

Convocation Address

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I am most grateful to the authorities of Navrachana University for inviting me to be its Guest of Honour at this year's Convocation. I have seen the University grow from its humble beginnings several years ago to its current impressive state, and followed its fortunes with unmixed joy. I have also been privileged to know some of the people who have guided it over the years, especially my good friends Rahulbhai and Tejalben Amin. I am therefore particularly happy to be associated with the University in this formal way and to affirm publicly my admiration of its achievements.

Convocation is one of the most important events in the life of the university. It is the day students obtain their degrees, receive appropriate recognition of their talents and hard work, end their formal ties with the university, and embark on a self-chosen career. Since students are at the heart of Convocation, I would like to use the occasion to reflect on the quality of our higher education.

The university is an institution of higher education. Higher education is not the same as further education. It is obviously further education in the sense that it takes students further than the school education, but that is not its distinguishing feature. Higher education represents a qualitatively different and superior level of education. In the school one is taught certain bodies of knowledge about different areas, and accepts them as authoritative. In the institution of higher education one takes a radically different approach to them. One learns how these bodies of knowledge are arrived at, by what methods, whether these methods are appropriate,

whether their concepts are valid, and if and how they are all related. In other words, one looks at their modes of legitimation or their grounds, and participates in the creation of knowledge. As one acquires this capacity, one learns to apply it to one's other beliefs and convictions and asks to know their basis or grounds.

Among other things, it is this capacity to examine the grounds of one's beliefs and actions that distinguishes an educated person; uncritically accepting whatever is on offer represents the opposite. Higher education is not about rote learning or accumulation of knowledge. Rather it is about the cultivation of the capacity to think analytically and critically. An educated mind is reflective, self-critical, inquisitive, constantly asking why things are as they were and if and how they can be different. It would be useful to explore if our universities achieve this goal.

Currently there are around 306 state universities, 154 private universities, 129 deemed universities, 44 central universities, and 67 other university level institutions. Most of these universities find it difficult to recruit their teaching staff, so much so that nearly a third of them remain unfilled. Those recruited by the university are not always properly trained, or trained only to stay one step ahead of their students. Their interest in research is extremely limited and they contribute little to the generation of new knowledge. In most universities regional languages are the medium of instruction. Since only a limited amount of creative writing is available in these languages and there is no concerted program of translation from English and other languages, our students have poor access to great and original ideas and remain virtual prisoners of their teachers or the guide books written by them. It is right that students should be taught in their mother tongues, but that is pointless if these languages are poorly developed

and lack high quality material. English medium universities have an advantage here but present difficulties for the vast majority of our students who are educated in their mother tongue and continue to think and feel at home in it even when taught in English medium schools.

In a knowledge-based economy, research means power and wealth, and a country lacking in it lacks both. Research trains the mind, creates further researchers, and gives rise to a class of people capable of thinking independently, challenging the established orthodoxies, and creating new ways of thinking. In the context of higher education, persons not engaged in research lack intellectual curiosity and depth and make poor teachers. Those who do not ask questions cannot entertain questions by others and stifle their students' curiosity and creativity. Research and teaching are inseparable. Only a good researcher, a person whose mind is restless and constantly asking and exploring answers to new questions, can hope to mould his students in his image and produce self-questioning and restless students. Excellence breeds excellence just as mediocrity tends to reproduce itself.

The lack of a well-developed culture of creativity is not due to lack of talent. When Indian students study or settle abroad, they are generally as good as their local counterparts. It seems to me that several factors are responsible for a weak culture of creativity, such as lack of training, inhospitable intellectual environment, and poverty of resources. Research implies that one does not meekly accept the authority of the existing body of knowledge, but dares to disagree and think for our self. Such a capacity obviously presupposes intelligence that alone is not enough because intelligence needs to be suitably trained. In most Universities in India the kind of training required to develop critical and independent thought is neither valued nor

cultivated. The emphasis in primary and secondary education is on authority, rote learning, reproducing what is passed on by teachers. These habits of thought are carried over into colleges and universities. This affects not just the bright students but all students. Unless they are lucky or exceptional, none of them goes out of the university equipped with the intellectual capacities it exists to cultivate.

We do need to expand our educational base and bring the university within the reach of far more students than at present. But such an expansion has no meaning and even becomes a fraud if it only perpetuates a poor quality education unworthy to be called 'higher' or university education. Expansion, equity and excellence, the three widely canvassed goals of Indian higher education, are closely related, and none can be attained at the expense of the other two. Currently India spends less than the western average and even China. Few universities have the resources to build up decent libraries, buy the latest books, and subscribe to professional journals. Few of them can afford to allow their promising young scholars to go abroad for further training or to attend conferences and workshops in their areas. Many universities have no funds to invite eminent foreign scholars, let alone host them for a couple of weeks. While individual academics in Indian universities earn salaries comparable to their colleagues in the West in terms of purchasing power parity, universities as institutions are underfunded, especially the state universities, and starved of even the most basic resources. They are also poorly endowed and have limited financial resources of their own to fund imaginative activities and projects.

Thanks to a contingent combination of several complementary factors, modern education and research are better developed in the West than in the rest of the world.. Its universities are coveted centre of learning, students flock there in large numbers from all over the world even at a considerable financial cost, and the degrees of these universities are guarantees of their recipients' intellectual worth. It is striking that those universities in China, South Korea, Singapore, and Hong Kong that are often ranked amongst the Top 200 have a significant presence of Western scholars and scientists or those who were trained in the West. The National University of Singapore, placed 22 in one respectable world ranking order, has an international faculty score of 94. Hong Kong University, ranked 41, has the international faculty score of 82. The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, ranked 43, has a score of 93. Tsing Hue University, ranked 62 has a score of 25. Beijing University, ranked 15, has a score of 7, which gets much higher when Western trained scientists and returning expatriates are taken into account. Hardly any university in India has an international faculty score above 2. While the great universities of the UK and USA advertise their faculty positions abroad and recruit the best available candidates, India rarely does so. It is only now that the Government of India has realized how mistaken that policy has been.

If India is to create world class Universities and provide high quality education to their students, it desperately needs to attract world class scholars and scientists from abroad. One way to do this might be to attract retired Western scientists and scholars or those planning to take early retirement to India in sufficient numbers. They have done their life's work, have more free time, do not have young families and outstanding mortgages, and no longer need expensive research laboratories to make their mark. They have their well-earned pensions and do not

need full salaries either. Other ways include inviting foreign scholars and scientists as short term visiting professors or asking them to run summer schools which our young scholars and scientists can be invited to attend. Sending our students abroad for doctoral and post-doctoral research is also worth thinking about.

In education as in other areas of life, quality control is crucial. It is essential to identify talented minds, set them high standards, stimulate their ambitions, and assure them appropriate recognition and esteem. In Britain, for example, being elected a Fellow of the Royal Society is a widely sought after status in the natural sciences just as being elected a Fellow of the British Academy is in the social sciences and the humanities. Unfortunately such academies do not exist in most developing countries, including India. Sciences and humanities in these countries have no collective voice, and no protection against political manipulation, commercial exploitation, and the temptation to secure funds or esteem by faking results of research.

Barring a few pockets of excellence, our system of higher education is in a sorry state and needs urgent attention. Everybody acknowledges the problem but barely a few have an interest in tackling it. The rich and the middle classes send their children abroad and have no interest in the country's higher education. The poor can barely send their child to any university. The longer this inertia lasts, the greater would be the damage to our economy and university, and the more difficult will be our chances of improvement.

In such a situation private universities can provide part of the answer. They can be imaginative, innovative, experimental, open to collaboration with Indian and foreign universities, willing to allocate resources to disciplines and areas that are most likely to yield results, and train their

faculty to international standards. In so doing they can show by example what the state and other Indian universities at their best are capable of achieving, and create a climate in which enough pressure is exerted on all universities to deliver high quality education. Private universities do bring their problems, but so do state universities, and these are not insurmountable. With all its limitations, the United States provides a good example of how private, state and other types of university can work together to produce both excellence and expansion and ensure the minimum intellectual development a university should aim to provide.

You who are graduating today belong to the privileged few, and will go on to play an important role in your chosen area. You will be expected to show your capacity for analytical and critical thinking as well as to conduct yourself in an honest and honourable manner. This is not going to be easy. In our country corruption in its different forms has spread like cancer to all areas of our body politic, and arises from many different sources. It is a way of asserting power over others, a perk of one's office, an escape from a routinised world, a way of mocking the other person's superior status, a means of making easy money, and so on and on. Since corruption takes so many different forms and is motivated by so many different considerations, it is not easy to tackle. But it must be tackled if India is to be a trustful and humane society. Your role is therefore of critical importance. There will be pressures on you to cut corners, to bend rules, to cheat, to lie, and you will have to find the resources to resist the temptation. The inspiring pledge you have taken commits you to upholding moral values and walking the righteous path. Although pledges by themselves may sometimes mean little, they do help at critical times and alert us to the promises we have made and the things we have sworn never to do. I hope you

will see the pledge as a moral rock or anchor, and use it to give you strength in those dark hours when the temptation beckons you.

There is also another resource that can help you to resist the temptation. The habit of analytical and critical thinking has profound, though little noticed moral side effects. It enables us to examine our actions, see them as they are, and feel guilty if they are found to be wrong. Socrates, the great Greek philosopher, had a reputation for acting righteously. When asked how he had acquired such a character, he attributed it to his capacity for critical thinking. At the end of the day, he said, he would critically review his actions, conduct a silent dialogue with himself, disapprove of those actions he found unworthy and resolve never to do them again. This habit of constant self-examination and self-criticism was his best guarantee against wrong doing. Your university education has hopefully given you this capacity, and that is one of your best defenses against walking the unrighteous path or acting selfishly and without concern for others.

I wish each of you a rich and rewarding career in your area of endeavour. The world you are about to enter is both good and evil, both exhilarating and frustrating, full of opportunities and challenges. It will test your patience, self-control, ability to resist temptations to the utmost. I sincerely hope that you will pass the test and do yourself, your family, and your university proud. You would not be able to do it all the time because we are human and hence fallible, but if you can do it most of the time, you would have done well enough to be the worthy products of this fine university.