

University of North Bengal
27th Annual Convocation,
December 14, 1994.

Speech delivered by Chief Guest Dr. Ashoke Mitra.

1

Mr. Chancellor, Mr. Vice-Chancellor, distinguished guests and assembled friends, I am grateful to the North Bengal University for inviting me to be the Chief Guest for its Annual Convocation this year. My emotions are however somewhat mixed. The Annual Convocation is a special day for the University; it is a special day particularly for those who have passed out and will receive their degree and awards from the University. As everybody knows, the tradition is to call in an elderly individual to give an address on the occasion as Chief Guest. A European writer had once written an insightful novel on man's fate. It is my fate to be trapped by the University for this talk this year, and it would have been socially immoral on my part to run away from the assignment. But a problem remains. I am ~~so~~ ^{deeply} ~~greatly~~ ^{attracted} to the ~~idea~~ ^{idea} of ~~giving~~ ^{giving} ~~an~~ ^{an} ~~address~~ ^{address} at the ~~stock~~ ^{stock} or ~~platitudes~~ ^{platitudes} Convocation addresses are generally responsible for. There is also the problem of separating the wheat of relevance from the chaff of what can be described as academic small talk. A further difficulty is set by the fact that many of the young people who are leaving the university on receiving their degrees and are present here today may now have other things in their mind rather than issues which directly involve this University.

2. At the risk of aggravating their sense of boredom, I have nonetheless decided to talk in the manner of a supernumerary idealist. I would like to discuss what, in my view, should be the principal areas of concern and interest for the academic community such as is constituted by the North Bengal University. An institution such as this is, after all, a continuum. Students

flow in and flow out; a certain degree of turnover also marks the teaching, research and other staff associated with it. But society's demands and aspirations vis-a-vis a university do not become defunct at any point. These urges do get altered or modulated through the seasons; a university, if it is to live up to its name, has to cope with the nuance of these changes. To discuss the agenda for a university is therefore never an irrelevance. And I hope what I have to say over the next half hour or thereabouts will not be regarded as such.

3. A university, let us agree, is an arena where questions relating to the universe, and beyond, are raised. In the ambience of a university, the mind is free to roam and soar. No enquiry is taboo, no subject is beyond the ambit of search, enquiry, exploration, analysis. This is as it should be, for the pursuit of knowledge can have no frontiers. Such is the message conveyed by a university. Discipline is involved in this pursuit, because no quest can be meaningful without the rigour of both thought and praxis. Whether a poet or a mathematician, a nuclear physicist or a philosopher, were he or she to give full expression to his or her creative genius, he or she must agree to be bound by a code of grammar. This grammar attaches as much to the arts as to science and technology. Even if one were determined to circumvent old confines and break new ground in one's sphere of creativity, a code of grammar would still prove immensely useful. It would be useful even for breaching this grammar. A university imparts this discipline. It teaches us how to combine methodology with the untrammelled expanse of both the intellect and the imagination.

4. I know this idealistic description will, in the present season, invite, if not derision, at least an amused sense of disbelief. A university is now hemmed in in its daily perambulations by the harshness of social, political and economic realities. It has to operate within the confines of a monetary and financial framework and worry constantly about funds and resources. It has to cater to the immediate requirements of the community, and it cannot afford to remain unresponsive to regional issues and clamours. Whether we like it or not, a university has therefore to reduce itself these days to a compromise. It has to organise the search for new knowledge; it has to impart the knowledge that is already established. But the knowledge and the learning have to be fitted into the straitjacket of pre-determined courses and syllabi. Not all

subjects hold equal fascination for all universities. In any event, given the limited availability of resources, a university has to pick and choose. True, some universities follow the line of least resistance and cater to a wide number of disciplines and branches of learning. They nonetheless cannot defy the rigidities which survival within a given financial system makes inevitable. The outcome is that they spread their resources thinly over a vast expanse of subjects, so much so that practically all the disciplines suffer.

5. These are the datum of existence of any university, and I dare say, even of the North Bengal university. I will not dwell on them at any length because you are familiar with their texture and tonality. I would rather speculate, something

whimsically, on what I wish the North Bengal university, very nearly perched on the slopes of the great Himalayas, could concentrate upon. Given my very limited acquaintance with the activities of this university, perhaps I would be speaking well out of turn and on themes and issues which are, according to the judgment of most of you, somewhat discordant. Perhaps I would be speaking on matters you are fairly familiar with and have already taken some initiative to meet the challenges they throw up. Even so, I will seek your indulgence to allude to a few areas of study and investigation which I think should be the specific concern of this university and in regard to which this university, I feel confident to suggest, will have something substantive to offer as much to the country as to the rest of the world.

6. Before I proceed further, I have to enter a caveat. The social pressure to duplicate courses pursued in other universities elsewhere the country, or, for that matter, in the other parts of this State itself, is another basic datum. I will not underrate the social necessity of equalising opportunities of higher education, including the opportunities to pursue research in different areas of arts, sciences and technology, for different groups and classes. It is however a question of sorting out priorities. This I say despite my awareness of the persistence of intense regional emotions involving the fulfilment or otherwise of academic aspirations. But perhaps what the region would lose, in the short run, if, on account of the paucity of funds, this university is curtailed.

pursuit of a particular course, would be more than compensated by the phenomenon of its pioneering advanced studies in a number of new directions.

7. I am merely thinking aloud. I would suggest with some deference that the North Bengal University, given its proximity to the north-eastern region, could fruitfully develop a whole field of studies on the history, the geography, the sociology, the economics and bio-diversities of the States known as the Seven Sisters. I am not of course ignorant of the fact that a North-Eastern Regional University very much exists in Shillong, and has been in existence for decades; it should be the natural habitat for the kind of studies I have in mind. But supplementation in this area can do little harm. It is not totally unreasonable to speculate that, given the specific location of the North Bengal University, geographically not too far from the Seven Sisters, and yet not within it, could permit it to import in these studies a sense of detachment, and what is often described as the scientific temper, and all this without shedding a sense of involvement either. The north-eastern States are an integral part of India, but a much-neglected part, and a much-misunderstood part as well. The pride and dignity of ethnicity is an issue which constitutes the centrepiece of human passion; it is also a prime impulse behind the creativity in man. In a different context, we call the latter attribute by the more grandiose composite name of patriotism.

8. I could not be more categorical here. Unless we learn to respect and salute the patriotism embedded in the ethos of the

ethnic groups inhabiting the north-eastern region, we would be unable to cope with the problems which underlie the roots of the problems currently bedevilling the region. Violence-filled tension has been the acutest fact in the north-eastern States for the past several years. We owe it to ourselves to go to the fundamental issues involved. This university should be well-equipped for the task through organizing research work and introducing courses covering the spectrum of the problems.

9. Let me now cross over to a theme which is even closer to home. The North Bengal University, I am aware, has initiated a number of research activities belonging to the genre that has come to be described as Himalayan Studies. Such studies should justifiably place special stress on the problems rearing their head, in and around Darjeeling, related to the weal and welfare of the proud communities -- Nepalis and others -- who are the native citizenry of the district. Here too, deep and complex issues of ethnicity demand attention, and cannot of course be brushed aside. Rather, such issues should be studied both extensively and in depth. As in the case of the north-eastern region, the people of the district of Darjeeling too have their distinct persona. This persona has a history. This history is full of glorious achievements and this deserves recognition as a differentiated history. India is a great tapestry where different cultures, languages and ethnicities are supposed to blend into one another. It does not however often happen that way. Those of us who come from the plains often tend to take things for granted, and to take even people from other cultures

: 7 :

for granted. We also have the tendency to assume that whenever an issue of conflict or a conflict of view arises, it is those arrayed across the fence from us are more responsible for the resulting misunderstanding than we ourselves are. We have, I am afraid, to shed this mental hang-up. Perhaps no attributes serve a human being better than humility. As constituents of the great Indian nation, we have to learn to be humble. It is this humility which will hasten the process of integration, and in the absence of which we will continue to be a nation lagging far behind the point where its creative potential could be realized in full. The North Bengal University could help this national endeavour by discouraging the inhibitions in the choice of academic contributions organised in the sphere.

10. Should not this University aspire even further? Leave out China, our great neighbour in the north, of which we know so little. To set up a full-fledged Centre of Chinese Studies might be beyond the capability of this university given the limited resources it commands. But I would also dearly love to see this University established as a focal point for detailed studies and investigations into hitherto untrodden areas of study concerning our other honoured neighbours, such as Nepal and Bhutan. Socio-political developments of the highest significance have, for instance, taken place in Nepal in very recent times. These developments are bound to propel themselves into a major dynamics. There are several questions Indian citizens, given the experience of their own country, would like to raise the moment Nepal is referred to; they might conceivably even search answers for their national quests from Nepal's history, sociology^{and}

political processes. For example, how is it that in Nepal, where the stratification of social classes is not much different from the realities obtaining in the Indian States of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, and from which she is divided by only a vaguely etched border, has had a political devolution so spectacularly distinct and qualitatively different? Caste alignments have come to dominate the political agenda in the two Indian States I have just mentioned. Despite widespread landlessness, illiteracy and social oppression, the economic classes in the lower echelons are yet unable to articulate themselves; it is the social friction between castes which continues to define the landscape. On the other hand, only fifty or a hundred miles away across in the north, in Nepal, castes have seemingly broken into class and the political coordinates have designed themselves in a manner which bears no resemblance to the nittygritty of southern realities. A university is a place where one observes, studies, analyses, isolates the genuine issues from the ersatz ones, and arrives at conclusions one can rely upon. How much I wish a centre would come up and flourish within the precincts of the North Bengal University where the study of the Nepali language will be accompanied by a wide variety of other related studies, covering facets of the country's diverse problems. Such studies should invigorate the university, and generate large-scale interest in its activities, even outside the country. The studies would, I expect, throw fresh light on Nepal's realities, but would in turn also help us understand better the morphology of the problems emerging in some parts of our own country.

11. Let me now mention another of my pet concerns. We know that the district of Darjeeling, and in fact several other parts of the terai from Himachal Pradesh downwards, have been the victim of severe environmental exploitation over the decades. Mindless deforestation has done havoc to the geography and ecology, not just of Darjeeling but of the proximate areas as well. The northern districts of West Bengal, along with the rest of the State, but perhaps to a greater extent, have been starved of crucial funds for industrial and economic growth. That has been a handicap which has to be got rid of through diverse endeavours. But a more daunting task is to mobilise awareness against the conspiracy to spoil the environmental equilibrium of this excruciatingly beautiful region. Basic research into the problems relating to biodiversities and environmental pollution, research which would combine the pursuit of theoretical constructs with resolution of practical issues, should have a natural habitat in this university. I would hope that the university authorities can impress both the University Grants Commission and the State government on the significance of such a pivotal area of academic activity.

12. But, then, should I forget some of the other characteristics of the hinterland of where the North Bengal University is situated? This hinterland has not just the mountain ranges, but also the plains. Let me repeat what I said a while ago, no two universities need be alike or provide the same menu. Given its natural environment, this university, I would have no hesitation in suggesting, should have courses of

study which have a nexus with horticulture and the plantation industries. Horticulture as an applied science offers its own challenges. While this university does not specialize in agriculture, it should be easy for it to gather a group of scientists and technologists who could form a devoted team and by their contributions spread the message of horticulture as a major economic activity in the neighbourhood. Tea was once one of the perhaps offer an even greater challenge. Tea was once one of the country's largest provider of employment as well as foreign exchange earner. But it is facing problems in recent times. The effective closure of the East European market and developing competition from Sri Lanka and East Africa have created difficulties for the industry, which in turn have a cast shadow on the economic prospects of North Bengal and Assam. This university will not be considered guilty of doing things which do not belong to its sphere if it could develop a vertical chain of regular syllabi and research studies of an integrated nature covering the facets of tea-raising, tea processing and the trading and marketing of the beverage.

13. Would you kindly permit me to stray to a cognate area? The Darjeeling district and the outlying areas have a history of labour mobilization which goes back to the pre-independence days. The exploitation of man by man has in any society acute economic and political implications which have a manifestation of class. Such exploitation also involves problems of aesthetics too. Our sense of symmetry ought to be deeply offended by the spectacle of some human beings suppressing and oppressing some other human

beings. The parallel labour movements have filled to the brim social history of the district of Darjeeling continuously for at least the past half a century. These are, first, the mobilisation of tea garden labour against the outrages perpetrated by unfeeling employers, and, second, the heroic struggle down in the plains launched by share croppers and the landless ones against the depredations unleashed by the propertied classes. This history is replete with magnificent tales of sacrifice on the part of members of the tailing classes and should offer lessons in working class mobilisation from which inspiration can be drawn by successive generations. At this moment, I have ~~making myself~~ ^{asked myself} why this university should not act as a store house of such narrations, which could perhaps also include compendia of oral history contributed by political and social activists who might not have the background of wielding a facile pen.

14. As you can see, I have taken the liberty of this occasion to ramble from theme to theme. Despite the fact that this university has existed for three decades or thereabouts, I still consider it to have not quite emerged out its nascent stage. It is bound to grow; it has to be helped to grow. It has to pick and choose between areas of study and research. All that I have been doing is to indicate some significant directions along which this university might travel, and for which society would feel deeply grateful to it.

15. The other -- and overwhelming -- ground reality will however continue to demand attention from all of us. A university is a seat of learning, a seat of advanced learning, a

and yet we know whatever resources are allotted to it have to be at the expense of allocations elsewhere, including for mass literacy and elementary education. The allotment for higher education could, in certain instances, also actually be at the expense of socially necessary expenditure in such spheres as public health and nutrition programmes. There is always a problem of selecting and discarding in such situations. In a poor country this problem of choice cannot be categorically resolved: what economists call a social preferences function would need to be deployed. A country is poor because it does not possess the resources for development; it does not possess resources adequate for educational development either, and there is constant tussle for obtaining funds for higher education or secondary education or primary education or for women's and children's health programme and so on; the parties engaged in the tussle could be sincerest ~~specists and honest~~ in the norm and yet they may all be clueless about what is the most just allocation between competing demands.

16. This is the problematin which is central to all our debates and discussions. The debates will continue to rage and allocations will always be less than optimum from the point of view of a or b or c or whoever is around with a cause to pursue. All I would, with humility, suggest to the students who are passing out today and students who will continue to pass through Lhn portals of this university is that while they might feel ~~greatly~~ dissatisfied with what this university has been able to ~~provide~~ to them, there are millions and millions of hapless

children in this country who are infinitely less fortunate than they themselves are, and for whom society is able to provide nothing at all. Perhaps this dichotomy is in a way the gravest problem the Indian polity will have to face and try to resolve through the next few decades. The issues in fact are growing complex with every day. Even the cultural and moral ambience is now rudely disturbed. Thanks to liberalisation, our younger generations are bewitched by the dazzle of a consumerist world that is being endlessly mirrored to them. But being a poor nation, we are not in a position to cater across-the-board to such consumerist desires. Only a minority in the community can enjoy the good things of life advertised through satellite television channels; the rest of the countrymen are beyond its pale. What has emerged therefore is a two-track nation, just as we have a two-or-multiple-track educational apparatus. Can such an arrangement last? Or will such an arrangement have only a fitful marginal existence, that is to say, will it be riven by continuous social tension? And can we extricate our universities from the orbit of this tension? The task would, on the face of it, seem to be inordinately difficult.

17. Therefore the residue of what I have to say to our students assembled in the gathering and also to the faculty is straightforward. We are dissatisfied with the resources that are made available to us, but perhaps things could be much worse, things could yet turn to be much worse, give or take a certain interval of time. To face a very grave, tricky situation that might yet emerge, we would need intense toughness of the mind and a strong moral fabric. A nation can survive if it is without

visible material means and resources, as long as it can still
marshall this moral strength. We go to a university in the hope
that it will help us to recharge our intellectual battery and
induct us into a moral climate; you need honesty for intellectual
pursuits such as a university specialises in; nothing could be
more dangerous than false physics or dubious economic analysis.

18. I beg your forgiveness if you think that I have little
business to end this peroration with a homily of this kind. I am
very much a part of the system responsible for the milieu which
shapes and encircles us; if I have talked impertinently, it is
because I cannot escape the burden of a guilty conscience.

I thank you.