

Student politics in the campus – Visva-Bharati in the second decade of the twenty-first century

A university is also known for the quality of students. Here quality does not merely refer to academic prowess, but also how a student conducts himself/herself while discharging his/her role in the community and also outside. To illustrate, a student ceases to be a student if s/he is unable to imbibe values of care, concern, empathy and also learns that *Vidya Dadati Vinayam* (education/learning begets modesty) which also helps build respect to all. In their many creative writings, the great thinkers of humanity focused on this, as they believed, since students are both repositories of values and also act as a transmitter of those values from one generation to another. So, their role is not only critical but also unavoidable.

There is a complaint which is often heard. The lack of facilities is detrimental to the students' endeavour in fulfilling their role as a builder of future society. The charge may not be tenable as history shows. It is a matter of common knowledge that CV Raman, the Nobel laureate accomplished a rare feat while working in Calcutta University with facilities which were peanuts in today's assessment. He himself admitted not in the form of a complaint but just as a piece of information. What is worth-referring is his glowing tribute to his teachers who helped him to explore areas in science which remained untouched. According to him, he earned this rare distinction due to his teachers being so generous in sharing their ideas with him which were major sources of his research on light. The relationship was dialectically construed: Raman's respect created a space in the mind of teachers which was manifested in them being so kind to him whenever he came to them not merely for academic guidance but also otherwise. Respect to each other is a prime socio-cultural value which is now a casualty.

What is also intriguing is the behaviour of a select group of teachers in academia who, forgetting what forms the basic bridge between students and teachers, shamelessly utilize students for their partisan aims. Now, it is also indicative of a wider problem. Since today's students who happily resort to behaviour which is anything but respectful, it does not seem logical to think that they would change them radically to behave differently once they become teachers. As us well-known, socio-culturally bad behaviour quickly attracts pupils who are in their formative stage, which become more or less ingrained in them. I am not suggesting that there is no exception. Basic to my contention is the claim that the overall socio-cultural decadence needs to be taken into account to arrive at a plausible explanation.

Let me elaborate on the point of teachers' involvement in "misguiding" the young minds in the centres of learning. This is a general trend. The so-called teachers consciously undertake these activities to pursue their selfish goals forgetting that not only do they harm the students but also register them as "nuisance makers" in human history. Or, to use Buddhist metaphor, they are Satans who remain integral to history to be permanently abused by humanity for their nefarious roles.

One may argue how to combat them. My answer is that history will take care of these self-proclaimed abusers of human values. In the age of vicious social media, the role of these "accidental" teachers is more vivid than in the past. A casual reading of social media messages confirms that the misguided students circulate those messages written by their "mentors". I make this claim because the deviant students are incapable of articulating meaningful statements. There are proofs which are easily available if the concerned teachers who examine their answer scripts are asked; their capability in communication makes one cry as many colleagues at Visva-Bharati conveyed to me after having interviewed them on many occasions. The mentors who mercilessly utilise them for their narrow objectives never bother to take care of this presumably because once the students are capable of expressing themselves properly, they apprehend that they (teachers) would lose their importance to them. So, they will no longer be as important as they are now. It was a dirty game in which the so-called teachers are involved without realizing that history and future humanity will never forgive them and hold them accountable for socio-cultural decadence of the present.

One must not lose sight of the wider ecosystem in which we all are nurtured. There is no one to look for emotional and moral guidance. There is dearth everywhere. Those who could have had the role are hardly immune from the charges of being partisan and selfish. Hence a globally renowned individual escapes the human wrath since there are cheerleaders to support him despite being involved in activities which are not socially acceptable. Those who feel otherwise or purportedly conceive of the role of whistleblowers are too scared to raise their voice probably for the adverse consequences or even the fear of being liquidated by the self-proclaimed socio-moral custodians of human life.

Telling lies and hurling abuse are longer considered social taboos. The aim is to attain self-fulfilling goals by hook or crook. This is a general principle being assiduously followed from top to bottom barring, of course, a few exceptions, the voice of those is so feeble that it is hardly heard in the public domain on most occasions. In case, the voice is too powerful to be able to disturb the applecart, there are systematic anomie control mechanisms being created for muzzling the voice. Defaming, vilifying and even killing were instantaneously resorted to in case the disturbing voice becomes a cause of serious concerns to those who are targets. Daily newspaper reports provide many examples.

So, the decadence in the centres for learning is not free from the wider milieu of which academia is just a miniscule part. In such circumstances, what is not undesirable is not the growing importance of debilitating human desires. To expect teachers and students (not all though) free from this is tantamount to living in fool's paradise. Nonetheless, as teachers and the taught have the responsibility of building future society, their deviation from their assigned roles since time immemorial attract immediate attention. How to weed out the roots of decadence of the system? The task is easier said than done in view of the deep-rooted nature of the sources that cripple efforts to address the issues conclusively.

In order to meaningfully understand the roots of strikingly visible social wounds on the verge of being transformed into gangrene, we must put forward a conceptual framework. This is nothing new; if the framework is a reiteration of a historically tested set of persuasive modes of thinking. To be precise, I borrow this from the conceptualization of Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi. My yardstick to grasp and judge the nature and sources of revealed decadence is the notion of "politics". In common parlance, it is conceived to be a means to capture power. Here probably one may apply the Kautilyan conceptualization of "*saam, daam, danda and bheda*" rather lovely which means for wresting power one should be restrained by the nature of means since the achievement of ends is of primary importance. One's immediate reaction shall be that it should be rejected since it is contrary to Gandhi's fundamental percept of means being prior to ends. Illustrative here was the withdrawal of Noncooperation Movement as it became violent although he later characterized this decision as 'a Himalayan blunder'. There is another conceptualization of politics which both Tagore and Gandhi along with those who agreed with them, insisted on. Here politics is just an effective means to transform the prevalent power-relationships which means an articulation of a point of view justifying claims against existing socio-cultural division around the axes of caste, religion, class, ethnicity among others. Both Gandhi and the poet attacked the constructed segmentation among human beings. Hence, their principal aim was to do away with the hierarchical existence of human beings. As one who always challenged socio-cultural prejudices segregating human beings, the bard, many of his critical texts scathingly criticized the endeavours towards generating the divisive mindset; so, did Gandhi both in his writings and undertook organized campaigns to abolish such an artificial fissure.

We hardly witness attempts by the students and teachers (with the exception of a few) in pursuing activities towards that goal. Of course, there were deplorable incidents to artificially show sympathy by them to score brownie points. They stooped so low that they did not hesitate to utilize the dead body of one of our dear students simply to fulfil their partisan objectives. Not only did they break the main gate of the residence of the Vice Chancellor, they also would have forced their entry into the residence to perhaps execute their cannibalistic desire. It was not possible by God's grace as they were restrained by the indifferent law-and-order maintenance agent of the state on the direction of the Hon'ble first citizen of the state, viz., the Hon'ble Governor of West Bengal. Otherwise, I don't know whether I would have been alive today to write this missive.

Students are students. So, they have only rights and no duties. This is how the students' role in the campus is conceptualized. Although contrary to the Constitution of India, this has been the pattern with political patronage. As they have only rights and in complicity with the political bosses, they are allowed to do whatever they desire to achieve by deploying means which may not always be justified. If a teacher is proved (by means which may not have been disclosed) to have allegedly abused a student by again allegedly resorting to his/her caste identity, the teacher can easily be gaoled. This is however not the case in case it is reversed, namely if a student abuses a teacher and the proof is available, it usually does not receive the attention of the law maintenance agencies as in the case cited above. Here, ignorance by the agency responsible for maintaining law and order is a license to the so-called students

who are now encouraged to undertake such a feat so often as there is no fear of punishment. This is a clear case of how the system is being for a ride for narrow and partisan gains by a section of the pupil at the cost of others. The implications are disastrous because not only will the system be a refuge of those with muscle power, it will also lose its viability in the long run. Illustrative here is the sudden breakdown of the system in Sri Lanka in the middle of 2022.

One of the serious causes of students ceasing to be students is the unholy alliance between a select group of teachers and also a select group of deviant students. Teachers tend to feel empowered with the support of this select group given their capacity to be destructive. Teachers who make them dance in accordance with their tune feel highly satisfied once the authority is apparently hassled. These teachers however forget the plight of the scientist who was instrumental in creating the imaginative giant, Frankenstein, who finally liquidated the person who brought him to life. The narrative is imaginative although it is established with evidence that history repeats itself.

Teachers have a responsibility to inculcate values in the taught. Instead, if they indulge in activities which are unbecoming of teachers, they are equally responsible for making students deviant. For narrow gains, teachers invariably cross the border and set examples before their students forgetting the fact that it is contrary to their assigned role. In undertaking such activities, not only do they fall in the eyes of the people, they will also help confirm the widely circulated (not always substantiated though) charge that highly-paid teachers instead of performing their principal duties prefer to get involved in acts which are remote from what they are supposed to do.

Visva-Bharati is not just a degree-awarding academic institution, it also epitomizes a philosophy associated with the politico-ideological preferences of an extremely innovative thinker, Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore. Accordingly, the teachers and students have responsibilities to carry on traditions with utmost seriousness. As Visva-Bharati cannot be compared with any of the universities in the country, one must not forget its distinctive socio-cultural features which are integrally linked with this centre of learning. Hence, one must not dismiss the regularly held events as mere rituals; they are intimately connected with the university's profile. Hence, if one avoids participating in these events, it is simply unacceptable. During my tenure as Vice Chancellor, I kept on earnestly requesting Visva-Bharati's stakeholders at regular intervals that it was their responsibility by being its part in any capacity. However, the result was not as satisfactory as I had expected. The reason is not difficult to find.

Let me cite an example. Visva-Bharati holds regular prayers at its *Kanch Mandir* on Wednesday. I am told that except the mandatory presence of students of Patha-Bhavana, attendance of other stakeholders had always been negligible. With my presence in regular prayers, attendance is improved. What is noticeable are the absence of those stakeholders who merely verbally express their emotional attachment with Gurudev's ideational priorities. For them, the poet is just a commodity to be sold at an opportune moment which means that so long as it helps them protect their exclusive interests. If it is

otherwise, the so-called Rabindriks conveniently forget what they vociferously claim as and it is required.

The purpose of the above detailed elaboration is to put across the point that many of the teachers and members of non-teaching staff are in the habit of avoiding participation despite having been earning livelihood from the university. Many of them do not the early morning *Baitalik* (only five in a year) with the reason that it is too early to get-up although if they need to catch an early morning train they happily do that. Now, being guided by teachers many students pursuing higher studies in Visva-Bharati evince the same pattern. What is intriguing is their insistence in protecting Tagore's traditions when they do not have respect for the rituals which he devised to strengthen the bonhomie among those associated with this great seat of learning. After having confronted many untoward situations in the campus, I can vouch that I have learnt newer expletives from our dear students. These expletives were hurled on their teachers. Isn't it unfortunate? Those who justify their activities violate the basic norms guiding Visva-Bharati. Instead of regretting, these so-called students enjoy by demonstrating to the world that they are great experts in abusing their teachers and non-teaching staff rather happily.

Offline and online examination fiasco

It is possible only in Visva-Bharati that we tend to dishonour our commitment at the drop of a hat. The students, teachers and administration sat together and agreed to go for an offline examination in the final semester since teaching was held offline. Since the teaching was not completed on time, it was also decided to hold the offline examination once the teaching of all papers was complete. The dates of examination fixed by the students were also accepted. So, a consensus arrived in regard to the date and also mode of examination. But this was not what the Almighty wanted. Three of the state universities, Vidyasagar University, Kalyani University and Burdwan University decided to go ahead with online examination for reasons best known to them. Now, the self-proclaimed student leaders plunged into action. They offered an argument that since the examination was held online in neighbouring universities, Visva-Bharati should also take online examination.

What a logic! With the support of some disgruntled faculty member, the deviant section of students received extra oxygen. They were thus confident that their demands would soon be met. Barring a few, the majority of the faculty members did not endorse such a whimsical demand since teaching was complete and in order to complete the courses in the syllabi, they also sacrificed their summer break to a significant extent. Still, the students were not persuaded. They wanted online examination as it was advantageous to those who were too scared to take offline examination presumably in view of their lack of preparation or partisan reasons which cannot be disclosed in the puic domain. A comparison of the academic results of examinations held during the pandemic period and those in its aftermath gives us cues to provide a plausible explanation.

How did the drama unfold? On the first day of examinations, teachers and those students willing to sit for the examination went to the examination hall and they were not allowed to get inside the building

because main entry gate was locked presumably by those opposed to offline examination. Despite sustained persuasion, students remained adamant and no examination was held in the campus. The second day of examination was not different because students reluctant to take the examination congregated and locked the entry gate to the buildings where examination halls were located. Teachers and also non-teaching staff kept on persuading the students to take the examination as they committed to sit for the examination and it was scheduled in accordance what they suggested. No logic worked; being adamant for online examination, they refused to take the examination of papers slotted for the second day of the examination. On the third day, there was no deviation from the pattern except that those students who were selected for jobs after campus interview raised their voice against those involved in vandalizing the examination. It worked and many approached the Registrar and Vice Chancellor and expressed their willingness to sit for the examination. The administration endeavoured to help the students but with no avail. By early afternoon, the willing students requested the principal (Dean in other universities) to arrange for examination and they were ready to take the examination. So, examination started in the department of philosophy at about 5 pm followed by Oriya department which began its examination at 7 in the evening. The surprise was still awaited. At about 9 pm, the Vice-Chancellor was approached by the one of the principals of a department located in Sriniketan whether the department would be allowed to hold the examination after 10 pm. The administration endorsed the decision if the students were willing to take the examination the. Students agreed. So, the examination started at 11 pm. It was an unprecedented event because it is not known whether examination started so late and ended next day. It so happened that since the duration of the examination was three hours, it was over at 2 am. The administration took ample care of safely sending each of the examinee home in the wee hours of night. With help from the security staff, transport and those involved in conducting the examination, the examination was conducted to everybody's satisfaction. The Vice-Chancellor and his colleagues returned to their residence at about 3 pm and later.

The story is not however complete. Since on the very next day, a message was circulated in social media by hurling abuse to the Vice-Chancellor for holding the examination so late when it was done in response to students' requests. It is a wonder to me whether these deviant students did undertake such a feat on their own or by being instigated by the disgruntled faculty members! No investigation will take us to a satisfactory answer to this query. But the adult students cannot be absolved of their responsibility since they take university as a platform to pursue their political goals, and they therefore sharpen their skills as apprentices with guidance from their political bosses.

For most of the students, university is a place of learning; for the faculty members, it is also a place of learning and earning livelihood; for the non-teaching staff members, it is a place for earning livelihood and also for building inter-personal relationships. There were miscreants in each of the above three sections within the university and they are generally sources of nuisance in the campus. The authority has the administrative tools to bring them back to rails which are applied under exceptional circumstances. No authority prefers to adopt unpleasant steps; once the administration is pushed to the

wall, deployment of corrective steps is perhaps the only option. On occasions, the administration is constrained to go ahead in view of the invisible hands of big brother although the decisions are taken by following the due process of law.

As a centre of learning, Visva-Bharati is both good and bad: good because this is a rare academic institution which is endowed with a philosophy of life that its founder, the Nobel laureate, Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore developed. So, by being part of this great academic centre, we automatically become a part of a great heritage. Unlike other universities in the country or elsewhere where one is required to contribute to the building of a heritage, we, as parts of Visva-Bharati, inherit the legacy and its rich tradition. There is nothing so bad about the university except that there is a miniscule group who tend to disturb the balance at the slightest pretext. They probably forget that if the university grows everybody shall be benefitted and if it is otherwise nobody gains. By being totally non-sensitive to this aspect they seem to forget that it is *hara-kiri* for them and also for the university.

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