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विश्वभारती
VISVA-BHARATI
(Established by the Parliament of India under
Visva-Bharati Act XXIX of 1951
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संस्थापक
रवीन्द्रनाथ ठाकुर
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My Fifth Missive

18 July, 2020

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

After I joined Visva-Bharati in late 2018, I was told that the University has inherent advantages given the support extended by *Ashramites*, *Praktanis* (Alumni) and *Rabindriks* (those inspired by Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore being a *karmayogin* and humanist). I was delighted by the prospect of this reportedly easily available spontaneous support. The *Ashramites* especially were said to be *Marg-Darshaks* (path-finders) for the university. On various occasions, especially during the Poush Mela and Basanta Utsav, I met many of them and received their often-valuable advice. Their story-telling is a very useful way of comprehending how Visva-Bharati evolved as a globally-reputed centre of learning with inclusive cultural values that emanated from the Tagorean creative instinct to blend what we have learnt from outside with what we have imbibed from being an Indian. *Praktanis* were kind enough to offer many helpful suggestions and well-thought-out directions, besides their sincere involvement in working for the welfare of the University. A clear majority of those who work in various capacities in the University are alumni. In other words, many teachers, non-teaching staff and well-wishers of Visva-Bharati belong to this category, though there is a sizeable number of colleagues, both from teaching and non-teaching segments who are neither *Ashramites* nor *Praktanis* but outsiders, who are unfortunately often made to feel as if they can never truly belong to this vast legacy.

What is most striking in the campus is the mushrooming of *Rabindriks*. I haven't come across anyone associated with Visva-Bharati who has declared themselves as non-*Rabindriks*. Now, who are these *Rabindriks*? Irrespective of whether they are *Ashramites*, *Praktanis* or outsiders, everybody claims to be *Rabindrik*, which connotes that they are politico-ideologically baptized in the socio-political ideas

of Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore which are expressed in his writings. However, I have increasingly come to realize that claiming to be *Rabindrik* is more often than not just a cloak used to justify many things which do not appear to be what Gurudev would have approved of. *Rabindrik* is also a blanket expression resorted to by everybody surviving (and also thriving) because of the existence of Visva-Bharati which is, as I described in my last missive, the only industry in the district of Birbhum. This institution is an industry that is constantly giving to both those on its payroll and to those who eke out a living by being involved in activities which would not have existed without Visva-Bharati.

Rabindrik as an expression is hardly complicated. It refers to those who are drawn to Gurudev's socio-cultural values that have to do with human beings' socio-economic uplift. This is a most laudable humanitarian concern, because Gurudev has indeed taught us that our humanity is bound up with the humanity of others. For Tagore, the key to our existence as human beings is the concern for other human beings. This idea does not seem to be unusual, since he was raised in a colonial environment where the Enlightenment values were paramount. Appreciative of compassion care and concern (3 Cs), Gurudev articulated these ideas in his creative texts. It is therefore not surprising that Gora was vehemently against receiving the hospitality of the British lackey, Madhav Chattujee, preferring instead to stay under the roof of a compassionate barber couple who sheltered a Muslim boy, Tamiz, whose father Faru was arrested for having challenged the agent of the indigo planters. In his 1904 *Swadeshi Samaj*, Tagore reiterated these thoughts by devising various practical schemes for ensuring the well-being of villages in India. He admitted that it was difficult for him to take care of the country as a whole, but he was capable of addressing the socio-economic ills of one or two villages. A pragmatist to the core, Gurudev came up with very workable schemes, and adopted fifty villages around Santiniketan when he founded Visva-Bharati in 1921. Instead of merely supporting the villagers monetarily, he deployed volunteers to teach them various kinds of skills so that they could survive independently. This vocational training programme flourished presumably because Visva-Bharati back then had many selfless volunteers who were not in it for the money, and were instead devoted wholeheartedly to their mission for helping the poor. The result was obvious: villagers came in contact with the students and volunteers from Visva-Bharati, which allowed the former to understand the latter and vice versa. A new era was ushered in of which Gurudev was the main architect. His endeavour was complemented by many of his colleagues and it was a matter of common knowledge that quite few of these colleagues didn't receive a salary sizeable enough to make two ends meet. Thus, they were volunteers in the true sense, and they worked uncomplainingly because they had internalized the *Rabindrik* spirit of sacrifice and community service. To many of us, this sounds absolutely utopian: how can selfless work be gratifying in itself? The record however shows that unconditional love for Gurudev

Rabindranath Tagore, faith in his message, and concern for the Ashram led these extraordinary proto-*Rabindriks* to abdicate worldly comfort. Examples abound.

I would claim that *Rabindrik* is a conceptual category comprising a set of Dos and Don'ts. Even a casual reading of the texts that Gurudev left for posterity reveal this:-

1. One of the major pillars of being *Rabindrik* is the concerted effort to become self-dependent. The activities that Nikhilesh of *Ghare-Baire* had undertaken epitomizes what Tagore had in mind. His primary concern was to generate zeal for works contributing to collective good. This is, in Tagore's words, *Atmoshaktir Udbodhon* (generation of the urge for being self-dependent). In his famous 1874 lectures, later published with the title *Village Republic of the East*, Henry Maine attributed the inner strength of the villages of the east to this urge, which was sadly missing in the West, he lamented. This *Atmashakti* does not seem to have disappeared from *Visva-Bharati* though there is a miniscule group of partisan critics who are driven solely by their selfish motives. We are happy to declare that faculty members, non-teaching staff, students, stakeholders and other well-wishers of the University spontaneously came forward to support our endeavours to provide relief to the hapless villagers who had lost their sources of livelihood due to lockdown in the wake of the outbreak of COVID 19. Our relief operation continued for close to three months with voluntary donations, both in cash and kind. When we undertook the uprooting of the poisonous parthenium in and around the campus, it was also illustrative of *Atmoshaktir Udbodhon*.
2. *Rabindrik* was articulated by Tagore as a means to show concern for the socio-economically marginalized sections of society. The institution of Poush Mela, Magh Mela, among others, drew on this concept. Tagore felt that the Melas provided the local artisans with a forum to showcase their talents and also sell their products to earn a livelihood. Besides the commercial aspect of Melas, Gurudev also believed that these collective gatherings helped evolve bonhomie among the people scattered in many villages.
3. The Melas, as per Tagore, were meant to create a milieu in which Hindus and Muslims would come together, which was a stepping stone towards building communal amity among the religiously divided people. This was perhaps the most innovative way of bringing about and consolidating fraternity regardless of religious, ethnic and socio-economic chasms. For Tagore, the primary concern was to develop a mindset supportive of each other irrespective of differences in socio-cultural existence and practices. This conceptual intervention was contrary to what his colleagues in the Congress mainstream devised: as

is well-known, the 1916 Lucknow Pact, the 1920-22 Non-Cooperation-Khilafat merger, and also the 1924 CR Das-designed Bengal Pact took Hindus and Muslims as two socio-culturally disparate communities. There is no denying the fact that the institutional recognition of communal differences between Hindus and Muslims undoubtedly gave a fillip to those who thrived on socio-cultural divisions and partly justified the claim for Partition as the only option available to attain political freedom for India. However, Tagore felt otherwise; in his perception, Hindus and Muslims were never separate communities since they were born and raised in a similar environment. What was thus required was to create a mindset that helped bring them together as brothers and sisters. His zamindari estate in Silaidaha in the erstwhile east Bengal and later in Santiniketan, were sites for his many anti-communal ventures. In a nutshell, Gurudev was perhaps one of those rare thinkers whose unique socio-political views were conceptual designs to permanently address the issues separating Hindus from their Muslim brothers and sisters. This is especially desirable now, when we seem to have underplayed the dictum *Sabar Upar Manush Satya Tahar Upar Nai* (Human beings are always prior to anything else).

4. What was most explicit was Gurudev's own description of being *Rabindrik* which he explained categorically in his personal interaction with the essayist Sajani Kanto Das, saying that "it caught [him] by surprise that those who are capable of dividing fraternity among the communities become national leaders in [Bengal]. That is why instead of bringing the communities together, people here congregate to destroy the bonhomie as it gives them pleasure out of devastation". Gurudev also admitted near the end of his life that "I am physically not as strong as I was before and yet I derive immense pleasure when I am involved in activities contributing to the mass well-being. I nurture the desire to join those who have devoted wholeheartedly to the well-being of the deserving". These are very useful statements for comprehending what being *Rabindrik* was to Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore. He believed in working hard to ensure that no one is bereft of the things that are essential for human survival, which reinforces his idea that we exist for others. This was evident when Gurudev reminisced that during the period between 1925 and 1928, the villagers cleaned the weeds, built drains and also arranged free medical treatment in Ballavpur; they started growing vegetables in their kitchen gardens; furthermore, the Santal women were also being trained as weavers. The aim of these projects was to bring about and nurture an attitude of self-reliance. In so inculcating the idea of self-dependent collectivity, Gurudev took special care to involve communities with different religious denominations: not only were Hindus welcome, but Muslims, tribals

and many non-institutionalized religious groups also came together for the cause.

Having understood what Tagore meant by being *Rabindrik*, let us ponder on how the idea got distorted in service of partisan aims. Tagore had always believed in the power of the statement ‘*Aai Tobe Sahachari Hate Hat Dhari Dhari Nachibo Ghiri Ghiri Gahibo Gaan*’ (Let’s join hand together to sing and dance [for all]). This is why I see Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore as not just an individual, but an idea, an ideological voice, an ongoing experiment for humanitarian causes. Gurudev is not a means to gratify personal ends by hook or by crook; his legacy is the inheritance of not just Bengalis but of humanity as a whole. Tagore is essentially a mode of praxis, or an ethos of work. And, that is why I am certain that if he were alive today to see the current functioning of the University, we all would have been at the receiving end of some caustic remarks in his *Charitrapuja* or in his essay, *Paraninda*.

I am engaged in locating what has caused the steady deterioration of Visva-Bharati over the last few decades, and my Missives are meant to explore the reasons by objectively understanding the socio-economic and political milieu in which the University had to function. But let’s look inward for a bit, and no longer hesitate to admit that we all have a hand in perpetuating this culture of decay. The vast majority of us don’t mind if rules are flouted conveniently. No eyebrows were raised when an officially advertised post for one Assistant Professor led to the illegal hiring of three others, which did not escape the Audit Team’s attention; four increments were given and the objection of the Audit Team forced the University administration to take unpleasant decisions. We remained silent when the Vice Chancellor was abused verbally in a public gathering by reference to his deceased father, in the presence of three other academic colleagues who seemed agreeable to this perhaps, because they were denied certain benefits by the present administration that were against the rules. Does being *Rabindrik* mean ignoring one’s commitment to the University and its students, instead constantly commuting to other places in an ostensible effort to spread the *Rabindrik* spirit? The charge that Visva-Bharati awakens with the arrival of Ganadevata Express in Bolpur and slumbers once Santiniketan Express leaves Bolpur station by 12-45 pm may be exaggerated but it does not appear to be entirely devoid of substance.

Rabindrik is a handy label which some of our detractors happily resort to as a coverup for their less than savoury designs, such as hitting the Visva-Bharati administration with false charges when the Poush Mela was not allowed to continue beyond four days as per the National Green Tribunal order. The lack of campus unity is tragic: when some of our colleagues were undergoing severe suffering for no fault of their own, the so-called “Left” associates of Visva-Bharati were exchanging joyful Whatsapp messages to that effect (on 21 June,

2020). If the Visva-Bharati Executive Council is forced to discontinue the *Basanta Tandab* (Basanta Calamity), it is subject to vehement criticism since the decision cuts off many sources of legal/illegal income.

We tend to talk of *Rabindrik* tradition, but barring a select few, how many of us participate in carrying forward the tradition of the regular Wednesday Mandirs? How many of us are involved in the monthly cleaning of the campus? How many of us came out to lend a hand with the uprooting of Parthenium, a poisonous weed that spread in the campus like wildfire? It is very sad, but to most of us, the *Rabindrik* tradition is only useful when it contributes directly to our personal well-being and not the welfare of the institution that has been providing us with our livelihood and social respectability. What is *Rabindrik*, then? Is offering a job to someone who did not even have the basic degree in the concerned discipline, *Rabindrik*? Can it be called *Rabindrik* if members of the administration illegally enhance the number of posts to accommodate its ilk? Is it *Rabindrik* when certain *Praktanis* shed crocodile tears in public statements, but hardly part with a single paisa when Visva-Bharati embarks on welfare activities? Is the pampering of English medium schools since they are an easy and steady source of profit, *Rabindrik*? I am sure that you will agree with me that these are not instances of *Rabindrik* behaviour, and that these sections must be called out on their decidedly anti-*Rabindrik* schemes. Let us not be apathetic in the face of the institutional decay of Visva-Bharati.

I conclude this Missive with the hope of evolving a mindset exclusively tuned to Visva-Bharati's well-being. We have had the fortune of serving this great institution that Gurudev had founded to translate into reality his unique humanitarian vision. It is time to be thankful for this privilege, and infuse our work with gratitude.

As always, I urge you to remain socially connected in these trying times while observing physical distancing.

Keep the faith.

Bidyut Chakrabarty
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18/07/2020



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