Salad Days

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The first nineteen years of my life (1938-57) were spent in the idyllic ambience of the Banaras Hindu University. The BHU was then aptly described by its anthem: *Madhur manohar, ateeva sundar yeh sarva vidya ki rajadhani.* Here are a few random thoughts that cross my mind as I recall those salad days of my life.

My father, the late Professor Vishnu Vasudeva Narlikar had joined the Mathematics department of BHU in 1932 and had served as its Head till 1960. When he was a student in Cambridge, his achievements there had attracted the Founder of BHU, Mahamana Madan Mohan Malaviya who met him there and invited him to join the University after his studies abroad were over. "There will be a position waiting for you whenever you return to India", was his promise to the young student, a promise that was redeemed at the right time. That is how a young native of the state of Kolhapur (sometimes called *Dakshin-Kashi*) came to live in Kashi of the North.

My father justified the confidence placed in him by the Founder. He developed a school of general relativity and gravitation that attracted very talented students and made BHU a major centre of attraction for relativists all over India.

My father's example was not an exception. Indeed, in the 1940s, my childhood days, the BHU could boast of a galaxy of scholars drawn from different parts of India, in areas ranging all the way from the Humanities and the Arts to Sciences and Technology. The BHU had continued the tradition of its parent city of propagating oriental studies including Sanskrit, Ayurveda, Ancient Indian History, etc. In Sciences, its graduates distinguished themselves in research in India's various research institutes as well as enriching the faculties of other universities. Its Colleges of Engineering and Mining & Metallurgy attracted the cream of talent from all over India.

In the pre-independence days, the University did not have access to the resources it enjoys now as a prestigious 'Central University'. It had to rely on donations, gifts, covenants, etc. from the Maharajahs, wealthy industrialists and other non-governmental sources. As a shelter for the freedom fighters, the BHU was viewed with suspicion by the ruling British. In the always-tight budgetary situation, the Founder could offer the teachers and students a spacious and serene campus set against the backdrop of the ancient holy city, a scholastic atmosphere and a motivating idealism for delivering one's best. Perhaps these circumstances acted as a filter that attracted only those who cherished Goddess Saraswati over Goddess Lakshmi.

The same idealism was reflected in a miniature way in my school on the campus, the University Children's School. The School went only as far as the VI Standard when I joined it; it was gradually extended to Standard X. So I can say that I grew up with the School. My schooldays were relaxed and without the tensions that often affect most schoolchildren today. There were no coaching classes, none of the charged and competitive atmosphere to perform, no pressure on admission-system. And when I see today's mad rush for English medium schools, I look back on my own school education in Hindi medium and feel that I did not lose out in any way...nor did my fellow-students, many of whom have distinguished themselves in different walks of life.

Today's school curriculum is stuffed with information so much so that there is hardly any time left for comprehension. My colleagues and I were fortunate that the teacher had time to spend with us understanding our difficulties and explaining them; performing experiments in the class besides letting us do the practicals, even allowing for discussions of topics lying well out of the syllabus. I still recall our Maths teacher spending an entire period trying with us to solve a geometrical rider, known as 'the difficult converse'. [For those readers of this article who wish to try it, here it is: *If the bisectors of two angles of a triangle are equal, the triangle is isosceles*] Or consider the 'antakshari'

competition for Sanskrit verses held between our class and the next higher class, which we won. It was staged in front of the whole secondary school with Pt. Ram Kumar Chaube as Chief Guest. Chaubeji held a world record of the largest number of (I think, 15) M. A. degrees. I still recall the good words he had to say on my performance.

I sometimes wonder if our educational infrastructure has become too much tied up in knots of rules and regulations. Rules are meant to help taking decisions and to safeguard us against malpractice. Yet, we make rules, and someone finds a loophole to break them to serve his own ends and to cover such misuse we tighten the rules further. However, paradoxically, such tightened rules and regulations let merit slip away from our grasp. I very much doubt if the galaxy of scholars attracted to BHU by its Founder in the 1930s and 1940s could have been appointed under the present appointment rules. Yet, they delivered! And when we see how much litigation is being faced by our universities, we wonder whether it is the fault of the rules or their users.

In the last analysis, it is the attitude that matters. No rules ensuring fair play will work if the basic attitude, whether of the appointing authority, the selection committee, or of the candidate is self-serving. On the other hand, rules become irrelevant if the attitude of everyone concerned is to ensure that merit is recognized and rewarded. Paraphrasing what John F. Kennedy said at his inaugural speech as U.S. President in 1961, "Ask not what the University can do for you, but ask what you can do for the University".

My best wishes to BHU on the occasion when it is hosting the annual meeting of one of the premier scientific academies in the country. I am happy that my *Alma Mater* is sincerely trying to rediscover its glorious past: I very much hope it succeeds.

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"..... the staff and the authorities of the University should set an example of integrity, efficiency and upright behavior in the selection of the staff, in the distribution of awards and scholarship, in all their dealings with students."

..... Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan