

VIDYASAGAR UNIVERSITY

MIDNAPORE



CONVOCATION ADDRESS BY

Barun De

Director, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad

Institute of Asian Studies

Calcutta.

9 JANUARY 1995

Your Excellency, respected Vice-Chancellor, fellow workers in the educational field, students of the University,

I am sensible of the responsibility as well as the honour which attaches to my place today at Vidyasagar University's first Convocation. Initially doubtful about donning a mantle normally granted to people well past their prime, I still could not resist the temptation to communicate with a democratic gathering outside the purlieus of a somewhat somnolent metropolitan elite in the colleges and centres for study in my own city, within which I chose to cast my lot, thirty weary years ago.

West Bengal's rural districts have been to me a familiar haven and a source of friendship and mutual respect for much longer than that. Brought up in the once idyllic railway colonies of Kharagpur and Adra and in little four-wheeler railway saloons parked in leafy stations like Salboni or Godapeasal, in a multi-religious, multi-ethnic, multi-caste, culture of the countryside that brought together the composite values of Indian civilisation in the 1930s and 1940s, I was welcomed in the early 1960s by the fresh young boys and girls, flocking into the nowborn Burdwan University in its Rajbati and Golapbagh from Rasulpur, Bankura, Kamarkundu or even Medinipur.

I still retain fond memories of the early plans for library, examination and curriculum development in which one shared struggles with scholars of the eminence of Jitendranath Mohanty, the late Tarapada Mukherjee, and Mihir Rakshit.

I

In the mid-seventies, my friend, the late Dr. Hitesranjan Sanyal, who introduced me to the Medinipur intelligentsia of the time, took me round the subdivisions and blocks of this District, in many of which old artisan crafts had thrived till the nineteenth century or others in which the great **aimanya andolans** of the 1919--1944 years had germinated — Amarshi, Bajkul or Bhagabanpur, Rayerpara-Nandigram, Mahishadal, Pichaboni or Rangmalaput (where rural proletarian women had fought British colonial henchmen with stark non-violence in the 1930 Salt Satyagraha); Daspur with its terracotta temples second only to Bishnupur, villages in the old Mandaran **Sarkar** celebrated in Bankim's Durgashandini and hal'owed by the birth of Rammohan ; Isvarchandra Vidyasagar, Sri Ramkrishna, or Sir Gurudas Banerjee ; Kharar and Iripala where before 1875, the informants of W. W. Hunter's **Statistical Account of Bengal** heard the clangour of bell-metal were being prepared, resounding from one village to another ; Chandrakona with its fabled **bazaars** and bye-lanes, Binpur and Chilkigarh with their old Chuar

traditions, Karnagarh with its memories of the predecessors of Rani Siromani whose insurgent memory is commemorated even today by this University. People with whom Dr. Sanyal talked, occasionally in social gatherings convened for the occasion as in Rayerpara, could still recall for us the part they played in the local struggle for India's freedom, from the times of Birendranath Sasmal to that of Satish Samanta ; and one had a sense that they felt ennobled by it in a way the rest of Bengal did not.

Again, in the early 1980s, in connection with the work of the West Bengal State Gazetteers, I refreshed my impressions of Medinipur in depth. Its rich cultural heritage marks it out as a subregional marchland between Orissa and Bihar, in which Bengalis have settled from time immemorial, and have particularly — as also in Bankura and Birbhum — been influenced by the tribal values and integrity that Kavikankan Mukundaram celebrated in his **Chandimanga'akavya**, an energy that Gandiya Vaishnavism sought to socially discipline in the new faith and practices of Bhakti as propagated from **mathas** like Gopiballavpur Sripat.

Such distinctive subregional identities can be found in other border districts of our State like Birbhum, Darjeeling, Kuch Bihar or the South 24-Parganas. Each has certain geographical features giving it distinctiveness. In this District, the rolling river basins, whittled down in their higher slopes by

the erosion of age, coming down to marshy flats on the southwestern verge of the Bhagirathi estuary sets this tilting champaign apart from the Gangetic and the Mahanadi deltas looking out to a heavily silting Bay of Bengal. The ecological determination which follows creates variety in the diverse human-natural interaction. Diversities will be found in the other marchland subregions mentioned just now.

The interaction is exemplified in a hardy struggle of tribal and caste-based masses with adverse or favourable forces of nature, terracing fields in the north-west, bunding seepage of water from marshes in the southeast, holding the straying river bends in check in the east, and so on. Then, there is a specific use of rough building materials for public edifices, such as the laterite stone or red brick which give the Medinipur temples or all the Rarhi terracottas their distinctively creative flavour. Importance in such social activity attaches to the organisation of the community. By community, I mean **samudaya** or **gaum**, not **jati** or **varna**, nor **sampradaya** or **firka**; i. e. I mean co-operative cohesion, not communalist fission. Such fusion of what we call tribal or clan characteristics with Hindu or Pathan Muslim caste or communal civilisation marks the predominance of Medinipur culture from more stratified, or hierarchical, or objectively communalist societies.

This social character is explicated in the

co-operative spirit manifested in the entrepreneurial activity of "non-elite" subcastes such as the **Mahishyas**, **Kaivatvas** or **Rajus** of the south or east of the District, a capacity for initiating business ventures all the way from **Alamohan Das'** ill-fated pioneer factories at **Dasnagar** outside **Howrah** to the motorized fishing boats on the **Rupnarayan** and the **Hooghly** River estuary, a capacity for small-scale agro-industry and for fitting into the niches and crevasses of the service sector of industry. The penchant for aggressive social mobility, for standing out, perhaps sometimes like a sore thumb but as often in the pursuit of excellence, occasionally at the expense of less enterprising indigenous neighbours, most notably in the lot lands ("**lat jami**") of the western **Sundarbans** gives some people in the district an affectionate reputation in other parts of south Bengal for "pushiness". Of course, its obverse is the quality depicted by **Sombhu Mitra** in a memorable scene in the Bengali film on "42" when he is tied by his legs to a speeding Army truck and dragged off : of "do or die", a mentality so famously manifested by the masses in the freedom struggle against alien imperialism; whether they were involved like **Khudiram** or **Prafulla Chaki** or the **Daspur** villagers in armed uprisings, or whether they participated in the **Jhargram** forest **satyagraha** of the 1920s, or the **Kanthi** movements from 1919 to 1942, or the **Tamluk** civil disobediences and armed uprising from 1930 to 1944.

II

It is this distinctive character of the West Bengal, Bihar and Orissa marchland trijunction, which the founding fathers of Vidyasagar University surely emphasised when they marked out its confines in terms of territorial jurisdiction demarcated from the Calcutta University, I would suggest that they were correctly equating culture from sub-regional diversity. But before one comes to the positive content of the equation, it would be useful to consider the broader context of essential lattice-work braided structure of which they desired their new University to be a part, even while they sought to establish their diversity.

The old pattern of higher educational collegiate affiliation had sprawled over many variegated regions. At one time, the territorial jurisdiction of Calcutta as a nodal centre stretched from Rangoon and Dhaka in the east to Lahore, the borders of Rajasthan and the Central Provinces and Orissa. The Bengali **bhadralok** class of middle class gentry found jobs as school teachers, lawyers, or doctors all the way from Peshawar to Kuala Lumpur. It is this Bengali diaspora that Rabindranath speaks of in **Noukadubi** or **Gora**, or Saratchandra celebrates in segments of his serial novels **Srikanta**, which acted as a bonding force of Indian Renaissance, of the onset of not only Europeanising modernity, but also of the elements of science and technology. Pramathanath Bose in

the Central Provinces showed the Tatas the way to Swadeshi steelmaking : the Acharyas Jagadishchandra and Prafullachandra sent their best students to teach in Universities like Allahabad, Bangalore, Waltair or Jabalpur. That was the age when my generation's parents were taught that they were neither just Bengalis or Panjabis or Andhras or Chatisgarhias, nor were they just British Indians, camp followers following the drum of a conquering Raj, as some Cambridge educated historians since the 1960s have sought to label them; but that they were Bengalis or Punjabis or Andras' in their linguistic or personal ethnic consciousness, and Indians in their public cultural nationalism. That was the age when nationalism was not supposed to be just an elite ideology representing selfish middle class values — as the supplanters and investors of the Cambridge neo-imperialists the Subaltern Studies group of social scientists straddling the Commonwealth and its U.S. special relationship are now teaching post-modernist academe, Nationalism was, as the eminent Oxford scholar Tapan Raychaudhuri has written a direct challenge to Cambridge historiography, “a fire which ran in the veins” of his generation when it challenged imperialism in 1942, communalism in 1946-47, and indigenous authoritarianism in 1975-77. Nationalism was an outlook, a mentality, an encompassing ideal which met with similar chords of feeling among rich

and poor alike in a multi-class combination which represented the best at one time in Indian higher education, in professional values, in research and development for the national interest.

But by the 1960s and 1970s the pattern of collegiate affiliation according to all-India uniformity, part learned from British Indian regulations in all their bureaucratic inflexibility, part gained from the democratic standards of the federal character of the constitutional institutions of Independent India, which formed a part of the substructure of the ideological affinity for all-India consciousness, had become obsolete. This is not to say that there were no other structures from which all-India consciousness could flow. Certainly an alternative to middle class elitism was peasant national consciousness of the loose and greatly diversified unity of the entire South Asian subcontinent's composite culture, not just majority Hindu (as historians like Dr. R. C Majumdar or politicians like Balraj Madhok averred) nor merely fortified by Indo-Islamic syncratism (as scholars like Maulana Azad or Dr. Tara Chand emphasized in the 1920s to the 1950s) nor just a congeries of religious thoughts — Hindu, Sikh, Jain, Parsee, Muslim, Christian, Buddhist (which is where the Indian ruling class from Dr. Radhakrishnan to present day politicians would leave it, if the present state of the problem of Ayodhya is any guide).

Peasant national consciousness represents many elements. The material relations and forces of production quite apart from political conquest or centralising authority, have led to the ebb and flow of labour, enterprise or traditional intelligentsia from one region to another, Maldah to the Punjab's fields, the Eastern U. P. to Bombay's textile mills, the villages of Rayalaseema in Andhra to Coimbatore's factories. This has created what a very eminent Bangladesh political economist told me a few months back constituted an "integrated labour market" for the SAARC region by and large. The relations of production take new forms as market force liberalisation measures, very much part of world Bank conditionalities and the global policies of the North Atlantic rim, as well as the Asia-Pacific multinationals, bring very speedy changes in consumer culture, media manipulation and capital intensive investment at the cost of mass consumption in India in the last quinquennium of the twentieth century. Migration of social classes in search of gainful or job-satisfactory employment, or just plain release from conditions of regional immiserisation mingles cultural styles into new dimensions of nationality, which can no more be judged by the paradigm of one political party, be it Congress, Bharatiya Janata Party, or Communist Party (Marxist). Diversity is the new look in Indian

national consciousness. If the present upswing in Western reinvestment in India in the 1990s is any guide, diversity surely will increase.

III

But this movement along tracks of new possibilities of diversification of national consciousness in a period of inevitable transition in India's federal politics, has led me far away from the obsolescence of the old affiliating model of Indian Universities. By the 1970s, as the Gajendragadkar Committee of the University Grants Commission or the Ghani Committee on Calcutta University recognised, affiliation meant only uniformity of examination system not of standards as had been the earlier ideal. Colleges were diversely endowed, diversely attractive, diversely underprivileged — some were traditionally well — stocked with library and laboratories and staff — student ratios, others tucked away in the country side without any attraction in terms of staff strength, hostels or other facilities for students or even accommodation for teachers in their neighbourhood. Naturally teachers as well as students were lured by endowments much superior in megalopolises like Calcutta — compared to say Medinipur, Bankura or Berhampur, where the colleges had once competed very well with the second level colleges of North Calcutta. Actually, by the 1970s it was clear that colleges should be allowed to go ahead with their own

creativity in terms of syllabi, mixes, internal evaluation patterns, permission and encouragement to supplement government allocations with donations tax-free from private enterprises which might be interested in sponsoring research and development in selected critical nuclei, which could mix interdisciplinary research with rigorous training in at least one discipline at the postgraduate level.

This was what collegiate autonomy connotes as an ideal — creative freedom to innovate new lines of enquiry in a original way at a time when socio-economic crisis makes it imperative for Indians to embark on creative paths of transition from post colonial obsolescence of neo-capitalist economic stagnation and galloping immiserisation towards a better future for devising practical solutions for mass prosperity. At least that was how the idea of collegiate autonomy was mooted by the Bhabatosh Datta Commission for Planning Higher Education in the 1980s at the level of a selective choice of centres of excellence within university affiliating systems, so as to create "New Models" appropriate for the needs of particular regions — such as Bankura, Berhampur, Darjeeling or Calcutta and its environs in old and well-endowed Colleges such as Bankura Christian, Berhampur Krishnanath, Darjeeling Government, the Ramkrishna Mission at Narendrapur, St. Xavier's

or Presidency.

The Dutta Commission (of which I had the privilege of being an active working member) was the first of two such commission to be appointed by the left Front Government of West Bengal. The now more discussed Ashok Mitra Commission which has received more government support and publicity is its successor. Due to an unfortunate misidentification of stress on diversely creative excellence with elitism which was no part of our definition of autonomy, I understand that the Dutta Commissions voluminous and comprehensive Report was docketed. But it is worth recalling that its recommendations for partial opening of collegiate education to private financial donations in view of the already then predicted funds crunch, or for leaving higher education to the creative energies of the teachers themselves, for diverting the highly bureaucratised Education Directorate's administrative control to a formally autonomous Council for Higher Education, have now been accepted and some are being implemented by Government.

I say this in the context of the recommendations made slightly earlier by Professor Bhabatosh Dutta through yet another Committee for diversification of the sub-regional curricula and educational systems in this University's territorial jurisdictions. As we celebrate Vidyasagar University's first Convo-

cation we need not forget to honour Professor Dutta than whom West Bengal has not had a more devoted servant of creative innovation and encourage of younger minds with values and aims often quite different from his own upright loyalty to his **maatribhumi** and all its scholars, average as well as excellent. One trusts that this University will maintain the tradition of service to democratic educational organization, steadfastness and honesty of purpose, and utter lack of partisan bias that prof. Dutta and some others of his generation or some of his students, like my friend the late Sukhamoy Chakravarty represented, in furthering the cause of Indian higher education, as well as their more well known contribution to Indian economics.

I have been speaking of the dialectics of sub-regional culture and of all Indian compositeness of large, bureaucratic systems of affiliation and decentralizing ones of creative diversification. It may be said that I have had nothing to comment on Vidyasagar University and its student's actual achievements. This is no part of a valedictory bromide. Your respected Vice-Chancellor would have more comparative details to offer from his detailed experience. The difficulties you have faced are well known. There were initial problems of UGC support, the problems of financial release, the competition for

teachers from other University attractors, the enclaving of the colleges of the University away from the Calcutta mainstream, which was surely not the founding fathers' desire. Competition is a more powerful fact of life than co-operation, more's the pity.

But Medinipur, I would like to end by reiterating, is known for its resilience and distinctiveness. One would like to believe that it will make a new mark in the next five years before this century comes to a close, by developing new text book literature in the mother tongue, suitable for the bulk of its rural and small town students who are archetypes of the Eastern Indian scholarly cohorts; new paradigms and formats for looking at transition towards agro-industrial and estuarian cum - riparian investment which must follow if Haldia (and dare I hope, also Kharagpur with its unfortunately now moribund satellite industrial area on the Bombay Road towards Jhargram) are to develop, if the New Industrial Policy (can I call it NIP ?) of 1994 is to bear all Bangiya fruit, new values of impartiality from political rhetoric, uprightness in maintaining correct academic policy, and honesty of independent and at least University autonomy from old models. If the University shows results by producing students who will turn out to be among the best in this part of the subcontinent in the next century, ones who will train

and encourage young people better than themselves — has it not been said that there is nothing more satisfying than to be defeated by one's children and pupils (**putrat Sisyat parajayet**) — then its students will be able to hold their heads high in the educational milieu of New India.

Your Eecellency, allow me to cordially felicitate the students gathered today to receive their degrees and wish them **bon voyage** in their future avocations. Our good wishes go with them. The struggle of life will not necessarily be easy for them. but one trusts they will never lose hope.