



**The Tagore Memorial Lecture 2008 Speech by
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It is, indeed, a great honour for me to be here before you this afternoon to deliver the prestigious Tagore Memorial Lecture. Considering what I have done so far I find no reason for this honour. However, I accepted it with humility to be able to share with you some concerns I felt as someone who has had an association with the education sector for some time. I am not an academic, and therefore the thoughts I express may appear disjointed and somewhat raw. However, the rawness may perhaps convey an urgency which I do certainly feel about the issues that bother me.

I wonder if you saw the lead story in the Hindustan Times of 9th April, 2008, "Sleight of Weight". The same story was also carried by several television news networks. It is an interesting story. Some of the best names in the fast moving consumer goods business like Nestle, Kellogg's, Kwality, Hindustan Lever, Britannia, etc. cut down in weight the amount of popular consumer items packaged by them by negligible amounts of 5,10,20 gms. while keeping the prices of their packages at the same level. So what you used to get as 100 gms. of biscuits, became 92 gms and so on with other items. This was done honestly enough as the change in weight was mentioned on the packs. The companies are calling the device not exactly coyly as "grammage adjustments to hold on to price points". In simpler times, we would have called it the art of cheating without being caught. But the point is not that. The point is to look behind the companies and seek out the people who should have taken such intriguing decisions. The millions of consumers are being made to suffer loss by, may be, small amounts, to maintain or enhance the profitability of these companies. I keep thinking about this. Since these are the best of the companies, I am sure, these decisions are being taken by the best of managers - products of our best management institutions, if not premier international ones. I am sure at some time the same management schools will come out with case studies, and some worthy expert may even get a Ph.D.degree on this or at least publish papers in refereed journals on innovative methods of protecting or enhancing profits.

These are our 99% plus percentile boys and girls who are taking such decisions and the premier faculty in our management schools are creating such new knowledge and new pedagogy. The purpose of education has become how to make people amass money in whatever conceivable or inconceivable a way. This is the quality of education we are trumpeting about. That is the knowledge society we appear to be building.

Around three millennia back, Maitreyi asked her teacher husband Yajnavalkya the famous question that if the whole earth, full of wealth, were to belong just to her, whether she could achieve immortality through it. 'No', responded Yajnavalkya, her life would be in the same manner as the lives of rich people. But there was no hope of immortality by wealth. Maitreyi remarks: "What should I do with that by which I do not become immortal.?"

I will quote Amartya Sen from whom I have drawn the above quotation.

"Maitreyi's rhetorical question has been repeatedly cited in Indian religious philosophy to illustrate both the nature of the human predicament and the limitations of the material world. But there is another aspect of this exchange that has, in some ways, more immediate interest. This concerns the relation - and the distance - between income and achievement, between the commodities we can buy and the actual capabilities we can enjoy, between our economic wealth and our ability to live as we would like. While there is a connection between opulence and our ability to achieve what we value, the linkage may or may not be very close. Maitreyi's worldly worries might well have some transcendental relevance (as Indian religious commentators have discussed over many centuries), but they certainly have worldly interest as well. If we are concerned with the freedom to live long and live well, our focus has to be directly on life and death, and not just on wealth and economic opulence."

A similar and more educationally focused question was asked in the 19th century by Ramakrishna Paramahansa from his brother Ram Kumar: what would he do with an education which only provided him with livelihood?

We seem to have come a long distance. How does education come to this level? Does it merely enable an individual to earn wealth? A popular Sanskrit saying of an unknown author sums it up very well.

Vidyaa dadaati vinayam

Vinayaat yaati paatrataam

Paatratvaat dhanamapnoti

Dhanaat dharma tatah sukham

This means that education gives humility, *vinaya*. The word *vinaya* is derived from the root which means bending, and by extension of meaning, being courteous. So education teaches you how to be affable, courteous and subdued which in turn gives you the ability to receive. It makes you *paatra*, the container and when you

become a container you obtain wealth. And through wealth you get *dharma* from where you get happiness. So it is not exactly that it is a recent perversion of education. In recent times, of course, it has reached extra ordinary dimensions where solitary purpose of education seems to be the creation of wealth. Therefore, we do not go to Yajnavalkya to ask the question. We address it to Ambanis and Birlas to tell us how to run our education system. This is exactly what the NDA Govt. did. We ask those who have made money selling switchgears and soaps to tell us what really knowledge is for the society and how it is to be introduced. Till the other day we went to Dr. Radhakrishnan and Dr. D.S. Kothari and Prof. N.R. Sarkar. All these were knowledgeable in themselves, but still they interacted with people all over the country and only after elaborate consultations came up with their recommendations on education. Today's protagonists of knowledge mafia feel that they need not ask anyone. They already know all the answers because they have made more money for themselves or for their companies. Today's Maitreyi, if there was one, would be asking not Yajnavalkya but from someone from the Forbes list of billionaires the reverse question: "What should I do with immortality if that does not make me wealthy?"

I would like to share some of my concerns about the current debates in higher education and try to raise a few questions, even if I may not be able to suggest any answers. Briefly speaking, the issues can be categorized as these relating to access, equity, relevance and quality. An overarching debate is about the financing of higher education and the relationship that has with the nature of the economy. These are all interlinked issues and it is difficult to treat them as discrete concerns. I will, however, primarily restrict myself to the issue of the financing of education and its impact on the nature of education; that is, the relationship of the relevance and quality of education with the source of its finances.

Till fairly recently it was well conceded that education was a public good and therefore does have a claim on the resources of the state. Accordingly, it was presumed that the delivery of education cannot be a discriminatory activity. Any system of financing that transfers even if not fully but substantially the costs of education to the students or parents would be inherently discriminatory against the disadvantaged sections of society. The private investments in higher education have been substantial all along but they were in the nature of charities. Indeed, some of the best institutions today were products of such efforts and some of them came up as an integral part of our freedom struggle. The Banaras Hindu University, Aligarh Muslim University, Jadavpur University, Vishwa Bharati, the Indian Institute of Science were all representative of such glorious efforts. That independent India adopted them as part of its nation building project underlies both the acceptance of these private efforts as a national heritage, and the success of this model of private participation. The present law of the land as per the Supreme Court order today also permits this kind of private participation, where no profit taking is allowed for educational enterprises. That is the law, the reality on the ground may not be equally clear.

However, the present contention is not about such private participation. It is about opening up of the education sector, particularly, the area of higher education, for private sector participation for exploitation and profits. This major shift in approach is not due to any appreciation of the educational question. But the tacit assumption is that education is like any other tradable commodity or service and if we open it up for private sector participation it will bring in more resources and make

education more relevant to the economy in so far as anybody paying more for education would seek an education which gives him equally large economic returns. The questions of equity and access have been relegated to the issues of supply demand mismatch which will be taken care of by the market forces. The purposes of education in terms of individual fulfillment, societal cohesion, nation building and the advancement of learning have been quickly marginalized in this debate. The society has given right of way to the economy which must decide the priorities. The economy must decide the nature of citizens we make, the kind of culture we live in, the kind of society that must take shape. These are early days as yet of this invidious project and, therefore, the creeping privatization on the sly has not totally transformed the educational project so far. But the portents are there, of which one example I began with, with regard to the short packaging of goods.

The privatization debate has also pierced the public institutions and opened them up for all kind of new and attractive practices. One new name for this is 'autonomy'. In the past, we thought that the autonomy was with regard to what the students and teachers want to pursue in education. It was about the freedom to research and teach in a manner that only academics decided. It was about autonomous academic space. Now it means autonomy from the democratic processes of the state so that Parliament, or the CAG cannot ask questions about the non-academic functions of an institution. Be that as it may, it readily accepts the curbs put on its sacrosanct academic space by the market, by addressing the needs of the market for the kind of knowledge that is produced or by producing students that come out of its precincts, in terms of their placements and employability.

Even this limited erosion of the academic autonomy of the institutions of high learning has started extracting a price and is changing the nature of education. It is happening by way of privileging certain disciplines over others irrespective of the academic or social imperatives. The disciplines of finance and management are producing the new Brahmins, followed by I.T. and such other disciplines which currently reflect the market needs. It is draining away people from basic and social sciences and, indeed, from the productive sectors of the real economy. I understand that increasingly lesser number of students passing out of our engineering colleges pursue a career in their disciplinary area of training. This trend is bound to intensify and I will tell you one of its reasons, in a while.

At the heart of the issue is the conception of education, we adopt. Prabhat Patnaik, the distinguished economist in his Foundation Day lecture at the NUEPA, perceptively talked about the two conceptions of education. The one conception is that education is a transaction between the teacher and students for an end product which could be used in the economy. The alternative conception looks at education as no transaction at all but as an activity on behalf of the people in which both teachers and students engage in to produce "organic intellectuals" for the people in the Gramscian sense. The current trend for privatization proceeds on the basis of the first assumption and the moment you succumb to this definition of education there is a relentless process of privatization that must keep gathering momentum. This will lead to privileging and ranking of institutions and disciplines. This will also deflect the country's priorities. Our priorities may be eradication of Malaria but frontier research and the best minds may be engaged in the frontiers as defined by the metropolitan academia or worse by corporate interests, whose priorities may be totally different.

You all know the importance of Agriculture in our country. This sustains the livelihood of more than two thirds of our people and gives all of us whatever we have of food security. Are we able to attract the best of minds to study Agriculture? I.I.T., Kharagpur is the only one with a school in Agricultural Technology, an initiative of great foresight and commitment to our needs. But neither have been able to persuade other IITs for taking up agriculture as an area of enquiry nor have been able to impressively build on the Kharagpur foundations. We should ask how many of our young minds would consider Agriculture Technology to be the area of their first choice. Our Agriculture Universities are not among the preferred choices for our better students and academics, whereas by any reckoning agriculture should be a very high national priority.

There is much talk about frontier areas of science and technology. What are these? Who decides them? I have often wondered why the Bhopal Gas Tragedy, the worst ever industrial disaster, which continues to seriously impact the lives of lacs of people even today, has failed to attract our academics and institutions of higher learning. Have chemical and industrial engineers come up with an explanation for the accident and the exact nature of the design or operational failure? ICMR had launched several long term studies in the wake of the tragedy but what has come out of them? Is the academic community holding those researchers to account? We have built impressive Law universities and institutes. Are any of them engaged in the issue of criminal and civil liabilities of the Union Carbide? Do we question the take over of the assets of the Union Carbide by the Dow Chemicals without the liabilities? Is not corporate responsibility an issue that is the subject of the management schools? There are a host of other such questions which should bother technologists, scientists, social scientists, lawyers and other. But Bhopal is a non-issue for the Indian academia. One could talk about several such issues. So if you produce only coolies and managers for the market, you do not give rise to organic intellectuals for the people to ask questions and seek answers on their behalf. The coolies and managers are busy solving the problems of advanced country defined frontiers or becoming foot-soldiers of the global economy.

One could go on giving examples which are symptomatic of a shift in our academic understanding. One, to be fair, could also give equally inspiring examples of the engagement by the intellectuals on the concerns of the time. However, the dominant trend is worrisome because what we seem to be initiating today would intensify this trend. The education sector is not an autonomous activity nor an extension of the dominant economic currents. It is supposed to be a participant in the socio-historical processes of our time and in the time of such a siege, it has to be atleast a citadel, where people centric concerns can flourish and find articulations.

I would like you to ponder over a few other set of figures which may perhaps tell us why such a shift in priorities is globally taking place. Even if we concede that goods and services produced in an economy, i.e. the GDP, would influence the priorities of the education sector in a substantive way, we will be a bit disconcerted to reflect over the following figures.

According to the Bank of International Settlements, as of December 2007, the total value of derivative trade stood at a staggering \$ 518 trillion. This is 10 times larger than the global GDP. The trading in the global stock exchanges is nearly

double the amount of the global GDP. The currency transactions in the world, according to an estimate, is 60 times the trade in goods and services. These are mind boggling figures. It is fair to assume that this will impact all global realities in a much more substantive way than the global production and trade of goods and services. The shadow is much much longer than the objective world, the shadow economy dwarfs the real economy. No doubt that the best minds in the world are getting engaged with this economy. It is not a surprise that all our bright students are lured into finance and banking and related areas, whatever may have been their scholastic career. It is also not a surprise that quite a few of the Nobel Laureates in economics have been the analysts of this shadow economy.

Cohorts of our brightest students are getting sucked into this illusory world of global finance capital, a vagrant, foot-loose and virtual monster. Our children are getting cut-off from our roots of being human, from the multiple concerns of this great country of ours. Verily, it is very difficult to avoid the snares of this 'Maya'. The pun is intended. As you know 'Maya' is also money in popular parlance.

What is to be done, then? It is not something that can be given in a formula. We have to collectively seek the answers. One thing is clear, however, that the battle is not confined within the education sector alone, important though that front may be. The sway of global finance capital is wreaking havoc in the world, eroding the autonomy of the sovereign nations, devastating our ecosystem and precious cultures built over centuries. The battle is being engaged in by the people in a myriad way consciously and as a spontaneous reaction to the processes. Sometime, all these efforts will need to coalesce in a meaningful way. We in the education sector have a role in not only protecting our turf but providing both a platform and focus to these forces rather than remain a passive boarders of a train to nowhere or worse.

I.I.T., Kharagpur has a very apt motto '*yogah karmasu kaushalam*'. I do not know how you translate it. Popularly it is translated as "dexterity or proficiency in any work is Yoga". My teacher long way back told me that it could be deconstructed differently. The word *kushal* from which *kaushala* is derived could be deconstructed as '*kusham laati iti kushalah*', That is because he brings *kusha* - a specific grass for Pooja that makes him '*kushala*'..

The Guru must be asking the Shishya to bring *kush* grass for the Pooja, some would bring any grass, whereas only one with discrimination brings the right grass. This way the motto will translate as 'discrimination' in work is yoga. I do hope here in this prestigious institution you will continue to keep in mind this possible definition and apart from skills and knowledge and dexterity teach students also to discriminate, to discriminate between good and bad, knowledge and ignorance, a life of integrity and corporate greed. Only if they learn this discrimination all the knowledge that they take with them would not be a cause of worry. Bidding farewell to Shakuntala in Kanva's hermitage, there is a simile used by Kalidasa, which I want you to think over - '*sushishyaparidattaa vidyeva ashochaneeyasi samvrittaa*'. Shakuntala had ceased to be a worry like *vidya* bestowed on a good student. We get all good students here, the very best of the country; if we give them this knowledge and discrimination then we need not worry about them or about education.

While concluding, I cannot do better than by reciting to you a poem by Tagore which most of you know better than me and perhaps remember by-heart in English and in Bangla. Even then I will read it because there are no better words to engage with while thinking about education and about our country.

“Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;

Where knowledge is free;

Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls;

...

Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary

desert sands of dead habit;....

Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.”

These words bear reading again and again, in the privacy of our homes and publicly together so that we derive strength from them. So that as another poet in another country said - "Do not go gentle into that good night, /rage, rage against the dying of the light..."