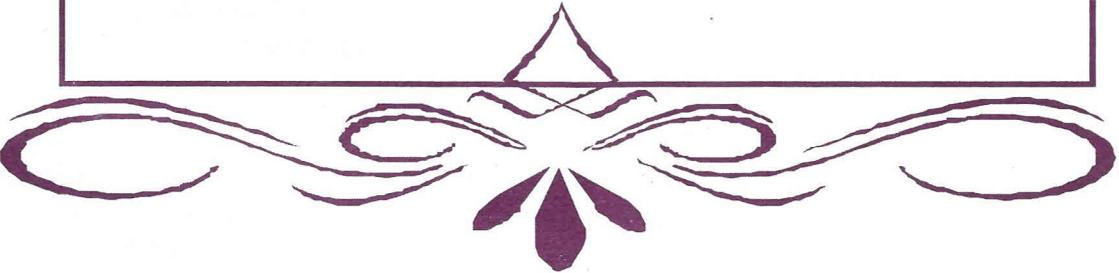




**Address
by the
Chief Guest**



CONVOCATION ADDRESS

BY

**PROF. VED PRAKASH, CHAIRMAN, UNIVERSITY GRANTS COMMISSION,
NEW DELHI AS CHIEF GUEST ON THE OCCASION OF THE
43RD ANNUAL CONVOCATION OF UNIVERSITY OF NORTH BENGAL
ON THE 9TH APRIL, 2011.**

His Excellency, Shri M.K. Narayanan, Hon'ble Chancellor, University of North Bengal and Hon'ble Governor, State of West Bengal, Respected Vice-Chancellor, Professor Arunabha Basumajumdar, Members of the Court, distinguished teachers, invitees, guests, students, ladies and gentlemen, I am thankful to the Vice-Chancellor and the Members of the various authorities of University of North Bengal for inviting me to join you in the most important event of the University's Academic Calendar.

I heartily congratulate all the UG and PG students, research scholars who are being awarded degrees today which have been earned by them through their whole hearted efforts.

Indian higher education has undergone massive expansion in post-independent India with a national resolve to establish several Universities, Technical Institutes, Research Institution and Professional/Non-Professional Colleges all over the country to generate and disseminate knowledge coupled with the noble intention of providing easy access to higher education to the common people of India. In this perspective I would like to share with you academic reforms envisaged during the 11th Plan period and issues and challenges and reforms to be carried out in higher education during the 12th Plan period.

The Context

Higher education in India is at the core of the developmental challenges facing the society. The challenge of global competitiveness has also been added to other demanding concerns such as access, equity, privatization and internationalization. It is necessary, therefore, to redesign its social functions in terms of building strong university-society linkages, creating and disseminating core values along with skills necessary for coping with the demands of the 21st century, and preparing graduates for a multi-cultural and multi-linguistic workplace settings. Needless to mention that as most reform initiatives in higher education demand changes at the university level, the university leadership acquires paramount importance in shaping the policy planning process at the macro level.

Keeping in view the critical contributions of higher education towards maintaining socio-economic cohesion in the Indian society, the Government of India has initiated wide ranging reforms in the field of higher education. The Eleventh Five-Year Plan initiatives for expansion, inclusion and promotion of excellence in higher education, through a series of measures aimed at revival and rejuvenation of the higher education sector have indeed been remarkable. The massive allocation for this sector during this period has resulted in setting up of a large number of higher education institutions (Central Universities, Indian Institutes of Technology, Indian Institutes of Management,

Indian Institutes of Science Education and Research, Indian Institute of Information Technology, Schools of Planning and Architecture, Colleges, etc.). Targeted expansion of participation aimed at equitable access to quality higher education has been no less laudable. As a result, the higher education sector, during the recent past, has undergone significant quantitative and qualitative changes. However, there is a need to further indentify and deliberate on key areas of concern in order to convincingly make our way forward.

Access, Equity, Engagement and Outcome

Even though our higher education system is one of the largest in the world, the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) is far below the world average of the developing countries. The National target is to increase the GER to 15% by the end of the 11th Five-Year Plan period (2011 – 2012), 21% by the end of 12th Five-Year Plan period (2016 – 2017) and 30% by 2020. While this goal requires higher capacity for intake, it also requires steps to improve access to higher education across gender and social groups, and to bridge the rural-urban divide in order to ensure more equitable outcomes in educational participation. The policy measures and programmes which were aimed at improving access and equity concerns in education in the past have certainly yielded some results and a large number of students from socially and economically disadvantaged sections are now entering the higher education institutions. However, results show that there are still large disparities across the social and economic groups particularly in enrolment of professional disciplines. Some studies show that despite increasing support to students from the marginalized groups, there is dearth of mentoring inputs for such students resulting in their high rates of drop-out and failures.

Content and Quality

The content and quality of higher education continues to be a major area of concern. In spite of several initiatives by the UGC and the universities, the content and quality of higher education still presents a lot of challenges for further improvement. Quality of teaching and research is closely associated with continuous development of educational infrastructure, instructional design process, quality of curriculum, competence and motivation of the faculty and reforms in the examination system. The process of curricular design and implementation needs greater attention. The method of induction of competent teachers in our universities and colleges needs revamping.

Research and Innovation

The issues of research and innovation need to be addressed at various levels, vis., (i) the way the research programmes such as M. Phil and Ph.D. are organized and carried out; (ii) time and energy devoted by the faculty in carrying out independent research projects (iii) the outcome and quality of researches undertaken by the faculty and researchers; and (iv) integrating research with teaching. There is a need to enhance the involvement of faculty working in the post-graduate and research departments, and colleges to engage themselves in regular research; presently they are predominantly engaged in classroom teaching. The initiatives taken by the UGC in this direction need to be supported and supplemented by creating appropriate mechanisms and structures in universities and colleges so that teachers could be motivated to undertake research projects.

Institutions that have had a long and reasonably good academic culture of research and innovations too have been facing serious procedural problems such as lack of administrative support, delay in clearance of research proposals, timely release of funds and institutional monitoring of research needs. Most of our universities need to strengthen the support for Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) related initiatives in order to encourage successful patenting as well as innovation in teaching and research.

Faculty Development and Inter-University Resource Sharing

Faculty development is central to the issues of quality and excellence in higher education. In order to ensure continuous flow of talented and qualified teachers to meet the needs of expansion and consolidation of higher education, a special drive may be needed to attract and incentivize talent to pursue teaching and research as a career. Post-induction, the faculty needs to continuously update themselves for the new knowledge and skills. The initiatives taken by the UGC through setting up of Academic Staff Colleges for conducting refresher courses and orientation programmes have to be reviewed with respect to their roles, functions and infrastructure facilities. The academic performance audit needs to be further strengthened.

Internationalization of Higher Education:

There is an increasing realization that generation of new knowledge is a major concern for which university-system stands, and this can be better achieved by inter-disciplinarity, international networking and exchange of ideas between students, scholars and institutions. The quality of teaching and research within Indian higher education institutions can be further promoted through diverse strategies of collaboration within India and abroad. This will facilitate exposure to different cultures, branches of learning and create understanding of society and polity of different nations. It will also enhance both the physical and academic infrastructure and resources of educational institutions in India.

However, there are various regulatory, financial and administrative constraints. At present, there is no regulation to enable the entry of foreign universities as the degree conferring authority vests with the Universities to be established under an Act. Even if the Foreign Education Providers Bill enables foreign universities to make an entry into India, the regulations pertaining to them need to be spelt out. However, with regard to programmatic collaborations, issues relating to different modes of collaboration and award of degrees need to be clearly articulated. On the financial front, Indian universities need to be provided funds to create facilities of academic collaborations and the necessary physical infrastructure.

Alternative Modes of Delivery of Higher Education: Open and Distance Learning

At present, 18 to 20 percent of enrolment in higher education is in the programmes offered by the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) and State Open Universities. However, there is a substantial number of students who are enrolled in various correspondence courses with the State Universities and the Central Universities. The Distance Education Council (DEC) is authorized to regulate the standards of distance education programmes run by the IGNOU and the State Open

Universities. The correspondence courses offered by the State and the Central universities are regulated by the universities concerned.

There is an opportunity to exploit the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) mode, particularly with the advances in technology. This will increase access and the reach of the institutions to all corners of India. This mode of delivery may provide enormous opportunities of learning to those who have missed the opportunities for formal education because of various reasons. It may also provide opportunities to those who are already employed and seek to enhance their qualifications. However, the perceptions about the quality of programmes under ODL to be at par with the regular courses where face to face teaching is used need to be convincingly tackled. With the advances in ICT, the boundary between face-to-face and ODL modality is getting blurred. While there should be an attempt to use online teaching modes in the face-to-face programmes, similar opportunities should also be an integral part of ODL programmes to derive optimum advantage in learning achievement.

Models of Financing

Public finance for higher education increased significantly in the 11th Five-year Plan. However, it is much less than the normative figure of 1.5% of GDP (Centre and States) recommended by the various Commissions and Committees set up to reform Indian education from time to time. It is also inadequate in relation to the expansion needs of the higher education sector. Private finance has also come into higher education to some extent in the last two decades but this is mainly concentrated in a few areas and is principally market driven.

Good Governance

The principle of autonomy and the relevant spheres of autonomy in universities and higher education institutions have been stressed by a number of Committees. Nevertheless, the autonomy of universities in different spheres continues to be constrained by several factors, often invoking principles of accountability. There are also several other issues which impinge on the governance of higher educational institutions. These issues differ between central and state universities, between universities and their affiliated colleges. It is important to note that while most of the university teaching departments are directly governed by the university administration, a large number of government and aided colleges are governed by the departments of higher education which come under the State Government and governing councils in the case of aided or private institutions.

It is emphasized that the public funding shall have to be increased both by the Central Government and State Government to take up the challenging task of expansion and diversification of the higher education system in the country to meet the continuously growing demands. But it is the primary responsibility of the state to provide strong quality control measures to assure performance above an acceptable benchmark, which is essential for the institutions. But higher education is a public asset and cannot be left to the market forces to control. Those who venture investment in these areas need to be properly scrutinized. Those with commercial interest dominating over the interest and ethics of Higher Education need to be eliminated.

It has been observed that policy framework is carefully planned at the level of the planning Commission, Ministry of Human Resource Development and University Grants Commission. However, the policies are not fully implemented mostly because of faulty management of the institutions of higher education. The administrative structure of the Universities, which was devised in the pre-independence period, seems to be still continuing. The new challenges facing the system of higher education in the country cannot be met without a review of the structure of management of higher education institutions. This has become all the more necessary because of globalization, which requires talent, competence, drive, initiative and innovation at several levels. This cannot be achieved without revamping the administrative set up of Universities/Institutions. The Governmental control in the Universities must be reduced, so that the University's autonomy and accountability are strengthened and academic decisions are taken on merit.

As the Colleges are the feeding sources of the Universities, a better coordination along with monitoring their working and activities is very much required. The participation of the teaching faculty through a democratic process should be ensured and higher education should be developed as an infrastructure for social and economic growth of the Country. Political interference in the appointment of University teachers and administrators should be totally stopped.

UGC believes that while quantity is important i.e., like achieving double digit percentage of GER for higher education but quality is always paramount. Higher education needs to be subsidized by the government in an adequate manner to improve its quality. Policies of higher education should be designed to strengthen indigenous research agenda. Policies of our country based on simplicity and sharing of facilities within and across institutions must be established and encouraged.

It is true that enhancing social access to higher education is very important in the country, specially in the regions where this University is situated. But, the major challenge before the Indian higher education system is to bring equity in quality of education across the length and breadth of the country. This is more close to the heart of students in rural, semi urban and urban areas, because they also wish to participate in the new economic revolution.

Today on this very important day, my heartfelt best wishes is with all the graduates, postgraduates and doctorates and I would like to say that let education be your guardian angel to achieve all your dreams and help in creating 'a just society', where you, the privileged graduates, may lend a hand to your 'faltering brothers' to soar above misery and darkness of ignorance and shine in the firmament of enlightenment.

Thank you.