

## Thirteenth Convocation held on March 18, 1979

**Professor (Miss) Allo J. Dastur\***

I deeply appreciate the honour done to me to address you on this solemn occasion. We call it a convocation, elsewhere it is termed commencement. Perhaps this is a better expression big with meaning and consequences for the future. It is also an apt occasion when we take stock of the quality of the education that we impart in this country.

One of the primary aims of education is to pursue knowledge and try to achieve excellence; it is, in practice, providing information and giving degrees, both, in most instances, of doubtful quality. How this came about is a long story into which we need not go, let us, however, try and find out how we can set it right. It is not that efforts have not been made to analyse the causes and prescribe remedies. Several Commissions were appointed to review education and chart out new paths; 30 years ago, 15 years ago we moaned that our educational system was out of touch with Indian realities; that it required an overhaul. Even today we say the same. To what purpose all the efforts of the Commissions? Is it that we put off the day of reckoning by appointing Commissions and committees, then studying or pretending to study their reports and ultimately-or is it surreptitiously -shelve them when public interest has receded or public memory faded ?

The education scene that presents itself is a study in contrasts. We have in this country more than 120 Universities, 4500 affiliated colleges, 40,000 Secondary Schools, and 600,000 elementary schools; 3.5 million teachers, 100 million students and an annual expenditure touching Rs. 25,000 million-next only to Defence. (Figures taken from a U.G.C. publication- Development of Higher Education in India - a Policy Frame, May 1978 ). Impressive figures these. But ten conceal facts. We have few, very few Himalayan peaks in our education



panorama; institutions that can compare favourably with their counterparts elsewhere are few and far between. The vast majority in the edifice are mediocre or below par.

Another feature not revealed by mere numbers is the creation and persistence of a caste system of education. Those who take or can take advantage of whatever type of education is offered from the most highly scientific and technological to the bare minimum of literacy, belong to the elite and the middle classes. In the thirty two years of independence, we have taken free and compulsory education neither to every busty in our urban slums nor every rural hut nor tribal area. True, the state has stepped in to give scholarships, freeships, partial financial aid to some of the disadvantaged groups, but this is totally out of proportion to the immense needs. Higher education with the exception of social services, humanities and languages, continue to be a very expensive process; we can neglect it only at our peril. And yet, it is socially unfair and morally unjust that the affluent and the not so affluent alone can take advantage of it. Higher education, by and large, is beyond the reach of the poor.

You young people who are today taking your first and successive degrees do not know nor appreciate that you are among the favoured in this land of ancient lineage. Students have never had it so good in the rich variety of courses and in the choice of training according to aptitude. This is something new on the education horizon. However, it is also true that institutions do not take advantage of the new advances in the field of knowledge, old syllabi continue with a tenacity worthy of better causes. This leads to a deterioration in both the teachers and the taught. Knowledge in our days doubles in a decade due to repetition and continuous study is necessary to absorb it.

Some stereotypes, nonetheless, persist. We keep on complaining that the old system of education that the British started more than 150 years ago to serve their imperial and administrative purposes is followed right into the present day. But let us acknowledge that education did throw up some brilliant scientists, mathematicians, Sanskritists and



literatures. Can we say the same of the last few decades? Anyway, we can not blame the .... was ours. We let pass the opportunity provided by the euphoria of independence and the traumatic experience of the partition. We preferred order to originality, continuity to change; these were certainly more comfortable, softer options. Let us not lose the second opportunity provided by the recent emergency and its aftermath to create a new, not merely use cosmetics.

There is much churning up and rethinking in official and unofficial quarters. The areas of strength and weakness have been identified for nearly two decades; some how we have not been able to restructure a new edifice on the basis of the old nor have we had the will to recast a new system altogether. We still cling to the formal hierarchy from the primary stage through the middle and high schools, ultimately to affiliated colleges and finally the university and /or the various research institutes that have sprung up in the past few years. Every one- the parent, teacher, student, pupil- has found a sense of security in this order, and society has accepted it as well. The degrees given are passports for jobs. This has resulted in sending forth from our universities several un-employed and unemployable graduates.

The passing of the reins of office to an unexpected conglomeration of political parties has moved educationists, education planners and administrators not merely to review the bleak picture of Indian education but to try to put new and practical schemes into operation. In a country like ours the universities , their alumni and products have the primary duty to contribute to development and progress. Below are listed some of the things that need to be done towards this end:

to produce a sufficient number of people with a reasonable degree of practical competence in some field such as agriculture, engineering, law, administration, etc., or it is some combination of subjects which will enable them to write efficiently as teachers or businessmen and in their capacity as ordinary citizens;



to train a smaller number of highly competent specialists in a number of fields; to promote a sufficient volume of research in history, biology, geology, sociology, etc. of the region, to form a sound basis of teaching at all levels as well as contributing to universal knowledge; to avoid the sense of separation of the university graduates from his much less well-educated countrymen; to carry out all this work as cheaply as possible; to serve as an intellectual yeast for the nation as a whole and to help it directly, through extension courses, correspondence courses and other similar means; to ensure the preservation of that freedom without which the search for truth and the transmission of knowledge are both impaired. (Educational Strategy for Developing Countries by Adam Curle)

You will notice this reveals the purpose of education, formalised through the universities and seeks to draw a correlation with Society. Social purpose is the backdrop against which our education has to be tested. Here we find our system could have served us better. It has created a hiatus between the small educated and semi-educated minority and the vast humanity of the uneducated and unlettered. One of the main causes is the unreality of the system. Our dependence on formal education now almost seems pathetic. We have realised that to make education widespread even if not universal, new methods have to be devised and new perspectives cultivated.

One of these new perspectives is that while the right to education as a means to satisfy cultural, intellectual, economic needs is a fundamental right; the right to university education is not an absolute right; it is a contingent right based on the individual's capacity to profit and the country's capacity to bear the cost. We have not heeded this sound principle with the result that we have had a mushrooming of marginal universities and marginal colleges. One way of improving this state of affairs is to delink degrees from jobs. This is more easily said than done; but today's efforts by those interested in the welfare of the nation and in education planning are in this direction. It is not they alone who can bring this about. The Government, industry, commercial establishments— all must contribute towards this end.



When the freedom struggle was on, students took it to be their duty to teach the less fortunate ones ; with independence came a change for the worse. "Now" they said "it is our own government; hence the government should remove illiteracy". Such a psychological reaction was bound to widen further the chasm between the two sections of society. Our goal today is to have the student community impure with a sense of responsibility and service. How is this to be done? Student power has strength, immense strength when it is used for noble purposes. Jaiprakash Narayan's faith in student and young power is unlimited; and justifiably so. The students of Bihar and the Nav Nirman Movement in Gujarat were the more recent indications. Can educated youth not start a mass movement in national interest? Is this a forlorn hope? It appears so if we do not react strongly to what is happening on the student front. It shocks all that is decent in us when students and student "Leaders" (?) run riot and assert that copying and cheating at examinations are their fundamental rights. The opposition to such behaviour must come forth from the students themselves. It is strange, shall I add shameful, that student associations and youth organisations have failed to condemn such gross mis-behaviour and distorted reasoning. The present and future of any people or nation depend in no uncertain measure on the students; and they dare not imperil their own future.

In a measure the teaching fraternity to which I belonged shares the responsibility for today's near chaotic conditions. We have failed in arresting indiscipline, enthusing students, instilling moral values or injecting a sense of service or dedication to the cause of freedom, peace and progress. On the contrary like dead fish we have swum with the current.

Some very hard decisions have to be made at every level, an exercise the country has been avoiding all these years. These are listed in **Education for our People- A policy frame for the Development of Education (1978-87)**, compiled by Citizens for Democracy, New Delhi, as



regulation of the over-all expansion of higher education, the introduction of the system of double pricing under which the poor will get free education and others will have to pay higher fees according to their ability, are reduction of subsidies, both direct and indirect, which go to the rich and well-to-do side by side with an increase in those which go to the poor;

introduction of selective admissions with the necessary safeguards for the weaker sections;

adoption of measures which will eventually delink jobs from degrees; maintenance of discipline; and protection of university autonomy and full political support without political interference.

It also lists other decisions which the academic community including teachers and students must devise implement; these are exercise of academic freedom with courage to function as a critic of society;

earning and continuously deserving autonomy through the rectitude and quality of administration, level of academic performance and the extent of service to the local community and the nation;

sharing and passing down the autonomy from the universities to their departments and affiliated colleges which, in turn, should share it with teachers and students;

involving students intimately in the entire life of the university;

making medical changes in the contents of education and in the method of teaching and evaluation, and creating a climate of sustained and dedicated hard work in the system as a whole.

Rajaji, when Chief Minister of Madras, in his wisdom projected a new school scheme. He suggested that rural school holidays or vacations should coincide with the sowing and harvesting seasons; that the weekly time-table again should favourably respond to the work hours in the field or on grazing grounds, that the curriculum should reflect the



experiences of the pupils. The Legislative Council disapproved of the novel scheme on the ground that the pupils in rural areas must have the same education and during the same period as their urban counterparts. This unrealistic understanding of equality benefited none. Now it has come to be an accepted fact that to remove the heavy load of ignorance and illiteracy experimentation in a wide way is needed. The adult education programme is just the first step in the right direction.

Change in outlook and implementation is again required if we are sincere in attacking the twin problems of removal of illiteracy and adult education as distinct from literacy. The well-entrenched hierarchy of educational institutions cannot subserve the purpose. It is too narrow, too formal we have to go beyond it and devise non-formal, region-based methods which more easily attract people and prove fruitful.

We must remember education is not limited to the three R's—Reading, Writing and arithmetic. Men of vision and love of humanity like Sir Patrick Geddes and Mahatma Gandhi advocated also the three H's — teaching with the Head, Heart and Hand to make of us complete human beings. More than forty years ago, Gandhiji with the able support of Dr. Zakir Hussain advocated basic education round a craft, this again being based on local conditions. This well thought out programme was derided as “uneducation” in content and conception. But today work experience is a basic component of elementary or primary, even secondary education. We have turned this wheel full circle.

Similar change in attitude is seen with regard to the University. A U. G. C. publication—adult Education and Extension Programme Guidelines has well laid out the contemporary views on the University and its place in modern society. It is no longer conceived as an ivory tower gazing at the stars but is well rooted in the soil of a country and contributing to its development. It reads

Universities the world over have been largely concerned with three important functions viz., the preservation of knowledge, transmission



of knowledge from one generation to the next and the extension of the boundaries of knowledge and skills to people in all walk of life and to accept service to the community as one of their important responsibilities.

In order to discharge its responsibilities to the education system and to the society as whole, the University must assume adult education and as teaching and research. These should be made an integral part of the objectives and functions of the University/college.

It is possible that we who are generally tradition bound will make a breach with the past and experiment with a new system altogether? The options are closed; we have to do it. The academic community has to recapture the lost clan and generate a sense of social responsibility. This has become somewhat difficult because my generation and the generation after mine have failed the country and its people. The examples the leaders, politicians and party men set is not worthy of emulation by the young nor do captains of industry and big business project a good image; nor again do preachers and religious leaders command the respect they should. It can only be for the educated youth to restore to our society health, vigour, vitality and moral values. How may this be done? The first step is a change in social attitudes; the older people are bound in a hard mould which may be difficult to break; but the young are malleable; they are more receptive to new ideas; that is why hope lies with them. What is the immediate task? Within the education system to cultivate a mind which abhors artificial distinctions which in their turn lead to discrimination. This needs a little emphasis. In the neighbouring state of Bihar, there was violent reaction and resentment against the government's policy of reservations. All things being equal there should be no reservations, but things are not equal. We are rigid in our distinctions and differentiations, and we concretise them. There is no interplay, no interchange, between sections and groups. The resentment against reservations is to retain in perpetuity the advantages that accrued to a group or groups at some time in history.



How dare the disadvantage of the past and the present enter or seek to enter or are helped to enter the hitherto well-guarded citadel of privilege. That it is injustice by man against man is ignored. They call it discrimination; but then, when through the years and decades discrimination prevailed in their interest and on their behalf, they were not only silent but they reaped the greatest benefits from enforced inequalities, both social and economic.

Today when efforts are made to mitigate discrimination at all levels and take forward those deliberately kept behind the earlier beneficiaries oppose it. If it is preferential treatment, it is in the interest of social or compensatory justice. Social prejudices, religious dogmas and anti-social behaviour had relegated sections of our own people to the background and condemned them to a life of misery, want and deprivation. The state now has to come forth to remove the enforced disabilities. You may agree that such government policies create a situation of "reverse discrimination". Possibly they do; but they are justified on the ground that they seek to undo the wrongs perpetrated in the past. Professor Tom L. Beauchamp's argument can hardly be improved upon:

There exist discriminatory social attitudes and selection procedures so deeply entrenched in contemporary society that they are almost certainly ineradicable by good faith measures in an acceptable period of time... Because these creeping conditions exist, policies are morally permitted because they are social measures necessary for the protection of those harmed by invidious social attitudes and selection procedures. A stronger thesis is that such policies are morally required and not merely morally permitted.

No major educational change can come about without social transformation; no social transformation can result except with basic psychological and emotional understanding. The weaker sections are not a liability on society but its responsibility. To bring them forward they must share in the educational process and efforts are needed to



provide good education. Wide disparities exist in the standards maintained by schools for the affluent and for those who may be the disinherited of the society. Very much as we need to remove inequalities among people and groups we need to remove inequalities between educational institutions. The easier way is to lop off the peaks and bring down the levels of the better institutions which today do cater to the wealthy sections of society. This is to raise the level of the general run of our institutions and inspire our teachers to emulate the services rendered by the "elite" institutions. Those of you, young men and women, who today leave the portals of this University take with you on your journey through life the added responsibility of responding to social needs. Young people are sensitive to injustices, to cruelty, to inhumanity. Redress and elimination of social evils lie with you. It is my hope and faith, it is the hope and faith of my generation, that where we have either not tried nor succeeded, you will. It is only when we bring a little light and little cheer in the lives of our toiling millions that we shall begin to pay back a little of the debt we owe to society.

I wish you well in whatever you choose to do in future. May you realise your personal ambitions but not silence the still small voice of conscience; may you prosper but not neglect your duty towards the disadvantaged; may you succeed but not without contributing to the progress and development of the country which has nurtured you.

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