

Missive

From the desk of the Vice Chancellor
11 September, 2023

“Pen is mightier than sword”. This is a widely-circulated proverb. Many of us thus carry a pen in our pocket to feel empowered because pen is equated with a sword. Implicit here is the claim that most of us appear to have failed to understand the inner meaning of this proverb. Hence, instead of combating the ideas conceptually and also intellectually, those who are unable to comprehend the actual meaning make virulent attacks on any of the well-thought-out text by making one or two lines of statement in the press. Their responsibility is thus over. But, in so doing, they also expose their intellectual bankruptcy and yet, they are all working in this globally reputed academic centre of learning, known as Visva-Bharati. Not only does it demonstrate their intellectual vacuousness but also underline the height of immorality since they are drawing fat salaries by not being adequately respectful to their *dharma* as Visva-Bharati’s paid employees. I am likely to be misunderstood since those who receive salary which they do not deserve shall distort my thoughts as if I am including all. Not, at all. There is a miniscule of the academics who keep on doing what they are expected by being part of this intellectual centre of knowledge generation and dissemination. So, please read this snippet keeping in mind that I qualify my assessment with the above proviso.

How are teachers assessed. In the West, in the preparation of a teacher’s report card, the assessment by student is an important criterion, besides, of course, publications, the capability of getting projects and also preparing students for the wider world as proficient enough for contributing to the development of the field of his/her expertise. In India, the student assessment is an anathema; so, Visva-Bharati cannot be an exception. This list of publications of those associated with Visva-Bharati does not seem to be exciting; our doctoral students, barring a few, may not have received the skill to compete with their counterparts in the rest of the world. I am intrigued by the fact that there is one department which is sought after in most of the universities globally because the students who are fortunate enough to get degrees from this department get instantaneous placement in the job market. Unfortunately, the students passing out of this concerned department at Visva-Bharati appear to be unemployable. One of the reasons is certainly the nature of training and also the trainers who appear to be inadequately equipped to prepare our students to stand out in the midst of students from other campuses. This is a bitter truth; but, unfortunately, a reality at Visva-Bharati. There are many departments which are also on the same plane; despite having identified the source of weaknesses, it is not an easy job even for the extra-terrestrial forces to set things right unless the desire comes from within which also does not seem to be possible because “who will bell the cat”.

About landsharks, I refer to them in my earlier snippet. I have never targeted an individual. Why because there are many landsharks in the campus who happily enjoy the illegally appropriated leased land of Visva-Bharati. But, whenever, I refer to the vicious roles of these landsharks, the press, the incapable teachers and equally emaciated stakeholders highlight one name presumably because the name of the individual will enable them to prove that they are nothing but lackeys of those wielding power, unfortunately. I am helpless because these half- educated and venomous individuals lack the capacity to understand a statement in its nuanced fashion and also complexity. I know, I am expecting too much from them because they are under the spectre of the ghost of innocence or the ism of harming others by hook or

crook which, they know, will not succeed because keeping a pen in one's pocket does not make one mightier.

II

Visva-Bharati and other universities in West Bengal which, with good intentions, were founded in the close proximity to Kolkata never took off due to attitudinal problems of those who earn their livelihood and obtain other worldly comforts by being associated with these universities; they are habituated to disappear as soon as they get a chance. This appears to be a recurring problem confronting these institutions of higher learning. If the authority takes punitive actions, those who are accustomed to enjoy such benefits of leaving the campus at the slightest opportunity are likely to be annoyed and disgruntled as they are reminded that this is a morally bad practice. It is strange that many of those who hold high offices suddenly remember their indispensable role as care-givers to their close kith and kins and also their pets when such an occasion arises. For one who sees these activities by applying a little bit of their intelligence will immediately realize that habits do not die so soon, and bad habits never die. I am saying this as I have experienced this while being Visva-Bharati's Vice Chancellor since 2018. What is also striking that those who cannot change their well-ingrained habit are also reluctant to rescind their position in the University administration. Those who leave often refer to their responsibilities towards others ignoring that their advice/help may be required in case an Emergency occurs in the campus.

III

We live in a state that has fascist leanings. Here, the Universities are soft targets; what is worse is the relentless attack especially on Visva-Bharati's authorities, especially the Vice Chancellor as he is engaged in cleansing the campus of the rogues. The landsharks, the truant teaching and non-teaching staff members are under the scanner and the authority follows zero tolerance vis-à-vis them regardless of the deployment of means by the fascist state. What is worse is the reckless behaviour of the police who are supposed to be neutral law-enforcement agency. There is a long history behind this. The earlier regimes utilized the coercive instruments indiscriminately to seemingly please the individuals wielding institutional authority. A careful reading of history of the state however reveals that these regimes are transitional and will soon become part of history. The Nazi regime, despite unleashing inhuman torture to those battling for justice and fairness, had the same fate as that of the state, governed by the Italian supremo Benito Mussolini. India stands out as our glorious nationalist history illustrates. Fascism is ephemeral. And, effective challenge is the only option to weed-out those fallen men and women completely from their worldly existence. The crux of this small paragraph is that FASCISTS and their minions cannot last long as their foundation is too fragile to sustain these regimes seeking to permanently stop the voice and endeavour opposed to them.

IV

Leaving the campus at the slightest pretext seems to be a chronic disease of Visva-Bharati. As I witnessed at outset, I was almost drawn to the conclusion that the disease appeared to have been incurable. No medicine works as effectively as it does elsewhere in the globe presumably because it was a disease of the mindset which gained ground over many years although I always considered that however well-entrenched the root of the disease was, it

could never be insurmountable. With sustained effort and also with adequate support from many of my like-minded colleagues, the spread of the disease was controlled and that mindset helping it to become viral appears to be changing. History will testify whether our endeavour yielded the results we expected.

Why as teachers and other staff members of this great institution prefer to do when it is immoral, contrarian to service terms and conditions and clearly deviant from the *dharma* of what we are supposed to do in exchange of fat salaries and other concomitant benefits? This is a million-dollar question. While seeking to unearth the reasons for such a deviant behaviour, I end up with some possible answers. Prominent among them is our ingrained lack of responsibility. We are not used to discharge our responsibilities which are integral to other service and yet we are a pampered community, especially in those academic institutions which are funded by public money, in terms of salary and other worldly benefits. Our customers/clients are students who generally avoid to assert themselves to get what is due to them because they appear to be scared of the teachers who decide their fate in the examination. There are umpteen number of cases where students were mercilessly penalized by the teachers since they were identified by the latter as truants. The second reason is the absence of accountability. As is well-known, teachers especially in our part of the world do not have bosses; and, if the institutional bosses exert their authority, they are immediately pulled down politically and other means by those blessed by the bosses. The third important reason relates to our failure to introduce “student assessment systems” which are very common in the West. In India, this system has its pitfalls because the students, as they are young, and have reasons to be gullible on occasions due to complex sets of reasons, may be restrained to express their frank opinion about their teachers freely. Furthermore, there are motivated teachers, always busy in disturbing their colleagues, take this opportunity to instigate students to write about their teachers what they want them to write. This will certainly be a source of irritation and sources of discomfort to the teachers who may not be assessed objectively by the taught. In view of this, this method of assessment of teachers does not seem to be persuasive; instead, it provides the students and their prejudiced mentors with an instrument to trouble others in the campus.

So, what is the best option to attract teachers to remain in the campus. Enhancement of emoluments does **not** act decisively as the implementation of the pay scale following the recommendation of the Seventh Pay Commission may not be as effective as it seems. Teachers cannot be forced to do whatever they are expected to do by charting out a set of dos and don'ts as human beings tend to enjoy by breaking what they have been asked to avoid doing. In other words, the application of means which are applied in other field of human activities shall not work, at all, because being truant runs in their DNA. Let me qualify my view. I don't club all teachers in the same category; I am ready to accept that there are teachers who are conscientious and being sensitive to their duties, they hardly need to be told about their duties as teachers. My concern is about those few rotten souls who, despite being warned, show-caused and punished, hardly bother presumably because of their thick skin.

The crux of my discussion hinges on the claim that we, as teachers, are required to develop and be respectful to those concerns which are integrally connected with the building of a nation. This is most urgent for a decolonized country like India which is, despite being civilizationally in unison, socio-culturally disparate. Important here is the mindset ready to appreciate that as teachers, we have a great responsibility to the nation and also future

generations. An appropriate mindset supportive to the cause is required to be generated, but, if it is otherwise, it will devastatingly harm the nation and its citizens beyond repair.

Truant Employees of Visva-Bharati (?)

I begin this section with a subsection that ends with a question mark which means that the idea implied in the subheading may not be universally true.

Let me begin with a story which was published in *Ananda bazar Patrika* of 7 September (Birbhum section) with the heading that a teacher of a particular department has not taken the number of classes as per UGC norms. The number of classes that he is supposed to take is far less than the allotted number (according to UGC guidelines) of classes. The charge may be valid and may also be unfounded since the teacher concerned is likely to deny. So, the authority has conflicting evidences. We have a mechanism which the Hon'ble Court also takes into account while deciding the fate of a complaint. There is nothing called *fait accompli*.

After joining Visva-Bharati, two issues intrigued me: first, the absence of large number of non-teaching employees during the office hours although when it came to overtime work, many of them were present. I was anguished because I felt that the office was inundated with works which our colleagues were unable to complete during the normal office hours; and, hence, they needed overtime. But the story was different: many of them were not found to be busy to do what they were supposed to do during the office hours; they remained busy in works other than office works which justified overtime. I stopped overtime on the basis of circumstantial evidence and now nobody needs to work beyond office hours. Hence, the university has saved crores of Rupees which were regularly siphoned off illegally.

Similarly, the same was true of the teachers. Students are too scared to complain against teachers because they are the ones who set the questions papers, they examine the scripts and they also award marks. In other words, they decide the fate of a student. Hence, even if the teachers do not take their allotted classes, they remained out of students' telescopic attention except when the concerned teachers have enemies from among their colleagues who instigate the students to lodge complaints against their "enemy". An example will suffice here. There was a student who took five years to complete his/her undergraduate degree, the normal duration of which is three years. This student never got even one mark more than the pass marks in Mathematics in any of the examinations s/he wrote. In the entrance text, surprisingly, s/he got 100 out of 100, I am told by the Principal of that Bhawan. Isn't it surprising. Later, I am told by the same Principal that the Mathematic question paper was leaked to him/her well in advance and the result was obvious.

In the same fashion, when I joined Visva-Bharati as its Vice Chancellor in late 2018, I was told by many from within the campus and outside that teachers do not come to the campus regularly to take their classes. I found it to be true because on my *incognito* visit to the Bolpur Railway Station at the beginning of my term in 2018 when my face was not known to the rest I found that one particular compartment of a particular Kolkata-bound train was stuffed regularly by teachers and also non-teaching staff members of Visva-Bharati. Later on, it was perhaps stopped. I regularly visited many departments. There I found that although a teacher had an allotted class, s/he was absent. This was not my experience on the basis of just one day visit. Many of my *impromptu* visits to the departments here at the Santiniketan and

Sriniketan Campuses substantiated the claim. It is also surprising that the response of the Heads of the Department were the same: on the day of my visit to the department, I received the familiar responses from the heads of the Department : the concerned teacher was absent on the day of my visit, but s/he was regular otherwise. Now, I don't have concrete evidence because teaching and other commitment of our teachers and non-teaching staff members should be fulfilled since they are paid; they don't do a charity. I have derived the conclusion on the basis of circumstantial evidence. I shall give you two examples: during my many visits to the departments of Economics, English, Philosophy, and also some of the other departments (Sangeet Bhawan, Kala Bhawan, Siksha Bhawan) among others, I never found evidences to change my views. The phenomenon of truant teachers seems to be universal. The scene appears to be a little better in Sriniketan; Still there are teachers who are the same. I found that many of the teachers were truant: I don't know whether this was a coincidence that every time when I visit the departments, I got the same answer: the teachers concerned were otherwise regular, but on the day of visit, they were absent because of some emergency work. Isn't it a source of being intrigued? It is true, I did not take photographs, I did not get a declaration from the Heads; but, I am sure, many Heads will be truthful enough to say what happened when the Vice Chancellor visited the departments. The charge made against me is based on the desire to fulfil some personal grudge. These truant employees happily forget that what they are doing is *hara-kiri* because the habit of not being present will ultimately affect the institution which gives them more than what is usually defined as subsistence allowances; and once that is stopped, their future shall invariably be bleak.

There is another problem confronting the administration. The Heads of the Departments, the Principal restrain themselves from taking decisions which, they think, will affect them adversely although they are aware that their decisions are rule-driven. They get scared because the teachers (who sometime adopt the attitude of non-teachers) can go to any extent to harm them, their reputation, and their social standing. What is worse is the fact that these deviant teachers instigate students to attack the teachers below the belt. Hence, on many occasions, the administration has to swallow the bitter pill. The Heads and Principals tend to avoid being targeted which was a source of their apprehension that they will unnecessarily be harassed.

The truant teachers, along with deviant students are always busy to sharpen their coercive instruments which are, to quote Gurudev Tagore, "not made of metal, but of abuse with chosen expletives directed to socially defame and humiliate those who stand to defend the institution" (Sajani Kanto Das, *Karmi Rabindranath*, p. 29). They gain satisfaction by characterizing the rest of the teachers as "Minions and Lackeys". Those who are abused remain silent which by implication means that either they admit what they told or they are too scared to raise their voice, or they remain indifferent with the view that the abuse makes no impact on them. If the teachers who are there to generate and disseminate knowledge are busy in collecting weapons to harm the authority, especially the Vice Chancellor, will they have enough time to concentrate on academic feat which is essential to go up in the ladder in the NIRF and NAAC ranking. The blame is given to the Vice Chancellor ignoring, rather conveniently, his sustained academic works which are available in the public domain.

There are many who were denied promotion and the Vice Chancellor is held responsible for this. Those who attended the Selection Committee Meeting shall vouch that the Vice Chancellor had never intervened. The proceedings are recorded; they are confidential. But in

course of time, they will be made public and the future generation will have realized how a Vice Chancellor along with his like-minded colleagues endeavoured hard to recruit the best of the best and also promotion was not given to those who were academically not fit enough to be upgraded. I was disappointed by many of my colleagues who were not promoted when I found them even incapable of expressing their ideas in meaningfully in English. I am not a defender of English. But so long as it remains the official medium of instruction, the university authority is helpless; furthermore, the experts are generally non-Bengalis. Hence, for them, the mode of communication with the candidate is, by default, English.

The Vice Chancellor comes and goes after a term of five years, if s/he is allowed to complete the term. The faculty members, no-teaching staff members, students and other stakeholders shall remain. If the deviant teachers are involved in seeking help from outsiders, where will they get time for academic works and even teaching in the class, and required office works? The University will go downhill. Absenting from the regular rituals which are also part of Visva-Bharati will make this unique heritage University lose its unique character to the disappointment of humanity which was always upheld by the founder of this great centre of learning, Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore. Isn't it a source of anguish for those who work day-and-night for safeguarding this Institution of global repute.

I shall end this text with a note of great satisfaction. When a globally reputed individual is fighting tooth and nail for just a tiny piece of Visva-Bharati's leasehold land, the University got a gift from Dr. Arabinda Mukherjee and his wife, Ms. Nita Mukherjee: a 7000 square feet house and 72 decimals of land. So, Good Samaritans are still alive to reiterate the ancient belief, endorsed by Mahatma Gandhi that "an eye for an eye will make the entire world blind". Visva-Bharati will not only survive but flourish since the truants are always outnumbered by those battling for humanity regardless of consequences.