

# UNIVERSITY OF NORTH BENGAL



## THIRTY-FIFTH ANNUAL CONVOCATION

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*Respected Chancellor, North Bengal University, Hon'ble Shri Viren J. Shah, Respected Vice-Chancellor, Professor Pijushkanti Saha, Respected Members of the Court and Executive Council, North Bengal University, successful recipients of doctoral and postgraduate diplomas in various faculties, and other distinguished members of the audience,*

I feel deeply honoured by being invited as the Chief Guest of your Convocation and having given the opportunity to address you from this rostrum. This is an occasion of celebration for the University, as it marks the culmination of the year-round activities of the University, consisting of the cycle of teaching, examining, and publication of results. Regularly held convocations also indicate the environment of normalcy that is prevailing in a university, send out the signal that the University is moving towards development and progress without any serious disruption or dislocation of its normal routine. I congratulate the University community and the Vice-Chancellor for maintaining this environment that is conducive and richly supportive to normal academic pursuit.

I congratulate all recipients of various degrees, diplomas, distinctions, medals and honours, some of whom have made rich contributions to society and to uncharted areas of knowledge, and others who have achieved success in the examinations of the University. For some, this Convocation is an acknowledgement for the work they have done. For many others, it again is a ground for taking off to new horizons of knowledge, and often beyond. The whole congregation here makes a highly valuable academic and human space, one such in which the honour and excellence of the nation is located, its future achievements planned. It is, to my mind, a much more precious space for us than, say, a battlefield, a temple, masjid or church of any sort. I would happily barter away a place of religious worship if I were given an institution of learning in exchange.

During the last decade, it has been customary for speakers in convocations to dwell on in some detail the economic crisis that has been plaguing the universities. Almost all the regional and national conferences of the Vice-Chancellors have also addressed this issue consistently. One cannot ignore the value of these deliberations, and one could say that the very philosophy of education administration has undergone a radical change in the process. I however will not deal with the same theme in my address today, chiefly for two reasons. One, I think there are much more competent persons than myself who can treat the issue better, and two, I have something else in mind, a thought about our teaching-learning process which I want to share with you today.

I will start with a basic question. When I use the phrase 'basic question', I mean a question that asks 'why'. As you all know, many ways of questioning are available in every language, developed or not so developed. In one category, there are the so-called 'yes-no' questions, whose answers will be either 'yes' or 'no'. This is not so simple as it sounds. There are one or two such 'yes-no' questions which may land you in an uncomfortable state. If you are asked the question "Have you stopped beating your wife?" you cannot straightaway go for either of the answers, for either will implicate you in some way or other. Pleasantly apart, 'yes-no' questions are not what I am after. I

am more concerned with the 'substantive' questions or interrogations, which in English begin with a so-called WH-word. That is why they are also called 'WH-questions'.

However, all WH-questions do not have the same status if we judge them by their contribution to epistemology. Not all of them carry the same load of information or idea. The 'what'-questions do not, as a rule, carry us to any depth of the matter, unless 'what' stands for something else. Nor does the 'how'-questions. It is indeed the 'why'-questions which should lead us far, if of course, we care to ask them now and again.

It often happens that your history and culture, as they have evolved, do not encourage you to ask the last type of questions. There is an in-built boundary beyond which you cannot question. What-questions are allowed to an extent, so are how-questions, because our education and training have to depend on finding true and effective answers to them. But somehow the third kind of question is seldom allowed to ask. Not at all levels though. At the highest intellectual level, such questions had been asked by a handful of knowledge-seekers. The answers they arrived at may not be what we can always accept now, but their spirit of adventure was something exemplary. But later in the course of history, our search for knowledge was controlled, and to an extent colonized, by various authorities, social, political and religious. It is they who decided how much we should know about the life and the world. For hundreds of years, our society has been organized in vertical layers of caste. While the so-called lower castes were allowed to have answers to 'what' and 'how' questions in a limited area, where the so-called upper castes would not enter, the former were kept out of bounds of the 'why'-questions. I mean the real 'why' questions. There were many readymade answers to some whys. If some person or groups asked, 'Why are we so lowly placed in society so that those above us jealously exercise the 'right' to deprive or oppress us?' The answer usually was : 'You are fated that way, or God in Heaven ordained it that way'. Had someone the extreme temerity to ask the next question : 'Why can't we change our 'fate'? Pat came the blatant reply : 'You simply cannot, that is why'. And the reply was in most cases accompanied by various acts of torture and repression. Older types feudalism yielded place to the industrial colonialism in the country, and the latter blended itself nicely with this ancient hierarchy of power and control and those who had remained at the lower rungs of the social ladder, remained where they were, with marginal variations here and there. That is why education, by which I mean literate education, remained an unachieved goal for the majority of people of the country, and in 1901, the percentage of literate people in the country was a meagre 5.35. The universities had been in the scene for more than forty years then, but you can well imagine the miniscule presence of degree holders in that literacy figure.

Now that the figure is somewhat more respectable, i.e., 64% or so, we cannot yet claim that persons that have received higher education constitute a significant part of it. I quote this figures, because I deeply feel that although we are surrounded by thousands of people receiving higher education, and the Indian higher education system is arguably the largest in the world, we have not succeeded in attracting more than 6 or 7 percent of our youth of college-going age in the area of higher education. All of us here, therefore, occupy a very privileged space in the context of the structure of our society. That, in its turn, places a kind of responsibility on each of us, about which we are not always aware.



And awareness, my friends, is always a result of intensive questioning. Questioning others, questioning our own selves. Questioning not only in terms of 'what' and 'how', but also questioning 'why'. And this is what we have been conditioned to refrain from doing for ages. A social structure that maintain strict hierarchy of power and control, and determines thereby the functioning of each class and caste, cannot accommodate too much of such questioning. The imperial powers also found such a society quite friendly to their designs and attempted to further its continuance. However, in spite of their intentions, the doors of higher education was thrown open with the establishment of colleges and universities in the nineteenth century, and some of the very first students of the system began to ask some uncomfortable questions relating to 'why' of the things and situations. These students are called the 'Young Bengal', as you all know the batch which studied in Hindu College during the late twenties of the nineteenth century.

When I look back, I find that it is not the new higher education alone that lead them to questioning as an emancipating exercise. There have been batches earlier in the College, as there were those later, marked rather by a conspicuous lack of questioning. As I figure it now, there was nothing in the system itself that supported or encouraged questioning. The person, a very young teacher named Henry Luis Vivian Derozio, who initiated his students to such vigorous kind of questioning, could not fit with ease in the system. He was called a heretic by the people who mattered, and driven out of the College in a few months. But the seeds of discontent were sown in the young minds, and out of these students emerged a group which set directions for a new society in the country. I am not undermining the contributions of Raja Rammohun Roy and other stalwarts of the nineteenth century resurgence, but it can be shown that he also had gotten his 'education' outside the 'system'. A system of course is never a monolithic and solid structure it is thought to be, and has areas where subversion can take place. Still, by and large, an education system as we have built up, in the model of our own time-old social structure, leaves little room for probing questions.

That is why I still find that questions are seldom encouraged in our classroom transactions. The usual practice is that the teacher should lecture, with or without a chalk in hand, for the stipulated period of the class-hour. The students will diligently take down notes with their heads bent, and that was that. In our younger days, questions asked by a student in the classroom were regarded as acts of high impertinence. Later, when I became a teacher and an educational administrator, my students told me that there were some teachers who threatened them if they asked questions in the classroom. Sentences like 'So you've become precocious, have you?' Or, 'Remember, I am the one who will score your answer-scripts'. That indicates that there still is a power-and-authority structure in our classrooms in which teacher and students find themselves and neither of the parties is too keen to break it. The organization of the society is reflected in the classroom and none dare to question its permanence.

I know I am simplifying the picture. Things began to change since the seventies of the last century, with the students, most of them of urban origin, trying to build up a space from where they could question the whole system. There were similar upheavals, although not as violent ones, among the student population in France and the USA in the earlier decade, and many an edifice of old habits and customs began to crumble. Although that did not lead to a complete restructuring of societal positions, things have been no longer the same.

In our country, the kind of revolt that was witnessed among the students has not resulted in the reshaping of the education system. There are two major factors that stood in the way. In this country, progress does not move along a linear path at all levels of our social existence. The cities move faster than the villages, and there are areas where movement is almost imperceptible. Another aspect that shows itself in history is that after every upsurge there is a 'withdrawal syndrome' in which we embrace the earlier practices with double enthusiasm. Questioning and rebellion make us feel guilty, and we rush to compensate the indiscretions by vengefully grabbing back what we had discarded.

Even when teachers are ready to accommodate questioning, I find students are not ready for it. Many of the teachers like me will share the experience that if you invite questions from the students, only one or two will respond with some zeal, while the rest will remain silent, trying to hide their smiles of embarrassment. Most of them find it quite unusual, far out of the range of the normal classroom behaviour of the student, to ask questions to the teacher. Not just the 'why'-questions, but the apparently simpler 'what'-and 'how'-questions. It is because in their families they have been raised on a 'no-question-to-be-asked-to-the-elder' ethos, obedience being a prime virtue in our societal norms. What we do not practice in our family we cannot be expected to learn and adopt in a classroom, where the environment and the dramatis personae are not of the familiar kind, at least for a while. But even if the teachers are supportive and encouraging, the majority of the students, in the course of their whole student career, lead a kind of questionless, even non-verbal existence in the classroom, as if the roles in the classroom were something fixed and permanent. It was the teacher who was destined to talk and teach, and it was the student who must take everything in or down silently. And the two would leave the classrooms that way, fully satisfied that they have played their roles out according to the time-honoured scenario. The power relations in the classroom remain fully protected and unharmed. Knowledge of course is power, and the teacher is much more powerful than the students by its possession. But he also has been endowed with some more power by the society itself, by which he can dominate the classroom.

I have little against this dominant role of the teacher. I only want it to adjust itself to the norms of a democratic society and accommodate also the participation of the students in the academic exchange that takes place in the classroom. As you all know, it can hardly be called an 'exchange' in the strict sense of the term. As Paulo Freire has put it, the teacher thinks of his students as passive 'banks' or stores, in which he deposits fragments of knowledge. There is no dialogue between the two so that students can spell out what they need, and the teacher can cater to the individual and class needs accordingly. In a country where a classroom has to sit more than one hundred students, such exchanges sound impossible. And therefore the tradition goes on, with our majority of students remaining speechless participants in the whole process. The lack of the courage or opportunity of articulation results in the lack of the growth of free and independent thinking in them. When they articulate at all, for example when they write answers in their answer-scripts, they write what others have thought and said, not what they have thought and decided.

Silence may be golden in some occasions, but that does not any longer hold for the students in the classroom. They must raise their hands, stand up and speak out their mind when they fail to follow a point the teacher makes. They must seek clarification, elaboration and more information from the teacher, and the teacher is honour-bound to provide them. I remember what happened in the

very first day of my class in the foreign university where I went for higher studies. A famous teacher came and started teaching. I was in complete awe while listening to this internationally famous teacher and was trying to sink in whatever was being said, without fully grasping its import. Suddenly a hand was raised. The teacher stopped, yielding turn to the student for speaking. The student stood up and declared, 'I'm going to ask a dumb question'. The teacher smiled and said, 'Oh sure, I'm paid answering your questions, dumb or bright'.

This is the only point I wanted to make in this lecture of mine. Grow a culture of questioning and answering in our classrooms and beyond. The growth of such a culture should need active involvement of both the teacher and the students. The teacher, being the more powerful of the sides in more sense than one, perhaps needs to encourage the student more by making the first moves. And the majority of students must break their cocoon of silence. They should start the celebration of questioning right away. Ask away all kinds of questions, my dear friends : the 'what', the 'how' and the 'why' questions.

You can begin by asking the 'why' of my statements in this lecture itself.

I wish a very bright future for the fresh batch of postgraduate diploma holders, and I wish the very best for the University of North Bengal.

Thank you.