

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH BENGAL



TENTH ANNUAL CONVOCATION

Address by
Prof. AMLAN DATTA
Vice-Chancellor

RAJA RAMMOHUNPUR
The 28th November, 1975

Mr. Chancellor, Professor Mehrotra, members of the University, other members of the academic fraternity, students and respected guests, I take a particular pleasure in welcoming you today because this is not simply an Annual Convocation of the University, but our Tenth Annual Convocation.

The First Convocation of the University of North Bengal was held ten year ago on the 31st October, 1965. On that occasion we resolved to dedicate ourselves to the highest ideals of education in this country, and two lifesize portraits of Raja Rammohun Roy and Rabindranath Tagore were unveiled as a testimony to our dedication.

By an irony of fate, the University entered a period of continuous disorder soon after that year. The academic life on the campus was violently disturbed and schedules of examination were gravely upset. Even so, the activities of the University expanded in certain directions. The Medical College at Sushrutnagar came into existence and a Law College was added to our University. Yet it is difficult to resist the impression that most of our energies were consumed till recently by a kind of brute struggle for existence.

Unaccountably, but not without an element of grim symbolism, the portraits of Rammohun and Rabindranath, soon after their first unveiling, passed out of sight, carelessly laid in a nearly forgotten corner of the University, where they gathered dust for several years thereafter. From this slow passage to oblivion, these magnificent portraits were retrieved only this year and installed in the Central Library of the University, where their commanding presence now sheds lustre on the labours of our scholars.

This year has also seen the inauguration of Vidyasagar Bhavan, named after another illustrious son of Bengal, who combined great erudition and remarkably enlightened views with a rare blend of courage and compassion. In the building bearing that name we have a small text-book library, a cafeteria and opportunities for students and members of the staff to come together in inter-disciplinary seminars, literary conferences and regular meetings in the evening to discuss various subjects covering both the Sciences and the Humanities.

During the current year we have struggled against heavy odds and succeeded in establishing a certain amount of discipline in the University, which is so essential for progress in future. We have also moved some way towards the normalisation of our various examinations. The B. A./B. Sc./B. Com. examinations for 1975 are being held in 1975. This is, of course, as it should

be ; but it was by no means the situation in previous years. It is yet too early to claim that normal time schedules have been re-established on a firm basis. Once the examinations and other academic programmes are delayed, as they were very largely, it is only through a somewhat painful process that normalcy can be restored. Our teachers know this. I trust that they will make the necessary effort and that, with the cooperation of all concerned, the gains we have already made shall be consolidated and we shall be able to set an example in attaining a difficult but much desired goal.

Normalisation of examinations is not simply a question of maintaining time schedules. We are happy to report that malpractice at examination centres has significantly decreased in North Bengal University. This has already received some publicity, thanks to the good offices of the West Bengal College and University Teachers' Association and an appreciative press and public. But we have to stay vigilant. Malpractice is a sly and tenacious foe ; it asks for quarter under diverse pretexts and spreads confusion all around unless it is dealt with very cautiously. Fortunately, the Chancellor and the Chief Minister have both expressed themselves in favour of a firm policy in this matter. I hope that we shall continue to receive their support as in the past.

It is not enough to prevent malpractice. The system of examination itself stands in need of change, and so does the system of teaching. In this University certain decisions have already been adopted to introduce reforms of the system of examination at the post-graduate level. We are now on the verge of implementing these decisions. Exclusive dependence on a few big examinations will soon be replaced, in large part, by a system of continuous evaluation of students. Thus a student will have to prove his worth, not by a short spell of excited effort of doubtful quality at the end of a long term, but by his diligent endeavours all through the academic session. It is hoped that a closer coordination of teaching and examination will also be achieved as a result. Although the new system of examination will, in the first instance, be introduced at the post-graduate level, a committee has already been set up to make appropriate recommendations for reforms at lower levels.

There are layers and layers of problems. No sooner have we brought under control problems at one level than the scene has shifted and other problems, half hidden in the background, have towered before us. Holding examinations on time, preventing malpractice at examination centres and reforming the system of examination, all appeared successively important ; and so, indeed, they are in reality. But behind and overarching all these, there is the great question of how to raise the level of education and research in this University, including its affiliated colleges spread over five districts.

Let us face the facts. For the past many decades there has been a "brain drain" from the districts of North Bengal towards Calcutta and Delhi.

It is not that these districts have not produced men of exceptional abilities. But few of them have stayed here. Professor Benoy Sarkar in the Social Sciences, Bidhu Shekhar Sastri and Pramatha Nath Bisi in the Humanities, Dr. Ramesh Majumdar, the noted Physicist, to name only a few, arose from North Bengal, but had to settle down elsewhere for the flowering of their talents. There did not exist here a sufficiently stimulating cultural and educational environment for holding people of their kind. Nor has there been a radical change in the situation since then. Educationally speaking, North Bengal still remains a land of vast and unfulfilled promises. This cannot be allowed to continue indefinitely. In our educational institutions, standards have to be raised all around. North Bengal is passing through a transition. This imposes on all of us, particularly teachers, a special responsibility.

It is equally incumbent on the Government to accept a special responsibility. At the time of the First Convocation of this University, the late Padmaja Naidu recalled in her message the original ideas of Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy and said : "With the prophetic vision that made him truly the creator of modern Bengal, Dr. Roy realised that all these plans of development would fail to serve any enduring purpose unless adequate academic facilities for higher education and research were provided to fulfil the growing needs of the people of the hill areas and plains of Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar, West Dinajpur and Malda. It is my hope that this University, situated in the foothills of the ancient Himalayas, will evolve into a centre of national integration for all the people of different ethnic origins who live in these districts." Thus did the first Chancellor of this University mingle her own hopes with the vision of Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy and, in so doing, she spoke of the importance and enduring value of higher education and research in North Bengal, with special attention to the growing needs and requirements of the region itself, but also with an accent on national integration. We shall do well to pay heed to that wise counsel. While planning for higher education and organising research in North Bengal, neither educationists nor statesmen can ignore it today except at the peril of the whole country.

In my report at the last Annual Convocation of this University, I pleaded for the establishment of a Centre of Social Science and Historical Studies and a Centre of Life Science Studies, which would be based here but draw scholars from all over the country and thus make possible a concerted, careful and continuing study of men and institutions and the natural environment of this frontier region. Dr. V. K. R. V. Rao, Guest-in-Chief at the First Convocation, called ours "a frontier University of India." From that apt description flows certain responsibilities, which, if I may say so, are equally binding on us and on the Government. I have had occasion to discuss this matter briefly both at the State level and, more recently, with the

Ministry of Education at the Centre. The Chief Minister of West Bengal has all along shown keen interest in our plans; he certainly appreciates the importance of setting up centres of research on the lines suggested above. I have noticed with sorrow a certain amount of scepticism in some quarters as to whether persons of sufficient academic competence would be available at all for organising centres of research in North Bengal. I can only hope that this is not the kind of scepticism which inhibits resolute action. Once one is satisfied that something is of national importance, it is better to take the risks of optimism and go ahead. I submit that we have here a task of national importance and a great opportunity for the University and the Government to work in close cooperation for accomplishing that task.

In the work that lies ahead of us, we will need the help of many sister institutions all over the country. We are fortunate in having the Vice-Chancellor of Delhi University as our Guest-in-Chief at today's Convocation. I am sure that this brings our two Universities closer together. It creates an intangible bond between the centre and the periphery in the academic world and so opens up possibilities of fruitful cooperation in future in a common pursuit of knowledge.

To all those who are assembled here, I offer my warm and sincere thanks once again. To those who have received diplomas and other awards on successful completion of their studies, I present my felicitations and best wishes. The University is a large and expanding fraternity. Let the Tenth Annual Convocation be a time for recalling with gratitude the labours of those who worked for the good of this University in the past and equally an occasion for renewal of faith and for pledging ourselves to the task that lies ahead of us in the future.

*Only yesterday news arrived of a grant made by the Government of West Bengal to start work on the proposed centres of research. The amount is small; but it is better than nothing.