

University Of North Bengal

NINTH ANNUAL CONVOCATION

Address by :
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30th. April, 1975

Mr. Chancellor, Justice Mitra, members of the University, students, other members of the academic fraternity and guests, allow me to welcome you all most cordially to the Ninth Annual Convocation of the University of North Bengal.

The Annual Convocation is the biggest day of the year in the life of a university. This is when a university ceremonially sends out to the world students and scholars who have successfully completed courses of study and research under its care, while the Chancellor and the Guest-in-Chief, on behalf of the wider society, bless those who are thus married this day to the world. This is also a time for academic stock-taking, for reminding ourselves with a special sense of seriousness of what we have achieved and what we should aim at as a university. In short, the Annual Convocation is a time for thinking of what we are and what we want to be.

We here are a comparatively young university, having just completed but half of a quarter century of our life. These have been unusually troubled years. I need not recount that history during which the campus was rocked by three wars and at least one major political upheaval. Situated as we are in close proximity to three international frontiers, the impact of these events was felt here with special force and severity.

These are well known facts ; and if I state them, this is only to present in proper perspective some of our main problems and the nature of the challenge we have to face in this university.

Thanks to an accumulation of disturbances, our examination programmes were seriously disorganised in course of the last few years. This has resulted in all students, including the good ones, losing a number of extra years for no fault of their own. We are now trying to restore normalcy. How far we shall succeed depends on the co-operation we receive from all, including the students, the teachers, the examiners, the employees and the wider public. Catching up with time is a strenuous exercise. The comfortable but harmful process of sliding back through time has created habits which impede a return to normalcy. These habits have to be overcome, and we should not think in terms of postponing the effort and prolonging the grave inconvenience and worse for future batches of students.

Beyond holding our examinations on time, there is a larger task that awaits us. A great majority of our students get plucked every year. And so it has been this year too. What can we do about it? It will be disgraceful to try to get rid of this problem by a more indulgent allocation of "grace marks" or expedients of that kind. A university is an institution of higher learning. Unless its standards have a certain respectability and some reference to international standards, it does not deserve its name. Therefore, the only way we can solve our problem is through a continuous struggle for raising academic standards, that is, standards of teaching and research.

In the affiliating universities in West Bengal, there is at present an overvaluation of the role of the Controller of Examinations and an undervaluation of the role of the Inspector of Colleges. This is a mistake which needs correction. We decided recently to arrange for a more systematic inspection of our colleges. Some reports are at hand and others are coming in. These should help us form a clearer idea of existing deficiencies. It is already apparent that these shortcomings are very large and we have to make a serious attempt to remedy them. In quite a few colleges the number of classes held in a year is patently insufficient. I do not want to apportion blame. But we should do something about it.

One thing that we need is more funds. But in a country as poor as ours, it is also important to ensure that we make the most of available funds. We have to accept budgetary constraints as part of current reality. The new U. G. C. scales of pay represent a new deal for our college teachers. Not a few of the deficiencies of our colleges can be remedied in large measure by conscientious labour on the part of our teachers and some careful planning.

A certain amount of new thinking is necessary on the role of the university in educational development in backward districts. I dare say we have not given sufficient thought to this subject yet. What is needed is a new strategy of educational development. The jurisdiction of North Bengal University extends over five districts which are educationally and economically backward. We have a special responsibility for the progress of higher education and research in this region. The duty of the university in relation to its affiliated colleges in these districts must extend beyond the policing activity represented by the Inspector of Colleges and the Controller of Examinations. We have

to evolve special methods for helping our colleges in the districts break out of academic stagnation. I am only posing the problem so we can give thought to it in future. The idea of extension services can be adapted and used for educational development in backward districts. A systematic use of extension lectures and districtwise seminars, with college teachers and some university teachers also participating in them, may help to some extent to enliven the academic atmosphere all around.

Some additional funds will be needed to put these ideas into practice. But what is more basically required is a certain conception of the duty of the university in relation to the wider community in matters of higher learning and research. It may be well to introduce at this point one special thought and single it out for particular emphasis. There are many matters in which we can reach the wider world only through the immediate neighbourhood. This is as true of research as it is of charity. Quite often, although not always, it is important that research should be rooted in the immediate environment. This is particularly true of North Bengal.

Let me dwell on this point a little longer. One way in which higher education proves its value is by producing a band of research scholars. Where research is fruitful and also appears to be fruitful, it creates and heightens in the community a taste for and an appreciation of higher education. In order that research may appear to be fruitful, it must have some relation to the perceived needs of the community. Therefore, a strategy for development of higher education must incorporate a special attitude towards research.

It is in the highest degree advantageous to the academic community as well as to national policy makers that we should have carefully planned and interrelated research programmes aiming at a large and reliable stock of knowledge about North Bengal, which, moreover, has a special value as a frontier region. The intermixture of races and social evolution in this region have a distinctiveness all their own. We have not studied these closely enough. North Bengal has had, in many respects, a different history from the rest of the country. But we do not have a complete and systematic account of that history. North Bengal could be a paradise for researchers in Sociology and Anthropology and History; but very little attention has been paid to this possibility as yet. The university has a special role to play here and so has the Government. I take this opportunity to appeal to the Government to come forward and help set up at this

university a Centre of Social Science and Historical Studies. Equally is it necessary to have here a Centre of Life Science Studies, since the flora and fauna and topography of this region need to be more carefully and systematically studied than has been possible till now. With these two Centres properly organised, the University of North Bengal can discover and develop an identity of its own. It is in this way that it can be rooted in its own environment. Only thus can this university give its best to the country and the country get the best out of this university.

Every great institution lives by a purpose. We have to form for ourselves or capture a glimpse of the kind of purpose by which this university might live. For a long time North Bengal lagged behind the rest of the country. The present moment can become a turning point in history. Whether it will depend ultimately on us, that is, on all those who work here in their diverse capacities. It will be a pity if the university fails to lift its vision and respond to the creative possibilities that lie ahead. For better or for worse, man makes his own history. The university can play a leading role in spreading knowledge, which is light as well as power, and in promoting a new renaissance in North Bengal, unavoidably different from the past but fully meaningful in its own context and of great consequence for the future. This is an aim worth living by.

Once this goal is accepted, it will be necessary to match it with a determination and a sense of discipline equal to its practical realisation. This sets the direction in which we have to strive and move in the coming days. Evidently this will be no easy task. There are obstacles on the way and limits to what we can achieve. But we have to try our best. By this shall we be judged.

I appeal to each one of you, and to all those who possibly wanted to join us but could not for one reason or another, to lend us your support in our best endeavours, even if it be by sympathy alone.

To those who have deserved and received awards for academic accomplishments, we assure our very best wishes.

Allow me once again to offer you all our grateful thanks.