

***Visva-Bharati's well-being: Missive from Vice Chancellor's table:  
1<sup>st</sup> March, 2023***

The dwindling of Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan as a centre of learning is unabated. Responsible are stakeholders, former Vice Chancellors, students, teachers, non-teaching staff and also the so-called Rabindriks and Ashramiks who have been there to extract a pound of flesh in exchange of nothing. The people of the town, Bolpur do not seem the less accountable. For then, Visva-Bharati is that proverbial goose that lays golden eggs; they are interested in their share but decline to take care and contribute to the well-being of the goose that has resulted in its slow but steady incapability of what she is naturally supposed to. Unfortunately, nobody seems to have bothered so much about her health which is now visible in the overall deterioration of the university both as a centre of higher learning and also a centre of excellence in areas for which it is globally reputed. Hence, Visva-Bharati does not have many students from abroad; most of our foreign students are from Bangladesh. This is a rough index of Visva-Bharati's inability to attract students from other countries. Perhaps coincidentally, the same is true to the faculties; instead of being a place for the world (*Visva*), it has unfortunately ceased to become one. Since 2018, in the new dispensation, a concerted attempt has been made to make Visva-Bharati Visva-Bharati which means that effort has been undertaken to get faculty from all over the country and also from foreign countries. Hopefully, the results will be visible in a few years.

There is a common feeling that Visva-Bharati is no longer the university as it was in the past. The charge does not seem to be unfounded because it has gone down in the national ranking and students from this university appear to have been less marketable in the job market barring some departments. Despite the decline is visible, there is hardly a conclusive diagnosis of the ailments weakening if not slowly killing this great seat of learning founded by one of the illustrious sons of Mother India, Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore. In the following paragraphs, an attempt shall be made to identify some of the major causes of the steady decline of this university which is associated with great social reformers of human civilization:

- 1) Forgetfulness of those who are stakeholders: there is a general tendency among stakeholders to obviously feel proud of drawing on the Tagore legacy. In local parlance, the group is known as Rabindriks. This does not seem unfair provided the so-called Rabindriks take ample care to protect the university from being derailed from the core ethos of Tagore's philosophy of care, concern, compassion and empathy for the institution and also those disprivileged sections who always remained one of the principal areas of the bard's attention. A cursory look of the gradual decline of the institution reveals that there are areas where the stakeholders failed miserably to address the root causes of the ailments. It is easy to simply suggest that the university needs care; but it is terribly difficult to offer appropriate steps to weed out the difficulties impairing its natural unfolding; neither, it is an easy task, nor it is doable soon since the roots of the problems are so well-entrenched and viciously coiled the institution like a blood-sucking creature. Nonetheless, the difficulties do not seem to be insurmountable because with genuine concerns for the poet and the "vessel of his thinking", they can be conclusively addressed and permanently done away with. For this task, one is not required to be a master, but just a sincere human

being willing to hold the bull by its horn. Honest and bold individuals with a commitment to the fundamental values of being a "true" Rabindrik will suffice. It is true, Gurudev Tagore also confronted difficulties when he devoted wholeheartedly to build this world-class institution in a remote area of the British Empire, in a discreet village of West Bengal which was hardly known to the outside world. Nonetheless, it did not deter the poet and he succeeded in creating Visva-Bharati in rather adverse politico-ideological circumstances.

2) The sources of the ailments: as mentioned above, it is not an easy task for two specific reasons: on the one hand, identification of the root causes of Visva-Bharati's decline involves mentioning those reasons which may not be palatable to many of the stakeholders. The charge that classes in the university were never accepted by the teachers as their prime duty does not seem to be overstretched. And, also, the comment that there are many students who do not appear to have internalized the core ideas of Tagore's politico-ideological priorities does not appear to be hollow. The accusation that the non-teaching staff of the university also had a role in its deterioration is not without substance. These are all bitter truths which will certainly raise eyebrows since none of the above statements can easily be dismissed. What is the way out. There is no magic wand at the disposal of the university authorities nor do they possess the magic lamp of Aladdin. Unless one is morally committed to the role one is supposed to play, the task shall always remain elusive. No coercive measure or the deployment of Danda (stern methods) shall help attain the goal. Most important is to imbibe the core concerns of being a teacher or students. Teachers are to take classes and take the full responsibility for guiding their pupils in accordance with the values of Tagore which he held to translate into reality his ideational vision. Similarly, students should also follow the code of conduct which is propitious for the growth of the university as a centre of excellence.

a) The responsibility of non-teaching staff: the time is bad for the teachers since they have to depend on the university bureaucrats to sort out many issues regarding the department which also includes those of the students as well. For the office, a feeling has emerged in Visva-Bharati and other universities that they are indispensable for the difficulties confronting the university. The other stakeholder, Rabindriks and Ashramites have also to discharge their roles in accordance with what they are expected to do being what they claim. There are many in these categories who genuinely uphold the attributes of being Rabindriks and Ashramites although they are less visible than those who always publicly declare their identities of being so. The genuine Rabindriks and Ashramites remained hidden although they silently performed what they should do to sustain the reputation of this university which also represents a unique philosophy of mankind. For them, Visva-Bharati is not just a award giving institution, it is, simultaneously, a specific stream of philosophy that always privileges universal humanism.

b) Visva-Bharati is one of those few academic institutions that has many first generation learners who belong to families who are unable to meet two ends so comfortably. In fact, this was Tagore's mission: he strongly believed that education was perhaps one of the most effective antidotes against superstition and age-old archaic values besides being an instrument for providing knowledge and also the required intellectual acumen and technical skills. The social composition of

students does not appear to have changed much although their concerns for morality appear to be less impressive in comparison with their predecessors in the past. Why is it so? An easy answer to this question is linked with the overall socio-cultural and moral decadence of the template designing and guiding human behaviour. There are deterioration in every walks of human life: be it academia, arts and esthetics, literature, politics, or any other aspects of human creativity. The trend is global; despite having severely hurt humanity during the last World War in the last century, the global powers remain insensitive to their moral commitment to humanity. This is reflected in our youths who will be our future leaders. For such a rather disappointing scene, the students should not be blamed; equally responsible are families, political leaders, teachers and those who are entrusted with the responsibility of carving out a new narrative for India and humanity in general.

The above argument is not without substance. Since a child learns socio-cultural practices first from the family and later once s/he goes to school and colleges or any other academic institution, s/he also imbibes modes of behaviour apart from what s/he has already internalized from the family. It is unfortunate that there are many lapses in these stages which are required to weeded out soon before they become vicious. It is equally unfortunate that academic institutions does not seem to be different in their perceptions since the teachers do not generally exercise their role "Gurus". Here, Tagore's views are most pertinent. In a letter to his friend on 12 November, 1902, he attributed the behavioural deviation of the learners due to the fact that education failed to act as a propellor of appropriate values and mores contributing to humanity in general. Teachers focus on teaching a particular part of the syllabus and are thus reduced to being purely "instructor"; they are not willing or are reluctant to go beyond classroom teaching as this becomes a part of their well-entrenched habitual practices. So, where do the students learn from? They are deprived of value of education which Tagore always espoused. The result is obvious. In their interaction (if not altercation) with teachers, they hardly draw a line between "proper" and "improper" behaviour. What is worse are the roles of many so-called teachers who cannot be absolved of their responsibilities since they happily contribute to worsening the situation by instigating them to do what they should not do as learners. So, the outcomes are disastrous because of this venomous combination. What is most appalling is also to underline that neither the students nor their mentors repent of what they frequently do, but by justifying their joint effort for fulfilling their "unjustified" demands, they do not allow the students to learn what is absolutely condemnable. This is the tragedy of what the deviants enjoy doing by indulging in activities which are not, at all, behaviourally appropriate but also unbecoming of both teachers and students.

C) unless the non-teaching staff of the university take ample care of universities' bureaucratic responsibilities, teachers and students are unable to discharge their role as responsible citizens. It was a common practice for a significant section of

the non-teaching staff to not be sincere to their assigned work although they were interested in working beyond the office time to avail overtime allowances. I was under the impression that the assigned work was so much that they needed overtime. I was soon disillusioned and discovered that since they were busy with other works outside the office, their assigned task always remained incomplete which necessitated overtime to finish the work and this slowed them to earn extra money on top of their monthly salary. As soon as I realized that overtime was not required if the assigned work received as much attention as was desirable. An apparently "unpleasant" decision from the point of view of the interacting staff had to be taken to stop a long-drawn unethical practice. We saved misappropriation of public funds by adopting such a step which immediately provoked many of the non-teaching staff to try to organize a campaign against the authority for having deprived them of an extra amount of money which was, of course, not ethically-procured.

Similarly, the claim of Leave Travel Concession (LTC) was made by many illegally in the sense that they received money on account of travelling by taking leave from the university without having undertaken the journey. The audit team brought this mal-practice in which our colleagues were engaged in which was immediately addressed by the University authority by recovering the amount of money with interests. It was also a source of consternation among the non-teaching staff. What is most disappointing to me is that none of my predecessors did not pay attention to this aspect although they were aware of this. It means that I had to swallow the bitter pill since they did not attempt to do away with these mal-practices which reinforces the point that they became part of Visva-Bharati's culture.

D) student and/or hooligans or goons: this is a matter of pain to me that I had to begin this subsection with the above title. Before I elaborate what I consider appropriate for the point, let me qualify the discussion by emphasizing that my purpose is to pinpoint those individuals who are goons in garb of students. Unfortunately, the centres of learning, especially in West Bengal, have considerably been plagued by many of these mortal beings who, with support from a selective group of political bosses, stoop so low that every sensible human being felt betrayed since education is always a privileged means for nation building. Instances abound. This is not uncommon to hear about the miserable emotional suffering and physical agony of many teachers, principals and even Vice Chancellors. The academic administrators are there to absorb the pain because they opted for this job. I shall however focus on my personal experiences as Visva-Bharati's Vice Chancellor or *Kulpati* since the beginning of my stint. Before I dwell on specific instances, I would like to preface the discussion with my teacher's warning of being thick-skinned if I accepted the offer. I did not perfectly decode the meaning of his statement although he served as a Vice Chancellor for two terms in a state university in West Bengal.

Soon I realized when I was subject to abuse with chosen expletives by a section of disgruntled students and non-teaching staff. I must add here that unless they were instigated equally by a section of teachers (who are behaviourally goons and by their deeds leave no doubt if they are characterized thus), the number of these deviant students would have considerably dwindled. By following the instructions of their equally deviant mentors, what these misguided students-cum-goons was to put a lock on the entry and exit doors to put the Vice Chancellor in captivity unless their illegal demands were met or the Vice Chancellor resigned. It was a bad joke when they insisted on the resignation of the Vice Chancellor because these individuals seem unaware that a central university Vice Chancellor is appointed by the President of India although when they demand my resignation, they imply that since they appointed me, they are authorized to demand my resignation. What stupidity! It is, of course, the fact that many of Visva-Bharati's former Vice were unable to complete their term of five years as they resigned before their term came to an end as they preferred peace and decided to leave Visva-Bharati. Perhaps this was their source of such audacity and were confident that if they succeeded in disturbing my mental peace I would have run away. Here, they were mistaken because for me, it was a mission to purge Visva-Bharati of evil forces and hooligans who were surviving here in the campus as students. It's a matter of great disgrace that they shamelessly lie to defend what is indefensible. One of the students seeking to pursue education in Visva-Bharati abused the Vice Chancellor by hitting him below the belt. Interestingly, the same student lodged a complaint to the local police station with the allegation of being abused by a teacher of Visva-Bharati who was reported to have called names to the students which was a source of his insult. The police immediately accepted the complaint and undertook an investigation. In the process, the teacher was incarcerated for two weeks. The jail sentence appears to have been justified had the crime been committed. The case is being pursued in the court of law. I was very happy since the concerned student raised his voice against abuse of an apparently serious nature. I was surprised that this concern did not dawn on him when he hit the Vice Chancellor below the belt. This is unfortunate since these deviant students also claim themselves to be Rabindriks which means that the meaning of being Rabindriks differ in accordance with individual priorities. Is this logical by any yardstick? Those who fail to internalize the core values of Rabindranath Tagore's philosophy do not have moral rights to be part of Visva-Bharati. Furthermore, the same student completed the three year degree course in five years which also demonstrates the intellectual abilities and also the willingness to take academics seriously. He was also registered for a certificate course in Italian language which also remains incomplete. These examples are referred to just to prove that his priorities seem to be anything but academic.

E) Misconception regarding *Poush Mela* not being held in the campus of Visva-Bharati: this is a matter of pain for everybody associated with Visva-Bharati. Yet, Visva-Bharati did not have courage to go ahead with the holding of the Mela which is exclusively the responsibility of Santiniketan Trust comprising two trustees at this point of time since the incumbent Vice Chancellor is not a trustee for reasons known to the two existing Trustees. Nonetheless, Visva-Bharati took the challenge of organizing such a big Mela with the help of the hon'ble Chancellor, the hon'ble Prime Minister, Sri Narendra Modi and also the Ministry of Education, Government of India. Due to the Covid pandemic, it was not possible for the university to go ahead with the organization of the Mela. In 2022, Visva-Bharati was keen to organize Mela and accordingly the Ministry of Education was requested for financial and other help that were extended in 2019. The Ministry declined with the instruction that the State Government be approached for support. On this instruction, state Chief Secretary was approached in June, 2022; no reply was received.

Now, an explanation is in order to clearly state why it was not possible for Visva-Bharati to go ahead with the organization of this historically-renowned event. We were very enthusiastic in going ahead with holding the Mela by being respectful to the instructions of National Green Tribunal (NGT) and other agencies for protecting our ecosystem. One of the most disappointing outcomes of our sincerity was rewarded by the state police by lodging FIR against the Vice Chancellor and many of his colleagues who took part in dismantling the Mela after four days as per the NGT's direction. Furthermore, none of the shop owners participated in cleaning the Mela ground although they made profit by selling their products in the Mela. The NGT imposed a fine of Rs. 25 lakh, the State Pollution Board asked Visva-Bharati to pay a fine of 10 lakh, and we spent Rs. 5 lakh for bringing the Mela ground to its original position.

There was Public Interest Litigation in High Court of Calcutta by a hotel owner, with the prayer that Visva-Bharati be asked to hold the Mela in the Mela ground within the campus. The Division Bench of hon'ble High Court of Calcutta, headed by the hon'ble Chief Justice of Calcutta High Court, Justice Prakash Srivastava. In its judgment of 6 December, 2022, the Division Bench, the hon'ble judges endorsed the views of Visva-Bharati and confirmed that with the non-cooperation of the local administration, especially the law-enforcement agency (police), it was not possible for the university to undertake such a gigantic exercise. Those who would like to be acquainted with the argument of the Division Bench are requested to go through the judgment which is available on the website of the High Court of Calcutta.

One may have differences of opinion on whether it was a proper decision on the part of the university to not hold the Mela despite the High Court verdict in favour of the argument made by Visva-Bharati. It is true that the Mela contributes to the

local economy by creating sources of income for the local people. In fact, those associated with the University also realize this. What disturbed the organizers in 2019 were the adverse consequences for being truthful to the emotional quotient of Debendranath Tagore and his illustrious son, Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore. I have no doubt to defend Visva-Bharati's point of view in insisting that Mela, instead of being a source of joy and gaiety, brought pain and agony to those who endeavoured hard to organize a pollution-free collective congregation as Poush Mela was. Furthermore, it is now well-established that no university is capable of being an efficient event manager. Hence, the largest crowd-pulling two Melas, *Kumbh* and *Gangasagar* Mela are organized by the State Governments: Government of Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal respectively.

The above discussion is not meant to just harp on the problems which appear to be insurmountable. This is not the purpose. The purpose is to ponder on the core issues which did not receive adequate attention in the earlier dispensation. Reasons can be multiplied which will be of no help. What is thus required is to analytically dissect the causes of impediment and to suggest ways to address the sources of discomfort to the stakeholders and also to identify probable ways to get out of the imbroglio. Let me qualify my above statement since there is hardly one set of solutions since it depends on how one decodes the problems and suggests the means to find a way out.

There could thus be manifold suggestions. Prominent among them are as follows:

First, the most important precondition is the creation of a mindset supportive of the fundamental ethos which the founder of Visva-Bharati, Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore espoused in his creative writings and his deeds since he appeared in the public domain. An analytical reading of these texts and careful assessment of his activities as an organic intellectual suggests that Gurudev also expressed his disappointment in many of his texts, especially *Charitra Puja* (1895) and his 1937 interview with the essayist, Sajani Kanto Das which was published in a compilation entitled *Karmi Rabindranath*. Let me briefly refer to the point made by Gurudev. Central to the point was his inability to inculcate a sense of selfless commitment to Visva-Bharati; instead, what disappointed him most was efforts made by some of his compatriots to pursue exclusive interests at the cost of Visva-Bharati. And, Gurudev Tagore never lost sight of the politico-ideological mission which he undertook since the foundation of Visva-Bharati. Being aware that all those who joined hands with him would not have the same mindset, he, despite being upset on occasions, never allowed the devilish tendencies to overpower him. Instead, he always admired those who acted contrary to his mission because they, according to him, provided him with the energy which he needed to carry forward what he espoused to achieve.

Taking cues from the founder of this great centre of learning, I have jotted down the following points for the present stakeholders and posterity to consider. First, as Visva-Bharati is a model of working together regardless of class, caste and ethnicity, for a cause, it is expected of all those associated with this great institution to value the ideals for which Gurudev Tagore stood for amidst odds. What is first and foremost is to be respectful to the socio-cultural devices which the bard identified to develop bonhomie among the people in the campus and also those in the adopted villages around the campus. It was an attempt to create togetherness in adverse circumstances due to colonialism. Following this, what is required to be done is to develop camaraderie among human beings, the lack of which was one of serious impediments towards developing India as a collective unit. As Visva-Bharati is a microcosm of India, the poet believed that it was a good laboratory for fulfilling his goal. Two Upanishadic mantras remained critical: Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam and aatra visvam bhavatiek needam (the entire world is a family which lives in a nest). Primary here is the concern for all since we all are human beings. The ideal is not a novel one, but is drawn on the values which are derivative of Upanishads. Secondly, Visva-Bharati transmits those values which privilege duties over rights. Long before Article 51b (Fundamental Duties) was incorporated in the Constitution of India, Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore made people aware of their *duties/kartavyas* of the privileged sections of society to the underprivileged. As the poet was an organic intellectual, he devoted wholeheartedly to those activities which were tuned to common well-being. Hence, he devised many schemes to attain his exclusive politico-ideological goals. It was possible, he believed, once one was dedicated to the cause of the poor or those who were socio-economically left out. It is also unfortunate that these distinctive Tagorean values and politico-ideological preferences seem to have lost their importance considerably in guiding even those who survive by drawing pecuniary benefits out of Visva-Bharati. Being Rabindrik is now a fashion cutting across social strata although it is reduced generally to an instrument for fulfilling one's partisan interests. Thirdly, Visva-Bharati is no longer the same as it was in the past. It has undergone a sea-change. There are many lacunae presumably because of its history. One may refer to many instances showing that one of the principal reasons is deviation from the ideals that Tagore endeavoured hard to inculcate among the Ashramites and those who came close to him when Visva-Bharati was being built. Unfortunately, these ideals lost, to a considerable extent, their salience. Finally, the aim of this missive is not to argue that everything is lost and Visva-Bharati does not seem to have future; instead, the objective is to reassure those in Visva-Bharati and its real well-wishers that the rise has already begun because (a) the sources of its decline have already been identified and (b) a concerted quest for meaningfully addressing them despite severe opposition since the nuisance makers have far more virulent as their days are numbered. Finally, I end this missive with an optimistic note on the basis of the difficulties the founder of Visva-Bharati himself confronted during the formative phases of his brainchild. As mentioned above, he articulated how he felt has already been referred to. When

he asked for financial help, none of his close kith and kind and also many of his admirers remained indifferent. He was forced to travel to various parts of India to raise funds for Visva-Bharati even when he was as old as seventy years of age. Mahatma Gandhi intervened and collected Rs. 60,000/- which was of great help to Tagore. It was thus not surprising that he earnestly requested him to help sustain Visva-Bharati which he considered as a vessel carrying his life's treasure. So, Visva-Bharati overcame the difficulty which proves the proverb that if there is a will there's a way. Keeping this instance in view, there are reasons to believe that with sincere and honest efforts, Visva-Bharati will soon regain its glory and the process has already been initiated.

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