

**Speech of the Hon'ble Chief Justice of Bangladesh
Dr. Justice Syed Refaat Ahmed
at the 75-Year Diamond Jubilee and Reunion of the
Department of Islamic History and Culture, University of Dhaka
8 November 2025 | University of Dhaka**

Professor Dr. Niaz Ahmed Khan, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Dhaka,

Respected Chairperson, Department of Islamic History & Lecture,

Special Guests,

Distinguished teachers and scholars,

Ladies and gentlemen

Good Morning

In October 2009 my mother National Professor Dr. Sufia Ahmed sat with the noted academic Iftekhar Iqbal and spoke extensively about her life and times. The audio-recording of that interview and its corresponding transcript are now both to be found archived at Tufts University, which coincidentally happens to be one of my Almae Matres. In the interview my mother speaks of the Lady days of the late-1940s when she found herself doing rather well in her Intermediate Examination. She was ranked 8th among the successful candidates securing a letter in Islamic History and Culture to boot.

In the meantime, as my mother recounts in the Tufts interview, the Department of Islamic History and Culture was opened with Professor A.B.M. Habibullah as the founder Chairperson. Professor Dr. A.F.M. Abdul Hakim from the History Department was also teaching here part time. Both these gentlemen were on the lookout for good students to get the Department of Islamic History and Culture going in all earnest and were, therefore, keen to enroll my mother

these who incidentally had set her sights on majoring instead in Political Science and take English and Islamic History as her subsidiary subjects.

But, clearly, that was not to be.

The final and decisive push came from whom I presume to be Dr. S.M. Hossain, who came to prevail on my maternal grandfather Justice Md. Ibrahim citing the Letter my mother secured in Islamic History as good a ground as any to enroll her as a first batch student in this Department. The rest, as they say, is history.

To be here with you on this historic day, therefore, Ladies and Gentlemen, is to experience a convergence of memory and destiny. The seventy-five years of this Department's journey are not merely a record of academic accomplishment, they form part of the intellectual biography of our nation itself. And for me, personally, it is a homecoming of the heart. I stand here as both a witness and an heir to the luminous tradition of the Department of Islamic History and Culture, which has molded minds and give meaning to the moral evolution of this country.

Founded in 1948, in the nascent years of our nation's intellectual awakening, this Department emerged as one of the earliest institutional platforms for a critical and inclusive understanding of civilization, its origins, its exchanges, its triumphs, and its failures. Over three-quarters of a century, it has sustained a delicate balance between faith and rational inquiry, between identity and universality, between the local and the global. Few departments in our universities have carried so quietly, yet so steadily, the torch of enlightenment in the Bengal delta.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am a self-confessed historian. I have come to believe that no reformer can act wisely without historical sense, and no judge can interpret the law without understanding the civilization from which it springs. Law, after all, is the moral record of a people written in the language of justice. And history, as I understand it, is not merely the study of what was, it is an inquiry into why things must be better.

In that spirit, allow me to share a recent reflection. Only a few weeks ago, I had the privilege of visiting the **Bibliotheca Alexandrina** in Egypt, the magnificent modern resurrection of the ancient Library of Alexandria, the first great library of human civilization. Founded over two thousand years ago, the Library of Alexandria was more than a repository of scrolls, it was a republic of ideas, a meeting place of civilizations. It welcomed Greek philosophers, Egyptian astronomers, Indian mathematicians, and Persian physicians under one roof. It stood as a symbol of mankind's audacious belief that knowledge could unify what politics divided.

Its destruction, through ignorance, intolerance, or neglect, remains one of the most profound tragedies in the history of the human intellect. And yet, its rebirth in modern Alexandria is a message to all civilizationsthat knowledge, once liberated, cannot be extinguished. As I walked through the silent chambers of that library, its glass dome open to the Mediterranean light, I thought of our own University of Dhaka, born in another epoch, in another geography, yet animated by the same faith in the mind's emancipatory power.

The University of Dhaka too has survived political storms, intellectual repression, and the ruptures of history. Yet, like the phoenix that Alexandria

symbolizes, it continues to rise, driven by the conviction that knowledge, if nurtured by integrity, can renew a nation's moral fabric.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

That conviction is what guides me today in another sphere of institutional life, the Judiciary of Bangladesh, where we are engaged in what I have called the Judicial Reform Roadmap. The judiciary, like any great institution, cannot exist in the comfort of tradition alone; it must reform to remain relevant. Over the past fifteen months, we have endeavoured to institutionalize a series of transformations designed to ensure autonomy, efficiency, and accessibility in the administration of justice.

Yet beyond these administrative achievements lies a deeper transformation, a moral one. Our reform effort is animated by a belief that institutions must serve people, not power; that authority without legitimacy is empty, and that in times of national transition, the judiciary must become the moral custodian of the people's trust. It is perhaps for this reason that our roadmap, born of quiet perseverance, has gradually become a people's reform, echoed in their voices, sustained by their hope.

We at the Supreme Court are also keenly alive to the necessity of staying relevant in the decades ahead in a highly inter-connected world not bound by limitations of geography or myopic intellectual exclusivity. Much of the past fifteen months has, therefore, been devoted to forging links with non-traditional partners far and near and indeed as diverse as Brazil, South Africa, Egypt, Palestine and Thailand to name a few jurisdictions. As I walked through the cavernous halls of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina I was equally convinced of the merit of inter-disciplinary connectivity where the study of law, history, and

philosophy interacts with an ultimate and lofty objective of propagating universalism in an increasingly fractious global order.

In that sense, this Diamond Jubilee is not merely a celebration of an academic milestone, it is a meditation on the power of institutions to shape civilization. The Department of Islamic History and Culture is defined by creed, and by curiosity. Its study of civilizations, Arab, Persian, South Asian, and European, has always been grounded in the universal pursuit of truth. It stands as a bridge between knowledge and ethics, reminding us that scholarship, when guided by reason and compassion, is itself an act of justice.

As I look at this distinguished gathering, teachers who dedicated their lives to the discipline, students who carry forward its ideals, and alumni who now serve the nation in diverse fields, I am reminded of something that “*History does not judge us by our achievements, but by the integrity of our efforts.*” The same is true of nations, of universities, and of courts.

I wish this Diamond Jubilee be an occasion to remember but to renew, to reaffirm the Department’s founding ethos of rational humanism, to strengthen its global academic and institutional linkages, and to inspire a new generation of scholars who view history as a living dialogue between knowledge and responsibility. The Department of Islamic History and Culture, through its inclusive, and pluralistic outlook, has always demonstrated that identity is enriched, not diminished, by openness. That message, I believe, is the cornerstone of Bangladesh’s democratic and intellectual future.

With that view in mind, I wish you all the very best in your current and future endeavours. Thank you for your most kind invitation and gracious hospitality.