

East and West, Tagore and Grundtvig

Report on the Second Grundtvig International Conference on Education & Development

By S. A. J. Bradley

The Second Grundtvig International Conference on Education & Development was held in January 2003, at Jadavpur University, Kolkata, arranged and hosted by the Department of Adult, Continuing Education & Extension (Head of Department: Professor Asoke Bhattacharya), and attended by a group of speakers from Aarhus, Copenhagen and York, headed by Professor Jens Holger Schjørring of the Centre for Grundtvig Studies in the University of Aarhus. The two-day conference was associated with organised visits to two 'extension' projects of the DACEE concerned with rehabilitation of (respectively) mentally ill homeless adults and abandoned children. It was followed by a two-day seminar on translation and on the future development of collaboration between Jadavpur and various Scandinavian centres, which was held in Darjeeling; and by a day of question-and-answer sessions with students of the DACEE in Kolkata. Also associated with the conference at Jadavpur were three notable formalities: the publication (reviewed elsewhere in this volume) of the Proceedings of the First Grundtvig International Conference on Education & Development (held January 1999), the Inauguration of the new DACEE Building; and the Inauguration of the Grundtvig International Research Centre at Jadavpur University. The conference proceeded before a gratifyingly full house, with students of the University forming a substantial part of the responsive audience.

In his welcoming address, Professor Asoke Bhattacharya spoke on the relevance of the Grundtvigian folk high school model in the enormous and ongoing task of spreading literacy and creating fairer educational opportunities in India, and referred to the links between India and Denmark that stretched back into the earlier part of the twentieth century, as well as to the parallel and independent educational initiatives associated with, among others, Rabindranath Tagore. Professor Jens Holger Schjørring replied, hailing the recent initiatives which had linked together Jadavpur, Göteborg and Aarhus in the study of Grundtvig and in an international spirit of both research and the practical application and extension of educational principles once enunciated by Grundtvig. In

other preliminary addresses, other speakers, notably Professor M. K. Mitra (Dean of the Faculty of Engineering, Jadavpur), Professor B. Chatterjee (Dean of the Faculty of Arts, Jadavpur) and (in the Presidential Address) Professor A. N. Basu (Vice-Chancellor, Jadavpur University) also alluded to the hugeness of the task of spreading literacy, widening access to education, achieving adequate provision of educational resources, seeking provision of suitable employment for the educated, and in general addressing the fundamental human issues involved and realising to the full India's vast resource of human capital. Despite realistic assessment of the near-overwhelming size of the task and frank recognition of faltering initiatives, optimism was expressed on the basis, for example, of the record improvement in literacy achievement over the decade 1987-97 and of the acceptance by universities, notable among them Jadavpur, of an obligation to contribute practically, through outreach and extension programmes, to the needs of society.

The relevance of the ideas and example of the philosopher, educationalist and poet Rabindranath Tagore to the needs of modern India was critically reviewed by a number of the Indian speakers in the conference agenda, including Shri Uday Banerjee, Shri Dipanker De, Shri Abhijit Mukherjee and Professor Pabitra Sarkar of the Higher Education Council of the Government of West Bengal. In these speakers' mixture of enthusiasm and caution over taking Tagore as a definitive figure of Indianness in a "secular, socialist and sovereign country" grappling with social, ethnic, political and economic problems of the twenty-first century, polarisations were expressed which had a familiar ring to the European Grundtvig-scholars present. Professor Jose Paz, who came bearing copious greetings from the University of Vigo in Spain, found in the educational ideas of Tagore a model for the solution of problems in today's world; while the youngest speaker, Assistant Professor D. Alfred Arun Kumar from the Allahabad Agricultural Institute (Deemed University), reflected positively upon the significance of ideas debated in the conference to his work promoting collaboration towards good agricultural practice in a rural community. The Director of the Grundtvig Study Centre in the Danish Mission Higher Secondary School, Kerala, Mr R. Daniel Jay Kumar, presented an extensive comparison between Tagore and Grundtvig as poet-philosophers and educationalists; and Professor S. A. J. Bradley (Universities of York and Aarhus) looked at the two figures as similarly problematical cultural icons in an increasingly globalised world. Dr Kim Arne Pedersen (Centre for Grundtvig Studies, University of Aarhus) took the discussion of

globalisation further and examined the concept and role of *folkelighed* within the historical process of the internationalisation of Denmark after the First World War. Professor Ove Korsgaard (Danish University of Education, Copenhagen) discussed Grundtvig's concept of Education for Life and the concept of lifelong education associated with his name; Dr Henrik Wigh-Poulsen (Grundtvig Academy, Copenhagen) spoke on the complex personality of the cosmopolitan Dane Jakob Knudsen; and Professor Claus Bjørn (University of Copenhagen) profiled Grundtvig, comparatively and contrastively, within the social and political complexities of his own times. Farewell ceremonies at Jadavpur rounded off an admirably well-organised and generously hosted programme for the exchange of ideas and viewpoints between East and West.

It is expected that a selection of the papers delivered will be published in due course, in a volume of proceedings of the Second Grundtvig International Conference on Education & Development, Jadavpur University, Kolkata, January 2003.