



**ADDRESS  
BY THE  
GUEST-IN-CHIEF**





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## Guest-in-Chief's Address to the 48<sup>th</sup> Annual Convocation of the University of North Bengal on 4<sup>th</sup> October, 2018

### Strive for Excellence

The Dignitaries on the dais, Faculty and Students, Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Convocation Day represents an important day in the lives of those getting their degree today. Just as it is a landmark day in the life of the graduand, it also marks a significant stage in the career of their teachers. For, today the teachers can congratulate themselves for having produced a fresh batch of graduates carrying the mark of this distinguished institution. When one thinks of an academic institution like a university, the criterion of excellence stands out. Today several excellent institutions act as beacons for this purpose: to name a few, Oxford and Cambridge Universities, the Sorbonne and College de France, Caltech and MIT, .. the list extends but not very far. For, excellence is not that common, nor is it easy to acquire. I thought that I could illustrate what I mean by examples drawn from my *alma mater* which celebrated its eight hundredth birthday about nine years ago. I am referring to the University of Cambridge.

The birth of Cambridge University was precipitated by the social disturbances arising out of controversy relating to religious priority. For example, the question arose as to who was authorized to appoint the Archbishop of Canterbury, the highest religious head in England? Those who supported the King argued that King of England was entitled to make this appointment. On the other hand the supporters of the Pope, who operated from Italy spoke in his favour. Verbal controversy is one thing; but when it degenerated into armed brawls, many scholars in Oxford University felt it unsafe to continue at Oxford and they migrated to a politically quiet part of England, which happened to be the town of Cambridge on the river *Granta* often called *Cam*.

That was around the year 1209. As the migrating scholars from Oxford needed an academic environment, gradually colleges were founded and subjects of study also identified. Fortunately, political temperature cooled down and in due course both Oxford and Cambridge received the Royal Charter as well as Pope's permission to teach anywhere.



Eight centuries is a long period! It will take a long time to review the progress of the university over that long period. The more recent and more exhaustive reviews of different universities by agencies like the World University Rankings gives Cambridge as the second best university in the world. Looking subject-wise one finds that no other institution ranks in the top ten for as many subjects. A count of Nobel Laureates who had either studied here or done some of their work here gives a total of 116. The number of Fields Medalists from Cambridge is 10 and the number of Turing Awardees 6.

But, in the last analysis one can say that the greatness of an institution is decided by its membership. So here are some anecdotes about geniuses from Cambridge.

The Mathematical Tripos is the oldest and arguably the most difficult graduate level examination at Cambridge. There was a time when the list of candidates passing out from it was read out in order of performance. The candidates who passed in first class were called *Wranglers* and the candidate topping the list was called the *Senior Wrangler*. The Senior Wrangler was highly respected for his mathematical acumen and he would easily get a prestigious job in Cambridge (or elsewhere).

Naturally there was heavy competition for Senior Wranglership. In one particular year, the top two scholars in the class were Thomson and Parkinson. In general it was believed that one of them would emerge as the Senior Wrangler. Of course bets must have been placed on the possible outcome. In the end, when the results were declared, Parkinson was the Senior Wrangler and Thomson the Second Wrangler. While examining the scripts of the two students the Examiner was struck by one aspect. *Both had solved a particularly difficult question in exactly the same way.* No one else had attempted even that particular question. Looking at this issue the Examiner felt that there was something to be explained here. Did one candidate copy the result of the other?

To resolve the issue the Examiner called both candidates and interviewed them one after the other. First he asked Parkinson how he managed to solve such a difficult question. He replied: "Sir! I read research journals besides the textbooks. I saw this question solved in a research paper by an author who had not given his name." The statement agreed with the experience of the examiner who had used the very same paper for setting the question. He complimented Parkinson for his habit of reading research papers. He then called Thomson being by then almost certain that he had copied Parkinson. He narrated what Parkinson had done and



asked somewhat sarcastically if he too read research journals and had seen the paper on which the Tripos question was based. Whereupon Thomson replied: "No Sir! I wrote that paper."

It is worth noting that Thomson later blossomed out into a great physicist and made contributions to the subject of electromagnetism and thermodynamics. Peerage was conferred upon him and he is known in scientific literature as Lord Kelvin. I am sure, the students here are familiar with his work.

Even scholars might sometimes become complacent and pay the price! James Clerk Maxwell had been so confident of becoming the Senior Wrangler, that he did not bother to attend the result reading ceremony in the Senate House. He sent his valet instead and asked him to find out who was the Second Wrangler. The valet came back with the answer : "You Sir!"

I could go on and on! But I feel I have made a point. The room at the top is highly competitive and hard work is called for. The Tripos Examination abolished ranking in 1909 since the lure of Senior Wranglership led to unhealthy competition. But the university, because of its achievements prompts students to strive for excellence... not only in scholastic studies but also in sports, debating, and many other activities

This brings me to the end of my narrative. The moral is that one should strive to achieve excellence, *whatever be the field*. It is not that all of us achieve excellence. But it is important to try for it. You may face difficulties on the way but I am sure, many of the students assembled here will do something that brings them job-satisfaction and also brings good name to your university. While I convey my congratulations to those who received their degree from this distinguished institution, I also wish them a creative future.

Jayant Narlikar