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Experiments in Education: The early years of Visva Bharati and Dacca University

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In 1921, Bengal witnessed the foundation of two universities: Visva Bharati and Dacca. The early years of the institutions give us a portrait of two unique models of education, learning, and pedagogy.

In 1927, Syed Mujtaba Ali, a Visva Bharati graduate, arrived in Kabul to earn some money before venturing further west to Germany. Fluent in Persian and French, both of which he had learnt at the university in Santiniketan, Ali easily found a job with the Afghan government. Initially paid Rs 200, his salary was further raised by Rs 100 when his superiors came to know that he was also conversant in German.

A few disgruntled graduates from Punjab University complained to the Afghan education minister that Mujtaba Ali got his diploma from an ‘unrecognised’ university. The minister agreed with them, but replied that the degrees of Punjab University had the signature of the governor of the Indian province, a personage unknown to the minister. There were quite a few governors in the world; Afghanistan alone had five. But Ali’s degree was signed by Rabindranath Tagore — the person who had made the entire Orient proud.

In 1921, Bengal witnessed the foundation of two universities. One was Visva Bharati, at Santiniketan, the extension of the educational model of Tagore, by then a world-renowned poet and a Nobel laureate. The other was the University of Dacca (now Dhaka), a pet project of the British colonial government.

Visva Bharati and Dacca could not have been more different in their outlook. Tagore’s Visva Bharati was unique as an institution, with the poet’s approach quite different from the education system introduced by the colonial government in India. On the other hand, the university at Dacca was modelled on the best institutions of higher education of the West. Recounting the initial years of these institutions provides perspectives on two very different higher educational initiatives of colonial India, both of which differed from the existing state of things. They give us a portrait of a different vision of education, learning, and pedagogy.

Visva Bharati: A global vision

Tagore’s institution started its journey with the dictum that “the system of examination will have no place in Visva Bharati, nor will there be any conferring of degrees” (Ali 1981, 70). Tagore was even uncomfortable with the tag of a ‘university’. “That word not only has an inner meaning but outer associations in minds of those who use it, and that fact tortures my idea into its own rigid shape,” he wrote to the English critic and artist William Rothenstein (Dasgupta 2006, 199).

Tagore radically rethought the British university-education system. He emphasised the importance of arts, crafts and agriculture. “True education is to realise at every step how our training and knowledge have an organic connection with our surroundings,” he felt (O’Connell 2020, 300). The historian Soumen Mukherjee has argued that Tagore had in mind a university “as a site for first and foremost production, and expansion, of new knowledge (vidyar utpadan) as opposed to imparting knowledge to students (sei vidyake dan kora) to which he ascribed a secondary importance” (Mukherjee 2021, 4).

The Tagore scholar Kathleen M. O’Connell suggests that Visva Bharati had three levels of operation. At one level, it was an Indian University, where scholars would teach Indian religions, languages, texts and folk culture. At another level, the institution was conceived as a university to study Eastern cultures and build a library of Eastern texts. “An important link between India and China was set up through the Chinese Buddhist scholar Tan Yun-Shan, who came to Santiniketan from China in 1928” — one among the several Eastern scholars and artists at the university (O’Connell 2020, 302).

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For O’Connell, though, Visva Bharati’s most inclusive level was the global one. This was expressed in its motto: yatra vishvam bhavatye kanidam, ‘where the world comes together in a single nest’. The global scope resulted from a shared vision of Tagore and Charles Freer Andrews, who was intimately connected with the university until his death (O’Connell). As Tagore wrote to Andrews in

1920, from a tour of Europe, “Now I know more closely than ever before that Santiniketan belongs to all the world and we shall have to be worthy of the great fact.” The post-war ravages he witnessed convinced Tagore even more than before for universal cooperation and international fellow-feeling. “Let the illusory geographical boundary lines vanish from at least one spot in India. Let the whole world settle there fully. Let our ‘Santiniketan’ be that spot” (Mukherjee 2021a, 112).

In his pursuit of cooperation, Tagore established links with various global educationists like John Dewey, Maria Montessori, Leonard and Dorothy Elmhirst, Paul and Edith Geheeb, Aldous and Dora Huxley; all of whom sought to create a curriculum that prioritised internationalism, social inclusiveness, human freedom, and creativity.

Tagore’s internationalism was in distinct contrast with the nationalist politics of the time. As O’Connell suggests, “Making a distinction between nationalism and culture, Tagore argued that nationalism as a construct produces the most aggressive and selfish elements in individuals, whereas ‘culture’ remains dynamic and open-ended, allowing for creative sharing and the building of international alliances” (O’Connell 2020, 300).

The newness of Dacca

While Visva Bharati was a novel experiment, the University of Dacca was modelled on the classical western system. The colonial government openly declared the university to be a compensatory gift to the eastern part of Bengal after the annulment of partition in 1911. The annulment was a blow to the political ambitions of a section of Bengali Muslims. As Viceroy Lytton put it, the university was a “splendid imperial compensation” for their support for the British regime.

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The University of Dacca was envisioned as a new type of university in India. It borrowed from the hallowed tradition of the Oxbridge as well as from the new universities in Manchester, Liverpool, and Leeds. As historian Iftekhar Iqbal notes, “there was also a desire for DU [Dhaka University] to be an example of a mix of American and British styles [...] This rich combination of teaching and learning approaches means that DU was imagined as one of the most advanced universities in India.” (Iqbal 2016, 315)

The university opened with twelve academic departments, 60 teachers, and 877 students. The students' social lives revolved around the university’s three residential halls. The initial days of the university were described in Nature as “an attempt to remedy...the abuses which had gradually grown up in India round the purely examining bodies of the older type. To many of the present university students in India, collegiate life, such as exists in Europe and the United States, is unknown” (Nature, 1925, 842).

The first Vice-Chancellor of Dacca University was P.J. Hartog, a founder member of the School of Oriental and African Studies at London. Under him, the university introduced new methods of teaching and learning. As the report in Nature noted, the new system was “designed to foster individual effort, to ensure that each student shall be enabled to learn something of intellectual production as well as reproduction, so that when he enters the world he will not find himself for the first time confronted with problems to which he had not been taught the answers beforehand.”

Hiring the best

While the rationale differed, there were certain similarities in the workings of the two institutions in their initial days. One such aspect was the recruitment of teachers. Both Hartog and Tagore were keen to have globally reputed scholars at their institutions.

Hartog felt “bound to choose as Professors and Heads of Departments men who, by actual performance, had proved that they had freed themselves from the old fetters; men who had not only learnt but had advanced learning or science” (Iqbal 2016, 321). Among the faculty were the physicist Satyendranath Bose, whose work on the theory of light was translated into German and published by Albert Einstein; Muhammad Shahidullah, the doctorate in linguistics in India; and the poet Mohitlal Majumdar. Eminent figures like Rabindranath Tagore, CV Raman, Meghnad Saha regularly visited the university. Research works from the university were published in leading journals of international repute.

One of the significant incentives for the faculty members was the higher salaries at the new university. Some of the best teachers from the University of Calcutta were given higher rank and pay to join Dacca. Even after the scales were reduced, in 1923, they remained

considerably higher for younger faculty, such as the historian Ramesh Chandra Majumdar, who joined from Calcutta,

At Visva Bharati, Tagore was keen on appointing scholars from all around the world. As he mentioned in a lecture in 1930, an international milieu would rid students of the nationalistic prejudices “often sedulously cultivated in our school-books, and also by the patriots who wish the boys to be proud of the exploits of their own country by running down other countries [...] With the help of my visitors from abroad I have tried my best to make our boys’ minds hospitable to the guests who come to us, and I think I have been successful” (Dasgupta 2006, 147).

From the very beginning, globally reputed scholars were associated with both institutions. This was an area that was quite dear to the founder members.

Tagore went globe-trotting to ask prominent figures of the literary and cultural world to come and spend time in his institution at Santiniketan. Through his efforts, Visva Bharati truly became a place where the world came together. The first visiting professor was the French specialist of Chinese and Tibetan studies, Sylvan Levi. Other important visitors during this period were the Indologists Morris Winternitz and Vincent Lesny from Czechoslovakia; Stella Kramrisch, an Austrian art historian and critic; Sten Konow, a Norwegian expert on ancient languages and archaeologist; Josef Tucci, a polyglot and noted Buddhist scholar from Italy.

Visva Bharati also boasted of some of the finest Indian scholars of the day. They included Kshitimohan Sen, a scholar of Pali and folk culture; Sanskritist Bidhu Shekhar Sastri; linguist Haricharan Bandopadhyay, the compiler of the Bengali dictionary; Vidhusekhar Bhattacharya, who taught the Vedas, Puranas and Buddhist scriptures; and Gurdial Mallik, who taught English and Sufism. The artists at Visva Bharati included Nandalal Bose, Surendranath Kar, Mukul Dey, Asit Haldar, Benodebihari Mukherjee, Vinayakrao Masoji and Ramkinkar Baij. They gave shape to Tagore’s vision of the place of art in education and art as an essential part of culture.

The institute was a place where Eastern art and culture were put on the same pedestal as the West. As Satyajit Ray, who studied for three years in Visva Bharati in the early 1940s, later reminisced, “Santiniketan opened my eyes for the first time to the splendours of Indian and Far Eastern art. Until then, I was completely under the sway of Western art, music, and literature. Santiniketan made me the combined product of East and West that I am.” (cited in Sen 2021, 40)

Challenges for the poet

Visva Bharati’s glorious faculty list could not alleviate more mundane difficulties. Funds were a perennial problem. Tagore invested his earnings from the Nobel Prize, his zamindari money, his income from lectures given in Europe and America, and even his wife’s jewellery. It was not enough, and he had to seek help from the rulers of princely states like Tripura and Porbander, among others.

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There were other problems as well. The colonial government was sceptical of the project and tried to thwart Tagore’s efforts to raise funds abroad. Several Indian personalities too did not view the venture with kind eyes. The noted Indian historian Jadunath Sarkar, an old friend of Tagore, was initially enthusiastic but later declined to join Visva Bharati’s governing body. His correspondence with Tagore reveals that Sarkar was not convinced by the system of continuous education from childhood to the highest level at one place. But more fundamentally, as Kumkum Bhattacharya writes, Sarkar “felt that the students of Visva-Bharati were over-concerned with the ideas of the international man and in being the aesthete rather than having the mindset required for concentrated academic purposes built on pursuit and perseverance required of exact knowledge” (Bhattacharya 2014, 68).

Independence and after

With Tagore’s death in 1941, Visva Bharati entered a tumultuous phase. In 1951, an act of parliament granted it recognition as an institute of national importance. Government rules and regulations began to check in the earlier free-wheeling spirit of the institution. Still, it retained some of Tagore’s vision, especially in providing continuous support to develop arts and culture in the curricula.

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Over the years, though, Visva Bharati has become a mere shadow of its vibrant past. One reason for the present condition of Visva Bharati was foreshadowed by Jadunath Sarkar's objections to Tagore's experiment. That a "system that seamlessly connected elementary education with the highest levels of learning could have serious disadvantages and drawbacks did not occur to Tagore [...] such kind of inbreeding is one of the main criticisms against the university — the general perception being that the university is today parochial, insular and cocooned" (Bhattacharya 2014, 69).

Today, Visva Bharati is constantly mired in controversy over nepotism, government high-handedness, appointments, funds, and utter negligence in preserving the legacy of Tagore. A recurring source of conflict is the appointment of the vice-chancellor of the university, who is often seen as a political appointment from the centre. Local party affiliates remain at constant loggerheads with the administration. Most recently, as a report in The Hindu noted: "Ever since Prof. [Bidyut] Chakrabarty took charge in November 2018, the university has been in the news for all the wrong reasons: a gag order on staff, several new do's and don'ts imposed on teachers [...] constant issuing of show-cause notices seeking to discipline employees, eviction of 'erring' students from hostels, construction of high walls around the campus, and conflict with the local population." (The Hindu, 12/06/2021)

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On the other hand, Dacca became the nerve centre of the intellectual and political life of the postcolonial East Pakistan province. Hartog continued to pull scholars towards the university, including when "in the 1950s, Hartog's intellectual network brought [the French anthropologist Claude] Levi-Strauss to Dhaka to establish DU's [Dhaka University] Sociology Department" (Iqbal 2016, 316). The university's students pioneered the Language Movement in 1952 to establish the right of Bengali language in the Urdu-dominated governance of Pakistan. They were also the first to raise the flag of Bangladesh on 2 March 1971, almost a month before the declaration of independence from Pakistan. The university community was especially targeted by the Pakistani army which moved in later that month to crush the national movement. Several teachers and hundreds of students were gunned down as troops stormed the campus over two days.

Naturally, Dacca University gained importance in the national life of Bangladesh after the country's liberation in 1971. Political leaders, ministers, educationists, artists, litterateurs light up the list of alumni of the university. The university remains the most prestigious centre of higher education in Bangladesh. But in its centenary, alumni members lament the passing of glorious days. They rue that even with state support, the university has not fulfilled its potential. Amidst the centenary celebrations, many distinguished alumni members expressed their desire to see the university among the top institutions of the world.

Yet this desire has a flip side. In India and Bangladesh, old government institutions face the stiff challenge of becoming "world-class universities", even as state spending on education has not increased proportionately. In India, the idea of self-financing in the name of autonomy to pursue global rankings is being drafted in the new policy documents. The ensuing free rein to set fees does not portend well for students or the general condition of higher education in this part of the world.

Conclusion

Both Visva Bharati and the University of Dacca were determined to set up something different from the established universities of colonial India. The relationship of the pupils with the teachers, the charms of university life, and the enthusiasm of being a part of something novel come through in the memoirs of the early batch of students. They give us a vivid sense of university life: one in an open rural setting, where the school has been described by Amartya Sen (2021) as "without walls" and was literally so, while the other in a burgeoning urban centre. The cosmopolitan culture of Santiniketan was matched by the urbane sophistication and modernism of Dacca. Adda was a leitmotif of both the institutions, with several famous spots and shops attaining cult status among the town's population.

Though very different in their orientation, and with famous predecessors in the form of Presidency College and the University of Calcutta, while the unique pedagogic attempts of Visva Bharati were streamlined into the traditional set-up regular university, the birth of Bangladesh gave a fillip to the prestige of Dacca University. Even today, the university throbs with radical politics and acts as a nerve centre of student activities in Bangladesh.

But both institutions are mere shadows of their past in terms of innovative teaching methods, active participation of world-renowned scholars, or diverse student population. This reappraisal in their year of birth centenary allows us to evaluate two distinct sets of educational ideals initiated in colonial Bengal, which charted very different trajectories in their independent nation-states. It also alerts us to the lost opportunities, with the systematic dismantling of university campuses as spaces of free speech, debate, dissent, and discussion.

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