

OUTSTANDING FACULTY AWARD GUEST SPEAKER REMARKS

Tinni Sen – March 1, 2022

Hello Everyone,

Thank you for this opportunity to speak at this celebration of our best and brightest. It is an honor.

We all have a story that gives us purpose, a story around which we organize our lives. I have spent most of my life thinking about how we learn, why we learn, what facilitates learning, what impedes it, and how learning can be used for shared progress. It has been my life's experience that the secret to learning lies in compassion, curiosity, and engagement: exposure to new ways of thinking, entertaining different perspectives, and debating ideas. It is my life's goal to share this lesson. So that of the many ways I have been introduced to an audience, I prefer to describe myself, first and foremost, as an educator.

My earliest memory of being dimly aware of how the teacher really matters was standing amidst the chatter of a kindergarten classroom, in a sea of white girls and boys, and not understanding a word of what was being said. I was five years old, and had moved with my family, from rural West Bengal, India, to newly-independent Zambia, Africa, and I did not speak any English. The carpool dropped me off every day, and every day, the teacher left me to myself. It was outside his experience, communicating with a kid who either didn't say anything, or when she did, spoke in a forked tongue.

My parents knew what learning was about. My father, a physicist by training but a teacher by reputation, wanted me to learn from this new culture, but not forget my own. So, he gave me storybooks to read, literature by famous Bengali authors. When reading these books, I stumbled past the words that were too hard in a rush to know what happened next. Meanwhile, in the classroom, Dick and Jane spent their time doing things that were incomprehensible at first and uninteresting later. I eventually learned to speak and read and write English, and then had to relearn the intricacies of Bangla grammar when we returned to India, but the stark contrast of these two models of learning remains with me.

Fast forward to 1992, when I moved from Kolkata, India, a city of millions, to small town Oxford, Mississippi, and the university there. Talk about culture shock: where were the skyscrapers and the gritty urban life of the movies? The academic culture was alien as well. In Kolkata, I learned through discipline: repetition, rigorous practice, and no-questions-asked memorization (literally). In Mississippi, my professors, schooled in the American liberal arts education system, taught me to question, to think, to analyze, to connect, to see what mattered—not just to my own education, but to the world at

large. The American model of teaching and learning, at its best, forges connections to literature, to science, and to the human fabric. When I emerged with my PhD in economics, I knew I had found my place. I belonged in academia as a social scientist, and I belonged in the United States. And I wanted to take this model of learning into a classroom.

I also fell in love with Economics (now there's a sentence you don't hear often!). Back in Kolkata, my high school economics teacher had understood well what facilitated learning. She took us beyond supply and demand, opening our eyes to the power of economics as a tool for furthering social justice. In Mississippi, I saw the stark contrast between rich, white, small-town Oxford, ringed by rural, mostly black, poverty. Granted, economists often shy away from normative questions of fairness. But one need not take that path. After all, the "first" economist, Adam Smith said, "However selfish man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him." (Applies to women as well!). How can one address issues of income inequality, and their role in voluntary exchange, without bringing to these considerations the full weight of economic analyses?

So here I was, fresh out of graduate school hoping to bring these lessons to my classes and my profession, and, as trite as it seems, to my community and country.

I came to the Virginia Military Institute in 2001. I did not have a military background, and I did not know anyone who did. In fact, the US military was quite outside of any of my experiences. Another culture to adjust to, I thought.

At VMI, I found a group of students contending with familiar problems: some as clueless about college as my five-year-old self, some struggling to fit in, some with the thirst to learn but not knowing how, and others who thought they knew what they were doing but did not understand why it mattered. I understood them. After all, I was intimately acquainted with learning in different cultures, the missteps, and the mistakes. I also understood their desire to seek out a larger purpose. Our cadets want to make a difference and to serve their country and the world, whether by commissioning in the United States armed forces or forging a path in civilian life. They are, it turns out, my kind of people. It remains a pleasure, and in fact, a calling, to fulfill VMI's mission of educating men and women to become citizen-soldiers.

VMI's system of education interweaves three cultures: academic, military, and athletic. Exams, and papers, parades, and rigorous physical training—every minute of the cadet's time is scheduled. It seemed that my life's experience had prepared me for this job: I had the benefit of knowing how to bridge diverse social cultures, and I knew how crucial the learning model was to that process. My experiences, from the lack of

empathy of my kindergarten teacher, to the engaged wisdom of my father, to the connections that I had learned to make in graduate school, shaped my certainty that learning is best achieved if the teacher brings compassion, connection, and engagement to the process.

When I received this award, I was appreciative of the recognition of my work as a professor, but I received it less as a validation and more as a call to action — to expand my vision of what I can do as an educator, a scholar, and a colleague. The timing was also perfect. Forget what the press is telling you about VMI - it is THE place to be- we are examining our current practices, forging new initiatives, strengthening existing ones, with a new visionary and dynamic leadership at the helm. I have jumped headfirst into these budding DE&I initiatives at VMI. I was appointed by VMI's first chief diversity officer to the new Inclusive Excellence Committee—a body to “guide and hold the Institute accountable for integrating our DE&I strategic plan. A plan that touches every aspect of VMI life.

All of us in this room are experts in our fields, and we have the tools and the knowledge to make our colleges, our community, and our country an inclusive and better place. I am an immigrant, and so have the zeal of the converted. That elusive American dream can only become a reality if we can engage our students and our colleagues to further those goals.

So here I am, 21 years into my career. The core lesson is still the same: that learning thrives in an atmosphere of tolerance and kindness, and it is only when students are engaged and forge connections across disciplines and experiences that they really learn. I know the frustrations of learning in this way—it is messy and “non-linear,” but I am the beneficiary of its bountiful rewards. Therefore, I have a special responsibility to share those rewards with others. So, I ask you, this year's award winners, to answer that call to action, and to be even better teachers, scholars, colleagues, and citizen, making some “good trouble” along the way. I wish you good luck in such endeavors.