

**Fourth Convocation held on January 4, 1969**

**Ramesh Chandra Majumdar\***

Mr. Chancellor, Mr. Vice-Chancellor, Members of the teaching staff, New Graduates - Ladies and Gengtlemen,

I feel greatly honoured by the invitation to address the Annual Convocation of your University this year, the more so as I am a son this soil. I spent my childhood and early life here. I had my schooling in the Zilla School and the Fanindra Deb Institution in Jalpaiguri and my College education at the Government College in Rajshahi. During the non-cooperation movement, I had the opportunity to work in many villages of North Bengal and to know the people and their conditions intimately. I still remember with great joy my association with the people— honest, sincere and simple folk. What, therefore, comes first and foremost to my mind today is their misery caused by the recent devastating floods. The Tista, which once enriched the plains of this area and added to the prosperity of the people, has now become a river of sorrow. One feels terribly distressed and yet helpless in the midst of this natural calamity. I pray that God may give the people strength to bear it and to rehabilitate themselves and their families.

As early as 1938 Professor Saha visualised the life-giving as well as destructive potential of Indian rivers and urged upon the Government to appoint a River Commission for an organised study of the rivers with a view to taming them and harnessing them for the good of the people. Our Government, it is hoped, will sympathetically consider the suggestion to appoint a Commission which would investigate the causes of the recent floods and chalk out remedial measures. As a long term project, the possibility of establishing a River Physics Laboratory in this area could be explored with the object of evolving methods of flood control and introducing measures for the improvement of irrigation and power supply facilities.

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This University is located on an enviable site. In the background stand the majestic Himalayas and one gets a magnificent view of the Kanchanjunga and its ice-cap of everchanging hues under the influence of the Sun. Not far from here we have the historic forest of Baikunthapur, the temple of Jalpeshwar and the princely city of Cooch Behar which, among other things, motivated Bankimchandra's 'Debichaudhurani' and 'Anandamath'. It is most befitting that the University township has been named after the great usherer of the Modern age of India, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, the prophet of humanity and the "harbinger of the idea of universal humanism". An erudite scholar of Sanskrit and the founder of Bengali prose, Raja Ram Mohan Roy had the vision and courage to introduce English education and western science in India. I do hope that, inspired by the missionary zeal and high idealism of Raja Ram Mohan Roy, the students and teachers of this University will make it a great centre of learning and research, which would come up to highest standards of excellence.

The idea of a University for North Bengal was conceived by the late Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy for the betterment of the social conditions, economy and education of the people of this region which, following the partition, had been virtually cut off from the rest of the country and had been reduced to the hill areas and plains of Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar, West Dinajpur and Malda. Strategically, these areas are immensely important as having Nepal, Bhutan and Sikkim on the north and Pakistan on the south. Proper education of the people of these parts is, therefore, a matter of vital importance not only for them but for the entire country. This University has a special significance in that context. Besides initiating advanced studies and research in the humanities and the sciences, it has to take the lead in synthesising the diversity of cultures, traditions, customs and languages which distinguish this zone. I hope the University will, in due course, create a centre for the studies and development of tribal languages and culture, and a Faculty of social sciences comprising sociology, political science and anthropology. It could profitably undertake comprehensive "areas studies" of the Himalayan region. It would also be a proper home for studies and

research in Himalayan Geology for which an Institute has been recently established under the Ministry of Education.

A distinguished scientist of our country once remarked that if the universities continue to multiply at the present rate, a time will soon come when colleges will be no better than schools and the universities nothing more than dignified colleges. As the University of North Bengal is still very young and has not yet become tradition-bound, it would perhaps be worth while for us to bear in mind the views of distinguished educationists on the objects and functions of a university.

As Sir Maurice Gwyer said, "A university is first and foremost a place of learning, a place where learning is sought for its own sake....for the purpose of extending the boundaries of knowledge. It is a place where young men....may become acquainted with all that is best in human thought, and all the latest advances in knowledge". In the language of our former President, Dr. Radhakrishnan, "A university is essentially a corporation of teachers and students. The kind of education that we provide for our youth is determined overwhelmingly by the kind of men and women we secure as teachers. Magnificent buildings and equipment are no substitutes for the great teacher". A university has thus a dual function, viz., teaching and research, and the effectiveness with which teaching is done depends upon the zeal with which research is conducted. In the combination of teaching and research, learning and discovery, lies the real strength of the universities. It would, therefore, be of paramount importance to attract first-rate teachers who would also be dedicated research workers. The universities must create conditions of service and an atmosphere which would draw the best available talent of the country to the teaching profession and provide adequate facilities to enable them to continuously improve and enrich their knowledge and scholarship. In particular, they have to generate enthusiasm in young teachers to create a climate of sustained hard work, to cultivate a sense of deep commitment to the pursuit of learning and excellence and to develop a close identification with the interests of the students entrusted to their care. While we expect high standards of sense of duty and conduct from teachers, the society and the Government should also be prepared to give them their due—a status

and consideration commensurate with their important position in society as the true builders of the nation. To quote Sir Maurice, "I would ask the question whether the position accorded to teachers in Indian universities is all that it ought to be.....I think that teachers ought to have reasonable security of tenure. They ought to have reasonable salaries .... which would enable them to live a life without domestic care or anxiety and which would give them opportunities for leisure and self-improvement. They ought to have reasonable prospect of career....the status accorded to the teacher is in the last analysis the measure of the standard of a University."

Unfortunately, this basic truth goes unheeded in our country. Teachers in schools and colleges, who are responsible for the bulk of our under-graduate teaching, are not treated with the sympathy and understanding they deserve. They are looked upon as employees who are to teach on certain rates of pay. As a result, we get nothing better than a bazaar commodity called education. This is a serious lacuna for which we are beginning to pay as a nation in terms of unrest and frustration amongst teachers. An important cause for dissatisfaction is the absence of uniform scales of pay and conditions of service for teachers in schools and colleges in different parts of the country. The Government have already accepted the same grade and service conditions for all university teachers of a given category. We earnestly hope that our Government will also soon accept the scales of pay recommended by the Kothari Commission for teachers of schools and colleges.

Let me now turn to the more human side of our academic life. In this context, the current problem of student unrest comes foremost to my mind. This problem has to be faced and solved. It is good that the Government and the University Grants Commission have realised that student unrest is not merely a problem of law and order but it is a symptom which has to be tackled with sympathy and understanding. Conferences of Vice-Chancellors of Universities, State Ministers of Education and Inspector-General of Police have been held under the auspices of the Ministry of Education and the University Grants

Commission to discuss the problem and find a satisfactory solution for it. I wish teachers, who know students much better than many others, were also asked to participate in these discussions. Recently, I attended an International Conference on "University today" at Dubrovnik, Yugoslavia, and it was a pleasure to see the conference attended by rectors, teachers and students from all parts of the world, who discussed all kinds of problems facing Universities. One full day was devoted to the consideration of students' problems and the session was presided over by a student. I was particularly impressed by the friendly atmosphere in which students and dignitaries of universities discussed their problems from one and the same platform. I felt convinced that the participation of students as well as teachers in the affairs of a university, if carefully and wisely planned, would be of great value in revitalising our academic activities.

The phenomenon of world-wide students unrest has been discussed by many eminent people. All of them seem to agree that answer to this problem has to be sought on constructive lines. More scholarships, more books, better transport facilities, subsidised food, medical examination and care, extra-curricular activities, especially games and other amenities, must be provided for students. Serious attention has to be given to such questions as the improvement of curricula and methods of teaching, examination and evaluation. Teacher-students ratio has to be increased to ensure intensive tutorial work and closer personal contacts between teachers and students. As early as 1962, Professor Kothari drew the attention of Vice-Chancellors to these aspects. "It is most important", he said, "that we take urgent and energetic steps to raise the quality and strength of the teaching staff, to make available good books at reasonable prices, within easy reach of our students, and to provide reading seats in libraries and day students' home for a substantial proportion of our students. And in whatever we do, the students must be at the centre of our attention". In this context, I would strongly advocate the formation of a Joint Consultative Committee of teachers and students in each college and university department, and a Central Consultative Committee at the university level. Such committees would deal with the various problems facing

students as well as teachers and thus help remove maladjustments and introduce reforms.

Another important aspect of our university life comes to my mind in this context: I mean the unsatisfactory condition under which our non-academic and subordinate staff are working in many universities and colleges. There hardly exist rules and regulations governing the conditions and tenure of their service. In the university, where we stand for equality, humanism and truth, this state of affairs should not be allowed to continue. Our non-academic staff must be given all opportunities for self improvement. Provision should be made for the education of their children and the care of their health. The whole university community is to be regarded as one family with the Vice-chancellor as its head and any polarisation between teachers, students and administration has to be avoided. A Consultative Committee of the university authorities and the non-academic staff will go a long way towards achieving good will and mutual understanding, and solving many of the problems facing our karmacharies today.

According to many, including the Education Commission, "our present system of education is largely unrelated to the life of the people of the country and there is a wide gulf between its content and purposes and the concerns of national development." Rabindranath voiced this view long ago. "The books we read", he said, "paint no vivid pictures of our homes, extol no ideals of our society. The daily pursuits of our lives find no place in those pages, Education and life can never become one in such circumstances and are bound to remain separated by a barrier. A growing hostility between the two is most often the result. We begin to develop a fundamental dislike and distrust of what we learn at school and college, since we find it contradicted in every details by the conditions of life around us". According to Professor Suniti Kumar Chatterji, our education must not only be "informative" in the sense that it should help develop our character and personality and make us full men and women. The Education Commission emphasised that our education must also be "productive" and should raise the level of prosperity, welfare and security of our nation. This essentially requires a science and technology based education with proper appreciation of

other values of life. In the language of Professor Kothari "We need strong and progressive universities. These not only should be vigorous centres for imparting and advancing knowledge, but should also promote in their members a sense of social responsibility and identification with the community". To attain this objective, something like a revolution in our system of education has to be effected. The success of such a revolution will depend largely on the enthusiasm and zeal with which our young men and women accept the challenge. They should be imbued with a spirit of dedication and service to the society and the nation and this attitude should motivate their education. Inculcation of a spirit of service in the educated youth of our country would help eradicate illiteracy of our millions in no time. After all, the universities cannot afford to live ivory towers. They have to share with the Government the responsibility of mass education. If people cannot come to the universities, the universities have to go to the people. Among other ways of doing this would be organisation of extension lectures on the culture, heritage and history of our great country and also on the broader aspects of science and technology and their contribution to human welfare. Correspondence Courses and Evening Classes will be of immense value in this context.

A few words may not be out of place on the question of the medium of instruction in schools and colleges. I have no doubt that ultimately education will have to be given in the student's mother tongue. About thirty years ago Rabindranath said, "The language of education cannot be divorced from the language of the people." He argued before the Sadler Commission that while English should be skilfully and thoroughly taught as a second language, the chief medium of instruction in schools and colleges should be the mother tongue. Today, no one would refute this argument. However, the change-over from a foreign language to the mother tongue as medium of instruction is bound to take time and has to be carefully planned such that standards do not suffer. In our approach to the problem, we would do well to keep in view the example of the Soviet Union which, at one time, was faced with similar problems but has now been able to secure a happy balance between the languages of the Republics and the Union language not only in the field of education but also in other spheres of life.

If education is to fulfil its role in national development it is of paramount importance that it be given the highest priority in our national planning. In the words of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, "If the universities discharge their duties adequately, then it is well with the nation and the people". The gigantic task of re-organisation of education needs funds and a great deal of thinking on the part of all concerned. Perhaps education will have to be declared a concurrent subject. A policy decision on education has to be taken and a comprehensive and purposeful educational programme has to be chalked out. Implementation of such a programme will be largely the responsibility of the University Grants Commission and this may be an uphill task for the Commission as it is now constituted. To achieve an educational revolution, the Commission may have to be expanded by including in it some more wholtime members who would deal with special areas such as the sciences, the humanities and collegiate education.

The Education Commission has recommended the involvement of students in the management of university affairs. A similar involvement of teachers at all levels would be necessary. This alone, the kind of "collective thinking" envisaged by the Kothari Commission would be comprehensive and effective. Teachers should have the opportunity of participating in the deliberations of the Inter-University Board. There should be a more effective liaison between teachers and the University Grants Commission in taking policy decisions on university education.

To the young men and women who have received degrees and distinctions today I offer my heartiest congratulations. You will "enter upon your careers with well furnished and disciplined minds, able to distinguish the true from the false, not liable to be shaken by gusts and emotions of the moment, but standing firm upon a basis of principle." I trust that by your action and demeanour you will prove yourselves worthy citizens of a great country. I wish you success and prosperity in life.

#### 4.1.69