

SPECIAL CONVOCATION
and the
FORTYSIXTH
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ADDRESS BY
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Your Excellency the Chancellor of the University and the Governor of West Bengal, Esteemed Vice-Chancellor, Members of the University Councils, Teachers, Students and Distinguished Invitees.

Convocation is the most important event in the academic calendar of every University. It is the time we look back at the performance of the preceding year and announce to the world outside the plans and programmes for the march towards higher levels of academic excellence. It is also a memorable event in the lives of graduating students who are introduced in the society as educated persons endowed with certain capacities, ready to take up responsibilities in life. It is an occasion to rejoice, reflect and resolve. May I join the academic community in this festivity and congratulate those who are awarded degrees and diplomas on this occasion. Let me extend special compliments to those who have won distinctions and medals for outstanding performances in the examinations and are honoured by the University for the same.

It is indeed a great honour for a teacher to have been invited as the Chief Guest to address the Convocation of a reputed centre of higher learning, the Jadavpur University. I am thankful to the University authorities and its esteemed Vice-Chancellor for the invitation. Being the head of a sister institution in the city struggling to establish its credentials, I have been seeking opportunities for academic collaboration particularly with centres of excellence. In other words, it is partly because of enlightened self-interest of developing future partnerships which persuaded me to be present here today to share my thoughts in the common cause of improving the quality of education.

SETTING GOALS AND EVOLVING STRATEGIES :

Ladies & Gentlemen, Jadavpur is not yet another University, one among the many under-performing Universities in the country continuing with conventional teaching and examination, and contributing to the alarming problem of unemployment and under-employment among the youth, the real asset of the nation. This University has taken bold and innovative steps to advance scholarship and discharge its social responsibilities. Some of its disciplines and departments are ranked among the best available in the University system. No wonder, the best and the brightest candidates have their priorities for Jadavpur. No wonder, the National Accreditation Council had no difficulty in acknowledging Jadavpur's leadership among the 300 and odd Universities and gave it the pride of place as a potential centre of excellence. Congratulations again to you, the Faculty and students of Jadavpur. You have now the difficult job to maintain your place in a highly competitive, globalising society which is being driven by knowledge and knowledge alone. They say, success is its own threat and possible cause for future failures. It need not necessarily be so if those involved take the challenge with all seriousness and rededicate themselves to the mission which is nothing but the highest level of excellence that human intelligence is capable of. It was Sri Aurobindo, the great patriot, philosopher and saint who said that man is capable of evolving into superman because of the innate abilities already in him, waiting to be developed through pursuit of knowledge and perfection. This is what modern science is also demonstrating in contemporary times. Education, after all as Swami Vivekananda said long ago, is the process of bringing out the infinite potential that is latent in every human being. And that precisely is the function of Universities which claim to be centres of excellence. They are supposed to be not only

transmitting existing knowledge, but creating new knowledges and finding new applications for existing knowledges. This is a daunting task in as much as it depends not just on multiplicity of programmes but on the quest for perfection in terms of curriculum, discipline, teaching methods, evaluation system, academic integrity, social responsibility and a sense of commitment to abiding human values. It is easy to find alibis and put the blame on others for non-performance. This is what most Universities do. But there are institutions like Jadavpur which working under the same constraints and similar environment, overcome the disabilities and show results in their assigned tasks. A few organizations like that will take the nation forward and change the course of events for good to all concerned. This is what we expect from Jadavpur and its many resourceful Faculty and students.

TEACHERS DETERMINE QUALITY :

It is worth pondering for a moment on how Jadavpur could show performance and promise in academic excellence when more established Universities in the State commanding greater resources have declined in most parameters. After all, Jadavpur also works in the same social milieu, subject to the same pulls and pressures and the same environment of strikes and indiscipline which have become the bane of public life everywhere. Jadavpur also recruits its teachers and students from the same constituencies as others, by and large through similar procedures. How can then Jadavpur prove different from others in performance? How come the best talents are attracted to Jadavpur even for under-graduate courses in preference to other Universities and colleges? The secret lies, as I see it, in commitment, character and leadership of the academic community here.

Teaching is a noble activity. It involves a great deal of sacrifices and total commitment to the welfare of the students. It cannot offer big money as in some other professions. These days it does not even command respect from the students. Its greatest reward is the promotion of socially relevant scholarship and enlightenment in partnership with the students. To be able to perform in contemporary times, the teacher has to have strong commitment to the pursuit of scholarship and the sense of humility to learn even from his students. Knowledge is such a thing that the more you have it, the more you realize how little you know. That makes you humble and puts you in the position of a learner even while you teach. I recall the response of Sri Aurobindo to a group of teachers who sought his advice on how to become good teachers. He reportedly said : "Every teacher should bear in mind that nothing can be taught, but everything can be learnt". There is great truth in what he said and I believe at least some teachers in Jadavpur , either consciously or unconsciously, are practising Sri Aurobindo's dictum. That is part of the secret which made them shine amidst a sea of mediocrity and sloth. Let me salute those teachers and students who made it happen here and thereby provided a silver lining to an otherwise dismal scenario for higher education in the region.

I said earlier that success is more difficult to manage and maintain than failure and non-performance. As the accountability systems in academic institutions are either weak or non-existent, there is no effective way of knowing the progress of a University from time to time. The accreditation process recently launched in the country, is inadequate and can conceal many weaknesses inherent in the system. The market indicators can be deceptive. Hence for a teaching and research institution, the best indicators of progress are honest self-evaluation by teachers themselves and occasional

peer group review, again by those in leadership of the institution. In many Universities in the West, this is part of the system. The more difficult part of it is the follow-up action necessary in keeping the system competitive and productive. This involves changes in the recruitment, retention and termination policies of academic staff as well as the reward and punishment system which maintains the work culture in the organization. I believe no one in a University should be retained on a permanent tenure except in very exceptional cases. It is neither good for the University nor for the teachers themselves. It should be for an agreed period of time which may be renewed for another term on re-negotiated terms. Security of service as understood in India in institutions of higher learning is counter-productive if competitive environment for the pursuit of excellence is to be built up and sustained. Of course, through dedicated efforts of a few, some institutions manage to put up a conducive environment for growth. But they are exceptions and are difficult to sustain in the poor work culture which obtains all around.

At the National University of Juridical Sciences, Kolkata, the entire academic staff are appointed for a contract period of five years extendable for another term of five years on mutually acceptable terms. We do get reasonably competent people to come on such terms and we have no difficulty in retaining them as higher positions are available for meritorious people more frequently than otherwise. It is possible for a bright hard-working lecturer to become a full professor in less than ten years' time under this scheme. It does not violate any law or anybody's rights as they are created by the parties themselves through free volition. Does such a system guarantee quality improvement and higher productivity? My experience at the National Law School of India University, Bangalore, tells me that it not only provides

for quality and productivity, but is the only possible strategy therefor. I am not suggesting that the security and permanency of teachers of Jadavpur should be dispensed with and the practice of hire and fire should be invoked. Far from it ; what I submit is that to be able to participate in competitive excellence on a global scale, academic institutions have to innovate and experiment not only in curriculum, teaching and examination, but also in staff selection practices and conditions of service. You cannot always work on a principle that every aspiring teacher should have a research degree or should possess certain percentage of marks at the post graduate level. We do know that it means almost nothing given the bizarre system of examination and standards in different Universities. Nor can we say that headship of a department should be by seniority or should rotate among a certain category of individuals. All these well-intentioned rules now being religiously followed are coming in the way of the pursuit of excellence. Equality is sometimes wrongly understood to mean that if the majority could not acquire excellence no one should be allowed to claim it. Higher education is not a matter of distributive justice or making everybody equal in intellectual attainments. It is a system of facilitating creativity on the part of those capable and willing whereby the collectivity is benefited although in the process individuals are differently treated and rewarded. This is the reason why the Supreme Court while formulating the right to education of every child, limited it to school education and did not extend it to University education.

PROMOTING EXPERIMENTATION AND CREATIVITY :

Ladies and Gentlemen, the name of the game is global competitiveness in creativity and productivity; and Universities are the places where it has to be cultivated in individuals seeking higher education. Such a vision requires change in

the mind set and in the way Universities are organized and administered today. This is what autonomy and accountability are all about. It requires some bold experimentation on the part of some Universities and such calculated risks are imperative for progress.

Let me illustrate the point by giving a personal experience in breaking with the past and taking a calculated risk at experimentation and reform.

Legal education has been in total disarray since Independence and neither the organized profession nor the University system could do anything worthwhile to arrest the decline in standards. There was not even one institution among the couple of hundred law colleges in the country which could claim some degree of professionalism and scholarship. Thousands of ill-equipped, unemployable law degree holders were being turned out every year to become, as the Law Commission observed, "half-baked lawyers who act as touts and parasites in society". The malaise had its adverse impact on administration of justice and in governance itself. Still, Universities were reluctant to change either because of fear of student unrest or inability to organize the resources needed for reform. It was in this context that the Bar Council of India decided to start a model Law University to show the law teaching institutions how legal education has to be organized to make it socially relevant and professionally useful. It fell to my lot to conceive the new University, assemble the resources necessary and accomplish the goal of putting in place a working model of a centre of excellence in legal education. My colleagues in Delhi University and elsewhere advised caution. They also believed that the system is in a total shambles and without strong political will and adequate resources, professional legal education cannot be improved

however much academics try to do so. I took the risk in accepting the challenge thrown by the profession and went to Bangalore to launch the experiment of the first Law University in the country. The Bar Council wanted it to be the Harvard of the East. The Bar Council of India mandated that the law school should not only be a model in academic excellence but also a pace setter for reforms in legal education around the country.

Ladies and Gentlemen, you can imagine the predicament of a Keralite who lived and taught mostly in northern India finding himself on unfamiliar ground in far off Karnataka seeking to establish in that State a centre of excellence in legal education on behalf of the Bar Council, with practically very little resources in hand. The strategic asset was the backing of the legal profession and complete authority to experiment and innovate in order to achieve the miracle. The National Law School of India was started in 1987 and in less than ten years' time became the premier centre of legal studies acknowledged as the best in India and comparable to the best elsewhere. When the Chancellor of the University, the Chief Justice of India, appointed an International Panel of Experts to review the working of the University in 1995, this is what they wrote in their report :-

“The National Law School of India University has fully met the objectives of being a centre of excellence that serves as a pacesetter for Indian legal education and a testing ground for bold experiments. Indeed, so successful has it been that it has stimulated expectations and demands that could not possibly be met by a single institution”

In fact it is the success of the Bangalore experiment which has brought me here to attempt building another

University in Kolkata different from others, pioneering educational reforms towards excellence. If you ask me to explain in one word the secret of this breakthrough in legal education, I would say it is commitment and hard work on the part of the faculty and students. There is no alternative to sustained hardwork if you want to achieve higher levels of excellence in whatever you do. Too many holidays, long vacations and lack of discipline are inimical to the pursuit of excellence. A University in fact cannot afford to remain closed even for short periods. On the one hand there is continuing explosion of knowledge and on the other, scholars and students are seeking more and more free time and leisure. Some of them do read and write only when they are compelled by rules or paid for it additionally! Most of us operate only at the cognitive level of learning even at the post-graduate level! Examination-oriented teaching/learning tends to destroy the creative potential of students and promote mediocrity everywhere. Individuals who try to rise above such standards by working hard on their own, are sometimes made targets of attack and ridicule. Is this to be the character of higher education and the process of shaping the personality of our youth? Can you blame the system or the Government for such perversities in our collective conscience? I am convinced after being a teacher for over four decades that all the ills of University education in our country today can be traced to the doorsteps of the teaching community and the teachers alone. If they want they can overcome other disabilities and give the desired change to the system as a whole. If they do not want, even with all the resources and autonomy that the State could provide, nothing would improve and mediocrity will be not only perpetuated but even glorified in the name of equality and social justice.

I gave the example of the National Law School only because I am intimately aware of its development and also because it became a success story which is being replicated in different States now. However, there are examples nearer home such as the IITs, IIMs and even individual colleges like the Presidency College. If you look deeper into their success, what is revealed is not the abundance of resources but the hard work put in by scores of individuals with vision and commitment.

Of course, competent leadership is imperative for the growth of an organization. It is more so in a centre of higher education. Leadership not just of the Vice-Chancellor only, but at every level of the academic hierarchy. It is not so much the personal qualities of the leaders which make or mar academic excellence, but the way they approach the situation with a view to securing the changes required which ultimately matters. A participatory style of leadership is the essence of successful performance in an organization. Encourage activities everywhere and appreciate successful initiatives by informing others about it and giving due credit to the achievers. Recognize and help elevate the desires for achievement latent in everyone. Leadership has to show understanding and concern in all these if quality and productivity have to be improved and the institution is to be put on the road to excellence.

DISCIPLINE AND ETHICS :

I have spoken enough and more about the role of teachers in the pursuit of academic excellence. Let me say a few words to the students, not by way of advice but comments for reflection. We are living in an increasingly globalizing environment. We are told that Asia will be the focus of

development in the new millennium and India will be one of the lead players in this process. From all accounts it appears to be the truth. India is not a poor country but a rich country with lots of poor people. India has the potential to become a land of splendid opportunities if only the human resources are properly developed and a disciplined work culture is cultivated. Our problems are corruption, reluctance to work hard and lack of scientific temper. If education can help overcome these handicaps, we can eradicate poverty from this land and provide opportunities for every citizen to develop to his or her full potential. This is where values become important in education and personality development. Today the society in general and the youth in particular are passing through a state of normlessness which portends danger for the future. Education should condition the mind to enable individuals to function effectively and to have a fulfilling life. In a situation in which children spend less and less time with parents and are bombarded with quick fix solutions for every problem through an aggressive media culture, it is important that centres of higher learning devise ways to promote ethical choices to the educated persons who are expected to be thinking individuals. This is a task our University system is ill-performing today. This cannot be left to the State and the Government as the raging controversy on re-writing of history text books reveals.

Again values become important for an educated person in the context of the emerging forces of globalisation converting everything to the naked fury of the market forces. Knowledge bereft of values can be dangerous. Look at the way organized crime, financial frauds and terrorist violence are being perpetrated by some of the best minds endowed with the best of educational and technical attainments. Look at the way even the members of the learned professions indulge in scandalous unethical conduct to make money in total disregard

of their professional obligations and social responsibilities.

The need for value education is central to all forms of education; but there are differences of opinion among teachers and educational administrators on how to organize it in the curriculum. The result is that it is not attempted at all and is left to individual judgment based on one's own perception and experience. This is not a happy situation especially in a multi-cultural, multi-religious and multi-ethnic society like ours. One can interpret secularism differently to suit one's point of view; but there is no alternative to multi-culturalism if India is to survive as one nation. This would mean that tolerance as a value must be imbibed in the personality of every individual whether he or she belongs to a majority or minority group. Fundamentalism is inimical to scholarship and progress. Education must enable individuals to be tolerant of differences and lead people to renounce violence and resolve disputes through socially acceptable ways.

Similarly the value of equality and equity must influence the thought and action of all educated people. For too long inequalities have divided Indian society and contributed to untold human suffering. People have been denied opportunities even to seek education for no fault of theirs. The Indian Constitution has therefore given the right to equality the pride of place in its Bill of Rights. Certain Directive Principles of State Policy and Fundamental Duties of citizens have also been formulated to promote an environment of equality of opportunities to those who have been long denied justice. The reasons and justifications for affirmative action programmes in favour of certain classes of citizens are not fully appreciated in educational campuses leading sometimes to conflicts and ill will. Even teachers sometimes reflect such an ambivalent attitude and refuse to get involved in the debate

on the side of Constitutional prescriptions and compensatory justice.

Another dimension of the same mind-set is what is found in the treatment of women in society. It is unfortunate that educational institutions had to be told by the Supreme Court on standards of gender equality and on how to behave with women colleagues and lady students. Despite the law prohibiting "dowry", we find that educated persons are more involved than rural folk in this criminal practice; and they do it without any sense of shame or guilt. Education seems to have got totally divorced from ethical standards and even laws are unable to deter them from evil conduct.

Value education in the agenda of higher education should necessarily extend to moral and ethical practices in individual and collective behaviour. And Universities will have to direct attention in this regard if they have to respond to social responsibilities and professional obligations. It seems to me that when the National Accrediation Council give ratings to Universities in future, due importance need to be given to their contributions in enhancement of ethical conduct within the University and outside. If corruption, deceit and violence prevail in public life today, Universities in the country will have to own a share of responsibility for the malaise. It is worthwhile for Jadavpur, long associated with the Freedom Movement and cultural renaissance in this part of our great country, to establish an Ethical Ombudsman for campus from among the willing members of the academic community and endeavour to elevate by all possible ways the moral standard of the academic life of teachers and students. Eventually it can extend to the families of teachers and students and the local community around Jadavpur Campus. If civil society has to

grow and exercise a redeeming influence in social development, centres of higher learning have to take the lead and mobilize social action particularly among the youth and the teaching fraternity.

May I conclude this Address with the renowned and inspiring verses from Gurudev's *Gitanjali* -

"Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;
Where knowledge is free;
Where the world has not been broken up into fragments
 By narrow domestic walls;
Where words come out from the depth of truth;
Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection
Where the clean stream of reason has not lost its way into
 the dreary desert sand of dead habit;
Where the mind is led forwards by thee into ever widening
 Thought and action;
Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake"

Thank you for your courtesy and patience.

