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Convocation Address of Chief Guest

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The 2020 New Education Policy in a historical perspective

I am extremely honoured to be the chief guest of this auspicious occasion in the history of Bodoland University which came into being in 2009. I am greatly privileged to share the podium with the Hon'ble Governor, Professor Jagdish Mukhi who is an acclaimed academician of the country. It is also matter of joy to share with those attending the Convocation, both physically and virtually, that I have had the fortune to work with him in Delhi University as one of his academic colleagues. I am thankful to him for having given this life-time opportunity to be the chief guest in the annual convocation of this university with great potentials in shaping the academic profile of education in Bodoland and also guiding the rest of the universities in the country in creating a vibrant system of education in general. I am happy that I have been given this chance to say few words when the Government of India introduced the New Education Policy of 2020 to usher in a new era in education in India. The most noticeable aspect of the 2020 Education Policy is to instill in the learners not the idea of what to study but how to study. This is a revolutionary mode of disseminating knowledge. Given the deeply-rooted dependent mindset which the Macaulay's Minutes of 1835 (also known as Macaulay's Poison Tree) produced, the Indians appeared to have nurtured the idea that the Western mode of learning was the best way of transmitting knowledge. It continued uninterruptedly till 1992 Amendment to the 1986 Education Policy which was a reiteration of the widely hyped Nehruvian approach to education. This was nothing but a vehicle to continue with the colonial mindset that helped the colonizers and the comprador Indian intellectuals thrived at the aegis of the Indian National Congress immediately after independence. They sustained a borrowed mode of learning which assisted an alien system to nourish a derivative mode of

teaching the new generations. The 2020 New Education Policy is a complete break with the past in many ways: prominent among are two: first, this is a policy which evolved out of discussion at many levels, beginning with the panchayats; secondly, this is also a policy which privileges values, mores and ideas that are linked with the India's prevalent socio-cultural reality and politico-ideological preferences. In a nutshell, this is a design in which an attempt which is long over-due, was made to locate the mode of learning in the milieu in which Indians are born and raised. The motto of Bodoland University is one of those values that we draw from the ancient texts which is now embedded in our common psyche: *Shraddhavan Labhate Jnanam* which meant that to earn knowledge, one is required to be respectful to those transmitting Jnanam. To illustrate the idea vividly, let me put few lines of a poem, written in Hindi to show that Shraddha is a critical ingredient of education that contributes to the development and consolidation of universal humanism:

Shraddha JnanDeti Hai (respect begets knowledge)
Namrata Man Deti Hai (humility begets respect)
YogyotaShanDeti Hai (capability begets social standing)
Par Teeno Jab Eek Sath Mil Jaye (when these three get blended)
To Byaktyeko Har Jagha Samman Deti Hai (human being gains respect)

Keemat Har Cheej Ki Hoti Hai (everything has a price)
Par Jnan Kee KoyeeKeematNehiHotee (knowledge has no price)
SikshaHeeOoMadhyam Hai Jo (education is the only mode)
Kartabya Marg Ko Batlati Hai (that helps human beings to be sensitive to their duties)
Achha Kon Hai Bura Kon Hai (who is good and who is bad)
EenSabka Bodh Koratee Hai(education enables human beings

(to distinguish between these two)

Rabindranath Tagore and Education

In the field of education, Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore provided an innovative mode of education, like his nationalist colleagues, Mahatma Gandhi, by drawing on India's intellectual heritage manifested particularly in Vedas and Upanishads.

The establishment of Visva Bharati in 1921, a continuity of the endeavour that Tagore had undertaken in 1901 when he founded the school, Patha Bhavana, was a powerful step in pursuance of his wider socio-political concerns for humanity. Being a firm believer in the organic connection of education with the context, Tagore was vehemently opposed to English education as it was not rooted in the Indian context which was one of the reasons why this system failed to become a source of inspiration to the Indian youths. In his address to the students in London in 1920, he referred to the devastating outcome of such an incongruity when he said that

'the Western university is an organic part of European civilization and cannot be imported to India. ... the solid completeness of some of the new universities was like a hard-boiled egg from which no chicken could be hatched. To drive after a material completeness which did not belong to the essence of the university, was to squander money on mere money-bags'.¹

By being explicit in his condemnation of British desire to export the system of education that flourished in Britain since it lacked

¹Tagore's address was reproduced in the Modern Review, 1920, cited in Ajit K Neogy, *Santiniketan and Sriniketan: the twin dreams of Rabindranath Tagore*, National Book Trust, New Delhi, 2011 (reprint), p. 265

the organic roots with the Indian socio-economic and cultural reality, Tagore created a space for alternative education on the basis of his arguments that exposed the inappropriateness of the English education which was completely hollow and therefore not adequate for discharging its true role. Reiterating the view, he further commented that ‘many universities created by the British government have been artificial and not bearing the fruit’.² This was one of the reasons which persuaded Tagore to embark on the project which led to fruition with the establishment of Visva Bharati, spread across in two contiguous areas, christened by Tagore, of Santiniketan and Sriniketan. For the poet, the university was not just a device for transmission of knowledge in the confinement of a class room, it was also a design of a creative life with incessant search by those who were engaged in making human life better by their deeds.

Being projected as a centre for continuous knowledge creation and dissemination, Visva Bharati was conceptualized as a platform generating enthusiasm for involvement in rural reconstruction. For the university to be true to its goal, it was expected to be a source of inspiration to the generation after generation; in other words, to remain viable, the university needed to be continuously creative in its responses. Of the two campuses of Visva Bharati, the activities that Sriniketan campus had undertaken were illustrative of what a university should do to justify its existence. Characterizing Sriniketan as ‘a research laboratory’³ which helped build a bridge of sustained communication with the villagers, Elmhirst thus argued that it set in motion ‘processes and the means out of which the

² Rabindranath Tagore’s interview in the New York Evening Post, 7 July, 1921, cited in Ajit K Neogy, *Santiniketan and Sriniketan: the twin dreams of Rabindranath Tagore*, National Book Trust, New Delhi, 2011 (reprint), p. 265

³ Leonard K Elmhirst, ‘the application of research to rural life’, *Modern Review*, April, 1935, p. 506

society is slowly and painfully evolving its salvation'. Sriniketan was, in that respect, not merely an intermediary between the villagers and their search for socio-economic well-being, but was also 'a pathfinder through the maze of development [processes] and helping [the villagers] to arrive at a decision [regarding] the alternative courses open to them'.⁴ Sriniketan was therefore a design of rural development that

Tagore had conceptualized in collaboration with his likeminded colleagues, including Leonard K Elmhirst. What was noticeable is the fact that his endeavour was not just confined to sharing with the villagers the new techniques seeking to augment production, but also to give human touch to the effort.

Basic to Tagore's concern was to treat the villagers with respect and empathy which was sadly missing with the increasing hiatus between the cities and villages. Instead of a grand plan, he was persuaded to get involved in activities which were doable. In a note, he thus wrote that since his 'path ... lies in the domain of quiet, integral action and thought, my units must be small and I can but face human problems in relations to some basic village or cultural area [which led him to] stick to Santiniketan and Sriniketan [with the hope] that [his] efforts will touch the hearts of ... the neighbouring villagers, and help them in reasserting themselves in a new social order'.⁵ A realistic to the core, Tagore appears to have been convinced that, in most likelihood, a grand plan remained confined to the level of conceptualization since the socio-economic milieu might not have been ready which reinforces the idea that

⁴Dikshit Sinha, *A Poet's Experiment in Rebuilding Samaj and Nation: Sriniketan's rural reconstruction*, Birupjatio Sahitya Sammiloni, Bolpur, 2019, p. 187

⁵Rabindranath Tagore's statement 21 December, 1937, cited in *Rabindranath Tagore: pioneer in education (essays and exchanges between Rabindranath Tagore and LK Elmhirst)*, John Murray, London, 1961, p. 38

what was required to be done was to prepare the ground for executing the plan. In other words, what he hinted here was the possibility of the plan being doomed to be a failure unless it was made realistic. Hence, Tagore's idea was, explained Leonard Elmhirst, 'to illustrate a few basic principles by winning the confidence of a few villages at first'.⁶ Once the villagers found that, he further mentioned, 'they could stand on their own feet, once they had confidence in their power to progress, they were more able to say what they required most and when'.⁷ Two ideas are prominent here: on the one hand, the poet was confident that villagers had the potentials to be independent in their thinking once they were inspired to think and not conditioned by any of the social barriers segregating the villagers from the city-brethren. Implicit here is, on the other, also the idea that what was critical to Tagore was the construction of a society, fragmented by artificially raised social walls, which was possible with the reconceptualization and introduction of a system of education that was not exclusive in character but one that generates bonhomie among the people irrespective of their respective socio-economic locations.

The 2020 New Education Policy

First and foremost, the New Education Policy (Policy hereafter) draws on the ideas of past masters, including Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore. Gandhi's Naya Talim and Gurudev's idea of Ashram Siksha (education in the Tapoban style) remain important intellectual sources for the 2020 New Education Policy. In order to understand its nature, a detailed discussion of the Policy is required which I shall avoid though I shall focus on the its distinct

⁶*Rabindranath Tagore: pioneer in education (essays and exchanges between Rabindranath Tagore and LK Elmhirst)*, John Murray, London, 1961, p. 41

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characteristics since that will help us understand the nature and also core principles governing the shaping of the Policy. This is important in order to avoid being misunderstood by my colleagues here. Let me begin my making a general point. The Education Policy is just a blueprint of the characteristics that our approach to education should take into account before going ahead in this regard. So, this is a path-finder which allows us to steer our mode of shaping the future minds. There are many important features of the Policy. I don't want to make a lengthy discussion of the New Education Policy except to identify those points which are, according to me, critical to conceptualize our approach to this noble task.

What is most striking as soon as one flips through the pages is the fact that it begins with a preamble with the fundamental principles which is an elaboration of the ideas on which the Policy rests:

- a) Ethics and human values and Constitutional values like empathy, respect for others, courtesy, democratic spirit, spirit of service, respect for public property, scientific temper, liberty, responsibility, pluralism, equality and justice;
- b) Promoting multilingualism and the power of language in teaching and learning;
- c) Life skills such as communication, teamwork and resilience;
- d) A rootedness and pride in India, and its rich, diverse, ancient and modern culture and knowledge system and traditions;
- e) A light but tight regulatory framework to ensure integrity, transparency and resource efficiency of the educational system through audit and public discourse while engaging innovation and out-of-the-box ideas through autonomy, good governance and empowerment.

Keeping in view the above goals of the 2020 New Education Policy, there are many ideas which did not receive adequate attention

since the aim of education even in independent India was to produce the imitative Parrot, which the Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore articulated in his 1918 short story TotaKahini (The Parrot's Training) to argue that the colonizers introduced such a system of education as it was conducive for governing India as a colony as per their preferences. The objective of education, as the Policy underlines, should be to make the learners sensitive to ethical values contributing to the development and consolidation of universal humanism. Implicit here is the idea of VasudhaibaKutumbakam (the entire world is one family). The second equally predominant aspect is the insistence on the compliance with the constitutional morality. It is an idea that Georg Grote developed while striving to explain the continuity of democracy in Greece for several centuries. What is meant to be emphasized here is that the learners should be respectful to the constitutional rules and regulations since they are endeavours at developing value systems which remain key to togetherness irrespective of constructed notions of schisms among the human beings. Here the concern that the chairman of the Drafting Committee of the 1950 Constitution, BR Ambedkar, expressed does not seem to be irrelevant. According to Ambedkar, also known as Babasaheb, it was morally wrong to disregard the constitutional values which were enshrined in the 1950 Constitution since it was both the brainchild of the illustrious members of the Constituent Assembly and also the outcome in the making of which they all zealously participated. So, there was no reason, felt Ambedkar, to oppose the Constitution which evolved out of our own effort. The third important value is the emphasis on the development of the skill of communication and also the ability to cooperate. In our collective existence, cooperation is the golden rule which involves the eradication of the chasm around the axes of caste, religion, region, among others. This was also the idea that both Gandhiji and Gurudev Tagore

affirmed in their many speeches and written texts. Equally important is the ability to communicate. What is thus important here is to create a milieu in which one's mother tongue is well-respected and extensively useful while persons with the same mother tongue interact with one another. One should not feel ashamed that one is unable to speak in English which is unfortunately still the language of social respectability across the country. The 2020 New Education Policy is a pathbreaking design because it generates an enthusiasm for all of us to be proud of our mother tongue to generate familiarity or apanapon with what is being taught in vernacular. Unless it is accepted wholeheartedly, the aim shall remain elusive. We must take a vow to be involved in creating literature in our mother tongue. Here, the example that Gurudev Tagore had set before us is worth-referring to. He strongly felt that young students should also be introduced to their mother tongue since it will help them understand the content of their studies meaningfully. If they are strong in their own language, they will pick up other languages pretty quickly. One may argue that neither a Japanese nor a German student does not, for instance, learn English and yet the Japan and Germany are well-ahead of many English-speaking countries. The argument has substance. Nonetheless, it is also safe to suggest that it may work in India given the perpetuity of colonial rule in India for long. By being hegemonic in India, the British rule gave us an advantage; Indians became instinctively bi-lingual, if not multi-lingual. For instance, we are well-verses with our mother tongue by being raised in an environment in which mother tongue gains precedence. Once we formally join schools, colleges and universities, besides gaining knowledge in the chosen disciplines, we are trained simultaneously to understand and also speak in English since (a) the medium of instruction is generally English and also (b) most of the authentic books are available in English. It will not be out of place to also

mention that many renowned creative writers in India in the past were comfortable in expressing their thoughts in their mother tongue and also in English. Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore wrote primarily in Bangla and he also wrote in English whenever he wanted to address the wider sections of global community. So, there is hardly a persuasive argument to defend that learning in mother tongue is an impediment to be a master in other languages. This is however not to suggest that we need to continue the system. The New Education Policy has held the bull by its horn by unambiguously stating that learning should be also done in one's mother tongue. Given the aim, the Policy can be characterized as a great beginning of a process that was not allowed to unfold given the servile mentality which flourished at the behest of those decision makers who accrued personal benefit with the continuity of this mindset.

The Policy is also roadmap for transforming the available academic institutions as hubs for being multidisciplinary in thrust and objectives. The ancient Indian universities in Takshila, Nalanda, Vikramshila, among others were the globally-reputed and vibrant centres for multidisciplinary training which helped develop a student capable enough to respond to the demands of the day most efficiently and meaningfully. On an efficient multidisciplinary training, a learner will be equipped to address concerns of the day. Such a training will enable one to acquire vocational skills, including an ethic of social engagement, soft skills, like communication, discussion and debate, and also rigorous specialization in a chosen field of fields. The policy is thus a clear roadmap for holistic education based on those wider concerns for society combined with what is required to be done to address the immediate requirement.

In view of the reputation of the ancient centres of education, it does not seem anunrealizable dream to seek to retrieve India's

claim as Vishwa Guru. The Policy thus emphasizes the importance of the study of Indology, Indian languages, AYUSH (Ayurved, Yoga and Naturopathy, Unani Siddha and Homeopathy) system of medicine which will make Indian learners globally marketable and also attract international students to be trained in these areas of studies. Given the growing acceptance of online teaching which the Government of India popularized through DIKSHA (Digital Infrastructure for Knowledge Sharing) and also SWAYAM (Study Webs of Active for Young Aspiring Minds), the mode of transmission has become far easier nowadays.

The New Education Policy is wrongly being dubbed as a harbinger of privatization of education. This is a deliberate campaign by the beneficiaries of the old system. A careful and honest reading of the Policy reveals that by no stretch of imagination, one can draw this conclusion in view of the clearly articulated views of those who were instrumental with the preparation of this path-breaking design of education. There are two important shackles to avoid this: on the one hand, the creation of a national agency to regularly go for both academic and financial audit of the academic institutions. Once this is in place, no institution, especially those responsible for imparting higher education, will be allowed to whimsically introduce courses and also enhance fees to be charged from the learners for learning. With the creation of Higher Education Commission of India (HECI), this task shall be institutionalized. As the system of credit transfer is now officially recognized, the students move from one institution to another in a seamless manner. This will, on the other hand, help the learners have the opportunity to go to other institutions if they so desire. Not only will this give them flexibility in choosing institutions of their choice, it will also give them a boost to do well to fulfil their dream of being students of their cherished institutions. In other words, this will make them competitive and also marketable when

they are equipped to offer their services to the country in many forms.

Once privatization is stopped, it will create a level-playing playing field for all students who are capable and well-endowed. The Policy also creates an opportunity for those who don't want to go for higher education immediately by introducing the system of multipoint entry and exist. One may not be persuaded by this now since our mindset is still clouded by the Western system of education. The multipoint entry and exist will allow the learners to decide what they want to do immediately; they may prefer to be trained in a field which is not possible so long as they remain engaged in a formal system of education, being transmitted in schools, colleges and universities. The suggestion of creating an Academic Bank of Credit will facilitate digital storage of all academic credits that a student earn from different higher education institutions, including for vocational and academic training. With the availability of this opportunity and also the facility of keeping their credits in a credit bank, they are always welcome to be formally registered as regular students. This is also a great advantage for the students because this will be an opportunity for them to avoid being rattled by the fact that they missed the bus. The creation of HECI is also an innovative step for two reasons: first, comprising the renowned educationists, the HECI will devise plans and programmes by the educationists and shall thus be free from bureaucratic control. Once the top educationists navigate the system, it is certain that it will easily negotiate with the difficulties that are likely to pull it back. One must not forget that the success of the Policy is also dependent on the creation of a milieu in which the idea of India reconceptualized by taking into account the newer ideas, values and mores. The inclination towards defining India as being derivative of the Western discourses appears

to have lost its validity because it is neither based on India's distinctive socio-cultural reality nor do they provide an intellectual tool to grasp the milieu in which we are born and nurtured. The Policy is an attack on this servile mentality and also provides a specific design to consolidate the newer ideas that have started unfolding with the rise and consolidation of a new mindset drawn on what India actually means to the common masses. In that respect, the people in general remains the focal point of this policy which is a clear break with our earlier mode of thinking that hardly received an effective challenge in the past.

With the adoption of the Right to Education as a fundamental right by the Indian Parliament in 2010, the Policy will act as complementary to the goal of providing education till 12th standard without charges. The opportunity to obtain foundational education will usher in a new era in the history of humanity. It is a matter of great joy that India is one of those 135 countries in the world where education till 12th standard is free. Furthermore, as foundational literacy is a key to enriching one and also to purge oneself of superstitious and prejudicial beliefs, adult education and life-long learning constitute an important aspect of this Policy. This will work in two complementary ways: on the one hand, it will help spread education among those who, so far, remained outside the purview of the policy makers or are socially labelled as "illiterate"; such a labelling is nothing but demoralizing, if not debilitating, social design to create a permanent division among the people in the localities; it is, in other words, a stigma that generally acts negatively on the so-called illiterate individuals in a locality. It will also assist, on the other, in building a corps of people who will also perform the role of highlighting the importance of education even if it was late in terms of ones' chronological age. The Adult Education scheme is of great help to transmit the values of education once the women are encouraged

to take part in the scheme. As soon as they realize the criticality of learning, they will help spread the view among the children who remain emotionally attached with female members of the family in their various roles, such as, mother, grand-mother, aunts and so on. So, the Adult Education Scheme stands out in fulfilling the goal of educating the so-called uneducated in an efficient manner.

Concluding observations

It is difficult to pay adequate attention to each and every aspect of a vast area of knowledge concerning education. Here, I pursued two major arguments: first, the New Education Policy has historical roots: besides, Takshila, Nalanda, Vikramshila, among others, it has drawn on the conceptual roots of the system of education that the Mahatma and Gurudev evolved while devising an alternative mode to the British education which flourished at the behest of colonialism. Secondly, the Policy is just a roadmap to clearly design the education policy that we contemplate to do in new India where the ancient sources of knowledge are no longer dismissed as archaic. This is a great step since these discourses that had emerged out of Vedas, and Upanishads, continue to remain relevant simply because they had organic roots in the India's socio-cultural milieu and politico-ideological preferences. The Policy is a powerful statement in this regard. For the first time in India's post-colonial history, a concerted attempt is made to ascertain that what Mahatma Gandhian and Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore envisaged were not only appropriate to us but also provided inputs to generate "togetherness" regardless of class, caste and ethnicity. In view of this, it will not be an exaggeration to firmly argue that the 2020 New Education Policy is not just a blueprint, but also creates a specific pathway for education for a new India. What is unique

about the new approach to education is a powerful challenge to the one-size-fits-in-all formula; it also releases those ideas which are linked with our search for a system of education, relevant for our intellectual enrichment and capability enhancement in which education is not just a mode of transmission of knowledge but also generates inputs for the learners to become creative and also pertinent to the prevalent socio-cultural and politico-economic environment.

I am happy to share my views with my colleagues in this very illustrious university which is known for creative endeavour involving students, teachers and communities. I salute the endeavour of my colleagues and express my gratitude to the Hon'ble Governor of Assam, Professor Jagdish Mukhi for having given me this opportunity to interact with those associated with higher education on an issue which is both topical and very close to my heart.

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