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SHRI NARENDRA MODI  
उपाचार्य  
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UPACHARYA (VICE-CHANCELLOR)  
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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 Third Missive

4 July, 2020

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

In continuation with my earlier Missives, I begin this one by repeating my call for introspection: let's question the reason for our emotional attachment to Visva Bharati. Is it because our survival is predicated on the University's, or are we genuinely inspired by the great legacy that Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore left for posterity. I reiterate that my aim is not to shift responsibility by blaming others, but to generate a sense of belongingness among those who are beneficiaries (direct or indirect) of Birbhum's only industry i.e, Visva Bharati. By characterizing Visva Bharati as an industry, what I mean is that it is a source of survival and even unfair monetary gain, for many of us. Those who work here full-time draw a sizeable regular salary, one which I am not sure is proportionate to what we are supposed to give to the university in return in terms of teaching, mentoring of students, academic output, and administrative efficiency. In the public eye, with our NAAC ranking of B+ and low NIRF ranking, we may gratify ourselves by heaping the blame onto the administration, but that will not help us get to the bottom of the issues that have plagued this great seat of learning with which the name of an illustrious son of India is tied. Our daydreaming about the "unassailable" glory of Visva Bharati is like building a sand castle: it may look exquisite on the outside, but is inherently fragile. What is thus required most is an ideational change which is tuned to the creation and sustenance of a healthy Visva Bharati. This is very doable, since

Visva Bharati does not have a dearth of talented, committed individuals who are determined to take Visva Bharati to exalted heights, as one of the greatest seats of learning and moral values in human history.

Two signature events of Visva Bharati happen to be (a) *the Poush Mela* and *Poush Utsab* and (b) *Basanta Utsab*, which is held on the day of *Dol Purnima*. These two events attract people from all over the globe, and when they take place, the campus of Visva Bharati is inaccessible to those who serve the university throughout the year. For those who live in the vicinity of the grounds where *Poush Mela* and *Basanta Utsab* are held, these events are nothing short of nightmarish, for reasons I will delineate shortly.

In this Missive, I will deal solely with the *Poush Mela* and *Poush Utsab*. Gurudev's father had initiated the latter which interestingly, could not continue uninterruptedly. Since Gurudev's founding of the *Brahmavidalaya* on 7<sup>th</sup> Poush in the Western calendar year 1901, the Mela has been held on this day every year. *Poush Utsab* and *Poush Mela* are two different events though they are held simultaneously: *Poush Utsab* involves the *Parthana* (prayer) at *Chhatimtola*, *Christo Utsab*, annual Convocation to award degrees to Patha Bhavana and Siksha Satra and many other events relating to Ashramite practices. *Poush Mela*, on the other hand, seems to have evolved out of Gurudev's idea of regenerating village handicrafts and alleviating the appalling poverty of the villagers. In his 1904 tract, *Swadeshi Samaj*, he outlined his thoughts on this matter in great detail. The purpose that envisioned for the Mela was to showcase the village talents and also for the craftspeople to earn money by selling their products. The idea was to generate an alternative mode of being economically self-sufficient. A perusal of the old record shows that it was just a rural fair.

As per the Santiniketan Trust Deed which Gurudev's father, Maharshi Debendranath Tagore, prepared, the Santiniketan Trust is the true custodian of the Mela, but gradually the Mela unofficially became the Visva Bharati's responsibility to hold for which the University was woefully unequipped. As a result, a specific group within the university was vested with the responsibility of organizing the Mela, and in the pre-2019 years, the University authority remained, in general, a mute observer, though the ultimate responsibility rested with the university. One major reason as to why specific groups were interested is the monetary profit, they made out of Mela stalls and the small businessmen who came to sell their products. Neither the university nor the Trust seems to have been involved intimately, as the old record demonstrates. Even in 2018, immediately after my joining as Visva Bharati's Vice Chancellor,

I was made to be a mere spectator to the Mela; I spent most of that week seated in the *Binodon Mancha* watching folk music performances, as I was given to understand that the VC had a largely ceremonial role in the proceedings. Once the balance sheet for the expenses vis-à-vis the income was shown to me, I was shocked at the gulf between the former and latter. The deficit was staggering, and the university had to pay said deficit to many service providers, like electricity, CCTV cameras and contractors, among others. I was faced with the rude realization of exactly what a former Vice Chancellor meant when they sarcastically described the Mela as ‘*madhu*’ (honey) to explain how it could never be organized differently, lest all these off-the-record benefits be lost.

Besides this, the university was subject to punishment by the National Green Tribunal, since the *Poush Mela* deviated from the Tribunal’s stringent conditions for pollution control. One self-declared environmentalist filed case after case to highlight how Visva Bharati had violated all the terms and conditions that the NGT had set out for the *Poush Mela*. The University has been spending lakhs of rupees in multiple legal battles for which neither UGC nor MHRD provides extra funds. The NGT was aghast because the Mela that was supposed to wrap up in four days, while two extra days were given to dismantle the stalls, continued even after the stipulated time. As per the NGT directions, on the seventh day, the Mela ground was to come back to what it was before the Mela started. This condition was not met; the Mela was allowed to continue beyond the permissible days, and the university authority was summoned for explanation. In 2017, the *Poush Mela* had continued for 14 days, thus violating the NGT directions and resulting in an NGT order for the personal appearance of the Vice Chancellor, Registrar of the University and the District Magistrate of Birbhum. Furthermore, our businessmen friends who had stalls earned a sizeable income, while Visva Bharati, the actual host of the Mela, not only incurred massive financial losses, but also had to bear the expenses of the legal battle with the NGT. This was, to put it plainly, a travesty of justice. As the NGT order of 1 November, 2017 unequivocally stated, ‘the mela would be wound up without fail on the 4<sup>th</sup> day’. This was reiterated in another NGT judgment of 11 December, 2019 by underlining that ‘the duration of the fair is 3-4 days’.

Under no circumstances did we want to discontinue the longstanding tradition; so we started exploring how it could be organized better. We approached Dr. Swapan Dasgupta, hon’ble Rajya Sabha member (and also the University Court member) for a possible solution; he agreed that it was not possible for Visva Bharati to organize a Mela of such gigantic proportions, and that it needed an event manager, and he placed this view in his intervention in the Rajya Sabha.

Our hon'ble chancellor, the hon'ble Prime Minister Sri Narendra Modi, summoned me to Delhi to understand, in detail, how to keep the tradition of the *Poush Mela* going. He immediately instructed a specific Joint Secretary in the PMO to help Visva Bharati in this regard. In my discussion with said Joint Secretary, I explained the difficulties that Visva Bharati confronted in organizing the *Poush Mela* with its old 'charm'. Below are the few issues that I had flagged.

It was not possible for us to dismantle the Mela because (a) we did not have adequate security support; (b) the garbage remained scattered on the site for days post the Mela and stunk up the area for months, and (c) there were clear deviations from the rules in the distribution of stalls in the Mela. These three conditions were met by the PMO; we got 100 ex-service men to maintain law and order and also to help us dismantle the stalls, a task that was not easy to accomplish. The PMO also connected us with 180 individuals from the Satya Sain Trust who cleaned the garbage generated in the Mela every night for four nights. We even got Bio-Toilets with the help of the PMO, which took care of the needs of both those who came to enjoy the Mela and the businessmen who were running the stalls. To avoid mismanagement of stall distribution, the PMO approached experts at Kharagpur IIT to help us set up the booking of stalls online.

It was decided in a meeting, held in our Library Conference Room on 17 December, 2019 in which the Bolpur Byabsahi Sangha representatives, Sri Sunil Singh, Sri Subrata Bhagat, Sri Aminul Huda, Sri Angur Khan, among others, participated, that they would all abide by the conditions of the NGT during the Mela. Those who booked stalls were also given the terms and conditions for having stalls in the Mela. Besides including the conditions that the duration of Mela was four days, and there would be no sales after four days, it was also agreed that 48 extra hours were to be given after the Mela duration for dismantling the stalls. On 27 December, 2019, Sri Singh, Sri Bhagat and Sri Huda came to our camp office at about 12-30 pm and threatened Sri Sanjay Ghosh, Joint Registrar (Accounts) of the University, with bodily harm and other harsh consequences if the Mela was dismantled in four days like we had decided. They threatened him in my presence and in the presence of other colleagues, including female colleagues. Our female colleagues were also verbally abused with filthy languages and manhandled as well. We immediately sent a request letter to the Santiniketan Police Station for an FIR. On 28 and 29 December, we moved around the Mela ground and requested, with folded hands, all the stall owners to dismantle their stalls according to the NGT direction. On 30 and 31 December, we cleaned the filthy Mela grounds as a team, in the presence of Sri Jayanta Mitra, one of the members of the Mela Advisory Board for environmental matters. The

grounds were such a mess that we even had to handle human excreta in the many makeshift toilets that the stall-owners had made. On 1 January, 2020 the Mela ground was back to its pre-Mela state, thanks to our efforts. Those who live around the Mela ground and those in the Santiniketan Police Station will surely vouch for this claim.

In an attempt to take revenge for being forced to wind up their sales, the self-acclaimed leaders of Mela businessmen lodged a false complaint of sexual harassment (that apparently took place in broad daylight on 29 December, 2019) against a select group of University administrative staff, and charged another group with looting stuff from shops. A perusal of the video footage and photographs of that day shows that more than a hundred staff members (teachers, students and admirers of Visva Bharati, not to mention the PMO-sent security guards) were moving around the Mela ground at the time. In such a situation, the charge of sexual harassment appears to be entirely frivolous, if not motivated. However, I don't wish to dwell on this issue, since it is under investigation.

I shall be focusing on the changing nature of the *Basanta Utsab* in my next Missive, just to illustrate how things have degenerated over the years here at Visva Bharati, presumably because we have failed to develop the sense of belongingness and/or ownership vis-à-vis the institution.

I end this missive by asking you all to please stay safe in these trying times, and to keep in your hearts the famous dictum 'UNITED WE STAND, DIVIDED WE FALL'.

Keep the faith,

*Bidyut Chakrabarty*  
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4/7/2020



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