CHAPTER - II

CALCUTTA UNIVERSITY COMMISSION

While issuing the Education Resolution in 1913, the Government of India planned to appoint a Commission on university education under Lord Haldane who had presided over a similar Commission on London University earlier. However, it could not materialise partly because of the outbreak of the First World War in 1914 and partly because of the reluctance on his part to accept the assignment. After the conclusion of the War in 1917, the Government of India appointed the Calcutta University Commission under the Chairmanship of Michael Sadler, the Vice-Chancellor of Leeds University, who had earlier declined Curzon's offer of the newly created post of Director-General of Education in India in 1904. The Commission was asked 'to enquire into the condition and prospects of the University of Calcutta and to consider the question of a constructive policy in relation to the question it presents'. Among other members of the Commission were Dr. Gregory, Professor Ramsay Muir, Philip Hartog, the Director of Public Instruction in Bengal, Asutosh Mukhopadhyaya and Ziauddin Ahmad. After a hard labour of seventeen months
during which it visited other universities in British India, the Commission submitted its report in thirteen volumes giving a critical account of the working of the Calcutta University and indicating the lines on which higher education in Bengal should develop in future. The Report investigated the problems which were common to the other four universities in India as well and its recommendations provided the basis for the future development of university education in India.\(^\text{17}\)

Popularly known after the name of its illustrious president, Sir Michael Sadler, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Leeds, the Calcutta University Commission included in its terms of reference all aspects of the working and growth of that University and, wherever necessary 'to study the organisation and working of universities in India other than that of Calcutta'. The mandate permitted it to view the school foundations of university education; its composition giving it the benefit of both British and Indian experience and informed opinion.\(^\text{18}\)


\(^{18}\) Champa Tickoo, *Indian Universities: A Historical Comparative Perspective*, p. 25.
The Calcutta University Commission was critical in connexion of affiliating universities: 'According to the view of almost all progressive societies, a university ought to be a place of learning, where a corporation of scholars labour in comradeship for the training of men and for the advancement and diffusion of knowledge. In the context of this definition Indian universities, in their first form, were no true universities. They were not corporations of scholars, but corporations of administrators; they had nothing to do with the training of men, but only with the examining of candidates; they were not concerned with learning, except in so far as learning can be tested by examinations. The colleges were the only 'places of learning', but the system tended to weaken the responsibilities of the stronger colleges and to reduce them to coaching institutions. The university, being merely a group of administrative functionaries or boards, had no direct contact with the real work of teaching; it could contribute nothing to strengthen the intellectual resources of the colleges, and little to stimulate free criticism and independent thought among teachers and students. With its uniform curricula and exaggerated emphasis upon examinations, the system reduced the colleges too
much to the same pattern. It encouraged them, for the sake of economy, to limit their teaching to the ordinary conventional subjects and to disregard those more practical issues to which the despatch of 1854 had attached so much importance; it often prevented the teacher from teaching the things he cared most about and understood best; it led the student to value the discipline of his training not for its own sake, but mainly as a means for obtaining marketable qualifications. In the long run, such a system must have a sterilising influence".19

The Commission was invited to focus their enquiry on the problems of Bengal. They were empowered to examine the existing organisation of the University of Calcutta with special reference to its standards and examinations, its constitution, its relations with the affiliated colleges and with the Government; and to recommend 'any changes in constitution, administration and educational policy which may appear desirable'. They were also empowered to consider 'at what places and in what manner provision should be made in Bengal for teaching and research for persons above the secondary school age'. But it was clear from the

further suggestions, that they might like to extend their enquiries
to other universities in India ‘for the purpose of comparison’ as
they were expected to frame a body of recommendations that
would be relevant to the university system as a whole: that if the
Government of India had chosen to concentrate on the problems of
Bengal because it was there that the defects of the affiliation
university were most acute, it was also because Bengal offered a
representative cross section of the problems which called for
solution in Indian higher education.20

An instructive comparison suggested by the Commission
showed the state of higher education. In 1947 Bengal had nearly
the same population as the kingdom - 45 million. The students
preparing for university degrees in each place were also about the
same - 26,000. But behind the similarity lay sobering contrasts:
a) That whereas literates formed the majority of the British
population, only a tenth of Bengalis could read or write;
b) That all the 26,000 students in Bengal worked under the
aegis of a single university;

c) That nearly 85% of them pursued purely literary courses, and

d) That most of them belonged to one sex only.

This was not all. Calcutta University had not only to supervise a large number of colleges but also schools spread over the provinces. 21

From the very outset of their enquiry, the Commission was much impressed by the necessity of reducing the unwieldy size of Calcutta University, which 'is in respect of the number of its students was the largest university of the world... The University of Calcutta has to deal with 26,000 students scattered over an immense province wherein communications very difficult; it is responsible also for the educational control of more than eight hundred schools - a function such as no university outside of India is called upon to perform; and in those conditions it is unreasonable to expect that its governing bodies should be able to deal with this immense and complex task in a wholly satisfactory manner'. 22


Nor was this true of Calcutta alone; its size might have aggravated the ills, but it did not change their character. Throughout the sub-continent a weakened and inefficient system of secondary education prepared candidates for university entrance which in turn led to a narrowly conceived unprofitable higher education. The result was obvious in terms of the country's economy - a vastly increasing proportion of educated unemployables.\(^{23}\)

In the constitutional sphere, the Commission proposed radical changes. Addressing themselves primarily to the outstanding problems at Calcutta, they devised a detailed scheme for transforming the overgrown affiliating university into a viable teaching institution. But in doing so, they did more than prescribe a new relationship between the university and its component colleges. They prescribed a new form of university government, and a new connection between the university and the state. Thus in catering to the special needs of Calcutta, they not only supplied the key to the metamorphosis of the affiliating university: they supplied also the constitutional formula for a new and more

ambitious type of teaching university. The Government of India, planning for Dacca, had taken the view that both as regards internal government and external control, the existing practice of the affiliating university afford a broadly suitable precedent for the teaching university. But the Commission, striving to put a new interpretation on the teaching university, judge it fundamentally inappropriate.\textsuperscript{24}

Their immediate problem in replanning the University of Calcutta was to decide between the competing claims of the unitary and federal structure. They were in no doubt as to the superiority of the centralised form where this was possible; they recommended it for Dacca, and they expressed the hope that it Bengal. But they were quickly agreed as to the inapplicability of doctrinaire theories of the so called "Unitary University", to the complex conditions of Calcutta. In view of the vast student members, the strong collegiate traditions, and the differing requirements of the metropolis and the mufassil they were convinced that a single centralised organisation was 'at once unattainable and undesirable'. And since they were equally

\textsuperscript{24} Eric Ashby, \textit{op. cit.}, p.116.
persuaded that the creation of new universities within the area of the existing jurisdiction of the University of Calcutta was immediately impractical, they concluded that the basic framework of the new teaching university must be multi-collegiate. In deciding on a federal structure, however, they drew a careful distinction between the organisation they proposed for the colleges in Calcutta, and those situated in the outlying districts.25

The Calcutta University Commission held strong views, 'Another group of correspondents propose ..., that the beginning already made by the University in the provision of post-graduate courses should be extended; and that the courses for the degree of B.A. and B.Sc. with Honours should be separated from the Pass courses and undertaken directly by the University. It is added by the advocates of this scheme that in order to cope with its new functions, the University should absorb Presidency College, the whole property and income of which should be transferred by Government. The other colleges should be left to do Pass-teaching only. The supporters of this plan are content to assign to them a humble function, for which they might be sufficiently

25. Ibid., pp. 116-117
manned with teachers mainly second-rate?

'This scheme is inspired by two sound and praiseworthy motives: in the first place a desire to draw a distinction between students of exceptional ability and students of only average powers, and to provide for them a better training than is now open to them; in the second place, a belief that the University ought to exercise a more effective control over the teaching given in its name than it now does. Both of these ends ought to be secured by a well devised scheme of reorganisation; but it is doubtful whether they would be satisfactorily attained by bringing the whole body of the students ..., under the control of a single, huge centralised lecture mechanism'.

'A further, and perhaps more important, effect of this scheme would be to reduce the colleges to a potion of insignificance and humiliation and to make an unhappy cleavage among the student body. The students would be divided into two classes: superior beings called 'university students', and inferior beings called 'college students'; and both sides would suffer ... The University, in fact, would become an over-powering competitor with its own colleges; a competitor in the unfair position of being
able to impose whatever conditions it pleased on its rivals and to establish for itself a monopoly of all the most interesting work. It would draw away from the colleges all their ablest teachers. The ultimate result might well be to reduce the colleges to such a state of insignificance that their continued existence would scarcely be worthwhile.\textsuperscript{26}

'In short, under a new and happier system, the University ought not to stand in the relation of task-master to its constituent colleges. It ought to assist and strengthen them. It can do this in part by giving guidance and advice and by encouraging its best men to take a deeper interest in college work; in part by providing instruction such as the colleges themselves could not provide; in part by giving recognition and emoluments to the best college teachers and thus helping colleges to retain good men on their staffs.'\textsuperscript{27}

In redrawing the structure of the university, the Commission had concentrated on two main objectives; providing the larger measure of freedom and responsibility called for in the teaching

\textsuperscript{26} Calcutta University Commission's Report, Vol. iv., pp. 251-252.

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., p. 289.
body of a teaching university, and stimulating the growth of a university system that would be more responsive to the needs of the community it served. And it was these objectives they kept chiefly in mind in prescribing for the government of the university. Here they were more dogmatic, prefacing their recommendations with a bold definition of the theory of university government drawn from the practice of the civic universities in Britain. 28

The Commission also made a number of recommendations on the administrative and academic roles of the university. It asked for a new type of university - 'a university of colleges, superficially resembling Oxford and Cambridge, and more closely, the reconstructed University of London', wherein teaching could be assured its due predominance. It recommended three year degree courses after the intermediate stage and the instituting of Honours courses for abler students. It urged the immediate need for:

a) The University at Dacca (already promised by the Government in 1912) and

b) The reorganisation of the administrative and academic structures of the university of Calcutta, for both of which it

gave detailed guidance.

Numerous suggestions were given on education for women teacher training, professional and technical education and the better organisation of the existing schools and colleges.

Passing to the nature of the relationship between the universities and the government, the Commission prescribed a further change of policy which mirrored their purpose still more clearly. For here they specifically related their recommendations to the new role they conceived for the universities, emphasising that the degree of control appropriate for an affiliating university primarily concerned with administrative functions delegated by the state, was no longer necessary or desirable for a teaching university primarily devoted to the pursuit of learning. Critical of the existing degree of control on the grounds that it was too rigid even for an affiliating university - and still more critical of the proposal to resort to direct state control at Dacca - they insisted that an entirely new form of government supervision was required if the teaching university in India were to be assured of its essential freedom to teach.\(^{29}\)

\(^{29}\). Eric Ashby, *op. cit.*, p.121.
Despite the trend of devolution in the political sphere, the Commission reserved important powers and responsibilities for the central governments. Indeed, regarding the problem of higher education India as increasingly an all India one, they represented an effective co-ordinating influence at the centre as more vitally necessary than before. In view of the number of new universities likely to be created in the future, they strongly recommended that the power of passing acts or charters bringing them into existence should remain with the Government of India only in this way would it be possible to ensure 'a reasonable degree of unity' in the university system, and 'a standard of training such as will be respected and recognised throughout the world'. And they went on to suggest new powers and duties for the Government of India, all designed to bring a more bracing and constructive influence to bear on the development of the university system. The other proposal was designed to free the university system from an indirect but more sinister influence exerted by the government: the influence stemming from the acceptance of university examinations as sufficient test for entry into the public service. University classes came to be flooded by inferior students who
aimed no higher than a minor post in the government; and the whole character of university work was increasingly vitiated a system which attracted students not so much to learn as simply to gain a foothold in the public services. Many witnesses before the commission offered a crushing indictment of the system, representing it as a chief cause of the deterioration in university scholarship, and a major obstacle in the way of reform.\textsuperscript{30}

In order to give effect to these recommendations the Government of India drafted a Bill for the reconstruction of the University of Calcutta. Questions of finance and questions of detail delayed the introduction of the Bill in the Imperial Legislature ... An Act was passed in March 1921 substituting the Governor of Bengal for the Governor - General as the Chancellor of the University.\textsuperscript{31}

By the time Calcutta University Commission had submitted their report the war drawing to an end. With the close of the war began a period of reaction, a period of inflated enthusiasm.\textsuperscript{32}

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., pp.122-123.

\textsuperscript{31} Progress of Education in India, 1917-22, p.57. Further cited as Progress of Education --- op. cit.

\textsuperscript{32} Anathnath Basu, Education in Modern India, p.71.
Also, the evil influences of a fast expanding one-track education had become widely accepted, when 'inflation had reached such a stage that the universities had become unmanageable.\textsuperscript{33}

The Commission had no impact whatsoever on the other aspects of Bengali education that it so ably analysed. Ironically enough, it was left to the United Provinces to attempt the adoption of one at least of its main recommendations - the exclusion of intermediate teaching from the university curriculum.\textsuperscript{34}

The suggestion for the creation of multi-collegiate university on the lines of Oxford or Cambridge in the city of Calcutta was really unique, but the Commission did not take into consideration the practical difficulties and complications that the scheme would have involved.\textsuperscript{35} In their constitutional proposals, the Commission had drawn heavily on the practice of the West. In reconstructing the University of Calcutta, they had been closely influenced by the recent precedent afford by the University of London. In proposing a new form of Government, they had confidently prescribed the 'two-tier' pattern of the British civic university which hitherto had

\textsuperscript{33} Champa Tickoo \textit{op. cit.}, p.25.

\textsuperscript{34} \textit{Ibid.}, p.27

\textsuperscript{35} N. Mukherji, \textit{History of Education in India}, p.201.
been considered too complex for India. Moreover, they had advanced a peculiarly British interpretation of the concept of university autonomy: discreetly ignoring the political difficulties in India, they had disallowed the contention of the Government of India and endorsed the opposite conviction of the India office. Yet they had been careful to underplay this aspect of their recommendations, to demonstrate their awareness that analogies between east and west could not be pressed too far, and to offer their proposals as specially adapted to the peculiar environment of India. Nor was this mere tactful presentation. In many instances, they had in fact shaped British practice to Indian requirements; and where they had, there were often underlying affinities to warrant the conformity. But in conceiving the University of Calcutta as a great city university like the modern universities of the West they had done no more than recognise the logic of its urban setting; whilst in conceiving the Indian teaching university as a corporate body of learning enjoying a large measure of freedom from state control, they were seeking an idea 'not less faithful to the best Indian traditions' for being in
harmony with the 'educational aspirations of the West'.\textsuperscript{36}

The Commission had recommended the second grade colleges in the new name of Intermediate Colleges. But their recommendations to transfer the control of the Intermediate colleges from the university to the Boards of Secondary and Intermediate education were not implemented by many universities. Most of the universities did not implement the three years degree courses as recommended by the Calcutta University Commission, either. As a result of these recommendations, however, a number of new universities sprang up.\textsuperscript{37}

About the influence of the Calcutta University Commission's recommendation on higher education Mr. J.R. Cunnigham says: 'In the outcome Calcutta University remained unreformed, and the system of university and secondary education in Bengal today is but little altered from what it was in 1904' except in two respects. Dacca area had 'a university and a school system of its own' and the Calcutta University had a post-graduate teaching department. Again, 'the University of Calcutta today is something much

\textsuperscript{36} Eric Ashby, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 124-125.

greater, for good or for ill, than the concourse of jarring atoms, presided over by the 'maleficent spirit of cram' which it seemed when it was first condemned'. In the context of Cunningham's criticisms of the Calcutta University Commission, the rosy picture of the educational progress painted by the Tenth Quinquennial Review and its ecstasy are wholly unjustified.

Thus, the recommendations of the Calcutta University Commission not only reshaped the character of the existing universities in India but showed the lines on which future universities in India would develop. The Calcutta University Commission revolutionised the character of university organisation in India by creating statutory bodies like the Board of studies and the Academic Council, reshaping the Senate and the Syndicate as the University Court and the Executive Council and by adding new Faculties to make university education more dynamic and more real. It emphasised the selection of the right persons through selection committees with external experts to the posts of Readers and Professors and mooted the question of appointing a full time

39. Ibid.
salaried Vice-Chancellor to head of the university organisation in India. It provided for the further development of modern Indian languages by including them in university courses while keeping in touch with institutions of classical studies. While the introduction of new types of courses and research work improved the bone of university education in India, the suggestion to set-up an Inter-University Boards provided an unique opportunity to co-ordinate the activities of various universities in India. The greatest contribution of the Calcutta University Commission to university education in India, however, lay in freeing it from the governmental shackles imposed on it by Curzon's Indian Universities Act of 1904-05. Henceforth, the universities in India were to enter an era of free growth and development - the process of university autonomy and democratisation of higher education in India may be said to have begun with the recommendations of the Calcutta University Commission.\textsuperscript{40}

\textsuperscript{40} S.C. Ghosh, \textit{op.cit.}, pp.144-145.