

Nineteenth Convocation held on April 11, 1986

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Mr. Chancellor, Mr. Vice-Chancellor, Members of the University and the Faculties, Distinguished Guests and Graduates of the Year:

It is a very special honour for me to be invited to address the 19th annual convocation of the University of North Bengal, for I had been associated with it from its very inception. I remember how the indomitable first Vice-Chancellor, Professor B.N. Dasgupta, built the University up, brick-by-brick, from a desolate grassland to a modern campus. I remember his late-night visits to my Calcutta residence, asking me to find urgently qualified teachers for the students who had been waiting for their classes to begin. I knew that next morning he would be at the Sealdah station personally supervising the loading of the building materials and equipment into the Siliguri-bound wagons and also that he would fly north to Bagdogra on the following day to see that everything was safely unloaded. The University should never forget how much it owes to the pioneering efforts of Professor Dasgupta.

The University seemed to suffer from an apparent locational disadvantage, but its location was in fact the strongest ground for its establishment. When there was a spurt in everything after Independence, and specially during the Second Plan period when funds were plentiful, the number of Universities multiplied all over India. But there was very little of locational planning and the choices that were made were often determined by various kinds of pulls and pressures and sometimes by factors which appeared superficially to be important, though in fact they were of a trivial nature. A Maharaja's residential palace was available somewhere and so a University was started there. Some other place had a few structures left behind by the Army and so it was thought

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The speech was presented in absentia

to be a good place for a University: A dilapidated residence of a great poet was available in one of the worst-congested parts of Calcutta and there had to be a University there. It was soon realised that the capital expenditure on new construction in those locations had to be so large as to make the initial assets negligible, useless and sometimes a hindrance.

There was also a tendency in West Bengal to make everything 'metro-centric', i.e. to build all the new institutions of higher learning in or near Calcutta. The city got two more Universities in addition to the one it already had and the others also were established close by. If you draw a circle with Calcutta as its centre and with a straight-line radius of 80 miles, you will find within it eight Universities (including Viswa-Bharati, Vidyasagar University and the Kalyani Krishi Mahavidyalaya) and three other University-level institutions- at Baranagar, Joka and Kharagpur. And all the high-level research institutions are in Calcutta or its suburbs. Every one wanted to be in a place which offered the best available urban amenities and everyone also wanted to be close to the centre of political power.

North Bengal University was the only one in the case of which a right choice of location was made. Despite the fact that North Bengal provided at that time one of our most important export commodities and in almost complete indifference to the backwardness of the tribal and hill population of the region, the British had neglected the area almost callously. To them all that mattered was the hillstation at Darjeeling which was made to wake up once or twice in the year. It was a singularly good decision to locate a University in the village Matigara (now Raja Rammohunpur) -far from Calcutta, but not quite inaccessible, near an airport and an important railhead, on the gateway to the north-eastern areas of India, near the hills and near the plantation areas-and above all an area which did require priority consideration from the educational policy-makers.

There is sometimes an objection to such a choice, because a

University of this type might turn into a local entity. I would hold that if this argument is correct, it creates the strongest case for a University of this nature. Conventional education -low or high-can be imparted anywhere. But if a region can be identified as distinctive, it must have special problems, requiring educational and research adventures into new fields. If the area as a whole is educationally backward, there has to be an integrated plan comprising all stages from primary upwards. And in the framing of such a plan, as well as in its implementation, a regional University, once started, can give an effective lead.

For the University, it is not simply a question of providing opportunities for higher education to those to whom south Bengal is far away. There is the more important need for organising special studies and research in the regional problems. There is wide scope for such research in the social sciences, including particularly social and physical anthropology, in the life sciences and in many other fields. This does not mean any neglect of fundamental research in the basic sciences or in humanities, but the emphasis must be on the regional problems. If you permit me, I will say that even if a regional University does not make a break-through in nuclear physics, it will perform a task of very high value if it can study the social and biological problems likely to be neglected elsewhere. I remember Dr. Charu Chandra Sanyal's great work on the Rajbanshis and I do not see why a University faculty should not be able to produce on other social groups work of the type that Dr. Sanyal did lone-handed. You now have your Centre for Himalayan Studies and also a Centre on Life Sciences. These naturally raise high expectations.

There are, however, difficulties. Just as the policy-makers have a preference for the metropolitan areas, the potential teachers and students also have a similar kind of preference. This preference is partly the result of the absence of urban amenities, but that can be remedied. And one cannot forget that the urban amenities in the Calcutta area are not what they once were. More important are the inadequacy of

infrastructural academic facilities and the failure to develop the right academic climate. And it is here that the government and the UGC have to come forward with liberal assistance. Special facilities like sabbaticals and study leave for the research-minded teachers can go a long way in inducing good scholars to come and stay. And if they come, good students will also be attracted. An academic atmosphere cannot be built by money alone; it requires devotion, co-operation and determination.

There has to be in all this just one principle of policy- that whatever is done is done well. It does not matter if all varieties of disciplines and sub-disciplines are not taught and studied, but if any field has actually been selected for development, it should be encouraged to grow to the highest level practicable. A regional University must not be regarded as a second-class University, either by the policy-maker or by the public.

The devotion to work of which I have spoken can be induced by giving the right people the right measure of responsibility. If our Universities and Colleges have always to look to the government for any and every decision, they lose their interest in improvement, and, ultimately, their ability to think and take decisions. It should become firmly established that academic questions must be decided by academic considerations alone and that such decisions should be taken only by those actively involved in academic work and not by those who are either routine-minded or are guided by extra-academic motives and whose tenures in the positions of power are generally transitory or uncertain.

This brings me to the crux of the problem of higher education. The first point to emphasize is that the comparative term "higher education" does not necessarily mean "high" education. Higher education in our country has come to mean a differentiation in terms of stages on a time-scale, but high education is a matter of quality and excellence. There is no point in developing what can be called higher education in statistical tables, unless we have a satisfactory answer to

the question, "How high is our higher education"? We have to aim high and there is no reason why even a small regional College or University should not be able to import education at the highest internationally acceptable level in at least some selected branches of knowledge. But this selection must be made by the academic people and the institutions comprising them must be autonomous in the full sense of the term.

Such autonomy does not exist now. The government controls the funds. The necessary money cannot come these days from any other source (the days of large endowments are over) and all the talk about generation of internal resources is not only unrealistic, but may sometimes be positively vicious. Internal resources are generated by atrocious "capitation fees" charged by some professional colleges in Southern and Western India -sometimes with the blessings of the state governments. I hope West Bengal will never fall a victim to this kind of practice. But while the necessary funds have to be provided by the government- State or Central-there is no logic in controlling in meticulous detail the internal allocation of these funds, even when the total budget is not exceeded. And it is positively undesirable to dole out the sanctioned funds in close fistcd instalments. One of the most pathetic spectacles these days is to see our Vice-Chancellors and Principals moving from door to door in the corridors of power at Laldighi and at Bahadur Shah Zafar Marg, just for obtaining what are their legitimate dues under budgets already sanctioned.

The financial interference by the government at every step has its academic repercussions, when a University cannot create a new post without specific sanction, even if the approved budget is not exceeded. If a brilliant former student with distinguished achievements abroad returns home and expresses a desire to work in his own University, the Vice-Chancellor is helpless, with impediments from the above and, sometimes, resistance from below. And very often the student who came back with high expectations goes back with broken hopes, never perhaps to return again. We talk loudly about "brain drain", but our

financial and administrative rules ensure that a drain which could be reversed becomes re-enforced. The autonomy of a University to build up its faculties by enriching them when opportunities occur is effectively thwarted.

Above all this, there is the attack on autonomy (and also on quality), by what, in the absence of a better term, is called "politicization". Corruption and politics have both entered education widely and deeply. They help each other, because corruption cannot go very far unless there is political support behind it and because politics has become largely dependent on funds provided by the corrupt. Corruption has become all-pervasive in education- from building construction and purchases, and from admission of students to private coaching as a commercial enterprise. Politics affects University appointments, examination results and even courses of study. If there are exceptions their number is becoming increasingly smaller. The ultimate sufferers are the new generation of young persons who do not get the education they seek and deserve.

I do not mean to say that autonomy alone will solve all the problems. Autonomy may be of a purely formal nature, giving large powers to the University bodies, but these bodies may be constituted on political lines. Autonomy has to be academically meaningful and must mean that all powers should be exercised by the academic faculties with only a minimal addition of a few distinguished educationists from outside. Once government control is minimised, political pressures are likely to be minimised also, because politics in the Universities is generally a replication of the politics that surrounds the government. But reduction of government control must be directly accompanied by a withdrawal of political pressures from outside the government. I firmly believe that if all political parties agree to take their hands off the internal operation of the Universities, all our campus troubles will disappear within twenty-four hours.

We have however to go one step further. If the Universities deserve autonomy vis-a-vis the government, the colleges also deserve autonomy vis-a-vis both the government and the affiliating University-irrespective of whether the colleges are fully government owned or only government financed. In fact, the whole idea of affiliated college is antithetic to academic logic, but we have persistently stuck to the colonial hierarchical system here while decrying colonialism at every opportunity. I do however realise that in the present conditions we cannot immediately do away with the affiliation system and I plead guilty to the charge that a recent Commission on which I served has recommended that one of our unitary Universities should be converted into an affiliating University in order to lighten the burdens of the University of Calcutta. But I do maintain that our aim should be to do away with the affiliating system as it operated now and replace by a collaborative system in which colleges are not subordinate bodies, but are active on equal terms with the University of which they are the constituents. Full autonomy will come later.

It will take time even to reach a position like this. Mean while, the first desirable step will be to give a substantial measure of freedom to some selected colleges-like those at Darjeeling, CoochBehar, Jalpaiguri and Malda in North Bengal. A college at Raiganj was at one time taken over by the North Bengal University. I do not know what is its status now, but if there is at all a University college, it should have a large measure of freedom. Some of them will require additional funds, but the government and the UGC can save money by refraining from starting new colleges (some of them non-viable by any standards) and by using the money for developing the existing colleges. The idea is not to create any discrimination but is one simply of accepting the fact that if there is a college, it must be a good college.

There is of course the politico-economic question arising from the pressure of increasing number seeking entry into colleges and later into Universities. It is necessary to realise the stern fact that we can

never have sufficient colleges and Universities to meet the rising pressure fully and also to consider what will happen after everyone has been admitted and then sent out to hunt for the jobs that are not there. It is not the function of colleges and Universities to seek to "solve" the employment problem by shelving it, i.e. by converting unemployed undergraduates into unemployed graduates at a heavy cost of time, money and energy. The solution lies in the planning of the whole economic system. If we have failed there, we cannot make educational institutions to bear the burdens and that also fruitlessly.

I shall ask for your forbearance, if I have been somewhat harsh. But what I see around me makes me despondent. I do not however want to spread this despondency among our younger generations. If we of this older generation have failed, both in this educational and in the wider economic field, it is the duty of the younger generation to come forward. The future of India lies in their hands and the nature will be what they make it. I have frankly given my ideas and I do not claim that additional or alternative ideas are not possible. To the young graduates my earnest request is that they should, in their active life, put the educational requirements of the people in the top-priority category, with full emphasis on standards, on quality, on internationally acceptable excellence.

Education cannot cure all the ills of the human society, but it is the essential pre requisite of social and economic development. And if that is so, higher education has to be meaningfully high, creating cultivated minds and minds that are free. There can be compromise with a number of things, but not with what the Government of India has, at long last, recognised as "human resource development".

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