

### Missive- May, 2023

Visva-Bharati is perhaps the most unfortunate centre of higher learning in the globe. Its misfortune is partly due to reluctance of those who drew their sustenance from the institution, to work for the fulfillment of the core values, the founder of Visva-Bharati, Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore endeavoured to articulate with the foundation of this great academic seat of knowledge dissemination and generation; and partly due to hegemonic dominance of the self-proclaimed custodians of this university who shamelessly undertook various steps to protect their partisan interests at the cost of this heritage university. What is most appalling is the continuity of practices contrary to what Gurudev espoused while being engaged in building Visva-Bharati as an alternative to English education which was, to him, a mechanical device to create a pool of clerks for colonizers' benefit. The bard was most disturbed by its uncritical acceptance because for the English educated Bengalis it was a sure passport for white collar jobs in government offices and other public establishments. Instead of transmission of knowledge, English education became a vehicle for jobs which was, according to the poet, was probably, the first step to transform a collectivity with an independent mind into a group of servile individuals who expressed the desire of being more English than the royal family. The framer of the 1835 minutes, TB Macaulay, was the happiest person of the ruling authority because his strategy of the introduction of English education acted most effectively in creating a solid base for the Empire. The old system of education declined fast, providing adequate space for the new mode of education to strike roots and thrive with almost no serious effort on the part of the rulers.

Visva-Bharati was an outcome of Gurudev Tagore's critique of English education as it was a design to drain off the creative faculties from the Bengalis. Accordingly, he devised a new format of learning which gained ground with the foundation Visva-Bharati in Santiniketan (Bolpur, Bengal) in 1921. The new academic centre which was not only a unique voice, but also a creative design was meant to inculcate values tuned to the development of a confident nation capable enough to stand on its own. Conceptually, it was, on the one hand, a meaningful step for an enslaved nation to be endowed with the capacity to effectively challenge the British system education; on the other hand, it also provided the anti-British forces with sources of inspiration that was almost non-existent in the past. What was unique in Gurudev Tagore's approach was his relentless effort of combining the past modes of learning with what he derived from the Western discourses. It was a judicious step because he realized that an exclusive dependence on ancient discourses of knowledge dissemination and generation was not adequate in the changed national and global milieu; and uncritical appreciation of Western discourses was equally futile since it was directed to completely ignore the importance of ancient texts, especially *Vedas* and *Upanishads*, in shaping the Indians.

Now, so much about the processes leading to the rise of Visva-Bharati and also the evolution of its pedagogy. In this missive, my concern is not to dwell on this aspect, but to focus on how it developed especially after it became an institution of national importance in 1951 with the promulgation of the 1951 Visva-Bharati Act. From the very beginning, Visva-Bharati was hardly recognised with reference to its strength in areas of music, arts and aesthetics and rural development; instead, it was conceptualized as a university which was formed in the pattern of other universities in the country. Nonetheless, it stands out as a distinctive academic institution in a pristine environment of Santiniketan. Away from Calcutta, Visva-Bharati has mostly retained the socio-cultural characteristics which are illustrative of a creative blending of Western and indigenous discourses. Even today, those who are associated with the university take ample care in sustaining its distinctive nature not only as a centre of academic learning but also as a hub of Indian culture. What is most significant is the retention of these clearly India-centric cultural voice despite the avalanche of non-Indian and rather rootless cultural expressions. Let me add a caveat here since the purpose here is not to defend the exclusivity of the indigenous culture by raising a wall between India and the rest of the world. Gurudev Tagore would have vehemently opposed this because he always believed that exchange of socio-cultural ideas was at the root of the development of humanity as one collectivity. By insisting on Indian culture, he was, as his creative writings demonstrate, in favour of being rooted in those distinctive modes which were clearly indigenous in nature and also texture. Implicit here is also the view that given their indigenous roots, these socio-cultural values are easily absorbed and understood which would not have been the case in regard to those taken from outside. The point is well-illustrated in, for instance, many dance dramas which he developed out of many familiar stories and narratives although the format in which they are articulated are not exclusively indigenous; he evolved a unique socio-cultural voice by creatively amalgamating the indigenous voices with what he learnt from elsewhere in the globe. Hence, one notices, for instance, the visible influences of Sri Lankan and Russian Ballet dance forms in many of the dance-dramas, Gurudev wrote.

Our purpose is to spread Tagore's politico-ideological priorities through the literary texts he wrote and also other forms in which music and dance remain predominant. A universalist *par excellence*, the bard was guided by this desire which is visible in the plethora of texts he left for posterity. Hence, along with pursuance of regular courses, the learners in Visva-Bharati are also introduced to the world of music and other creative activities. The objective is to create conditions in which the learners remain creative and also engaged in deeds towards fulfilling what they nurture internally. Visva-Bharati is thus a centre of learning which does not merely prepare students to do well in the routine examinations, but also help them imbibe the socio-cultural and politico-ideological preferences on which this institution rests. As students of this great institution are ambassadors for transmission of the poet's heart-felt concerns for universal humanism, they are, during their stint at Visva-Bharati, trained accordingly.

## Two Convocations

The year 2023 stands out in the history of Visva-Bharati for a unique distinction. The foremost objective is to bring back the earlier tradition of holding Convocation regularly. These events shall be memorable for future as it was graced by top dignitaries of the country. The convocation held on 18 February had the Hon'ble Raksha Mantriji, Sri Rajnath Singh as the Chief Guest and the Hon'ble Minister of State, ministry of education, Dr. Subhas Sarkar as the Guest of Honour; the next one held on 28 March with the august presence of the Hon'ble Rashtrapatiji, Shrimati Droupadi Murmu as the Chief Guest and the Hon'ble Governor of West Bengal Shri CV Ananda Bose as the Guest of Honour. Visva-Bharati is fortunate to have organized Convocation for 2021 and 2022 in quick succession. This was possible with the help of Visva-Bharati's well-wishers at the highest echelon of governance and all those who are associated with this great seat of learning. Both the chief guests, the Hon'ble Rashtrapatiji (our Visitor) and Hon'ble Raksha Mantriji and both the guests of honour, the Hon'ble Minister of State (ministry of education) and the Hon'ble Governor of West Bengal (our Rector) put on record their appreciation for university's contribution in fulfilling the grand objectives for which Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore built this great institution.

As is usual, Visva-Bharati's detractors endeavoured hard abortively to find fault with the university's administration by making points to expose that they were innocent and mischievous. This is also a matter of concern that they tend to justify unjustifiably by claiming themselves to be Rabindriks. Despite being recipients of many benefits, including daily sustenance, from the university, they unhesitatingly subject themselves to public aversion. Holding of two successive Convocation was beyond their comprehension which is a testimony of them being clearly deprived of a basic level of intelligence. This is tragic, but a reality in regard to these self-proclaimed custodians of Visva-Bharati which means sustenance of their partisan interests. In the dispensation of the present administration, they have been shown their places and they were also told at the beginning of 2019 that they needed to prove their worth by deeds and not by emotionally-charged statements defending their unjust claims. There was another bone of contention which the deviants exhorted that the Upanishadic mantra (*asoto ma sadgamayayo, tamosho ma jyotirgamaya, mrityam ma amritam gamoyo* 'Parthana' by Rabindranath Tagore, 1907, reproduced in *Santiniketan, Vol. 1, pp. 23-6*) I chanted at the end of my speech in the 2022 Convocation was wrongly applied. Again, this demonstrates that they again proved that they knew nothing notwithstanding their claim of being Rabindriks. Let them go through the texts incorporated in the compilation entitled, *Santiniketan* and read how the bard interpreted the above Upanishadic hymn. This was the only hymn in Upanishad which was uttered by Maitriye to her husband, Yagyabalka when the latter met the former before bidding goodbye to her. Gurudev took special fascination for this mantra because (a) it was uttered by a woman which is exceptional in so far as *Upanishads*

are concerned because all hymns are attributed to man thereby confirming the patriarchal bias of the text, and (b) by refusing to receive material good for worldly comfort, Maitriyee asked for a boon from her Sage-husband for capabilities for winning over attractions for worldly goods and comfort; instead, her desire was to acquire those qualities to take her from being chained materially to a divine existence when she would be absolutely free from greed for material gains. It was based on her belief that so long as you remain mesmerized by worldly comfort, you will be far away from the almighty. So, this is a reconfirmation of *Tyakteno Bhunjita* or you gain what you desire by abdication. It is a matter of shame that the self-proclaimed custodians of Rabindranath Tagore's values and ideas did neither have the basic intelligence nor inclination to make up the intellectual deficit. They live in fool's paradise which makes them believe that social media propaganda will act as a shield against their motivated sets of designs or they will befool everybody as they wrongly think that everybody else is a fool. The purpose here is not to denigrate the intellectual thugs because it is their *Dharma* and hence it is not undesirable, but to demonstrate how shallow they are. Let them read the text, then come out with their formulation which will help them to avoid being caught red-handed.

What is clear from the nefarious design of these fallen individuals (who are also parasitic in character since they are nothing without Visva-Bharati) is that they try to gain by hook or crook. They don't mind distorting Gurudev Tagore's own texts as long as these serve their narrow purpose. Instead of devising ways of improvement, they dance to show that they are joyous by claiming themselves of being effective in achieving their dastardly goal. They however forget that despite their hard work and devotion of energy by lodging regular complaints (I am not sure whether complaints were sent to the US President, or Russian President or any of the UN top officials), nothing worked in their favour. Now, they are reconciled to the fact that the fixed term of the Vice Chancellor cannot be cut short. This is a new realization that has dawned upon those miscreants who support the land grabbers and those who suck Visva-Bharati ruthlessly for their partisan gains. They have received the message that the cycle of history changes and it changes for betterment and their exclusive designs cannot always be as effective as they desire. There are providential interventions when things go wrong for them and their visible decline is evident. Remember the sloka of *Bhagwat Gita*: metaphorically, it means that the divine power descends when the rule of law is replaced by rule by law. It does not seem strange that what was uttered in *Upanishads* remains valid even today which confirms that the words of wisdom gathered in *Vedas* and *Upanishads* are still instructive to humanity. Here, what Gurudev Tagore suggested while dwelling on institutional religion is also valid. Restating the views of one of the most perceptive thinkers of nineteenth century, Dayananda Saraswati (1824-83) who argued that unlike *Quran* and *Old and New Testaments*, *Vedas* were historical documents which were articulated by many and over centuries, the bard also emphasized that both *Vedas* and *Upanishads* represented human efforts of codifying human history in different phases of human civilization. They, *Vedas* and

*Upanishads*, were neither about individuals nor about a specific phase of human evolution, but dealt with the unfolding of human civilization in different phases: they were records of human history with reference to the dialectical interconnection between the socio-cultural context and the evolution of humanity.

Let me come back to the principal issue: why two Convocations in quick succession? The reasons are not difficult to seek. I wanted the students to be formally recognised as ones who successfully completed their degrees. Convocation is an occasion when that happens. So, it was held keeping in mind the students' interests. In order to make these occasions memorable in their life, Visva-Bharati endeavoured hard to get the prominent personalities. Hence, we requested the Hon'ble Raksha Mantriji's and later the Hon'ble Rashtrapatiiji which was conceded and two Convocations were held without hiccups. Students were happy; so were the teachers, non-teaching staff and those real well-wishers of Visva-Bharati. They were great occasions which brought the students, teachers, and other stakeholders of Visva-Bharati together to the venue by being the most enthusiastic participants on these occasions. This is not unusual because the students look forward to attending Convocations as they are also moments when they join hands with their predecessors who got their degrees from Visva-Bharati in the past.

Convocations are not just conferment of degrees; they are also occasions when students are declared eligible to be ready to face bigger challenges of the wider world. Furthermore, they also represent the terminal point for students to shift from the protected life with care of their teachers to a world where they become their own guardians and also help direct/govern the cycle of human history. Let me add a caveat here since there is a misconception that after Convocation, students work hard to be absorbed in jobs as per their professional training and qualifications. This is partly true and partly a little over stretched assumption. It is true that many prefer to have a permanent job as this is the governing mindset of most of the students being continued from India's long colonial rule. There is now however a new trend especially in the twenty-first century when many who are endowed with degrees do not think so; they enjoy being independent and explore the possibilities of quality survival by being deviant from the well-entrenched pattern of human existence. We now hear many new words to explain such unique behavioural patterns. For instance, many are involved in and also are contemplating start-ups, for instance; with this emerge many newer options which were simply inconceivable a few years back. Conventionally, these new vocations may not be appealing as they involve challenges and hence uncertainties; but given the situation in which the idea of "permanent jobs" appears to be evaporating fast they are gaining acceptance. There is an apprehension which is also well-founded in view of the circumstances around that this is a design for the state to abdicate its social responsibilities towards the underprivileged. In a country like India, the argument is strong enough to challenge this since it is an endorsement for privatization which also means withdrawal of state's responsibility for taking care of

health, education, and social security. We are witnessing, as a result, radical socio-economic and politico-cultural metamorphosis in many countries, including the so-called developed ones where the state is no longer an aid for human betterment.

The above discussion shall inevitably lead to a question: how is Convocation linked with privatization. On the surface, there seems to be no link; but a deeper probing may help us understand the integral relationships. As mentioned above, a Convocation declares the successful students as fit to shoulder bigger responsibilities. So, following the Convocation, students need to choose their preferred path of gratifying their needs and also fulfilling their espoused goals. With the declining importance of public sector, attention is drawn to private sectors. Why and how did it happen? The answer is not an easy one; even the experts in this field of specialization do not find it an easy task. Despite being a difficult endeavour, let me make an attempt. My starting premise is that a Convocation is, at one level, a demarcation between students and those capable enough to take care of responsibilities; at another level, since Convocation is authorized to bestow degrees, it is also a space when the distinction is blurred because once the students are admitted to be eligible for discharging bigger responsibilities, the learners cease to be learners but are endowed with capabilities for holding greater responsibilities. How does then one justify the increasing importance of privatization? There is one simple argument: decline of the public sector is proportionately linked with increasing acceptability of privatization. A further probe suggests that this does not happen overnight or all of a sudden: it is the culmination of long-drawn processes. The charge that the public sector gradually became a den of inefficiency and without contributing to wealth or income generation gains ground because those who are engaged in public sector never forgot to take their pound of flesh without almost attending to their assigned duties. As it was allowed to happen and also to continue, public sector units lost their centrality in the economy. The space thus left hardly remains vacant; the private operators enter and permanently capture it for their own benefit. A new work culture is introduced and is linked with profit making which is now the motto and those with private sectors also internalize the claim that no profit also entails even retrenchment. With the downfall of the former Soviet Union, many also began appreciating the triumph of capitalism as it had passed the test of time. Socialism based on the conceptualization of the hegemony of the people seems to have lost its viability. There were many in the academia who now unhesitatingly endorsed the claim of the end of history as the alternative approach to human progress/development. With the collapse of a system in support of the state being the prime instrument in taking human civilization forward, the alternative in which the non-state actors were prominent gained momentum. This was the context in which the dwindling of the public sector was matched by the preeminence of the private sector.

Convocation is thus a critical juncture in the life of learners since it provides a space for them to chalk out a decisive plan for the future. I must add a caveat here since, for Gurudev Tagore,

education is a means of learning although in contemporary human existence, it is a passport for jobs. Education is, in other words, not a commodity, felt the poet, but a mode of empowerment for human beings. The bard was always opposed to commodifying education and his ideas were articulated with the foundation of Visva-Bharati during India's colonial era; by seeking to bring back the *Tapobon Siksha*, his endeavour was directed to inculcate values of togetherness and camaraderie which were alien to the period of history that witnessed a tussle between the imposed and the indigenous forms of education. By holding Convocations at regular intervals, Gurudev Tagore created and established a practice of transmitting critical human values to the learners who came out of Visva-Bharati after spending the years of learning there. Unlike other institutions of higher learning elsewhere in India and abroad, the *Ashwirvachhan* (oath-taking ceremony, led by the Vice Chancellor by reiterating the core values of humanity) constitutes an important segment of the event. The purpose here is also to remind the students that they are pedagogically trained to nurture the basic values and mores for universal humanism, and after passing out from Visva-Bharati, they will be the ambassadors of this great institution nurturing the apparently undermined values sustaining humanity as a well-knit collectivity.

For the bard, Convocations are occasions when learners are declared to have completed the courses they are pursuing in the institution. They are, under no circumstances, meant to be devices for grading students which is now the case because the certificates are documents segregating one student from another on the basis of marks obtained in the examination. This is a system of segmenting the learners which was never a part of the poet's mode of education. In today's competitive world, placements of students in accordance with their grades are not an exception, but integral to their ranks, fixation of employments etc., once they are made available for employment and other vocational deeds. Gurudev Tagore vehemently opposed this since it does not seem proper to assess every student in the same scale of assessment. A student who is good in music or arts and aesthetics may not be so in regard to other areas of knowledge. That does mean that the student lacking knowledge in other fields is not socially useful because music or arts and aesthetics are as good as knowledge in mathematics, for instance. Society needs everybody for its quality sustenance, believed the bard.

The situation is made a little complicated with the introduction of the system accreditation of centres of higher learning by both national and international agencies. As per contemporary media reports, India's accreditation agencies are alleged to have not been as fair as they are expected which leads to disproportionate ranking of many academic institutions in the country. Nonetheless, these rank making agencies providing grades to the institutions act as critical to derive benefits from various government and non-governmental agencies. Even the proportion of student-intakes vary in accordance with the ranks fixed by these agencies for accreditation. So, there is substance when it is argued that these agencies help inculcate the spirit of competition and not cooperation, which Gurudev Tagore so passionately nurtured.

The adverse impact of ranking is already visible: the universities with better ranking attract good students and also good teachers while those which are not so lag behind. Furthermore, the ranking by foreign agencies appears to be sought after by most of the centres of higher learning in India with the uncritical belief that the endorsement by these foreign agencies will enhance their marketability. Hence, they also get accredited by the agencies based in North America and Europe. Undoubtedly, this is illustrative of our colonial hangover because internally we, as a collectivity, privilege the assessments by the European and North American agencies because they are believed to be generally free from preconceived prejudices or any other external factor of influences which does not seem to be true of national agencies. Besides getting into debates on this issue, it is fair to say that the assessment by the agencies operating from Europe and North America is usually uncritically accepted as objective and thus free from the charges of being vitiated.

What is Convocation then, apart from being an occasion when degrees are conferred on those successful students who, after completing specific courses, receive a formal recognition. Here, the Sanskrit expressions of *Samabartan* and *Dikshant Samaroh* appear pertinent for two reasons: *first*, Convocation sends the students home after the completion of their academic training. Following the ideal of four ashramas : *brahmacharya* (training in the academic institutions), *garhastya* (shouldering of responsibilities of taking care of others in the family and society) *vanprastha*, (retirement from the worldly life despite being with the family) and *sannyas* (complete abdication of worldly existence, if possible, disconnect oneself from the worldly bond with family and society leading to an ascetic life), Convocation announces the return of learners to his/her family and society to prepare himself/herself to take care of greater responsibilities. This is also an occasion for *abartan* which means in the cycle of life, one is now endowed with the attributes and capabilities for dealing with greater responsibilities. *Dikshant* is a relatively easier word to comprehend since Convocation is meant to introduce the learners to the wider world by declaring that they are fit enough to responsibly discharge their duties. Convocations are that moment of learners' life when this is announced unequivocally; the learners are no longer what they were but are capable enough to serve family and society meaningfully. Hence, on occasions, the expressions, Convocation and *Dikshant Samaroh* are uttered interchangeably which does not seem to be exactly appropriate because the etymology and epistemology of the former do not correspond with the latter. Secondly, Convocations are also occasions when learners from various fields of study and specialization congregate with an identical purpose, viz., to be formally recognised as experts in the areas of study for which they spend specific years in *guru griha* then and academic institutions now. On this occasion, they are on the same platform since they are endowed with degrees together at the same time. In Visva-Bharati, the conferment of degrees is done symbolically by offering the head of the faculty (principal of Bhavanas in Visva-Bharati's lexicon) *saptaparni* or seven Chhatim leaves which are difficult to get elsewhere. They are given to the principals perhaps due to the fact that (a) these leaves are considered "holy" as



Gurudev Tagore's father, Debendranath Tagore sat regularly under the Chhatim Tree for prayer and meditation and (b) seven leaves represent seven colours of sun rays. Here, it means the endowment by the students of a system of knowledge which is a creative blending of ideas and views emanating from various sources. Giving of saptaparni symbolically represents that students of Visva-Bharati are not only adept at imbibing knowledge from the familiar sources (book etc.), they also draw on nature to understand the dialectical interconnection between Mankind and the ecosystem. This is a rare mode of acquiring knowledge which is hardly the case elsewhere. Here, the pedagogy Gurudev Tagore developed is of tremendous significance because he firmly believed that human beings remained incomplete without the bountiful nature which made the former responsible to protect and nurture the latter; otherwise, human beings ceased to be what they were.

### **Convocation: culmination or beginning**

A Convocation is both points of culmination and beginning at the same time. Viewed differently, it can be a point of culmination at one level, and also unfolding of different phase of life for the learners, at another. Metaphorically, it also represents a confluence of both culmination and beginning. As the students complete their degrees and it is formally recognised in a Convocation, it is a terminating point for them. Logically, it is perfect because with the completion of their degrees, students no longer remain associated with any of the institutions. At one level, Convocation formalizes the rupture between learners and the academic institutions. It introduces students, at another level, to the wider world and declares them fit for bigger responsibilities.

With the above prefacing remarks, let me get a little deeper into the issue. Convocation is a recognition of students' success after having gone through courses tuned to specific degrees. On the one hand, it means that unless one undergoes the processes, Convocation remains a distant goal. The awarding of the degrees is thus, on the other hand, integrally connected with the event when the degree awarding authority admits students as graduates, postgraduates and also doctorates. Convocation changes the nomenclature of students who now are placed at a different level of their life. Hence, this is a bridge which a student needs to cross to ascertain that one is no longer as dependent on his/her teacher to carve out a path for himself/herself. Following a Convocation, in which one receives degrees, s/he thus tastes freedom which is highly restricted so long as one remains within the well-defined format of course structure. This is considered by many as critical to make one self-governed or capable of guiding oneself as per one's priority. There are also flip sides to this argument since freedom and responsibility are dialectically interconnected. In other words, one is allowed to enjoy freedom provided one is also sensitive and respectful to one's duties and responsibilities.

As argued above, a Convocation is thus not just an event, but a moment which is ridden with many socio-psychological implications. Socially, one is recognised as capable for shouldering

bigger responsibilities contributing to social well-being. Psychologically, a Convocation is a formal recognition to one who is no longer the student but a graduate/post-graduate or a doctorate which not only is a source of satisfaction but also of empowerment. So, a Convocation is perhaps the most important moment for those pursuing degrees in an academic centre.

The purpose of this written intervention is to understand the critical role and importance of Convocations as events with multiple functions. They need to be held regularly given their importance in enabling students to prepare a roadmap for themselves. It is true that students, by being trained in a particular school of thought, generally articulate their voice accordingly. In case of Visva-Bharati's students, the claim that the learners have the opportunity to be trained in the disciplines of their choice along for developing themselves as compassionate human beings. Hence, the Upanishadic hymn, *asoto ma sadgamayayo, tamosho ma jyotirgamaya, mrityam ma amritam gamoyo* (take me from untruth to truth, from darkness to light, from death to immortality). This mantra is for revitalization of life amidst frustration, agony, and pain; this invocation is also for human empowerment in a situation when human beings enjoy by butchering physically and also emotionally the fellow human beings. By citing this mantra in many of his creative texts Gurudev Tagore reawakened our zeal for service to humanity regardless of artificially created barriers. The fact that Visva-Bharati's Convocations end with an oath (*ashirvachan*) administered by the Vice Chancellor for those leaving university after successfully completing their degrees is a testimony of the importance its founder accorded to the values appreciative of universal humanism which is strange in the prevalent context and hardly received adequate attention from the mainstream nationalists who fought a bitter battle with the colonizers for political freedom of a section of humanity under colonial subjugation. Nonetheless, by being true to what he learnt from *Vedas* and *Upanishads*, he never compromised with what he imbibed from them. It is evident in his creative writings and also the activities he undertook to put his belief into practice. As Gurudev Tagore carved a distinct narrative for Visva-Bharati, Convocations here are thus not merely events for the conferment of degrees, but a precious moment for the students because they are now formally endowed with the responsibility for spreading the core beliefs from which this great institution derives its sustenance.

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