Obituary

Professor Syed Nurun Nabi

Bangladesh Academy of Sciences lost another illustrious Fellow on the 4th of March 2021 with the death of Professor Dr. Syed Nurun Nabi after prolonged illness due to old-age complications. Professor Nabi was elected Fellow in 1982. He had been a faculty in the Department of Chemistry, Dhaka University, where he joined as a lecturer in 1959 upon returning from abroad after completing his Ph.D. and retired as Professor in 2000. After his retirement, he served in the same department as a Supernumerary Professor for another five years.

Professor Nabi showed his brilliance and love for experimental chemistry during his undergraduate studies (1951-1955) in the Department of Chemistry, Dhaka University and drew the attention of the then Head of the department, Professor Mukarram Hussain Khundkar (Foundation Fellow of BAS), who supervised his research work for his M.Sc. degree which he obtained in 1955. He was placed in the first class in his M.Sc. examination, and because of his excellent results, he was awarded the I.C.I. Research Fellowship of the Pakistan Association for Advancement of Science to work with Prof. Khundkar as a University Research Scholar. In 1957 he was awarded the prestigious 1851 Royal Exhibition Scholarship to pursue a doctoral program at the Cambridge University, U.K. He carried out research work under the supervision of Prof. H.J. Emeleus, FRS in the Department of Chemistry, and obtained his Ph.D. degree in 1959. He returned to his home country to join as a lecturer in the Department of Chemistry of Dhaka University in the same year. He pursued his academic career in this department till his retirement.

Dr. Nabi impressed his students as a classroom teacher from the very beginning of his teaching career. He taught courses on chemical bonding, the chemistry of transition metals, Group Chemistry, reactions in non-aqueous solvents, and the structure of transition metal complexes. He conducted laboratory classes on inorganic qualitative and quantitative analyses. He laid utmost importance on proper manipulations in carrying out experiments and maintaining discipline in keeping protocols. The training he offered in handling pipettes, burettes, and analytical balances remains a life-long asset to his students throughout their professional careers. He set an example of an ideal teacher.

Due to his excellent performance as an academic and a researcher, Dr. Nabi was appointed as Reader in the same department in 1964. He was elected to the Associateship of the Royal Institute of Chemistry, London, in the same year. Further, he was awarded a Post-doctoral fellowship to work with Prof. Robert A. Shaw in the Department of Chemistry in the Birkbeck College, London. In 1965, he was awarded the H.P. Roy gold medal by the Dhaka University for his excellent research performance. In 1969, Dr. Nabi was appointed Professor in the Chemistry Department of the Islamabad University in Pakistan, but he returned to independent Bangladesh in 1972 and joined his parent department as a Professor and continued working there until his retirement. However, with a fellowship of the Royal Society of London, Prof. Nabi spent an academic session in the Chemistry Departments of both Cambridge and London Universities. He was also a visiting Professor in Cambridge in 1975.

Professor Nabi will be remembered as a devoted researcher not only by his own research students but also by other students and colleagues in the university. His routine of appearing at the laboratory by 8 a.m. and leaving in the evening was well-known to all. He used the same room as both his office room and research laboratory throughout his career. He worked on reactions that emitted toxic gases, and in his early career, he was often found to conduct his experiments in the open space outside, as proper fume cupboards were not available in those days. He used to inspire his students to follow a strict routine of laboratory appearance.

Professor Nabi,s research interest was in synthesizing inorganic compounds, including fluorocarbon compounds, inorganic polymers, phosphazenes, sulfur halides, sulfur polymers, sulfur-nitrogen ring systems with transition metals, transition metal hydrazine coordination compounds, etc. He also investigated the solubility of inorganic compounds in non-aqueous ionizing solvent systems and solvent-solute interactions. His research work also included investigation of salt-like reactions of covalent halides in acetone and glacial acetic acid solutions and salt-like compounds of sulfur, phosphorous, silicon, and acid halide induced polyurea condensation processes. He used rather simple glassware and house-made glass apparatus for his experiments and conductance meters and viscometers for measuring the behavior of reactants in solutions. He supervised a large number of students in their research work for their M.Sc. degrees. Many of his M.Sc. research students became leading academics in the country.

As an administrator, Professor Nabi set an example of good governance. He was Chairman of the Department from 1976 – 1979. This was a difficult time for any administrator when the country was under a military dictatorship. Professor Nabi maintained strict adherence to the prevailing rules of the university and never yielded to pressure from any quarter to make deviations for special favors. Further, academics was in a turbulent situation due to a rather improperly planned transition from the annual system to a course system. Professor Nabi succeeded in bringing order to the assessment system in the academic programs. Professor Nabi served successfully as Director of the Bose Center for Advanced Study and Research of the University from 1989 to 1992.

During the tenure of Supernumerary Professor for five years after his retirement in 2000, Professor Nabi displayed his passion for training students in laboratory work. He carried out the assignment

given to him by the department and participated in conducting laboratory classes regularly, and provided guidance to the younger faculty members.

Professor Nabi was born in 1934 in Barisal, where his father, Syed Khorshed Ali, worked at the Collectorate Office during the British Indian period. His mother, Rabeya Latifa Khatoon, was a homemaker. Professor Nabi passed his Matriculation examination of the then Eastern Bengal Secondary Education Board in 1949 from A.K. Institution, Barisal, and was placed in the first division. He passed his Intermediate Science examination of the Dhaka University in 1951 from Braja Mohan College Barisal and was also placed in the first division. Professor Nabi is survived by his wife, Dr. Safura Nabi, daughter Dr. Hasina Zaman and son Engr. Syed Hassan Nurun Nabi and four grandchildren. Dr. Safura Nabi was also a chemist and worked as a scientist in the Dhaka Laboratory of the BCSIR. She retired as a Director in 1992. Dr. Hasina Zaman, who graduated from the Dhaka Medical College and later earned her FCPS degree from Bangladesh College of Physicians and Surgeons and FRCS from Glasgow, is a renowned breast surgeon. Hassan graduated as a Civil Engineer from BUET and is now working in a managerial post in a private company in Nova Scotia, Canada.

The Bangladesh Academy of Sciences and the University of Dhaka will always treasure the academic and scientific contributions of Professor Dr. Syed Nurun Nabi.

M. Muhibur Rahman
Professor (retired), Department of Chemistry, Dhaka University