

आचार्य
श्री नरेंद्र मोदी

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विश्वभारती
VISVA-BHARATI

(Established by the Parliament of India under
Visva-Bharati Act XXIX of 1951
Vide Notification No. : 40-5/50 G.3 Dt. 14 May, 1951)

संस्थापक

रवीन्द्रनाथ ठाकुर

FOUNDED BY
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My Fourth Missive

10 July, 2020

To my colleagues, students, and other stakeholders surviving on and thriving because of
Visva Bharati:

Basanta Utsav, 2020

This is my Fourth Missive. My aim throughout this series has been to understand why Visva-Bharati is steadily going downhill, despite having a rich legacy and being supported by competent academic and non-academic stakeholders. This is a tragedy which cannot be explained by a mere surface reading of the events that unfold in the campus. Here I shall focus on the 2019 Basant Utsav because that hogged the limelight for having caused a pandemonium. Following the completion of the dance drama on the day of *Basanta Utsav* in March, 2019, the process that finally culminated in a pandemonium had begun. Visva-Bharati has academic faculties that are known for their original work, and there are very bright students in each and every department. Perhaps it is due to the inadequate nurturing of talents that Visva-Bharati is lagging behind in the NAAC and NIRF ranking. As always, my purpose here is not to avoid responsibility by putting the blame on others. As one of the members of the Visva-Bharati family, I do shoulder the responsibility along with my likeminded colleagues and other stakeholders, which is especially significant because our circumstances are such that various members of this Parivar, both faculty and non-faculty members, seem to be content slandering Visva-Bharati for satisfying their partisan designs.

Interestingly, the survival and growth of the economy in and around Visva-Bharati depend on a healthy Visva-Bharati. As I mentioned in my third missive of 4 July, 2020, there are two signature events, *Poush Mela* and *Poush Utsav* and *Basanta Utsav*, which bring people to Santiniketan from all over the world; this flow of tourists twice a year, alongside the general glut of tourists that Bolpur sees throughout the year for Tagore-related reasons, provide a steady source of income for businesses all over Santiniketan, such as museums, hospitality services, what have you.

The last missive was about Poush Mela which unfairly saddled the University with multiple legal and financial issues, purely because the administration had sought to honour the strict instructions of the National Green Tribunal. There is no need to repeat what caused us (those associated with holding Mela in which the local businessmen earned an income) this terrible suffering. This Missive shall focus on another signature event, *Basanta Utsav*.

Historically speaking, *Basanta Utsav* was, initially, a spring festival; one that Ashramites celebrated to usher in a new season. Instead of covering how it evolved, suffice it to say here that *Basanta Utsav* was never meant to be celebrated on the day of Dol Purnima (the day of Holi), despite the fact that those who lived in the campus back then did play Dol with Aabir/Gulal. In 1931, as Sri Shantidev Ghosh reminisced, he and a student from Kala Bhawan, Sri Banabihari Ghosh, staged a spontaneous dance performance, which Gurudev Tagore appreciated. This was the beginning of the dance performance tradition during the *Basanta Utsav*. In this same recollection, Sri Shantidev Ghosh admitted that Gurudev did not approve of the way Dol Utsav was celebrated since the participants “threw mud and ink on others besides being involved in various filthy kinds of activities”. This clearly shows that Gurudev was vehemently opposed to the unsavoury practices that were justified in the name of Dol celebrations. So as to bring order to the celebrations, Gurudev himself set out rules and regulations for a disciplined *Basanta Utsav*. A note of disenchantment was recorded in 1938 when a student misbehaved in *Baitalik* (early morning procession on the Ashram area) which was expressed in a remark highlighting that “uncontrolled enjoyment resulted in unruly behaviour which not only caused shame to us but also debilitated the heavenly fun of the Utsav”.

The rapid degeneration of the Utsav started in 1982 during the reign of Prof. Amlan Dutta as Visva-Bharati Vice Chancellor. There were reports that the crowds then attending the celebration climbed and sat on the branches of the mango trees in the *Amra Kunja*. Due to the

falling of branches, there was pandemonium and also multiple cases of injury. Not only this, the unruly crowd even outraged the modesty of many participants and attendees. Prof. Dutta decided not to hold *Basanta Utsav* then, largely due to these untoward events that had defamed Visva-Bharati. *The Hindustan Standard* (in its edition of 1 March, 1982) expressed this sentiment very clearly by stating that “The Holi revellers last year allegedly indulged in unseemly behaviour; as a result, the *Karmi Mandali*, the association of the non-teaching staff resolved to dissociate from the festivity on the Holi day”. *Basanta Utsav* was held then at a reduced scale.

After my joining Visva-Bharati as a member of the Parivar, I witnessed the first *Basanta Utsav* in 2019. The Utsav was held in the ashram ground, in view of the surging number of onlookers and participants. It was held on the day of Dol Purnima; people from all over the country descended onto Bolpur and the campus of Visva-Bharati. As usual, we had several meeting with the police and local administration to manage the festival in a civilized manner. Visva-Bharati followed the instructions that the police and local administration had given. We spent several lakhs of rupees though we had no income; furthermore, for organizing festivals, neither the UGC nor the MHRD provides funds, which left the University with no option but to depend on the revenue meant for campus development.

As per the police’s estimate more than 250,000 people joined the festival although the ground was too small to accommodate that many. The results were obvious: massive traffic jams throughout the town of Bolpur, and the roads chock-a-block with vehicles. The traffic management appeared to have collapsed, probably due to the miscalculation of the number of likely attendees.

Pandemonium broke out once the programme was over. As everybody wanted to leave the ground as soon as possible, the crowd was simply unmanageable. There was also the fear of stampedes as the surge of the crowd was sudden. Many of those who came to enjoy the dance performances were stuck for hours just crossing the furlongs and hence were unable to either catch their trains in time or reach their residences on campus and its vicinity. Many sent SOS to the police and the administration for aiding old people and children. The entire campus witnessed a breakdown of law and order, and also a complete lack of basic human concern. Many women spectators were reportedly manhandled and molested. According to some of the women complainants, they had no alternative but to subject themselves to such humiliation, lest they suffer more severe bodily harm. Those who had a chance to consume the Facebook

coverage of the chaos will testify the nature of the agony that these women attendees had to suffer.

It was a hot day, and so many spectators suffered as they had no access to drinking water. Because there were more spectators than Visva-Bharati's administration had expected, the water pouches for the participants and spectators soon ran out, which were replenished in the form of water tanks kept near the venue. It also needs to be highlighted that the supply of plastic pouches enraged a self-declared environmentalist, who lodged a complaint with the National Green Tribunal and even filed a case against Visva-Bharati, for which University continues to spend money despite being blameless in the matter.

Our female students, both performers and members of the audience, were also physically molested and heckled. The unthinkable happened near the Pratima Hostel, where our girl students were hounded by miscreants from outside the campus. Our security staff went and managed the situation, though there were girl students who suffered due to the suddenness of the attack.

Bolpur town remained out of bounds till early evening, though the programme was over at 10 AM. What is sought to be conveyed here is that neither the police, nor the local administration, and nor the university security staff was equipped to manage the sudden surge of people on this occasion. Visva-Bharati was helpless.

What were the other causes of the serious contemplation we (administration, teachers, students and non-teaching staff) undertook in the meeting immediately after *Basanta Utsav*?

- 1) When we (teachers, students, non-teaching staff, Patha Bhavana and Siksha Satra students and our NSS volunteers) embarked on cleaning the ground where *Basanta Utsav* took place, we found many alcohol bottles, to dump which we needed 35 bags. I am mentioning the number of bags to prove that many of the tourists consumed alcohol during the programme which partly explains the unruly behaviour many of them engaged in.
- 2) While cleaning the ground, we also found foodstuff, which confirms that those who came to enjoy the programme were fully prepared to spend the day there as they used the ground for eating their lunch. What caused even more consternation was the discovery of non-vegetarian foodstuff (chicken and mutton preparation), which is strictly forbidden in the Ashram.

- 3) Aside from the food and plastic bags littered all over, the ground was extra filthy because for many of the onlookers, it had served as a toilet; we thus had to even clean human excreta.
- 4) After four constant hours of work, the Ashram ground was brought back to normal.

In view of the above, we, in a meeting, decided not to go ahead with the holding of *Basanta Utsav* henceforth. The University Court member, Dr. Swapan Dasgupta, the hon'ble member of Rajya Sabha, was informed and he also agreed that since Visva-Bharati was not an event manager, it was difficult for the University to organize such a gigantic event. He reported this in his intervention in the Rajya Sabha. We however wanted to continue with this longstanding tradition, albeit on a small scale. We, in another meeting, resolved to hold *Basanta Utsav* during February-March on a day of Purnima, if possible, by strictly following the Ashramite traditions. Once this was announced, the Government of West Bengal consented to help Visva-Bharati marshal resources for a successful *Basanta Utsav* in 2020 on the day of *Dol Purnima*, since it is also a signature event for West Bengal. Visva-Bharati agreed, so as to prevent the degeneration of *Basanta Utsav* into *Basanta Tandav* (calamity). Unfortunately, due to the outbreak of COVID-19, it was not possible for Visva-Bharati to go ahead with the Utsav after the UGC in its letter of 5 March, 2020 asked "the universities to avoid large gatherings". We had to take this decision with a heavy heart—calling off the celebration was the best antidote available to us, and we were bound by the UGC instruction. We are thankful to the government of West Bengal, especially the hon'ble Chief Minister, Madam Mamata Banerjee, the hon'ble ministers, Sri Firhad Hakim and Dr. Partha Chatterjee, the SP-led Birbhum police administration and the DM-steered local administration for the sincere effort they had made towards throwing a successful *Basanta Utsav* in 2020.

I hope this explanation has made the administrative decision regarding *Basanta Utsav* clear. As always, I urge you to stay safe and stay connected.

Keep the faith,

Bidyut Chakrabarty
Bidyut Chakrabarty 10/07/2020



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