

Higher education values

Myths and realities

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In 1921 two universities were set up in the larger geographical area of what was then known as Bengal – one in Dhaka, and the other in Santiniketan. Both the University of Dhaka and the Visva-Bharati University, which was a dream project of Rabindranath Tagore, began with a mission to impart the best education to their students who would be active questers of truth and would turn out to be ideal, ethical and enlightened individuals cultivating values that both the eastern and western civilisations cherish. While the University of Dhaka didn't have a goal-specific mission statement which would guide its educational and other activities, it was nevertheless implied in the optimism the founding fathers felt about the university and in the activities of the educators who came from both parts of Bengal as well as from England. Tagore's university, however, had a Constitution, which specifically stated that its primary objective was to 'study the mind of Man in its realisation of different aspects of truth from diverse points of view.' A year later, Tagore wrote an essay titled 'An Eastern University' which was published initially as a bulletin of Visva-Bharati and was later included in his 1926 book Creative Unity. There, he reiterated his belief that a university's primary object should be 'the constant pursuit of truth,' but warned that in doing so, a university should not become 'a dead



cage' where 'minds are fed with food artificially prepared.'

Although both the universities shared a common objective in generating and disseminating knowledge, and in realising ethical, aesthetic, individual and social aims, their histories and the way they were run were different. While Visva-Bharati was set up on Tagore's

personal initiative and funding, the University of Dhaka was established by the British as a compensation for the loss of political agency of the Muslim population of East Bengal who had strongly supported the partition of Bengal in 1905. Visva-Bharati was designed to realise the ideals of Tagore's 'eastern university' and was seen as a meeting

place of the east and the west, where people offered 'their intellectual hospitality, their wealth of mind to others,' and earned 'their proud right in return to receive gifts from the rest of the world.' Visva-Bharati also reflected Tagore's appreciation of Ralph Waldo Emerson's idea of a scholar as somebody who is a 'Man Thinking' rather than 'a mere

thinker, or still worse, the parrot of other men's thinking' – one whose mind develops under the influence of the past (which is manifest in the wealth of knowledge contained in books) and one who imbibes in him the values that nature instils (Emerson, 'The American Scholar,' 1837). The University of Dhaka, on the other hand, was modelled on Oxford as a residential university where Deans were leading academic administrators and where students attended tutorial classes along with general classes in their subjects. The idea was clearly to get a world class model which the university would attempt to emulate.

Both the universities began with a great deal of promise, and if the initial academic and extra academic performances of the scholars were any indication, both appeared set to realise at least a part of their mission goals. The University of Dhaka gathered together a formidable faculty whose name and fame spread beyond the border of Bengal to the rest of India and beyond. Both universities maintained their progress even in circumstances that were not always conducive to learning, and in this, the University of Dhaka played a stronger role. In 1947, with the partition of India, a large number of its faculty left for India. Throughout the turbulent years of Pakistan rule, the university was under attack for its promotion of culture and critical thought, and for the active involvement of its students and faculty in realising the rights of Bangalis.

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