

MYTH AND REALITY

## Towards the Anthropology of a University

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Universities have become inseparable from the sociopolitical reality of a nation-state. They bring in varieties of socioeconomic groups within the campus cutting across region, class, caste, religion and gender but at the same time universities also marginalize some people particularly the underprivileged by a kind of elitism, which is built into the structure of the university. Ironically enough, these centres of highest learning also champion high ideals regarding the elimination of poverty, illiteracy and various forms of social inequality.

The university campus is one of the physical symbols of the elitism of a university. The campus is an enclosed space often encircled by boundary walls, which separates the university from its surroundings. The university administration makes sincere efforts to protect their campus with high walls and security forces but not through participatory management by involving the local inhabitants. Under this background, one can judge the case of the establishment of Vidyasagar University in the erstwhile Medinipur district of West Bengal.

Vidyasagar University was established by an Act passed in the West Bengal State Legislative Assembly in the year 1981. The University Grants Commission (UGC) recognized this University on condition that it should develop in a non-traditional line incorporating subjects, which would have rural development oriented bias. Accordingly, departments like Economics with rural development, Political Science with rural administration, Anthropology with tribal culture, Commerce with farm management, Applied mathematics with oceanology and Libraray and Information Science were introduced in 1985-86 academic session. The Vidyasagar University Act in its section entitled "The University and its officers" mentioned in its clause 4(2) that the institution shall have the power to "to organize specialized diploma, degree or postgraduate courses... in such subjects as Tribal languages, habitats and customs, rural administration forestry... regional resources planning, ecology and environmental studies."(The Vidyasagar University Act 1985) The clause 4(5) in the Act is more remarkable which emphatically stated that the University shall have the "*power to make such academic studies as may contribute to the improvement of economic conditions and welfare of the people in general and the tribal people in particular.*" (Ibid) [emphasis mine]. With this pro-poor and pro-tribal legislation passed in the state assembly of the Left Front Government (LFG) of West Bengal and taking its name after the famous nineteenth century social reformer Pandit Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, the non-traditional University started its journey by affiliating 30 undergraduate colleges from Calcutta University within the administrative jurisdiction of the erstwhile Medinipur district. This was a sufficient load on this new University in terms of routine works related to examination and others to detract it from the stated objectives enshrined in its Act. This also reveals the populist policy decision of the LFG, which passed a progressive Act in the state assembly without giving any serious thought towards its implementation.

## **CAMPUS**

The location of the Vidyasagar University campus was also selected on a non-conventional site at a distance of about 3 kms from the Medinipur railway station (about 34 metres above the Mean Sea Level) on the Western side of the Medinipur town under the municipal ward 21. This ward and its adjoining one, ward 20, represent the recent municipal extensions of the town into the rural areas characterized by vast open land, agricultural fields, woodland and lesser number of administrative offices, residential houses as well as trade and commercial activities. The National Atlas and Thematic Mapping Organization (NATMO) calculated the densities of population in wards 20 and 21 as 12.84 and 23.65 persons per hectare respectively in 1981, while the town's average population density was 47.50 persons per hectare (NATMO 1992).

The administrative, academic and residential buildings of the University are built on the vast open 150 acres of uncultivated lateritic upland (*tanr* land in local parlance) donated by the state government. Formerly, this land, which was probably regarded as 'non-agricultural waste' by the colonial administration was owned by one revenue paying zamindar belonging to the illustrious 'Khan' family of Narajole of Paschim Medinipur district. The big palace of the Khan family and its adjoining garden lie on the south west side of the Vidyasagar University campus and the palace has become the Raja Narendra Lal Khan Women's College which is affiliated to Vidyasagar University. The campus of the N L Khan College provides a marked contrast in terms of the vegetative cover on this lateritic and undulating landscape. The campus of the College harbours a wide variety of old indigenous fruit bearing and other kinds of big trees like mango, jackfruit, arjun, neem, wood-apple, kul, guava, lemon etc. The Vidyasagar University campus on the other hand, still looks like a forest department office with krishnachura, sirish and debdaru trees and patches of eucalyptus and akashmoni plantations. There is also an area measuring a few acres, which contain some cashew trees. Recently, some well-protected gardens containing mahogany, sal and segun have been developed within the campus. And that is all. No systematic attempt has yet been made by the University authority to plant and protect a good number of local varieties of fruit and other kinds of trees on this vast open land since its inception. Till today only some ritualistic gestures have been made by the University authority (sometimes by the units of the National Service Scheme) to plant some indigenous trees during the onset of the monsoon. But a large number of such trees are eaten up by the grazing cattle of the surrounding settlements which include the tribal village named Muradanga. Even some eucalyptus and akashmoni trees which the grazing animals do not eat have been felled by the local villagers who used them as fuelwood. But despite all these kinds of uncomfortable interactions of Vidyasagar University with its neighbours, the myth of the non-traditional and rural University catering to the needs of the local people survived at least in the initial stage. The myth however began to pass through a process of deconstruction over the years. The published statements of the Vice-Chancellors of Vidyasagar University revealed that the University is gradually deviating from its mandate.

## **THE NARRATIVE OF THE ELITES**

The idea of developing a non-traditional University in a rural milieu having a substantial number of tribal communities was placed before the policymakers not by the anthropologists but by Dr Anil Kumar Gayen, a professor of Mathematics and Statistics of the Indian Institute of Technology at Kharagpur. The University Grants Commission

approved the idea of Dr Gayen but unfortunately the chief planner of Vidyasagar University passed away before the establishment of the University in 1985. Interestingly, the Professor Gayen was born in the eastern part of the erstwhile Medinipur district and was a doctorate from Cambridge University and he is now a forgotten personality at Vidyasagar University. His name is hardly uttered by the present policy makers of the University and no one has attempted to write his biography. Many of the present generation of University teachers and employees do not know his name. There is only a portrait of Professor Gayen on the wall of the lobby in front of the Vice-Chancellor's chamber. Almost everyone in the University believes that Vidyasagar University was built up by the efforts of Mr Dipak Sarkar, the present District Secretary of the CPI (M) who has recently been inducted into the state secretariat of the party. After the establishment of the University, Prof Bhupesh Chandra Mukherjee, a former history teacher in Presidency College (a student and colleague of the Marxist historian Professor Susobhan Sarkar) and an administrator in the state education department was appointed as the first Vice-Chancellor of this non-traditional University in West Bengal. Professor B C Mukherjee published a communication in the UGC's Journal of Higher Education in 1987-88 entitled "Vidyasagar University: Its Objectives and Character"(Mukherjee 1987-88). In his communication, apart from reiterating the VU Act regarding the upliftment of the 'backward areas and removal of regional imbalance' and the rationale behind the establishment of the University, Prof Mukherjee stated : "The overall emphasis of the university is not to perpetuate the traditional nature of other universities but to emerge as a distinctive entity with a special nature of its own having an orientation towards non-traditional and specialized teaching and research."(Ibid). For one thing, just after seven years of difficult run owing to fund shortage and non-availability of capital grants from the UGC, another vice-chancellor, Dr Satyanarayan Ghosh, in the First Convocation Address delivered on 9 January 1995, frankly admitted : "The university started with the objective of teaching and developing non-conventional subjects, but had later to stray a little away from this original idea in the case of some subjects which did not find ready employment. A brief but disenchanting experience more or less forced some of the departments to revert to teaching what is called traditional or conventional subjects." (Ghosh 1995) It appeared from the statement of Dr Ghosh that the university has already made enough innovative experiments in developing along non-traditional lines and its students have been refused jobs and/or fellowships for pursuing the original objectives of the institution. Suffice it to say that nothing could be far from the truth about the pursuance of the ideals and the real spirit of the University as depicted in Dr S N Ghosh's narrative quoted above. The next vice-chancellor of the University, Professor Amiya Kumar Deb in his Second Convocation Address on 4 April 1997 did not mention the words "non-conventional" or "non-traditional" like his predecessors. Professor Deb had a different kind of answer to the problem. Throughout his speech, he went on narrating the tale of opening new undergraduate and postgraduate courses by the University which have both application and job for the students. In his own words : "Our interest in vocationalisation and application orientedness of education has also led us to giving affiliation to a course in Master of Social Work...." In another place of his Convocation Address Professor Deb elaborated his arguments in the following manner: "In pursuit of the third dimension of university education, we have set up an extension centre in which self-financing certificate and diploma courses are going to be given from the coming academic session in such fields as Computer Application, Laboratory Technology and Seed Technology to begin with. The courses are being designed in such a way as to impart full application oriented training to those who offer them in search of a career or for the sake of career improvement. This is only the initiation. We plan to fare further, in answer to the

developmental and career needs of the region.”(Deb 1997) The narratives produced by these three vice-chancellors of Vidyasagar University over a period of twelve years show the evolution of the deconstruction of the myth of a non-traditional University constructed by the Leftist Government, which found its expression in the Vidyasagar University Act of 1981. At Vidyasagar University, non-conventional now means opening of self-financed and distance education courses by which the University can generate its own funds and resources. The trend was set during the tenure of Professor Amiya Kumar Deb. Not a single experiment was conducted by the University to directly involve its faculties and students towards the upliftment of the weaker sections of the region, some of whom live right under the nose of the University community and regularly visit the campus in search of fuel and fodder.

The Vice-Chancellors, who succeeded Professor Amiya Deb followed the path of metropolitan and traditional universities taking pride in opening more money generating self-financed and distance mode post-graduate courses often without adequate infrastructure facilities and teaching staff. These moves on the part of the university authority often resulted student agitations and even the SFI led Students' Union took recourse to class boycott and organised students to refuse them to pay the hefty sums of admission fees for self-financed courses, like 'Remote Sensing and Geographical Information System'. What was more interesting, no Vice-Chancellor of Vidyasagar University till today has taken any down-to-earth approach to bring the university students and teachers closer to the marginalized communities of the district through some action-oriented academic programmes as envisioned by the founders of this rural university. Vidyasagar University still aspires to be like the other elite universities of the country.

### **THE TALES OF A MUNDA AND A SABAR**

The 150 acres of non-agricultural land on which the Vidyasagar University campus was constructed is still being perceived by the inhabitants of the neighbouring villages as a reservoir of common pool resource on which they have been enjoying customary usufructory rights for several generations. The adjoining villages named Muradanga, Tantigeria and Phulpahari are inhabited by poverty stricken Munda, Oraon and other Scheduled Tribes people. On the northeastern side of the campus there is a small settlement of after cure leprosy patients belonging to Scheduled Tribes and Castes who live a highly marginalized existence in the town and represent one of the weakest sections of the locality. Closer observation reveals that the people around the campus of Vidyasagar University do not present a homogeneous entity in terms of economic and sociocultural features but they share at least three interesting characteristics, which are important for the present discourse. These characteristics are enumerated below:

1. All these groups of people used to enjoy *usufructory rights* of grazing, firewood and other non-timber forest product collection and rights of passage through this land without getting any resistance from any quarter before the establishment of Vidyasagar University. The present campus land was a kind of open access resource and /or common pool resource to these groups of people.
2. Since the establishment of the University all these groups of people are experiencing resistance from the University although the responses towards this resistance are not similar for all the groups.
3. All these groups of people distinguish themselves from the University community, although no specific term has been found to emerge yet in the vocabulary of these people to designate the paired opposition: “University Community” vis-a-vis the “Local Community”. The Levi-Straussian binary opposite does not seem to be very much helpful in this context. (Guha 2001)

There was an old Munda villager of Muradanga. His name was Raghunath Singh. He was about sixty years old when this writer first met him in the year 1987. He was a dark skinned lean man who was strong enough to pedal a three-wheeled cycle rickshaw with passengers in its seat in Medinipur town. It was his occupation since he could not engage himself in cultivation. Raghunath was a man of wit and humour. He used to tell stories of the past. He narrated his childhood when this Gopgarh area was covered with big sal and other trees and people from the Medinipur town did not dare to come to this place even during the daylight hours. This was a heaven for the large snakes, wolves and jackals and occasionally also used to roam in this area. 'The land of your university was never used for cultivation'. Raghunath went on saying 'It is the grazing field of our cattle, our women collect fuel from your ground and our children play here. The Rajas of Gop gave this land to us. We defended our village from the attacks of the robbers with our bow and arrow and village unity.' 'But' Raghunath used to continue 'now your guards are creating problems for us'. He frequently lamented over the rapid weakening of the collective strength of the inhabitants of his village. Tragically Raghunath's sons did not look after him properly. After four or five years, he suddenly became much older and could not pedal the rickshaw anymore. Raghunath started to beg on the streets of Medinipur. Every Sunday morning he reached the university campus limping with the help of a stick and collected some coins from the residents of the University quarters and then used to go to the town. After not seeing him for some weeks, a young man of Muradanga was asked about his whereabouts. Well, Raghunath died a few days ago. In 1997, few years after the death of Raghunath, the university authority employed a Calcutta based private security agency to protect and guard the campus from the 'encroachers'. The university authority had also started plantation of akashmoni, eucalyptus, sirish and some fruit trees on the western residential side of the campus. The cost of employing the security agency was Rs 4,80,000, not a negligible amount for the University. The main task of the security guards was to drive away the grazing animals of Muradanga and Saltola. The people of the neighbouring villages adopted interesting strategies to continue the grazing of their animal, on this traditional common pool resource base. One strategy was to play a hide and seek game with the security guards and the other was to send the grazing animals in night to the campus land when it was very difficult for the security men to locate the animals. The proposed plantation of the University however did not materialize due to various reasons. For example, the grazing animals ate up many saplings; some were also taken away by the villagers, some died for the lack of proper care and protection. There was no attempt on the part of the University to involve the tribal villagers in the protection of the plantation of the University although a specific proposal was submitted by the Anthropology Department of the University in this regard.

'Saltola' is the name of the settlement of leprosy-affected patients who have been living by the side of the boundary wall of the University on the east. If one comes through the metal road of Tantigeria to reach Vidyasagar University in the night one may not even know the existence of this group of people who have planted a good number of indigenous varieties of trees. They do not have electricity, latrines and supply of safe drinking water from the municipality. They are of course voters and their settlement is known to the general public and the district administration as a settlement of lepers or 'kusthapally'. They also graze their cattle and collect the fuel from the University campus. The inhabitants of this place call their settlement by two interesting appellations, one is 'thutapara' which means 'a hamlet of physically handicapped people' since 'thuta' in spoken Bengali means a person whose limbs, particularly the hands have

become non-functional. 'Thuta' symbolizes a person affected by leprosy. This has a derogatory connotation and many people of the town designate this colony by this term and the inhabitants also use it in their daily conversation although they would not usually mention this name of their settlement to a newcomer. The other name by which the inhabitants refer to their settlement is 'Saltola'. Saltola means 'a hamlet where one can find sal trees' (*shorea robusta*). And here comes the anecdote. In one evening, while this writer was discussing the problems of getting patta (a deed of right over land awarded by the state government to landless and poor families) for the families of this settlement with its inhabitants, a very energetic cultivator, Nagen Ari who belonged to the Sabar tribe narrated an incident. "When I came from Gokulpur to this area there was a very big sal tree at this place. We used to enjoy its cool shadow and our children played beneath its huge canopy. It was about twenty years ago. But one day few men from the Tantigeria panchayat office came to this place and told that they would hack down the tree for using its wood to make the furniture of their office. We objected by saying that you won't get much wood from this tree because it has already been bored by the termites." Nagen continued, "The panchayat men didn't care since they were unable to understand this from outside. They brought their men and felled the tree but not much wood was obtained. Our prediction was correct." Then Nagen said with an emphatic smile. "You see, although the tree has gone, but we call this place 'Saltola', which means that this was the abode of the huge Sal." Three years ago, the district administration made a move to rehabilitate the inhabitants of Saltola in another place in Tantigeria, which is about 1 kilometre from Saltola. The district administration seemed to be more interested to shift these families from near the University campus than giving them pattas on this land and the general attitude of the University community was not also favourable to these after cure leprosy patients although, there was not a single individual in Saltola currently affected by the disease. With the effort of the district administration 12 families from Saltola were shifted in a resettlement colony and all these families now lament for leaving Saltola since in the resettlement colony they could not continue the village life of Saltola. Moreover, very recently in 2004, the district administration has given land patta to the families whom they could not resettle. Here one may recall one interesting incident regarding the attitude of the University community towards the marginalized families of Saltola. In the year 1997, the members of the University community decided to organize a procession on the occasion of the celebration of the 50th year of country's Independence and they had also resolved to distribute some fruits and sweets to the poor people of the locality. Neither Muradanga nor Saltola was selected for this purpose. Someone suggested the name of Saltola but it was rejected on the ground that many members of the University community might not like to visit a 'leper colony' on such an occasion.

This in brief constitutes the deconstruction of the myth of the non-traditional University at Medinipur in West Bengal. The narratives of Muradanga and Saltola signify how the process of disempowerment and marginalization of the rural tribal and the poor families have been taking place in and around Vidyasagar University which was established to contribute to the improvement of the socio-economic conditions of the rural poor and particularly the tribals of the region.

### **POSTSCRIPT**

In this connection, it may be relevant to mention the case of Manomanium Sundaharnar University in the Tirunelveli district of Tamil Nadu. According to a report published in a national daily, this small and young University has set an example in conducting action oriented research projects by involving the local people in many rural development

schemes which include organic farming, wasteland development and aquaculture. Dr N Sukumaran, Head of the Centre for Environmental Sciences of this University said in a training-cum-seminar programme in the Agricultural Science Centre at Kapgari in West Medinipur : "The key to our success lies in the fact that the faculties and the students of the centre regularly meet the locals to understand their problems and solve them" (*The Statesman*, 1998). Interestingly, two faculties of Vidyasagar University from its Botany and Zoology Departments were sent to M S University to get an exposure on organic farming through vermiculture in collaboration with the Centre for Women's Development Studies, New Delhi. Ironically, neither the tribal women of Muradanga nor the women of Saltola were involved in developing vermicompost by the Botany and the Zoology Departments of Vidyasagar University. Recently, the University Grants Commission has sanctioned a grant of Rs 5 lakh per annum for the running of a Women's Study Centre at Vidyasagar University and a workshop was held to discuss the problems of tribal women and self-help groups. Since Muradanga and Saltola have no Women SHGs so naturally no women from those villages were invited to this workshop.

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