

**Twentyfifth Convocation held on February 7, 1992**

**Satyasadhan Chakraborti\***

Mr. Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor, Members of the Court, The Executive Council, Teachers, Students, Officers, Non-teaching Employees of the University and Guests :

I feel greatly honoured by the invitation to deliver the 1991 Convocation Address of the University of North Bengal. This University holds a unique position in the academic map of our State. While some other universities of West Bengal have been set up to share the burden of Calcutta University which grew out of all proportion with the passages of time, this university was planned to have a distinct identity of its own. Its departments of Himalayan Studies and Nepali are unique in the country. Scholars of this university have undertaken intensive researches into the peculiar problems of this region. The topography, the historical antecedent, the linguistic pattern, character have helped this university to draw up a packed agenda for further research. But being far off from the state and national capitals the university had also suffered to a certain extent as the flow of funds had to travel through a long pipeline creating uncertainty in the academic pursuits of the university. If in spite of these difficulties the university has been able to record commendable academic achievements, they speak eloquently of the sincerity and diligence of teachers and students. In my humble capacity I can assure you that your problems will receive the closest attention they deserve from the Education Department and no effort will be spared to maintain a constant dialogue between Calcutta and Raja

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As a person associated intimately with our educational system in various capacities, today I should like to share my thoughts with you on the current educational scene of our nation.

The academic environment of our country is, as it must be, conditioned by the economic forces and the changing pattern of our policy. The colonial system of our education was characterized by two predominant biases. On the one hand the educational system was to be subservient to the commercial interests of the rulers and on the other it would display an elitist character. Only students belonging to an affluent middle class could receive quality education in a few prestigious institutions and the underprivileged would be compelled to drop out of the system.

It was in the fitness of things that an independent India embracing a sovereign, democratic, secular and socialist society as a constitutional obligation should look upon education as a principal agency for social transformation. Indeed the nation's search for self-reliant growth with professed egalitarian bias has given rise to a consensus on the objective of setting up a national democratic, secular and scientific system of education for our country. Such a system of education was visualised as a significant element of the development matrix of our economy. Social scientists and planners emphasized the need to allocate a substantial part of the nation's budget on education which would help the formation of physical and human capital. Massive investment, in human capital was expected to accelerate economic growth of the country. The active participation of the state in extending the educational opportunities among the poorest of the poor would help to inculcate all sections of our people with the

spirit of democracy. However, this development role of education was soon lost sight of and education was considered a social welfare activity. Expenditure on education was delinked from the productive investment of the Government and education was not regarded as an integral part of our plan budget.

The task faced by the Indian educational system in building the nation's economy and in promoting social justice and welfare was more challenging than that confronting the educational planners of the majority of the Third World countries. Ethnic, religious and cultural diversity is a part of Indian life. A balanced regional development that encourages the ethos of each of this bewildering variety of social groups is inextricably linked up with the progress of our educational system. An education system with room for all-round participation is a necessary precondition for universal political involvement essential for a democratic set up.

Unfortunately it is in these two areas, viz-vigorous state participation in the educational programme and a balanced regional development that shortfalls in the achievement of our educational system has been most glaring. In the First Five Year Plan the budgetary allocation of the Union Government to the field of education was 7.92 percent. In the Seventh Five Year Plan it has been reduced to a mere 3.25 percent - one of the lowest in the Third World. Instead of democratising our educational system our policy makers have gone for an overcentralization of our educational set up. Education has been transferred from the State List to the Concurrent List and to strengthen the Centre's grip on the education system, a National Policy of Education has been formulated with a built-in centralised bias. Two aspects of this policy militate against the democratic spirit enshrined in our

constitution. First of all, the governance of educational institutions would leave little space for the participation of students, teachers and other sections of the community. Secondly, private management is sought to be encouraged which would loosen on us all the vices of an elitist, colonial education system - exclusion of weaker section from quality education, commercialization of technical and professional education through capitation fees, winding up of courses for which the current market demand is not substantial.

Such marginalization and overcentralism have created a sense of alienation among a large number of people in different parts of our country. A curriculum designed for the students of Delhi cannot bring forth active participation of people in distant areas which is so essential in a pluralistic society. There has been a massive expansion of the educational opportunities of the country. But not only has it fallen short of the country's requirements but the inequality in the opportunities available has give rise to a sense of deprivation among the vast number of poorer people. It has taken us more than forty years just to make half of our total population literate, not to speak of universal literacy which has been one of the primary goals of our educational system.

Just as centralism of our fiscal and political framework has bred a sense of injustice among our States, a centripetal education system has generated a sense of alienation among a large number of ethnic and religious groups. Social inequities have restricted educational opportunities for the back ward classes, for the weaker sections and for the women. A number of Commissions and Committees have laid bare the weakness of our educational system but their recommendations are yet to be acted upon. We have

opted for a secular society in our constitution in deference to the glorious tradition of united struggle against the World's most powerful imperialist power. The reorganisation of states on a linguistic basis was aimed to fulfil the aspirations of people belonging to different cultures. The secular outlook has not been properly integrated with the content of our education and no attempt has been made to free the academic world of obscurantist ideas and superstitious beliefs. The language policy pursued by the Union Government has given rise to a feeling of disenchantment among the minority linguistic groups who have resented the element of coercion.

What was needed was an equal treatment of different Indian languages to redress the grievances of religious and linguistic minorities. A sense of alienation has led to movements threatening the very fabric of our country. As it always happens with any movement form, a section of the students has been closely involved in separatist and communal movements. Subsequently this lead has been used by many undesirable elements to work for the disintegration of our country.

In West Bengal sustained movements against the pitfalls of our education system have emboldened the state government to experiment with an alternative system that ensures widest participation of all sections of people. The governing bodies of schools and colleges have been democratized making it possible for teachers, students, non-teaching employees and even common people to take an active interest in the educational institutions of their localities which must serve the interests of the society. Statutes of universities have been reframed to guarantee the broadest participation.

The language policy of the state has been aimed at creating a sense of belonging among the largest section of our people. Emphasis on mother tongue even for attaining the highest degree is aimed at acquiring the basic knowledge of a subject which many find it difficult to master through an alien language. At the same time knowledge of English is sought to be strengthened through a more effective language teaching method which would help students to keep themselves abreast of current developments in their respective disciplines all over the world. Two major regional languages, Nepali and Santhali, have been encouraged to help large sections of the two communities to imbibe knowledge through their mother tongue. Nepali is being increasingly used as the language of official work in the Darjeeling Hills, and a collaboration among the State Government, the Hill Council and the North Bengal University can go a long way towards the development of the rich Nepali language.

Mention should be made of the remarkable success achieved by the State in spreading literacy for which the state has received appreciation from the UNESCO. One district has been declared to have attained hundred percent literacy and another seven districts are witnessing hectic programmes towards this goal.

This sort of experiment has produced encouraging results. With the participation of students and common people we have been able to root out the vices of mass copying, campus hooliganism, atrocities on women students. Examinations are being held more or less regularly and the spectre of unemployment has not deterred a majority of our students from taking their examination with utmost seriousness. Students of West Bengal have done remarkably well in many all-India examinations. With

proper motivation and training they are likely to do well also in other competitive examinations. Opening of training courses at the University level to equip our students for competitive examinations is being actively considered.

In spite of such achievements there are some gaps in our education system. In the first place, we have not been able to create enough avenues for vocational and technical education for which demand has been ever growing. Creation of more opportunities of professional and technical education after the H.S. stage would not only reduce the pressure on our conventional education but also ensure the right kind of orientation needed for drawing the students to the field of liberal education. Although we are spending about 28 percent of our State budget on education, finance is proving to be the principal bottleneck in the way of bringing about the desired developments in our education system. We have to take a second look at the financing of our education system and to find out ways to make the richer section pay more for higher education.

One major lacuna in the Indian educational system is the lack of orientation towards manual work. Gandhiji warned us against this bias and gurudev Tagore's experiments at Viswa Bharati were designed to remove this sort of angularity among our educated people. We have done precious little to overcome this attitude which has impaired our national consciousness. The National Social Service Scheme or such voluntary activities as anti-illiteracy drive can instil the right type of feeling into our students.

Coming to the field of university education I must say that the basic task of university teachers and students would be to

dedicate themselves entirely to higher studies and research. This state has done a great job in expanding educational opportunities and it is time to strive for further qualitative improvement. All the avenues need to be explored towards this end. It is necessary for the State to provide the minimal wherewithals to help them carry out this task. No scholar embraces an academic life with the expectation of leading a life of luxury. But an academic must be provided with the basic comforts so that he can pursue his studies without having to worry about the daily needs.

A campus throbbing with vigorous intellectual activity ultimately brings glory to the nation and the world at large. With a revolution of information system, competition in the academic world has been ever-growing and new challenges are being encountered by our scholars. But we must not forget that one of the major goals of our society has been to achieve self-reliance in all fields of activity. Our academic research must conform to the needs of our society. We cannot rest on our past laurels and should make every effort to accelerate the development of our nation. If the academics of this university can fulfil this task, the future of this nation would remain safe in their hands.

I congratulate the scholars who are to receive their degrees and wish them all success in life.

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