

INTRODUCTION

The Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India, appointed on 6 March, 2006, a High Level Committee to study Visva-Bharati (VB) matters, headed by the Governor of West Bengal, in his capacity as Pradhana (Rector), as Chairman. The Committee comprised:

- (i) Professor André Béteille
Professor Emeritus of Sociology at Delhi University
- (ii) Professor Amlan Datta
Former Vice Chancellor, Visva-Bharati
- (iii) Professor Goverdhan Mehta
CSIR Bhatnagar Fellow and Honorary Professor,
Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore
- (iv) Professor A. P. Mitra,
Honorary Scientist of Eminence,
National Physical Laboratory, New Delhi
- (v) Professor Romila Thapar
Professor Emeritus at Jawaharlal Nehru University,
New Delhi
- (vi) Professor A. Vaidyanathan
Honorary Fellow, Centre for Development Studies,
Thiruvananthapuram.

The Ministry's communication began with the following preamble :

'Taking note of the *present state of affairs* of Visva-Bharati vis-à-vis the *need to restore the University to its pre-eminence* in the *national/international* arena and to *re-establish* it as a *centre of excellence*, the President of India, in his capacity as the Paridarśaka of the University, has been pleased to constitute a high level committee...' (italics ours)

Three elements were prominent in the Paridarśaka's (Visitor's) order constituting the Committee –

1. There was a reference to the *present state of affairs* pointing to a condition of decline.
2. It spoke of a need to *restore* Visva-Bharati to its pre-eminence, recognizing the need for a restorative return to a position of distinction.
3. Its use of the phrase *national/international* recalled an earlier stature enjoyed by Visva-Bharati within the country and beyond, free from any localism.

It therefore became necessary, as a first step, for the Committee to understand the *present state of affairs*. Without resorting to a *Hamlet*-like generalization about there being "something rotten in the State of Denmark", the Committee needed to understand the contours of the *affairs*,

which the Paridarśaka and, by extension, the Acharya (Chancellor – the Prime Minister of India) wanted it to take note of, study and remedy.

With the Paridarśaka's and Acharya's mandate before it and the foregoing perceptions, the Committee recalled similar exercises that had been undertaken before.

The *Karma Samiti's* Special Committee (1970), to review the academic and other activities of the VB to identify the defects in its working and suggest the lines of reform for the academic and administrative structure of VB “in the light of the ideas and ideals of its Founder-President (Tagore)” was perhaps the earliest in the series. It had the Upacharya (Pratul Chandra Gupta) as its Chairman and included such celebrities as Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, Professor Uma Shankar Joshi, Dr. C. D. Deshmukh, Dr. Nihar Ranjan Ray and Professor Amartya Sen. The first meeting of this Committee was held in May 1971 and its report was finalized in 1973. It was signed by members of the Special Committee in early 1974, with some members, notably Dr. Nihar Ranjan Ray submitting a separate note. This notable effort had a very limited outcome. Regrettably, the Committee was unable to find a single copy of that report in Santiniketan or elsewhere.

The Union Minister of Education had appointed, in February 1974, a Committee under the Chairmanship of Justice S. A. Masud of the Calcutta High Court to determine the lines of the future development of VB. This Committee included Dr. P. C. Gupta, Upacharya, VB, and other eminent persons, such as Professor V.V. John, Dr. S. Gopal, Shri Krishna Kripalani and Professor Sankho Chaudhuri. The Committee held its first meeting in February 1974 and its report was published in 1975.

The University Grants Commission (UGC) constituted in January 2001, “a high powered committee under the Chairmanship of Shri T. N. Seshan, to rejuvenate Visva-Bharati”. Shri Kirit Joshi was one of the notable members of this Committee. The report of the T.N. Seshan Committee on the “rejuvenation” of VB bears the date of June 2004. It was forwarded to Professor Sujit Kumar Basu, the Upacharya, along with a letter dated 4 August 2004, by the Member Secretary of the Committee. By a resolution dated 16 October, 2004, the Executive Council of VB constituted a Committee which included Professor Ramaranjan Mukherjee, among others, to consider the Seshan Committee Report. This sub-committee submitted its report in early 2005. The Executive Council of VB authorized the Upacharya (Vice-Chancellor) to take necessary action on the basis of the recommendations of this sub-committee. There can be little doubt that the Seshan Committee would have expected the follow-up to have been better.

In the same year VB produced its own plan of development called “Comprehensive Perspective Plan for the Development of Visva-Bharati during 2005-2025”. Thus, within the last six years, we have had two Committees studying VB and, a Perspective Plan prepared by the University itself.

These committees have done their work and submitted their reports and recommendations. But it is evident that these past exercises have left much to be done, leading to the constitution of this, yet another, committee.

The earlier committees' reports provide accounts of the genesis and early development of Santiniketan and also offer partly dissimilar but thoughtful recommendations regarding what should be done in future. These reports deserve to be studied with care.

Our Committee commenced its work with respect for and even partial concordance with the earlier committees and their perceptions, though it was also to differ from some of their approaches and recommendations.

Among the references which the HLC found before it was this comment from Professor Hiren Mukerji in his speech in the Lok Sabha on 29 November 1971, while debating amendments to the Visva-Bharati Act of 1951 : “For years now, Visva-Bharati is going down the drain and nothing is being done by the Government of the day...That is why our grouse is that during the last few years, repeatedly, the demand has been put forward that there should be a real, genuine probe into the affairs of Visva-Bharati. It never took place. This demand was made because the characteristic institutions of Visva-Bharati have been deteriorating. The Cheena Bhavana, which in the days of Tan Yun-shan, a friend of Mao Tse-tung himself, was a stupendous institution, an institution with potentialities which were incalculable. The Cheena Bhavana is now in a derelict condition. Even the Hindi Bhavana, in spite of the enthusiasm for Hindi on the part of some members of the Cabinet, is in a shambles. The Shilpa Bhavana, the museum, and all that are in absolute doldrums. What is supposed to be an advanced centre of philosophy is completely defunct, and Sriniketan has been going downhill all the time.”

That was 35 years ago. It is astonishing that the same or similar sentiments are to be heard even now.

The High Level Committee (HLC) undertook its work with these images and perceptions in view.