

Ref

SPECIAL CONVOCATION  
and the  
FORTYNINTH  
ANNUAL CONVOCATION

24 DECEMBER 2004

ADDRESS BY  
GUEST-IN-CHIEF

PROF. PARTHA CHATTERJEE

DIRECTOR

*Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Kolkata*



JADAVPUR UNIVERSITY

KOLKATA 700 032

INDIA



His Excellency the Governor of West Bengal and Chancellor of the University, Professor Asok Nath Basu, distinguished Vice-Chancellor, members of the faculty and staff, students of the university, and ladies and gentlemen:

You have done me a great honour, Professor Basu, by inviting me to be the chief guest at the 49<sup>th</sup> annual convocation of this university. During my professional life as a teacher and researcher in the social sciences, I have had several occasions to visit this campus, participate in academic events here and develop many enduring friendships with members of the faculty in different departments. It is because I hold in such esteem the commitment of this university to the highest standards of academic excellence that I particularly value your recognition. Please allow me to express my gratitude.

I also remember today my brief association with Jadavpur University thirty-seven years ago as a student in the post-graduate class in International Relations. It was a time when at least the Arts and Social Sciences departments of this University were treated with much disdain and condescension at Presidency College, from which I had come. I cannot now remember very clearly what had prompted me to enroll at this university. Perhaps it was the curiosity evoked by a new discipline called International Relations which was not taught then at any other Indian university. It was also, as many of you from my generation will recall, a time of great political unrest in this part of the country and every university campus was seething with debate, agitation, plots and ideas. I remember spending much of my day on the front steps of the Arts College, arguing about the future of the United Front government or the course of the war in Vietnam, or, more seriously, or so at least I thought at the time, discussing the world-historical dialectic in a smoke-filled room in the university hostel. I also remember a few afternoons at the nets on the cricket field,

trying to get into the university cricket team. That attempt, I am not ashamed to confess after so many years, ended in a miserable failure. My time as a student on this campus lasted only a few months. That memory, I have to say, is marked most of all by the smiling presence of Timir Baran Sinha, one of my closest friends of the time, who was to die two years later in a prison in Berhampore and on whose death his teacher at this university, the poet Sankha Ghosh, wrote a most moving poem.

I am sorry to have begun this address by talking about myself, even before I have congratulated the students who have assembled here to receive their degrees, medals and prizes. That is, of course, the most pleasant part of my duties today. I know that being admitted to this university as a student is now one of the most treasured privileges of academic life. The world is a very different place from the time when, in 1967, I announced to my professors at Presidency College, with as much contrition as I could muster, that I had decided to join Jadavpur University. "Jadavpur," they had asked, with genuine bewilderment, "but why?" I know they don't say that any more in the venerable institutions of College Street. "Jadavpur," they now say, "congratulations!" As an ancient defector from College Street, I take great pleasure, and a little pride, in congratulating all of you who have today received your degrees from this university which is now recognized everywhere in India as one of the most outstanding teaching and research institutions in the country in virtually every discipline in science, technology, humanities and the social sciences. It is one of the first universities in India to have been given the highest rank of accreditation by the national accreditation agency. Perhaps you will now forgive me for not being able to resist the temptation of advertising my brief connection as a student with this university, even though I have no degree to show for it.

Although the history of this institution in its formal status as a university only goes back to 1955, the real history of

Jadavpur University begins almost a hundred years ago with the founding of the National Council of Education in 1906, at the time of the Swadeshi movement in Bengal. One often tends to think of that period as steeped in revivalist rhetoric and the celebration of traditional values. But a look at the curriculum adopted by the National Council of Education will show an astonishing commitment to the universal virtues of modern knowledge. The objective of the Council was, of course, to create a new institution of literary and scientific education, carried out, as it declared, “on national lines and exclusively under national control”. The idea was to establish an alternative to the existing university structure which was then under the control of the British colonial government. But even in claiming its distinctiveness, the Council was careful to state that it was being set up “not in opposition to, but standing apart from, the existing systems of primary, secondary and university education”. This idea of building a set of institutions that were parallel, but not necessarily antithetical, to the official structures appears to have been the driving force behind much of our nationalist modernity.

While the National Council set up the Bengal National College, with Aurobindo Ghose as its first principal, with the intention of providing a well-rounded literary, scientific and technical education, the Bengal Technical Institute was established at the same time by another group of nationalist educators with the rival idea of imparting a strictly technical education. National development, they felt, would be best promoted by the rapid spread of technical knowledge – something that the colonial system of university education, with its emphasis on academic and literary scholarship, had failed to provide. University education, it was said, was designed to produce office clerks, while the real need of the nation was a young generation capable of producing useful things. Professor Benoy Kumar Sarkar, who of course wholly belonged to the National Council group, derided the Technical Institute as a body guided by a

*dal-bhat* philosophy and devoted to the *mistrification* of the country. Building the nation, he asserted, required the cultivation of the liberal arts, humanism and culture and not merely the creation of a generation of *mistris*. Professor Sarkar's views seemed to be confirmed in the period of the Swadeshi upsurge. While the National Council expanded its branches and set up its own examination system, the Technical Institute was on the point of folding up. In 1910, the Technical Institute merged with the National Council. The philosophy of culture seemed to have defeated the philosophy of *dal-bhat*.

But the victory was illusory. As soon as the Swadeshi movement ended, the students of the National Council returned to the official university system. By 1916, there was not a single student who wanted "literary and scientific education along national lines". Ironically, the only unit of the National Council that survived through the following decades was the Technical Institute, transforming itself into the Jadavpur College of Engineering and providing in 1955 the core of the new Jadavpur University. In the long duration, then, the story of national education seems to show a strong tendency towards the *mistrification* of the country.

But we should not trivialize the moral of this story. The word *mistri*, we know, probably entered most of the north Indian languages through the Portuguese *mestre* which meant a master in one or the other craft. In this etymological sense, the word has the same root as the English *mister* which is a weakened form of *master*. A *mistri* in this sense is someone who has acquired rare technical skills in a particular craft, through intensive training and experience, and has thus earned a certain social recognition, because his services are of value to society. If we stick to this meaning, there should have been no difference between calling someone "Mister So-and-so" and "So-and-so *mistri*". In Western industrial societies, there is no such difference, because the specific social meaning of the word *master* that designates a craftsman has vanished. In our

country, on the other hand, a hundred and fifty years of university education has perpetuated a system designed to produce graduates who are called “Mister”, and now “Ms.”, erased of any reference to marital status, but we all know that university graduates are not to be confused with the class of *mistris*. The latter may have a technical knowledge of doing things; they may even be able to do things that university graduates cannot do. But they do not have the knowledge that universities provide. Or so at least we must insist, if we are to justify university education.

So what is this education that is different from the knowledge that craftsmen have? The anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss has described the working methods of a man who in France used to be called the *bricoleur*. Those of my generation who grew up in Calcutta will remember a person who would often appear on Sunday mornings, shouting out from the street to the neighboring houses, announcing his offer to repair anything in the house that needed to be mended. He could repair pots and pans, pieces of furniture, metal objects, toys, cheap jewellery, broken umbrellas, I don't know what else. He carried a toolbox and a large sack slung over his shoulder, containing a puzzling variety of odds and ends. When shown something that needed to be repaired or rebuilt, he would reach into his sack, pull out one little implement after another, try them out and finally select the ones that would do the job. Levi-Strauss points out that the *bricoleur* always had a finite set of materials or tools, accumulated from previous jobs, out of which he had to choose the ones that would serve his purpose for any task at hand. The odds and ends he collected for his toolbox did not have any specific purpose; rather, each could be made to serve a variety of functions. The craftsman's skill lay in being able to pick the right combination of pieces from his sack that would be appropriate for any job that he was asked to perform. This is entirely different, Levi-Strauss tells us, from the way an engineer is

trained to approach a project. The engineer first solves the task in his mind, works out the details on the drawing board and then looks for the appropriate materials and tools. For him, unlike for the *bricoleur*, each material or tool has a specific use. But the total set of tools or materials an engineer can draw upon is, in principle, unlimited. The craftsman's conceptual world is closed; the scientist's is open. That is the main reason why the number of new things that modern science and technology can enable us to do has grown so rapidly in the last two hundred years. The incredible achievements of modern knowledge are based, we say, on a new way of thinking, one that is different from the way craftsmen in the old days solved their technical problems. Modern science thinks theoretically, through concepts of varying range that can be used to explain and, if possible, intervene in phenomena in the empirical world. That is the way of thinking that modern university education is supposed to promote. I am sure this is what Professor Benoy Sarkar meant when he argued so vociferously against *mistrification*.

We must not make the mistake of believing that we moderns are the only people who have learnt to think conceptually or theoretically. The history of mathematics, philosophy and art in China, India, the Islamic world and Greece shows that even in the ancient and medieval age, there were scholarly communities that engaged in theoretical discourses of great sophistication. But those were usually small groups of highly learned people, enclosed within institutions to which access was tightly controlled and in which the modes of training and dissemination were extremely restricted. As for the rest of society, specialized knowledge in particular arts and crafts was learnt and transmitted through disciplinary training under a master. Such training consisted more of an initiation into disciplinary practices rather than providing a grasp of concepts and theories. Anyone who has the experience of being trained in classical Indian music or dance will know that the work of



the student does not consist merely in grasping the conceptual form of a *raga* or a *tala*. Rather, training mostly consists of a seemingly endless repetition of the same movement or rhythm, over and over again, long after the student thinks she has learnt to do the exercise perfectly.

That is not the form of modern university education. The university of the nineteenth century produced a form of secondary and higher education that opened up the training in the new theoretical knowledges, rather than the old craft practices, to ever widening sections of society. Obviously, the new education had a great deal to do with the social transformation brought about by industrial capitalism. The new processes of factory production, powered by rapid innovations in technology, required a population that was fully literate and with the general conceptual skills to be employed not in one particular craft but in any branch of industrial production or services. At higher levels of training, industrial society required professionals who had the ability to create institutions and change practices to keep pace with, even to anticipate, the often bewildering changes thrust on society by rapid industrial growth.

Training in the skills of innovation – that, to put it in a nutshell, is the ideal pursued by modern university education. That, I think, is what Professor Benoy Sarkar was keen to see institutionalized in a national and modern education system in India. The *mistri*, he would probably have said, is only trained to repeat the practices of his craft. He may sometimes find ingenious solutions to difficult problems. But he does not have the theoretical apparatus to generalize his solution by redefining concepts, making new connections between concepts and formulating new theories. The *mistri* cannot imagine an entirely new framework of practices never attempted before; he cannot create new institutions

A general capacity for creativity and innovation, I have said, is the ideal of modern education. Have we followed it? I believe the answer is highly uncertain and ambiguous. Let me devote the remaining part of my talk today to some thoughts I have on the state of university education in our country. What I will say may not be acceptable to all of you, but that is a risk, Professor Basu, you have taken by inviting me to speak here today. But let me also assure you that I do not hold any of these views as dogma. I am open to persuasion; I am prepared to change my views, as indeed I have on many questions since I was a student on this campus thirty-seven years ago.

First, there is the overwhelming fact of the continuing expansion of demand for university education. I know that in some circles this is seen as an unfortunate, and largely negative, pressure on the university system. I strongly disagree with that view. If one takes a longer view of the potential for a democratic transformation of the deeply hierarchical Indian society, one cannot but marvel at the historical force represented by the urge for higher education among so many sections of the Indian people who for centuries were denied access even to literacy, on grounds such as caste or gender or religion. Many recent studies have shown that this urge is not necessarily driven only by the material incentive of securing a white-collar job. It represents a desire to acquire the dignity and social respect that is still given to those in our society who speak and behave with the refinement produced by education. Even from a utilitarian point of view, it represents a huge potential for the productive society of the future, comparable to the forces that have been unleashed in China, a country that went through a political and social revolution that in India is probably occurring at a more gradual pace over a much longer period of time. I believe we will only harm our collective future by trying to stem the tide of democratization that is sweeping across the universities in India today. It is potentially a source of immense strength.

But, second, I am not blind to the challenge of ensuring that the true ideals of modern education are also upheld. On this matter, I do not think we have done as well as we should have. I feel we have allowed much of our university education to slip into the routine repetition of old practices, not unlike the craft practices I described earlier, and possibly in their worst forms. We have not devoted enough efforts in the last two or three decades to invent new ways of energizing the millions of new entrants to the university to direct their inherited memory and experience to the critical evaluation of the concepts and theories we are teaching them in class. The failing is not of those who are entering the university. It is of those of us who claim to have the capacity for conceptual innovation. We have failed to invent new educational practices that could use the concrete knowledge possessed by the new generation of students, many of them first-generation literates, to enrich the conceptual apparatus of the disciplines that we teach.

Third, I cannot resist the temptation of raising one more contentious subject – that of the language of education. If one reads through the curriculum of the National Council of Education, unquestionably imbued with the spirit of nationalism, one cannot fail to be struck by its desire to produce an ideal educated national citizen who was indubitably multilingual. At the primary stage, the curriculum recommended the study of the vernacular with an English alphabetical primer. At the secondary stage, it suggests, in addition to the vernacular and English, a classical language such as Sanskrit or Arabic or Persian. In the final years of secondary school, it was suggested that for those students choosing the literary course, they should opt for a second vernacular such as Hindi, Marathi, Gujarati, Tamil or Telugu, or a second European language such as French or German. At the undergraduate college level, those studying Economics were asked to study French; those studying Political Science were asked to study Sanskrit or Arabic and German. I should also mention that those who led the National Education

movement in the early decades of the twentieth century actually arranged to send their best students for further training to Germany, the United States and Japan rather than to Britain, which would have been the usual preference at the time.

Compare this with the situation today. It is not wrong to say that in actual fact, for all practical purposes, the large bulk of university graduates in India today are educated only in one language, usually their mother tongue. This is unprecedented in our history. For as long back as one knows of, literary, scholarly and bureaucratic work was always carried out in India in a language other than the mother tongue of most people. Even uneducated people have always had, and still have, the ability to deal in more than one language. It is with the rapid spread of university education after independence that we have created, quite paradoxically, the first generation of educated persons in the entire history of India who are functionally monolingual. I feel very strongly that in this we have somewhat squandered the historical advantage of multilingual education that was a part of our inheritance and which even the pioneers of our national education were keen to preserve.

Fourth, there is the new context of economic and institutional changes brought about by the pressures and opportunities of increased globalization. This is not the place for me to discuss the rights and wrongs of government policy regarding globalization. But there is a more specific question about institutional reforms in higher education in the wake of increasing foreign investment in the university and research sectors. Clearly, there is little merit in insisting that those sectors should be closed off from international contacts or influences. The danger is also not that by expanding the production of trained personnel skilled in the routine performance of jobs in the new information industries and services, our universities will only participate in creating a pool of low-paid skilled labour for global capital. After all, we have not been able in half a century of independence to entirely avoid *mistrification*. It is

also unfair and unrealistic to place on our universities the responsibility of redressing the balance in the present international structure of capital. I see the bigger danger in the possibility of dismantling the institutions of independent theoretical and experimental research built in this country in the twentieth century. Both in their scale and in their quality, these institutions are virtually unique in what used to be called the Third World. They have provided a focus of independent, critical and innovative thinking that is unmatched in the postcolonial world. There is certainly nothing like this in the countries of East and Southeast Asia which today have much higher incomes and rates of literacy and much better funded universities than we do. Indeed, I often think that the advantage that India has over other countries in the IT industry, or the significant global presence of Indian academics in several branches of the social sciences, is the result of a culture of independent and innovative critical thinking fostered by the best Indian universities and research institutions. This is not an inheritance we should throw away. That is my plea today to those who will make the big decisions for us in the next few years. It is also my reminder to those who are graduating today. Don't forget that those who built this university for you dreamt that you will not merely learn and copy the modern knowledge produced elsewhere in the world but innovate and create new forms of modernity. There is now a real historical possibility that the most significant innovations of the twenty-first century will come not from the old modern nations of the West but from the new modern nations of the East. It is for you to take up the challenge.

I congratulate you once more on your success and the distinctions you have achieved. I thank you, Your Excellency, and you, Professor Basu, and all of you assembled here this morning for your kind attention.



