

Vice-Chancellor's Convocation Address, 2013

Honourable Chancellor, His Excellency Shri M.K. Narayanan, Governor of West Bengal, distinguished Chief Guest, Shri Sam Pitroda, Advisor to the Prime Minister on Public Information, Infrastructure and Innovations, respected Guest of Honour, Shri Bratya Basu, Honourable Minister-in-Charge of Higher Education and School Education, members of the Presidency University Council, faculty members, officers, staff, students, recipients of degrees, distinguished guests and alumni – may I extend to all a very warm welcome.

Today, 22nd August 2013, is a historic day for Presidency University. We are gathered here to celebrate our First Convocation. This institution, first set up as Hindoo College in 1817, renamed Presidency College in 1855, made an affiliate college of Calcutta University in 1857, was granted university status in July 2010. Today the university feels privileged to be able to confer degrees *honoris causa* on two distinguished alumni, Professor Ranajit Guha, recipient of the degree of Doctor of Literature, and Professor Mihir Chowdhury, recipient of the degree of Doctor of Science. Presidency University admitted its first batch of students in 2011. The first batch of students to become eligible for a Bachelor's degree from Presidency University will qualify in 2014. The first batch of students to become eligible for a Master's degree from Presidency University qualified this year. The total number of students eligible to receive degrees at this First Convocation is 340. I welcome them to this First Convocation and congratulate them for the rare distinction of being the first recipients of a Presidency University degree. I am sure this is a very special moment in their lives.

It is a great privilege for me, an alumna of Presidency College, to be able to address you on the occasion of the First Convocation of Presidency University. As we look forward to the bicentenary of Presidency in 2017, we remember with pride the great scientists and

scholars in the humanities whose contributions have shaped this institution. The walls, corridors, and flagstones of Presidency's heritage buildings are imbued with their spirit, their inspiration motivates us all. Now that Presidency is an autonomous university, it is time to build on this exceptional foundation.

Perhaps Presidency's greatest achievement since becoming a university has been its ability to attract talented and dedicated researchers and teachers from Bengal, from other states of India, and from some of the best universities and institutes of North America, Britain, Europe, Japan, and other countries of the world. Presidency University appointed its first faculty in April 2012. In a little over a year, the university has been able to appoint 155 faculty members, 47% of the total faculty strength, through a transparent, merit-based and rigorous selection process. We are grateful to the eminent subject experts from across India whose presence ensured that the best applicants were selected for faculty positions at Presidency University. During this time, the university also appointed its first officers – the Registrar, Finance Officer, Controller of Examinations, Dean of Students, Assistant Registrar and Senior System Analyst.

With the new faculty in place, it is time to upgrade the infrastructure. In January 2013, renovation of the Baker Laboratory building in its centenary year was inaugurated by Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, former President of India. This building and the Netaji Subhas Building had no lifts, and thus no disability access to major departments. This is now being rectified. Work is nearly complete in the process of installation of a lift for the Baker Building and the civil work for the Netaji Subhas Building lift is about to begin. Renovation work for a Central Instrumentation and Research Facility for the Department of Biological Sciences, renovation of the Professors' Common Room in the Main Building – to create an efficient working

environment for faculty members of the departments of English, History and Philosophy – and construction work for toilet facilities for students is about to begin. We are grateful to the University Grants Commission and the Department of Higher Education, West Bengal, for financial assistance for these projects. The process of infrastructure upgrade for the Departments of Statistics, Geography, Chemistry and Economics are being examined next, together with a Food Court for all, and improvement of the Eden Hindu Hostel. Facilities for students at the Girls' Hostel at Salt Lake have been now upgraded and there is a regular shuttle bus service between the Girls' Hostel and the College Street campus.

Meanwhile, Presidency University has received ten acres of land at Rajarhat for its second campus. A convention involving students, faculty and officers of Presidency, the Presidency Mentor Group, and invited architects from different parts of India, is being planned to decide on the best utilization of this second campus.

Faculty members of Presidency University have continued to conduct significant research in spite of inadequate infrastructure. While it is not possible to give a full list of all achievements here, including a list of publications in esteemed refereed journals and individual research funding received, an account of some achievements will give an indication of the quality of teaching and research at Presidency today.

Professor Somak Raychaudhury, interim Dean of the Faculty of Natural and Mathematical Sciences and Head of the Department of Physics, was one of two academics to represent India at the first Thirty Meter Telescope Science Forum and Board meeting in Hawaii in July 2013, where the Master agreement was signed between the USA, Canada, Japan, China and India to build the largest telescope in the world, to be situated at Mauna

Kea, Hawaii, by the year 2022. Academic activities of the Department of Physics include a weekly colloquium where distinguished scientists are invited to speak.

During 2012-13 the Department of Geology received recognition from UGC as Centre for Advanced Studies (CAS) for the second consecutive term and DST-FIST stage II is now nearing completion. The initial CAS allocation is Rs. 1.5 crore for five years. The XRF and SEM laboratories are now well equipped and a new facility for heavy media mineral separation has been added this year.

The Departments of Botany, Physiology, Zoology, Biotechnology, together with Molecular Biology and Genetics, and Biochemistry, have merged to form the Department of Biological Sciences at Presidency University. Research interests of the faculty are shared with faculty from Physics, Chemistry and Statistics. The newly formed DBS is proud to announce that it has been shortlisted for multi-crore DST-FIST and DBT-BUILDER grants for doing interdisciplinary research.

In the Faculty of Science, the Departments of Chemistry, Statistics, Mathematics, Geography and Economics are also keenly pursuing Presidency's objective of providing a fine balance between teaching and research of the highest standards.

The interim Dean of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences and Head of the Department of English, Professor Shanta Dutta, continues to receive international recognition in the field of nineteenth century studies. Her invited article 'Teaching *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* in Kolkata' was published in the *Victorian Review*, a journal of the University of Victoria, Canada, in Spring 2012.

One of the new emerging areas growing out of the Department of English is Digital Humanities. Presidency University organised the first international conference on Digital Humanities in India in December 2012. Digital Humanities, which explores how digital media has changed the ways in which the arts and culture are experienced, is a cutting-edge research area in the Humanities curricula all over the world. Led by Dr. Souvik Mukherjee of the Department of English, Digital Humanities is set to develop as a major focus area in which faculty from other departments are interested to join.

The other language departments are also developing new strength areas. The Department of Hindi is very strong also in the North-Eastern languages and has a formidable publication record. The Department of Bengali is in the process of forging important links with Bangladesh. The Department of Philosophy has a vibrant Logic Circle and organizes regular seminars. The Departments of History, Political Science and Sociology are very active in organizing seminars and conferences with a high level of student participation.

The level of academic activity currently in place at Presidency University is reflected in the new curriculum which was introduced in the academic year beginning July 2013. The new undergraduate honours and postgraduate courses are designed to build a strong foundation while also offering a wide range of options and innovative courses. Research is strongly encouraged. Supplementing this is a new and exciting range of General Education options for undergraduate students.

Our examination system functions with exemplary efficiency. From 2012 onwards, results of all examinations have been published within seventeen days and e-Grade Cards are

made available immediately. Around 90% of the students receiving their degree at this convocation have secured First Class Equivalent Grade Point. The admission ratio for Presidency is 26:1, indicating the pressure for places at Presidency. Extracurricular activities of students continue with great enthusiasm. Language courses, karate and yoga are offered. Placement efforts have yielded good results. Presidency's IT capability has recently been enhanced and most areas are now wi-fi enabled. The process of offering internet access to all students has begun.

There are some milestones in Presidency University's short history that we are all proud of. On 31st January 2012, the Royal Society of Chemistry, U.K., awarded a plaque to this university (the RSC's first plaque outside Europe) for the outstanding contribution of Acharya P.C. Ray in Chemistry. And on 15th September 2012, IEEE awarded a plaque to Presidency (their first in India) for the outstanding contribution of Acharya J.C. Bose in Physics. In December 2012, the UGC recognized Presidency as an Institution of National Eminence.

Presidency is in the process of establishing important international collaborations. On 29th November 2012, the university signed an MOU with Trinity College Dublin, the premier university of Ireland, for student exchange, faculty exchange and research collaborations. Student exchange is being made possible for us through the generosity of the Keventers group who have offered scholarships to enable our students to go to Trinity College Dublin. The first group of students will be able to avail of the scholarships in 2014.

This brings me to the subject of private funding. I am happy to be able to report that the funds received in the Presidency University Vice-Chancellor's Fund for Excellence has

now crossed the Rupees 2 crore mark. The most recent generous donation is the setting up of a chair – the Paresh Chandra Chatterjee Professor of History – and the gift comes from the Luxmi Charitable Trust. Progress has also been made in discussions about corporate funding for infrastructure and for research fellowships for students and I expect to be able to make an announcement before the end of September. On behalf of the university, I would like to express my grateful thanks to all contributors to this fund.

This is a rare moment in the life of a university when the synergy between an inherited tradition of academic excellence and the commitment of outstanding scholars and researchers comprising the new faculty at Presidency University can create an outstanding institution. All of us at Presidency today – students, faculty, officers, staff and alumni – believe that Presidency University will be able to achieve the highest levels of teaching and research in the liberal arts and sciences. Mentoring some of the finest students, producing outstanding research publications and achieving path-breaking research findings, we believe Presidency will soon be home to visiting scholars and emerge as the natural higher education destination in many fields of knowledge. Together, we want to take Presidency University to new heights. The First Convocation of Presidency University is surely the right moment to reaffirm our faith in our destiny. Again, a very warm welcome to all.