



**Prof. (Dr.) Basab Chaudhuri**

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**P**rofessor Basab Chaudhuri, Ph.D. (Tech) in Chemical Engineering from UDCT, Mumbai (now ICT) was a Lecturer, Senior Lecturer, Reader, Professor and then Registrar of the University of Calcutta, spanning a period from 1991 to 2015, before joining the post of Vice Chancellor of the West Bengal State University, Barasat in 2015, and where he has been working now. During his academic career, he was an active researcher and worked in various capacities in the Netherlands, the USA, South Korea, and other places. He got several gold medals for best publications in journals. He was an INSA - KOSEF research scientist. He was a Fulbright - Nehru Academic Administration awardee. He loves to read and write. Basab Chaudhuri's profile is given in Researchgate. He believes in the dictum, "To thine own self be true." He loves his students and colleagues and tells them to remain reflective and humane in spite of everything.

**Q.** Having so many years of experience in education and academia, how do you see the evolution of India's higher education system?

**Answer:** Yes. I started doing serious research in the year 1985 and had my job of Lecturer in the University of Calcutta in 1991. So I have walked a long way and have got a little bit of experience. I have a philosophical

bent of mind and I always compare my knowledge with the vast knowledge of the universe. My knowledge is limited by space and time. So what I say is my personal opinion and of course, limited by my capacity to absorb and appreciate.

At the time of independence, we had about twenty universities and five hundred colleges. Since then we



have about nine hundred universities and fifty thousand colleges today. This has happened in the last seventy years or so. This has been a spectacular growth by any standard and all the successive governments have played their part in this journey. So many first generation learners are coming to colleges and universities today. Lady students are coming in large numbers and doing remarkably well. Overall, therefore, there has been remarkable enhancement in scope and opportunity and improvement too in the teaching and learning processes. No discussion, however, proceeds without “ifs” and “buts”. Complacency is inimical to growth and so far as growth is concerned, the sky is the limit.

**Q. Can you tell us about the major reforms that you introduced on taking over as Vice Chancellor of the West Bengal State University?**

**Answer:** Prior to my joining the present assignment, I was the Registrar of Calcutta University for seven years four months at a stretch starting from May 2008. From the post of Professor of Chemical Engineering, I became Registrar with no experience in academic administration. But I was a member of the Syndicate of the University from 2003 to 2007 and generally knew how the university functioned. Chemical Engineering as a subject teaches you all-including intricacies of systems management. The relationships amongst components are well-taught in chemical engineering. I put that knowledge in academic administration. You know, administration is a science that involves papers, files, people, vision, knowledge, precedents, laws, hard work and every other thing. You need understanding and empathy. From empathy comes cooperation and help from all concerned.

When I joined the West Bengal State University in September 2015, there were major problems in examinations. It took me about six months to understand the source of the problem. One after the other, problems were solved. When I joined, no convocation of the university was held. Pass-outs did not get certificates. From 2017 to 2020, we organized four convocations. All backlog certificates have been distributed. There has been complete transparency in administration today. There are only a few Court cases. There is no RTI application pending. These, according to me, are signs of good governance. Otherwise, administrative decisions would have been challenged. So, with the help and cooperation from the Department of Higher Education, Government of West Bengal, and all others, we have been able to create a reasonably robust system. I have got immense cooperation from all in the process. Recruitment of non-teaching staff in the University on government-sanctioned posts was a major issue since 2009 and after 10 years, in December 2019, that problem could be solved. Fiscal discipline is a hallmark of any good organization and the university has recruited a Finance Officer who happens to have had education in inter alia your institute

and is dealing with university finances well. Constant persuasion, hard work, discipline, discussion, a grasp on everything that goes on in the university: all these have been beneficial in running the university. In the last four years, there has been no adverse press report about the university and that definitely says something. University has earned certain trust from students and guardians and that is definitely satisfying.

**Q. Course curriculum: undergraduate and post-graduate adequacy and necessity to change**

**Answer:** Course curricula at the under-graduate and post-graduate are quite good and compare very well with the curricula followed in other universities. Syllabi and curricula are modernized and updated on a regular basis and on regular frequency. But this does not mean changes are not required. In the modern world, obsolescence of knowledge and skill is a reality. Things change so drastically everywhere. The recent pandemic can be a good example. See how the usual practices have been challenged by the tiniest. So, upgradation of curricula is a must. A virus is causing havoc and in the curricula elements of nutrition science should be introduced so that a sense of food and immunity is inculcated in the minds of all.

**Q. It is the era of globalization. Is your university planning any international collaboration?**

**Answer:** The answer is emphatically affirmative. The university has organized seminars and conferences in collaboration with overseas universities. The university teachers visit laboratories of distinguished overseas scientists and conduct research there. Through an MOU the university started imparting Korean Language Course by Korean teachers and funding was received from Korea. In order to do that, the university had to get FCRA certification and it was an exercise by itself. You must remember that the university is just twelve years old. As it grows up, it will achieve distinction. I am confident about that.

**Q. Many of the graduates coming out from the universities are unemployable. What initiatives have your university taken to improve the demographic dividend?**

**Answer:** Employability is a very complicated issue and there cannot be any direct relationship between graduation or post-graduation and employability. A large number of students are coming out of the universities. Are there so many jobs in the market? That is an issue and it has persisted all along. I remember, in the year 2000, when call centres were very active, youngsters who just completed their higher secondary got jobs and used to have salaries comparable with mine. In western world, jobs are technology oriented and market plays a



big role. New technologies are developed, existing and new workforce are newly trained and created, and the economic cycle goes on moving. In our country, often, we look up to the government for job creation. For the government also, it is not easy to absorb all people. Since I come from Chemical Engineering, I remember Acharya P. C. Ray, the legendary chemist, who told his countrymen long back to engage in business, even small business. Acharya's advice was not heeded to. Today even for a post of peon, graduates and post-graduates compete, knowing fully well that the job of a peon does not need that qualification. We all have a charm for "sarkari". But there is a limit to everything. The private sector needs to create new jobs by using new technologies created at the universities. There are question marks there too. We must appreciate that the relationship between education and job is not linear. In the post-pandemic period, it will be more non-linear. In the circumstances, graduates will have a set of careers. The era of 10 to 5 steady job is over. Now there will be contract jobs. The western world has seen that. We will also see.

What initiatives are we taking? We are making students computer literate. We are asking them to study foreign languages. We are also collaborating with institutes like yours and asking students to use this interface. Students are aware of the challenges that lie ahead. Only future will say what lies ahead. But hope and optimism are the pillars to success. We must remember that and our students will go on trying. Static mentality will not work. There must be optimism and dynamism. At the same time there must be zeal to take challenges. I know it is easy to say such things. But reality must be faced eye to eye. Human spirit is undying and will overcome challenges.

Finally, I will talk about a utopian concept. It is idealistic. See, education as a whole can be classified into two sets: one is "education for job", and the second is "education in spite of a scenario of having no job". I sometimes reflect, will all education stop if there is no job? And I get an answer: education must go on. The close interlinking between education and job will slowly vanish. Education will not remain chained to a job. Education will be free to experiment and experience. Even without formal education, people will be entrepreneurs. In some communities in India, we have seen that. May be, we will see more such endeavours. Those pursuing education in humanities and social sciences may get associated with jobs requiring no formal education. Education and livelihood management may have reduced linkages in a distant future.

**Q. What, according to you, are the big ideas in the draft National Education Policy that may alter the higher education scenario in India?**

**Answer:** Look, policy documents put vision in place. Accepting them and working on them is more important.

The NEP has still not been adopted. The last education policy was adopted in 1986. Since then thirty four years have passed by. So, new vision statement is necessary. I understand that the proposed NEP gives stress on research in the area of social sciences. For me, any thought-provoking discourse is good. They should be documented. The NEP talks about more linkages with industry, development of future workforce, etc. As such, they are good ideas. But their success will depend on implementation. Institute - industry - society linkages are very much necessary. Success of higher education in future will depend on such a linkage. But the government role will always be important. Education must get patronage and support from the government irrespective of policy framework.

**Q. How important is the digital ecosystem in a learning environment?**

**Answer:** Digital ecosystem is important. But we must ensure that there is no digital divide. We have got smart classrooms, smart boards, transmission of knowledge at electronic speed. But for knowledge to be absorbed and accepted, books including e-books have to be studied. Without practice nothing becomes perfect.

Although in a digital age, I think the presence of teacher in the classroom is very important. Live demonstration has no parallel.

**Q. The Government of India (GOI) is trying to improve quality of education at all levels to make India "global knowledge superpower". What are your suggestions in the matter?**

**Answer:** Access, Equity, Quality, Employability are important parameters by which standard of education is monitored. The GOI intends to improve upon the quality of education so that India can be a global knowledge super power. In my opinion, our state government and the other state governments also intend to improve upon the quality. The question is as to how we can achieve the quality or excellence in education. Primarily, teachers must teach well and taught must prepare well. Then comes the problem-solving attitude. Good quality education prepares students to solve problems hitherto not encountered. This will require project-based learning. Books will give essentials. Training beyond books, more appropriately out-of-the-box approach, must be followed. A graduate must know how to sail in uncharted water. This requires good school education, sincere teaching, good teaching methods, skill sets, dedication of the students, development of learning abilities, knowing recent research work, asking appropriate and relevant question in a subject, personal discipline, institutional commitment and so many other things. If these are put in place, quality education can be ensured. Moreover, for first generation learners, having a degree certificate



in hand is a lifetime achievement. That has to be kept in mind. I hope I have been able to make my point. Quality is a result of a continuous effort of everyone involved in higher education. It is not an accident. If we strive constantly and consistently, we will succeed.

### *Q. On Recent UGC advisory*

**Answer:** First of all, this COVID-19 is a game-changer. That such a thing can happen was inconceivable. Lockdown has stopped traffic everywhere. It is a no-flow situation, as if, an earthquake has suddenly destroyed everything. The conventional teaching and learning process has come to a halt. Red signal prevents movement. The roads in the city of Kolkata are empty. The offices are closed. Schools and colleges are closed. In spite of everything, I have seen tremendous discipline in people. I have also witnessed great leadership in my State Chief Minister. Equally I have seen leadership everywhere.

In this context, the UGC advisory deals with the conduct of examinations, online teaching, etc. All these are in public domain and I am not going into that.

My own observation out of COVID-19 is that any threat to humanity gives rise to new solutions and opportunities. So, three years from now, you may see regular online examinations in this country. There will be a large network and from the Himalayas to the Kanyakumari and from the Hooghly to the desert in Rajasthan, you will find better internet, better cyber security, better connectivity. I think that no future virus can stop us in the manner Covid-19 has done. There will be newer technologies on teaching-learning process, holding examinations, holding seminars and conferences online while reducing digital divide to a minimum. This will be our challenge. And in pharmaceutical science again, India will rise. This is my hope, my take away from the Covid crisis.

### *Q. How can young aspirants prepare themselves in the fast-changing job market?*

**Answer:** It has been said again and again, 'Attitude' and 'Aptitude' together make success possible. In my opinion, attitude is very important. Attitude involves flexibility, ability to innovate, managerial abilities, and so many other things. The concept of one fixed job throughout one's career is over. There may be a situation of multiple jobs sometimes and no job sometimes. The world will throw new challenges from unknown directions. Young aspirants must prepare themselves accordingly. None knows how an ordinary person down the years becomes a superstar. Life is uncertain and beauty lies in uncertainty. There is risk in uncertainty. But....that's how it is.

### *Q. On initiatives.... that others may consider good.*

**Answer:** My university has many first-generation

learners. When they step into the university, they lack self-confidence. As Vice Chancellor, I try to develop confidence in them. I feel these simple boys and girls with education and confidence can walk a long way. When they go out of the university, I see radiance on their faces and compare the radiance with that of the yesteryear. They definitely look more accomplished. In their accomplishment I find my own salvation. If you call it success, yes....

My own pursuit to success does not drive me anymore. I get tremendous pleasure in other people's achievements. I find the true meaning of success when my old eyes meet the dazzling eyes of my students. I live in them and through them.

### *Q. On various ways the university can collaborate with your institute.*

**Answer:** I always feel that interdependence is of higher value than independence. The days of individual success are over. Collaboration is a must. My university and your institute have the same purpose of human resource development. I always encourage collaboration and hand-holding following rules and regulations. If the rules are found stiff today, we will approach appropriate bodies, even the government, for incorporation of necessary flexibility. That is my roadmap. Fair to everyone, a situation of win-win.

### *Q. Advice to CMA students*

**Answer:** CMA students are bright, energetic, enthusiastic, and dedicated. If they apply themselves and can handle failure, their success is guaranteed. I take this opportunity to wish them well. I advise them to stay safe and take care in this pandemic. I look upto them for innovation. I will love to shine in their glory.

*Finally, I thank your Institute for bestowing faith in me. I put on record my deep sense of gratitude to all of you for your support and cooperation. MA*