to know a little about Bangladesh; I have made friends, and I take the occasion of the second issue of the *IUBAT Review* to honour Miyan's contribution to higher education in his country.

Miyan could have enjoyed a comfortable life as an academic at the University of Dhaka; he and his family could have emigrated to a western country. He did neither. His ambition was to develop a credible university, free of partisan politics, that would contribute to the education of the next generation of Bangladeshi. He was among the generation of "social entrepreneurs" who founded and built major NGOs and education institutions in the two decades following the War of Liberation. They are now over 70 and some unfortunately have died. Miyan died in the spring of 2017.

When I first visited Dhaka, IUBAT occupied several floors in a rented warehouse in the Dhanmondi neighbourhood. As enrolment grew, IUBAT made use of every square meter in the building, including laboratories on balconies

and Sheema's café on the rooftop. I followed the painfully complex negotiations with government authorities required to develop the present campus in Uttara. In the 1990s, Uttara was on the outskirts of metropolitan Dhaka; it has now grown to become a major community within metropolitan Dhaka. Simultaneously, IUBAT has grown; it now hosts 8000 students.

At times, Miyan and I disagreed on priorities for IUBAT. This is not the time to revisit our disagreements. This is an occasion to acknowledge the time and energy he devoted to building IUBAT – recruiting faculty, encouraging students, inviting foreigners (such as the Canadian nurses who helped build the nursing college), and protecting the university from those who did not wish it well. Many others have devoted nearly equivalent time and energy. At the risk of giving offence to others who have contributed much, I mention three people I have known well – pro-Vice Chancellor Mrs. Khanum, Selina Nargis who for the last decade has assumed a major role in university administration, and Rabiul Islam the VC's personal assistant.

The last request that Miyan made to me was that I serve as the "native English speaker" – I was born in England – and help edit the initial issues of this journal. The intent of the *IUBAT Review* is to provide a multidisciplinary outlet for articles of good quality written by, primarily, faculty at IUBAT. If we succeed in establishing the reputation of the journal, we will in a small way have advanced Miyan's mission.

We must hope that Bangladesh produces a new generation of "social entrepreneurs" with as much passion to advance the country as Miyan's "liberation war" generation.

— John Richards  
*Visiting faculty member*