

Twentieth Convocation held on January 20, 1987

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

I consider it to be a very special honour for me to be invited to address the annual convocation of the University of North Bengal. One of the major features of higher education in post-independence India is that institutions of higher learning have spread into locations away from the metropolis. The location of the University of north Bengal away from the ambit of the long dominating metropolitan University was indeed a very welcome decision.

The natural hinterland of this University demands that it should not only generate and disseminate modern learning but also carry forward the yet untapped regionally adaptive reservoir of cultural strength of the people of the area. We must gain a properly studied understanding of the emergence of socio-cultural symbiosis between the people of the hills and the foothills and those of the plains of this region.

For nearly four decades I have been travelling in different parts of India, mainly in the rural and hill-forest areas, for conducting and guiding anthropological field research. As I review these experiences, I find that contrary to the prevailing stereotype among our urban educated people, the tribals and the peasants in the relatively outlying and isolated regions have endogenously developed and, also adopted, many varieties of tools and techniques for productive activities which are adaptive in their natural environment. Any careful observer will be impressed by their endogenous 'technological temper' and also by their capacity for empirical inductive reasoning. Quite often their cautious hesitation about adopting induced modern technologies is rooted in their feeling of

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uncertainty about whether the new technology and new knowledge would disturb their social autonomy. It is often not realised that the problem of diffusion of new knowledge, particularly in science and technology, lies, in the inability, or often unwillingness, of the dominant urban people to bring modern technology and science within the social and cultural control of the people in the countryside. I would expect that the students and the members of the various faculties of this University will be interested in communicating with the rural people with a clear awareness of their endogenous technological and empirical temperament. This will enable them to gain a realistic idea about the nature and sources of the knowledge derived from their life experience and also about the specific conditions of constraint in adopting new knowledge. I would not, however, plead the case for 'village science' as good enough for the rural people. Unequivocally, our task is to carry the latest developments of universal modern science and technology within the social reach of the villagers. I would only insist that we should not thrust advanced science and technology in such a way that it would appear to be a monopoly of the outsiders and shake their self-confidence in the manner often followed by the colonial rulers of the past. Also, one should be prepared to learn something of technology and knowledge of the environment from the people who have successfully adapted themselves in particular ecological niches for long periods.

I would also like to draw your attention to the vast untapped reservoir of creativity in the folk culture of the people of the hill and plain sub-regions of North Bengal. Coming from the urban centres we cannot but be deeply impressed by the rural peoples' aesthetic and intellectual capacity for conserving and innovatively re-structuring lores, dances, songs and dramas. In many villages and cluster of villages forming micro-regions we come across local thinkers and creative persons of various kinds who may be regarded by the teachers, researchers and students of the University as fellow thinkers who have significant knowledge about the socio-economic, cultural and political

problems in their areas. I earnestly hope that we develop a tradition in this University of taking the indigenous intellectuals and creative persons genuinely as colleagues, and start a two way communication with them. Such communication will help us to discover the manner in which social and cultural bonds were, and are now, being built up beyond the parochial boundaries of tribes, castes, religions and local communities.

About 80 years ago Rabindranath Tagore in his address to the students, "Chhatrader Prati Sambhasan", at Bangiya Sahitya Parisad stated (translated from Bengali):

"In our country, too, we will have to exercise special effort and specially attentive thinking in order not to let our minds be governed by the printed letters of the books, but to be able to dominate over books. We have not yet been able to document a true description of our country. That is why, although we are living in our country, our own country continues to occupy a small place in our realm of knowledge. Knowledge attains a firm basis only when the process of learning leads from near to far, from familiar to unfamiliar. The foundation of our knowledge is bound to be weak if it is mainly built up by encompassing things which do not pervade our surroundings, which are not present before us. The strength for receiving and comprehending something outside our direct observation, something unfamiliar, can only be attained if we at first learn to properly and completely grasp things which are familiar to us..... If we are disconnected with the concrete reality our heart, mind or vision, whatever we value, will turn narrow and perverted".

Elsewhere, Rabindranath has also indicated how colonial rule has seriously disrupted the natural two-way communication between the town and the countryside that prevailed in precolonial India.

I feel that this University has a responsibility of knowing the neighbours of the region in their characteristic environmental contexts from many discipline bases. Such an endeavour will definitely produce

new knowledge and interest in the social sciences and the humanities. It is also likely that the students and researchers in the field of biological and material sciences will benefit by exploring the nature of the environment and the peoples' adaptation to the particular ecological set up.

It is indeed very heartening that the Centre for Himalayan Studies has been organized in this University with a multidisciplinary base. I sincerely hope that a fairly large number of young scholars would be attracted to the programmes of this Centre.

One of the most significant features of contemporary Indian society is an explosion of consciousness from particularistic or local ethnic bases to universal levels. From Kashmir to Kanyakumari, from Gujrat to Nagaland we witness that various ethnic groups and local/regional communities are involved in consciously re-examining and restating their identities. An Angami Naga of Nagaland, for example is involved in defining in what manner he is an Angami, a Naga, a 'tribal' an Indian, a Christian and a member of the modern world. He is not satisfied with a standard definition of 'national mainstream' vis-a- vis the periphery. He would like to define the character of the Indian mainstream in his own manner. Since independence, apart from the powerful impact of universal adult franchise, exponential growth of the number of the educated (matriculates, graduates, postgraduates and professionals) in the rural and mountainous outlying areas has provided the conscious spokesmen for the construction of new identities and for participation in the new nation building process.

It is important for scholars of the University to properly analyse and understand the transformation scenario, particularly in the immediate hinterland of North Bengal, with an objective and humane perspective. Perhaps the emerging nature of socio-economic and cultural interdependence between the people of the hills and of the plains will attract their serious attention. It is through continued involvement in probing and solving such problems that an endogenous thrust for modern

knowledge may be created in a wide range of disciplines in this University.

We may recall here a case from the history of Japan. After the Meiji Restoration in 1867 a number of young Japanese scholars became concerned with relieving their country from earthquake disasters which was one of their very important national problems. With sustained research in this area, Japan developed a major Centre for Earthquake Studies within two decades and their scholars did some path-breaking work in the frontier areas of geophysics. We get a lesson from this example that once the people of a country gain confidence through involvement in solving some critical problem of their life situation, they are able to cross the hump of the legacy of perpetual diffidence and playing the role of being mere receivers of knowledge.

Although I have so far emphasized the route to knowledge from the particular to the universal, it has to be clearly kept in mind that a University is ultimately expected to operate within universal global parameters of discourse. It will lose its central sense of direction if it fails to perpetually nurture among the students, researchers and the teachers a determined bid to preserve the universal domain of studies. There should be formal arrangement for inviting Visiting Fellows and Professors and granting sabbatical leaves to the faculty members for keeping the academic community in continuous touch with the latest developments in various fields of knowledge.

I feel that some of the unresolved issues in administration and in human relation in the regional university systems would be substantially solved if an effective balance is struck between search for social relevance in the pursuit of knowledge through authentic accountability to the regional population and firmly preserving the universal framework for academic discourse and thereby keeping the path of excellence open. The entire University community, including the non-academic staff, must get a feeling that significant socially relevant as well as intrinsically important and devoted pursuit of knowledge are being carried out in

this University.

I congratulate you, the Graduates who would spread out all over the country for various kinds of constructive and creative endeavours on the basis of the specialised training received in this University. I would also expect that you will keep in touch with your alma mater with your growing fresh experience and help to rejuvenate the activities of this University.

Once more I thank you all.

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