

## **Plight of Visva-Bharati (Missive from the table of Vice Chancellor, 1 February, 2023)**

Visva-Bharati is a unique centre of human collectivity for a variety of reasons. Prominent among them is that besides being a degree awarding academic institution, it is also an epicentre of a cultural voice associated with the creative ideational vision of its founder, Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore. Besides sustaining its unique character, Visva-Bharati is perhaps one of those rare academic institutions in India and elsewhere where one also gets acquainted with chosen expletives which are both constructed and also repetition of what are so familiar. As soon as the so-called agitation by the stakeholders takes place one invariably confronts with a situation in which one has a great opportunity to expand one's stock of words since the stakeholders leave no chance to test their lung power while attacking the victims. Besides being powerful wordsmiths in designing new expletives, the agitators who also claim to be students, seem to have had a thorough training in devising new ways of abusing the authorities; their primary aim is to forcibly establish what is indefensible in terms of any of canons holding any human civilization although they always defend either by completely denying their involvement in such misdeeds or justifying wrongly that even what they do is attempts at articulating the Rabindrik traditions.

Why is there such a decline in Visva-Bharati despite having a rich legacy? This is a matter of great pain and mental agony because, apart from the Nobel laureate, Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore's contribution to the development of an alternative mode of learning, his father, Debendranath Tagore was no less insignificant since he laid the foundation of Santiniketan Ashram in 1861 and started a school, Brahma Vidyalaya to teach Vedas, Upanishads and other ancient texts to learners. Once Visva-Bharati appeared as a full-fledged university, it immediately attracted attention from all over the world for its innovative design of pedagogy. As many of his compatriots joined hands with him, Visva-Bharati soon unfolded with a different language of education. With Gurudev Tagore's initiatives, the institution became a hub of education upholding a uniquely constructed pedagogy contrary to the prevalent English education.

There are no reasons to believe that the poet's journey was a rosy one. In fact, he confronted many hurdles which he himself codified in many of his texts and also interviews with many in which he expressed his anguish. He was not sure whether "the vessel of his thought, Visva-Bharati, will survive at all". It is a matter of common knowledge that when he decided to undertake a cultural tour of the country at the age of 74 with his failing health, he was restrained by Mahatma Gandhi who raised funds for him. Many of those who flourished otherwise with his support left him just like the selfish soldiers who leave the sinking ship. Nonetheless, Gurudev continued, with his indomitable will, the task that he undertook with the foundation of Visva-Bharati in 1922.

With India's independence in 1947, it was Gandhi who came to the rescue of Gurudev's brainchild following his demise in 1941. Headed by Jawaharlal Nehru, the government of India accepted Visva-Bharati as "an institution of national importance" in 1951. The detractors of Tagore became active now once his eldest son who survived then was made the first Vice Chancellor of Visva-Bharati. It

did not augur well with those who claimed that they were the true heir to Tagore's legacy. Hence one of them should have been the head of the institution. Many anonymous letters were dispatched to the Prime Minister, Nehru highlighting the so-called misdeeds of Sri Rathindranath Tagore. Of these misdeeds were an attack on him for not being adequately protective of his legally-wed wife, Pratima Devi due to his alleged emotional involvement with another colleague's wife, Miradevi Chattopadhyay. (As the novelist, Nabakumar Basu in his 2017 novel, *Tomar Aandhar Tomar Aalo* informed), So, it was a case of moral turpitude although none of them had any difficulty and even the husband of Miradevi, Nagen Chattopadhyay had no qualms about this. The other charge was that of financial embezzlement of Rs. 10,000/- which the university's accounts department highlighted wrongly as it was proved later that it was the outcome of a wrong calculation. The critics of Rathindranath thus created an opportunity to launch a vilification campaign to defame him. And, interestingly, those who took a lead in such a smearing campaign were adequately rewarded once Rathindranath resigned out of disgust in less than two years. It was a matter of shame that he was not even invited when the centenary celebration of his father's birthday in 1961 was celebrated in Visva-Bharati with fun. As per the available evidence, he left Calcutta with tears.

A trend was established unfortunately as the history of Visva-Bharati reveals. As soon as the Vice Chancellor engages in a cleansing operation, s/he continues to be humiliated till s/he demits office. There are, of course, exceptions: some survived with their strong determination and some with political patronage. Nonetheless, a perusal of history enables one to put Visva-Bharati's evolution as an academic institution in a mould which remains the same as I, as the nineteenth Vice Chancellor of Visva-Bharati, vouch for. Once a new Vice Chancellor joins the office, those seeking to fulfill their vested interests move around him/her like honey bees. After a few months, they come up with their unjust demands. Now, if the Vice Chancellor succumbs, there is no problem and if it is otherwise, the problem starts. There is a snowball effect since, in order to justify their demands as "legitimate" they keep mobilizing many of their ilk and it does not seem difficult since it allows many to conveniently deviate from what they are supposed to in exchange of a fat salary which is not just a source of their survival and also sources of gratifying their other needs; without this regular income, it would not have been possible. This seems to be conveniently forgotten as soon as their job is confirmed because they are fed with the inputs that it is impossible given the availability of many techniques in thwarting in case the university undertakes steps to remove one who is truant and also deviant of their duties. The system runs on the basis of two principles: (a) employees have only the rights and no duties and (b) they authorize themselves to set rules for them since they have, in their possession, means to assert that "might is right". As a result, Visva-Bharati employees stoop so low that they do not mind in adopting means to defame, embarrass and defame the Vice Chancellor to seek to establish their hegemony. There are, of course, many sincere employees who, being alert to their obligations, endeavour to sincerely discharge their roles. But they do not generally assert to avoid unnecessary trouble. So, a general trend of indifference appears to have gripped them. The result is disastrous. The university suffers most due to a miniscule section of the employees as they claim to have access to coercion and other techniques of forcing the rest to either be indifferent or join them as supporters.

One of the major reasons for Visva-Bharati's decline is perhaps the conceptualization of the Vice Chancellor being "a Kalpataru (a device for wish fulfillment). Hence s/he has, at his/her disposal an institutional authority to whatever s/he likes. The belief has roots in the fact that a Vice Chancellor has discretionary authority provided s/he exercises. Furthermore, this has been the practice in Visva-Bharati where the preceding Vice Chancellors are reported to have purportedly willfully extended favour to individuals without being respectful to the Statute and other canonical rules. With the hope of getting benefits (both tangible and intangible), a rat race begins to "capture" the Vice Chancellor and if an individual or a group succeeds, it is immediately announced presumably to declare that s/he or the group is too powerful to get things done easily. In the Vice Chancellor is shown to be a mindless machine that can be guided by these specific individuals as per their whims. The assumption is not unfounded as the functioning style of some of my former predecessors demonstrates. I was clueless when one of the members of non-teaching cadre admitted in my office that he did not visit his office for the last two years and yet he drew full salary and also received his retirement benefits; he was terribly upset when his extension for two years after superannuation was not granted. It was possible perhaps because of his political clout and nuisance value that the former Vice Chancellors avoided holding the bull by its horn. After I joined in November, 2018, I noticed that university administration was, to a significant extent, servile to the views of the group with the right kind of political connections. It was easier for those associated with the university to smoothly continue what they prefer to do (being truthful or not to their assigned duties) if they are blessed by this group. They extended their tentacles in the university administrative offices and across departments. As soon as attempts were made to reverse the well-entrenched system that flourished at their behest, they immediately took out their fangs which were removed by applying the canonical rules upholding justice and fairness. Besides the politically pampered groups, within administration, many belonging to the non-teaching cadre, deploy the same technique to undertake more or less same activities to similarly show to the outsiders that they are very close to the Vice Chancellor which means that they are capable of decisively influencing his/her decisions. It further reinforces the claim that the Vice Chancellor is a kathputli with no capability of governing Visva-Bharati. They draw on their "emotional" attachment with me. There were cases when teachers of various departments joined this clique. Unlike the political groups, they also endeavour to act to influence the Vice Chancellor by devising ways of making him/her believe that they are his/her most trustworthy colleagues. I am persuaded to make this point since one belonging to that group who seemingly rose to prominence according to his ilk and outsiders by claiming to be emotionally close to me as Vice Chancellor. Their techniques were subtle and varied; they involved various designs to show how close they were to me in the past. Now, at the fag end of my term, they decided to withdraw since I appeared to have been dissociated with them to come closer with another group. They made it very clear by apparently following the Gandhian mode of "omission". They thus did not participate in any of the collective gathering, like Visva-Bharati's festivals, picnic, and also daily prayers as I became a hostage of a different group although I must make it clear that they invariably abstained themselves in the past from these collective activities by resorting to one pretext or another. Why did I become close to the so-called different group? An explanation is needed. Out of my experience as a member of Visva-Bharati Parivar, I have understood why Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore introduced many regular rituals: he was guided by his heart-felt

urge to cement an emotional bond among those in and around Visva-Bharati irrespective of class, caste and ethnicity. His design of developing "togetherness" among all was most appropriate when the divisive forces became prominent in seeking to segregate people around this axis. During my stay here for more than four years, I can vouch that most of those who earn their livelihood appear to have forgotten that Visva-Bharati is not just a degree awarding academic centre, it is simultaneously a living voice championing a philosophy of life. Unfortunately, Visva-Bharati is reduced to become just a source of earning a regular income which does not seem to be proportionate to the service given to Visva-Bharati for which the employees are entitled to pecuniary benefits. The trend has now changed, I am told. Only the students of the school in the Ashram area, Patha Bhavan, are there presumably it is part of their school time table; so it is difficult to ascertain whether they participate in regular prayers on Wednesdays and other special events in the campus out of their concern for Tagore's philosophy or they do it out of compulsion! I am now persuaded to believe that most of those associated with Visva-Bharati have failed to imbibe the spirit on the basis of which Visva-Bharati was founded by Gurudev Tagore although even the deviants claim to be Rabindriks in order to pursue and attain their partisan goals. This does not seem to be unusual as it appears to have been ingrained in our character. As a student of Social Sciences, I attribute such an indifferent attitude to our traditions and heritage to long-drawn colonial rule in India: we were trained to develop distaste for our own socio-cultural roots. No serious attempts were made to reverse the mindset; in fact, efforts were pursued to the contrary in India till the beginning of the first decade of the twenty-first century. To our chagrin, these endeavours are dismissed as clearly archaic and attempts to go back to the days of bullock cart. What would have best is to critically evaluate such attempts to understand whether they are politically motivated or are seriously pursued collective efforts to learn from indigenous discourses to develop empowering designs for modern India. The task is difficult but not insurmountable; hence, in order to demean the efforts, the detractors criticize those engaged in such activities as "divisive" and "intellectually incapable".

Since most of the teachers do not seem to be as protective of Rabindrik traditions as they are expected, they appear to have lost the moral authority to ask their students to be attentive to Visva-Bharati's socio-cultural ethos. As a result, most of the students barring those from Patha Bhavan, remained indifferent to the established socio-cultural practices which Gurudev consciously evolved to translate into reality his idea of *Tapobon Siksha* or the system of education prevalent in India's past. Here, a clarification is required. Gurudev Tagore evolved a pedagogy seeking to combine sources of past intellectual wisdom with those derived from contemporary sources. Hence, the course curriculum Gurudev introduced in Visva-Bharati entails thorough studies of disciplines required to be studied to acquire an in-depth knowledge of different areas which are relevant and contemporaneously valid. Like Plato's Gymnasium where students were also trained in music, the poet also emphasized on the inclusion of music and dance as part of regular courses in the university. In short, as the bard's aim was to develop human beings as perfectly as possible, he consciously pursued a set of activities which he considered appropriate for realizing their full potential.

It is easier to state that Visva-Bharati has declined over time. What is however most critical is to understand why and how it happened. It is not however an easy job to persuasively explain the decline of the institution since it unfolded both in pre and post independent India. Before Visva-Bharati became an Institution of national importance in 1951, it was governed almost exclusively by how Gurudev Tagore set out a plan in accordance with his own politico-ideological priorities. Once the 1951 Visva-Bharati Act was approved by India's parliament, Visva-Bharati also became a central university which meant that the Government of India took the entire responsibility of running the university. The Act set out the structure of governance which became far more institutionalized than what it was before. At the outset, it was a little difficult for those associated with Visva-Bharati to adjust to the changed system of governance. Nonetheless, with the guarantee of regular income, many difficulties did not seem to have bothered the employees of Visva-Bharati as it was not the case earlier. What was however lost in the process was the commitment to the philosophical priorities associated with the bard's distinctive ideational vision. Visva-Bharati appears to have delinked itself from the long-drawn heritage which it had by being integrally connected with Gurudev's significant contribution to the development of humanity. It led, inter alia, to a volatile situation in the campus as a tussle developed among the Visva-Bharati employees over who were true heir to Gurudev Tagore's legacy. The selection the eldest son of the poet, Rathindranath Tagore as Vice Chancellor fomented the trouble further since many of the poet's disciples also claimed their stake which meant that for them the appointment of Rathindranath was a source of irritation and, if not, anger. The situation deteriorated: Visva-Bharati's dwindling as a university and as an alternative pedagogical centre was hardly halted. Gradually, Gurudev's vessel of thought also lost its distinctive position as an academic centre. Regular prayers and other events which were instruments for advancing the poet's politico-ideological preferences no longer remained as critical in Visva-Bharati's day-to-day functioning as they were in the past.

Is Visva-Bharati like many institutions in India a victim of widespread social, economic and political decadence? There is an easy answer along with a difficult one. An unambiguous yes is an easy answer; but such an answer absolved one of the responsibilities of persuasively explaining why it is so which requires a threadbare discussion of the sources of ailment that appears to have become chronic in many academic institutions and is spreading like a wildfire. Immediately after independence in 1947, of all the professions, teaching in schools, colleges and universities was not attractive perhaps due the fact that salary of teachers was not commensurate with jobs in any other employment. The pecuniary income was not adequate and hence teaching as a profession was not lucrative enough to attract many of our bright students. Yest, many joined teaching out of their love for preparing the next generation of learners despite not being adequately paid for their selfless endeavour. With the acceptance of the Seventh Pay Commission's recommendation which enhanced the salary of teachers, the scene underwent a sea-change. The salary of teachers in schools, colleges and universities has gone up perhaps beyond what was conceivable then. This is good and bad at the same time: good because the pecuniary benefits attract many bright minds; bad since it created an opportunity for many relatively incompetent individuals to teaching as a job given the possibility of getting a fat salary in exchange of nearly nothing in terms of substance. The inevitable result is that the academic institutions gradually

become places for the touts to operate. Fixing individuals in these centres for learning gives them an easy income. Many of the judgements of Calcutta High Courts during 2022-2023 are a testimony here which led to the incarceration of the former Education Minister of West Bengal and also those holding high positions. We don't know how many heads will fall with the Court's intervention.

During my stint as Vice Chancellor, it has come to our notice that quality did not seem to matter in regard to recruitments, both teaching and non-teaching on many occasions. During my interactions with many academic colleagues, it was evident that the truth was not far from my above statement. Among the non-teaching staff, there is hardly a miniscule segment of employees who are capable of preparing a readable draft in English for the authority. Moreover, it is also difficult to locate one who is well-equipped in flawlessly typing just one page. I noticed many "typists" typing the official note with the help of one finger. So, one can imagine the quality and also speed one so-called typist can have under the circumstances. The situation does not seem to be exceptional in Visva-Bharati; most of the centres of learning, including the monitoring agencies, suffer on this count which confirms that the ailment seems to be all-pervasive.

Here, I need to qualify the above statement of mine. My purpose is not to demean any of the souls associated with Visva-Bharati, but to draw their attention to the nature of the illness and seek their help in meaningfully addressing its sources. The purpose of this exercise is to devise designs to purge the academic institutions of deficiencies. It is easier said than done. Nonetheless, one should begin the effort soon because the earlier we start it is better for not only the academic institutions but also for those who are surviving and also thriving by being associated with them. In order to reinforce my point, let me further add that I have no axe to grind. What guides me is to set out a milieu in which all those who are associated with Visva-Bharati or any other institutions of learning should imbibe the idea that what we get should be commensurate with what we give in return. The academicians have a moral duty which is socially governed because they are duty-bound to prepare generations after generations as socially responsible and committed individuals; otherwise, society will crumble down unless the ailments in the academic institutions are completely cured.

The detractors shall not be, for obvious reasons, be persuaded by the initiatives to transform academic institutions from being a fiefdom of vested interests to one for socio-economic and politico-cultural uplift. Let me share a story to illustrate my point of why academic institutions are critical to human progress. One day Aristotle was in a boat with one his famous students, Alexander of Macedonia, sailing from one island to another in Athens. There was a thunderstorm when the boat carrying them was in the middle of the river. Alexander's private bodyguards immediately encircled him to prepare for evacuation as the threat of the boat being sunk. As soon as Alexander noticed this, he at once instructed his guards to protect Aristotle because if there was one Aristotle, many Alexanders would be born. Here is the punchline of the narrative: a teacher is critical to the building of a nation. Hence, Alexander's direction to his bodyguards was based on his belief that a competent teacher or, *Guru* in Indian parlance, is irreplaceable for socio-economic and politico-cultural progress of humanity. Visva-Bharati is fortunate to have had the blessings of Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore who devoted

wholeheartedly to its cause. Those who are associated with this great centre of learning inherit an equally great legacy by virtue of being connected with the most humanitarian ideational vision of the bard which was simply inconceivable in a world dominated by those drawing exclusively on brutal minds. His insistence on universal humanism reintroduced humanity to ideas which lost their salience given the nearly hegemonic grip of evil forces of the globe. It was the poet along with his like-minded compatriots who joined hands with those engaged in safeguarding humanity from being dehumanized. By fiercely attacking colonial rule, Gurudev Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi and many of their cohorts pursued the same goal. Visva-Bharati was an alternative design of learning which was innovative and inspiring to the learners. This centre of learning also evolved to become a platform for generating a sense of belongingness which gradually waned presumably because many of the Indians preferred to remain loyalist as it was rewarding. With new politico-ideological preferences in place, Visva-Bharati became a powerful input in setting-out a new perspective of thinking which also contributed to the consolidation of nationalistic mindsets. Unlike Gandhi, who fought the British nonviolently, Gurudev's endeavoured to carve out a new narrative of nationalism which was a clear departure from the past since it was directed to develop and strengthen a mindset seeking also to establish the claim that India had too a rich intellectual heritage. *Vedas* and *Upanishads* were, for instance, not symbols of archaic thinking, but provided a persuasive record of humanity in different civilizational phases of its evolution. Contrary to other ecumenical religious texts, these ancient texts did not talk about a specific religious denomination, but dwelled on a civilizational wave in which many socio-cultural modes of thinking were articulated and flourished. With emphasis on this aspect of these ancient texts, the bard exposed the limitations of the argument linking them with Hinduism. By being appreciative of Tagore's distinctive understanding of *Vedas* and *Upanishads*, Visva-Bharati introduced them in the public domain completely differently. By being respectful to this unique comprehension those who are responsible for carrying forward the Tagorean legacy leave no stone unturned in this regard. The fact that Visva-Bharati has been nurturing nearly the same tradition for more than a century underlines the dialectical interconnection between an academic institution and the ideas derivative of Tagore's ideational priorities.

The above text is based on my experience as Visva-Bharati's Vice Chancellor for more than four years. Hence, one may easily conclude that the text is likely to be prejudiced since it is an outcome an individual's exclusive experiences. Such a conclusion seems to be a little overstretched for two reasons: on the one hand, a Vice Chancellor is a team member and thus his/her decision is generally an offshoot of a collective wisdom; on the other hand, a perfect or a nearly perfect assessment of the contextual peculiarities is possible out of a dialectical interaction between the decision makers and the prevalent socio-economic and political milieu. Hence it is entirely wrong to view the decision of the Vice Chancellor as completely exclusionary in character.

The above explanatory points shall put the views I have expressed in a proper perspective which is also inclusive of the historical past of Visva-Bharati. It is most tragic that the university despite being Gurudev's brainchild had to suffer on various occasions as many of his detractors were not ready to sacrifice for a noble cause. Gurudev experienced setbacks now and then and yet he never abjured his

determination to fight against odds as he was convinced that Visva-Bharati continued to be inspirational to many not only in the present but also in future. Besides having lost most of his children, his wife, his father and many of his close kith and kin, he was steadfastly committed to his creative work and the development of Visva-Bharati. His only survived son, Rathindranath who was made Vice Chancellor immediately after Visva-Bharati became the first central university in India, reminisced that he was astonished by his father's tenacity and the ability to remain strong emotionally despite being mentally devastated on many occasions. It is also unfortunate to mention that Rathindranath was not spared either when he held the position of Vice Chancellor in 1951. He became a victim of vilification and humiliation on false grounds which forced him to leave Santiniketan permanently. Despite being the only heir to Visva-Bharati and huge landed property that his father Gurudev Tagore bequeathed, he died in Dehradun, now in Uttarakhand, as perhaps the loneliest soul.

The story did not end there. Many Vice Chancellors who followed him had the same plight. The globally reputed scientist, Satyendrnath Bose, famous for his Boson-Einstein equation, had to leave before completing his term of five years. Similarly, the famous economist, Professor Amlan Dutta also had an ignominious exit from Visva-Bharati. The story was repeated when Professor Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, one of the famous historians of India, left long before he finished the term of five years. Other Vice who completed their terms also recounted their bitter experiences while being in the chair. On the whole, it can be fairly said that Visva-Bharati is "a troubled water", to quote my teacher who twice served a state university as its Vice Chancellor. The university has also reputation of illegal academic and non-teaching appointment; the most glaring example was the appointment of a teacher for the university who just passed Higher Secondary examination and what was most alarming was the fact that the teacher taught the graduate and post-graduate students for five long years. The entire administration and also the stakeholders forcefully claimed that they never had a clue about this. It sounds strange although it was believed to be true for half a decade. Visva-Bharati has also the distinction of losing the Nobel medallion which Gurudev Tagore received in 1913 for his immense contribution to literature. What appears to be mindboggling is the fact that notwithstanding being famous for wrong reasons, no stakeholders of this great centre of learning appear to have awakened from their deep slumber perhaps due to the fact that the more they remain indifferent to the sources of decay the more secure will be their future. It was thus figuratively articulated by one of the erstwhile Vice Chancellors that nobody ever remembered that the goose that laid golden eggs also needed careful nurturing. This was conveniently forgotten because there was a feeling that one had the freedom to do whatever one liked to do paying no attention to the statutory obligation to the university. It was manifested differently as my brief experience of being at the helm of affairs confirms. It is true, as one former Vice Chancellor, who was forced to resign since he took decisions affecting adversely those who always remained truants, commented "*ee togulo badh loker samabesh eek jaigai boi ki kore*" (how come that so many deviant individuals congregated at one place, i.e., Visva-Bharati. There is no exaggeration in this statement since those who don't pay attention to their duties, but only insist on their rights usually take the university at **ransom**. Those who do not appreciate this stay away to avoid the best and those who raise voice, although they are a miniscule minority, are generally ridiculed



of being "unsmart". Hence, the deviants prevail over others for a set of complex reasons; but the outcome is the same. The decline of Visva-Bharati remains unabated.

There is not an easy solution since the source of Visva-Bharati's decay is deep-rooted. The tree is infected with a virulent disease for one is required to administer strong doses of medicines. Who will shoulder the responsibility? The process has begun since the university authority has now taken many corrective steps to address the problems in as satisfactory ways as it is possible. The present administration is highly alert to its responsibilities as per the 1951 Statute of Visva-Bharati and also the philosophical priorities which Gurudev Tagore articulated with the foundation of Visva-Bharati in 1922. Here, we must also add a caveat because the politico-ideological preferences Gurudev upheld during his lifetime may not be tenable now in 2023, more than a century after the university came into being.

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