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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 Special Missive

22 August, 2020

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

On outsiders and the history of fencing/barricading/construction of wall

17 August, 2020 was a Red-Letter Day for all the hypocrites whose avowed love for Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore and his Santiniketan manifested itself in a power trip full of vandalism, mayhem, and strong-arming. Not only did the miscreants, encouraged and led by their political bosses, indulge in activities which are everything but true to the great legacy that Gurudev left for posterity, but they also, in just three hours, ravaged the physical structure of Gurudev's pride and joy, his beloved Visva-Bharati. It was, plain and simple, muscle-flexing at the behest of a select group of people. The happenings of 17 August, 2020 do not, at all, go with the espoused traditions that the Rabindriks proudly nurture.

In this Missive, I would like to focus on two important issues: (a) the sustained endeavour to alienate, exclude, and ostracize those colleagues who are from outside Bolpur or West Bengal by labelling them as outsiders who are not emotionally equipped to become true Rabindriks and (b) the charge that the construction of fence/barrier/wall is contrary to Visva-Bharati's tradition is absolutely unfounded since, as will be shown below, there are innumerable instances of the construction of demarcating walls on campus to maintain its integrity and sanctity, from theft of precious items kept in our museums, preventing the entry of socially deviant elements and the stopping of unsavoury and even dangerous activities (like gambling, drinking of alcohol, sexual activities, including prostitution).

Regarding the accusation that outsiders have no locus-standi as Rabindriks:-

- 1) Let me begin by reminding the readers that Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore was an outsider himself; had he not taken a liking to the area, Visva-Bharati wouldn't have evolved. Besides, Gurudev Tagore, his colleagues - who paved the way for Visva-

Bharati to develop as a hub of knowledge creation and dissemination - all came from outside Bolpur. In fact, pre-Santiniketan Bolpur was just a discreet little town in colonial Bengal. It was Gurudev Tagore and his colleagues from outside the town who not only initiated the project but also consolidated the University as one of the most innovative pedagogical centres in the world.

- 2) Unfortunately, the tradition of bringing teachers and non-teaching staff from outside did not last long, because the children of those who came initially to Visva-Bharati became claimants of jobs merely by virtue of being the sons of the soil. This tradition gradually became a matter of entitlement and birthrights for these sons of the soil, regardless of their qualifications (or lack thereof). Examples of this tragic trend are aplenty. But I will not go into that in this Missive.
- 3) History has shown that many of our colleagues who came from outside gradually became immersed in the cultural tradition that Visva-Bharati represents. It would not be unfair to say that Gurudev's decision to allot land for those who came from outside to construct dwelling units (a practice he established in service of campus integration) has taken on a new form: most of those who come from outside prefer to buy a flat here or construct an independent house. This shows that the so-called outsiders undertake serious steps to become integrally connected with Visva-Bharati.
- 4) Let me state my position in the language of autobiography: I came here as Visva-Bharati's Vice Chancellor in November, 2018; I have been here for close to two years. In this period, I have become fully immersed in the cultural ambience of Visva-Bharati, which has even resulted in my avoiding less-than-urgent visits to Delhi where my family resides. Without fail, I take part in the weekly Wednesday prayer; I enjoy being part of early morning Baitaliks; I participate actively in all the other cultural programmes that Gurudev instituted to generate togetherness and attachment with the University. Furthermore, Gurudev was an activist-thinker: his design of being integrally connected with the world outside the University led to the adoption of fifty villages around the campus. I took special care to build and supplement the infrastructure in these villages, and also supplied the libraries with books from Delhi and elsewhere. With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, my colleagues worked hard to raise funds to support the hapless villagers who had lost their sources of livelihood. This relief operation continued for almost three months (April-June, 2020). Here, too, those who are associated with Visva-Bharati in different capacities, both the sons and daughters of the soil and the so-called outsiders came forward spontaneously.
- 5) I am clueless as to who are the outsiders, if they display a genuine involvement with activities that Gurudev came up with in order to foster the development of humane qualities. I am also intrigued by those who stay away from participating in what Gurudev established as Ashramik practices, and yet claim to be 'Rabindrik', merely because their upbringing occurred in the campus and resulted in their partaking in the "**KG-TO-PG-TO-JOB**" tradition. Let me illustrate my point. During the Poush Utsab, Visva-Bharati organizes many events that our former students (or *Praktonis* in Visva-Bharati's parlance) attend; whenever I raise the question of financial contribution from

them (since most, if not all of them, are pretty well-off thanks to their being engaged in activities, which gave them, besides name and fame, pecuniary benefits) my request has never elicited a positive response, so far. Let me also share with you that our relief operation survived for almost three months mainly on the contributions of the so-called outsiders.

- 6) It is time to look within and ask ourselves: of what use is the divide between Rabindriks and outsiders, if it is based merely on an accident of birth, and not on a devotion and commitment to the wellbeing of Gurudev's greatest legacy?

Fence/Barrier/Wall construction in Visva-Bharati

- 1) Let me begin by reminding my readers that the China Bhavan was encircled by a wall for the security of the students, back when Gurudev Tagore was very much on the scene.
- 2) The original Poush Mela ground (now known as "old mela ground") was fenced at least 30 years ago. Public entry to this ground has been restricted for several years; only morning walkers are allowed here, but nobody has a problem with that. This ground truly claims a heritage tag, as it is more than 100 years old, but there has been no hue and cry regarding its being fenced and entry to it restricted.
- 3) The "ashram math" (considered popularly as part of the heritage Santiniketan ashram founded by Debendranath Tagore) is a huge playground, nearly as big as the present Poush Mela ground. It was barricaded with temporary fencing (known as 'landing mat') after the second World War, and then with permanent wall-cum-fencing in 2011-12. Nobody had a problem with this, rather everybody welcomed it, as the Principal of Patha Bhavana was relieved of the obligation of removing liquor bottles every morning so that her students could use the playground. Entry to this ground has been restricted to students and walkers only, for at least 7 (seven) years. Nobody has objected to this.
- 4) Another heritage playground at Sriniketan (near Kuthibari) was completely walled/fenced, with two gates only, in between 2005 and 2014. Entry to this ground also was restricted to students and walkers only in 2014. Nobody raised any grievances. Rather, everybody was happy that the ground was being used for its intended purpose. Thoroughfare through this ground has been stopped successfully by the University.
- 5) The Vinaya Bhavana ground was walled/fenced in 2008-09. It has an area of more than 70 acres! Visva-Bharati has since then developed the ground and constructed an international standard swimming pool, an indoor sports hall and many other facilities. A huge infrastructure for Department of Yogic Art & Science is coming up. The ground is even being used as a helipad. The university wants to make it into a Ranji standard cricket ground as CAB officials have shown interest. Here too, nobody has raised their voices in protest.
- 6) Who had a problem with this conversion of Vinaya Bhavana ground from a "barwari" (belonging to all) public picnic spot and tractor-driver's training ground into a safe educational space? For the sake of the record, there were more than 10 public thoroughfares in the ground, including one Panchayat road, as recently as in 2007. No

department was willing to shift there, presumably because the environment was anything but conducive to healthy academic work. Prof R K Ray, one of the erstwhile Vice Chancellors, literally forced the Physical Education Dept to move their academic activities there. He visited the ground several times to request drivers not to take their trucks and tractors through the ground. One of the senior professors of this Bhavana got a big quarter there in 2008 but was afraid to shift despite being assured by the Estate Officer that he would be safe there once the boundary wall was completed. All this goes to show that the construction of a wall in Vinay Bhavana ground was welcome and even necessary, in order to secure the ground and its inhabitants.

- 7) The present Poush Mela ground does not represent any heritage at all. In India, the 'heritage' status is given only after a building or precinct exists for more than 100 years. This ground was not a part of Maharshi's Santiniketan Ashram. Visva-Bharati acquired it less than 60 years ago. Poush Mela started here 20 years after Gurudev Tagore's death. Three huge gates (one of which has been demolished with a pay loader on 17-8-20 by the miscreants) leading to this ground were constructed between 2004 and 2013. Walls already exist on two sides of this ground. On the western side of the ground, a 6+2 feet high wall-cum-fencing was put up by the University in 2005. On the southern periphery ("Kabarkhana" side), there is a 6 feet high wall for more than 25 years (recently renovated with State Government funds probably!). Only the southern and eastern periphery remain unfenced now, although the University erected more than 500 concrete pillars in between 2006 and 2017, to prevent thoroughfare of four wheelers. Before 2006, hundreds of four wheelers used to ply through the ground to cut short the distance between our central office and the police station. This practice has been successfully stopped by the University.
- 8) There have been other developments (and constructions!) also. There was a route bus stand here before 1990. This was shifted by the Govt (and most of the bus routes were diverted) in the 1990s. In 2005, the district administration led by the then DM Mr Khalil Ahmed conducted a massive eviction drive in the vicinity of this ground to clear encroachments from government/Visva-Bharati lands at this entry point to Santiniketan. Mr Ahmed convened a series of meetings in 2003-2004 for removing encroachments from the entry points to Santiniketan and Sriniketan, and it was on his administration's advice that Visva-Bharati put up walls in the vicinity of the Mela ground for the first time in 2004-05.
- 9) In 2009-2010, all the unauthorized stalls in the Mela ground were removed in eviction drives conducted by Visva-Bharati, with assistance from district police. In 2013-14, the CPWD constructed two big pay and use toilet complexes (in addition to that constructed 20 years ago) at an expenditure of around Rs 60 lakhs. In 2014, entry of vendors and cars was stopped through the gate opposite to Nisha Hotel. Only tourist buses were allowed into the south western corner of the ground at a parking fee of Rs 100 minimum.
- 10) Presently, the University, in association with the Santiniketan Trust, has started the construction of wall-cum-fencing (4.8 feet wall + 3 feet net fencing) on the eastern and northern periphery of the ground only, as the other two sides are already walled/fenced. This is part of an ongoing process, as per Central Govt /UGC directives and CAG special security audit recommendations, directed at securing Visva-Bharati's property. We also have to comply with the Hon'ble NGT's orders on creating a

barricaded and self-contained Mela venue separated from the rest of the campus, particularly the academic and residential areas.

- 11) It is to be noted that Visva-Bharati has about 20 departments (with 4000 students), 80 residential buildings, 4 (four) guest houses (including 2 for foreign scholars), 2 (two) hostels (having 500 boarders), Central Administrative Complex (housing more than 500 staff), Central Library, and internet communication control centre etc, within 50 metres of this ground. We certainly have multiple pollution and waste management issues to deal with as per NGT directives, but there is an even more important reason to have a wall/fencing: ensuring adequate security and an academic ambience for our students.
- 12) No special interest of any business lobby and no threats from miscreants can stop an educational institution from exercising this right.

Let me end this Missive by urging everybody to maintain physical distance while being socially connected.

Keep the faith.

Bidyut Chakrabarty
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22/8/2020



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