

Third Convocation held on November 26,1967

Dr. R. C. Majumder*

Mr. CHANCELLOR, Mr. VICE-CHANCELLOR, Members of the Teaching Staff, New Graduates-LADIES and GENTLEMEN:

I deem it a great honour and proud privilege to address the young graduates of a young University.

By a long-standing convention, a University Convocation serves as an occasion for a general discussion of educational problems and affords an opportunity to the elders to offer the Graduates salutary advice on their future duty and responsibility. Both these functions have assumed a special importance today. We are on the threshold of "educational revolution", and the ideals and inspirations guiding our youths have undergone a revolutionary change.

. The problem of the reconstruction of our educational system is not a new one. Just half a century ago the first serious attempt was made to tackle it by appointing a Commission with Sir Michael Sadler 'as Chairman. Among other efforts during the British period to solve the problem may be mentioned the establishment of a Central Advisory Board of Education and an Inter-University Board on a permanent basis. But these did not lead to any material improvement.

Almost immediately after the achievement of independence a Commission was appointed with Sir S. Radhakrishnan as Chairman and its report was submitted in 1949. But the fond hope that with the removal of British incubus free India would remodel its own education according to its own genius, has not been fulfilled to any degree,.

So in 1964 the Government of India appointed another Commission to advise it on the national pattern of education: It was

*** Eminent historian, Philosopher and Educationist.**

presided over -by prof. D. S. Kothari and its members consisted not only of Indian educationists, but also experts on education from Britain, U.S.A., Russia, France and Japan. This Commission considered all the aspects of education in India and submitted its report last year. It has created a great stir all over the country, and the Government of India would so on formulate its decisions on the recommendations of the Commission. In these circumstances I feel it incumbent upon me to take the Report as the principal theme of my address, particularly as the Chairman of the Commission himself has described it as 'the first step towards bringing about what may be called an educational revolution in the country.'

Before discussing the Report I would like to stress the fact that the failure of the previous Commissions and Boards, which included eminent educationists, to solve the educational problem, should convince everybody that it is very complex and intriguing. The Chairman of the present Commission has himself pointed out that "in the rapidly changing world of today, one thing is certain: yesterday's educational system will not meet today's and even less so the need of to-morrow". Yet the Report envisages a scheme of reforms extending over twenty years. We should seriously ask ourselves whether our past experience of the results of commissions and permanent Boards, the present condition of the country, and the Commission's conviction and frank admission of the instability of any scheme of education that may be adopted to-day, should not make us pause and think rather than rush head long to give effect to a long-term project of a comprehensive and revolutionary character. Failure of our Five year Plans to achieve their object to any material extent, ought to serve as a stern warning before we launch a scheme of such magnitude which will extend over twenty years and raise the annual educational expenditure from the existing six hundred crores to nearly four thousand crores of Rupees. This aspect has not received the attention it deserves from the public. We cannot forget that this country has practically exhausted all its savings in the shape of sterling reserves, its public debts to foreign countries have

reached almost astronomical figures, the amount of annual public expenditure by the Centre and the States has already risen from nine hundred crores in 1950-51 to more than five thousand crores, and the *per capita* tax ratio to income has increased in .five years from ten to eighteen per cent reducing the per capita balance to about Twenty-five rupees a month. The result is, to use the words of the Commission, we are faced with the problem of hunger as never before.

Swami Vivekananda, the great ascetic, once said that religion is not for hungry stomach, The educationst and the public should seriously consider whether even a perfect system of education will be more agreeable to a hungry stomach. The Commission has expressed the laudable ambition for the development of quality of pacesetting institutions at all stages and in all sectors, But recent experience has shown that greater expenditure of money does not necessarily lead to more efficiency in education. Money has been spent lavishly of late for promoting research by increasing the provision for Research Scholarship, opening Centres of advanced Study in a number of Universities, and finally by establishing a Research Institute in the Viceregal Lodge at Simla. These have had so far little effect in stopping the steady deteriorations in the field of advanced study and research. A veteran Professor of Visvabharati once told me that in spite of plenty of money this institution today is a very inferior replica of *the nihssva-Bharati* or the poor University of Rabindranath's days. Afteuill it is not so much the money but men who really count in education and it is the men who are wanting to-day.

It is a well-known fact that in spite of increased scale of pay a large number of higher teaching posts in many Universities cannot be filled up for lack of suitable candidates. Yet the Commission has recommended not only the extension of the Centres of Advanced Study in Universities which have proved a costly failure, and the establishment of new Universities, but also the development of six Major Universities for first class Post-Graduate Work and research whose standards would

be comparable to the best institutions of their types in any part of the world, so that Indian students may not be in need of visiting foreign countries for higher education in arts or science. This, we are told, would be rendered possible by the selection of superior types of students on an all-India basis, and recruitment of intellectually distinguished groups of teachers not only on all-India but world basis. These are counsels of perfection, but very difficult of achievement. Two things are certain, namely that money alone cannot create this dreamland of education, and that India cannot afford to go in for a scheme involving an ultimate outlay of expenditure estimated at four thousand crores a year, which will be almost certainly increased much more in the course of actual execution. Of course the chances are that before we reach that stage another Education Commission would repeat the words of the present Commission viz "that Indian education needs a drastic reconstruction, „almost a revolution." There is a real danger - and I consider it to be a great one that only a part - and not necessarily the best part - of the scheme would be put into operation before it is abandoned, and this may prove even worse than useless. A small completed house may be worth more than an unfinished palace, without roof. Further, some of the major recommendations of the Commission will have to be shortly abandoned, as they are self-contradictory. For example, the recruitment of students and teachers in the six major Universities on an all-India or world basis or the establishment of an all-India educational service, both recommended by the Commission, is hardly compatible with its other recommendation to make regional language the medium of instruction in Universities within ten years. Chances are that this latter recommendation will come into operation leaving the scheme of major Universities high and dry- a relic of a dreamland after crores of rupees have been wasted on it.

A long outstanding problem of educational reconstruction is the transition from school to the University stage. Since the recommendation made in the Sadler Commission about half a century ago to separate Intermediate classes from the University, the question has been discussed

ad nauseam and all possible alternative arrangements have been experimented in different parts of the country. The intermediate classes have been wholly detached from both schools and university Degree Colleges, wholly or partly joined to schools, and wholly or partly attached to University Colleges, in various permutations and combinations, accompanied by consequential changes in the total period of school education, varying between ten and twelve years.

While in this case the Commission has simply suggested reversion to one of the alternatives which have been already tried and given up in some places, it has rejected some new schemes recently introduced which were gradually coming into favour. Thus it has recommended the re-transfer of the pre-University courses from the Universities and colleges to the school, and condemned the idea of gradually raising all Secondary schools to the higher Secondary status. This constant move, to and fro, like a shuttlecock, is likely to prove highly injurious to the healthy development of an important stage in education. The recommendation for a common school system of public education by the abolition of all good private schools, in the name of social and national integration, is also likely to result in a nationalisation of inferior types of schools to the great detriment of secondary education. For it is much easier to abolish the few good private schools, than to raise the standards of all schools to their level. This seems to be a fantastic idea which is only matched by the other idea of replacement of English books, even in the University stage, by the production of "needed literature in the Indian languages" presumably within ten years. All these matters and many more, vitally affecting the system of education, which lack of time would not allow me to discuss, require more careful consideration. As one who held the office of Vice-Chancellor 30 years ago and has since been in close touch with the educational system, it is my considered opinion, as a result of long experience, that it is better to maintain the *status quo*, until and unless, by experiments on limited scale or by other means, we may be reasonably assured that a new scheme is better, generally acceptable, and is likely to be of long duration.

Failure of a long-term educational planning may prove more disastrous to the intellectual growth of the country than the failure of Five-year Planning on the improvement of material condition.

As noted above, some of the most important and novel recommendations of the Kothari Commission have been challenged and considerable modifications have been proposed. One of these, which is of vital interest to every university, and is likely to affect profoundly both the teachers and students of this University in particular, is the period of change-over from English to regional languages. The Kothari Commission recommended that the change-over should take place as early as possible, and in any case, within about ten years. The Committee of the Members of Parliament and the conference of the State Education Ministers suggested a time limit of five years. But the Conference of the Vice-Chancellors held on 11, 12 and 13 September, 1967, definitely expressed the view that "the programme of changeover to regional languages as media of education will have to vary from University to University, from subject to subject, and even from institution to institution in the same University. The criteria in each case should be that the change-over helps, at every stage, to raise standards. The manner and speed of the change-over should be left to the University." Such clear and wise modifications may be easily adopted in respect of many other specific recommendations of the Commission. I do not like to discuss on the present occasion an allied, and perhaps still more vital problem, namely the respective place of Hindi and English in our scheme of education, and as a link language of the country. For, it is no longer an academic but a political question, and its obvious relation to general educational scheme has receded to the background. Nevertheless it deserves serious and earnest consideration by academic bodies.

There will be a general agreement with the Kothari Commission that "a radical improvement in the quality and standards of higher education and research" should be regarded as a high priority

programme, and that education should be "in coherence with Indian culture and values" so that it may serve as "an instrument for the nation's progress, security and welfare". Such ideals and objectives have been repeated times without number from different platforms for at least half a century, and have always received universal approbation. But the real difficulty is to devise concrete measure that would ensure the realisation of these ideals. It is time we direct our mind to this practical task, instead of repeating the pious platitudes. The practical steps suggested by the Commission are not likely to take us very far towards the goal.

About one of the ideals to which the Kothari Commission seems to have given priority over the rest, I feel it necessary to utter a word of caution. The Commission recommends that the "education should be science based." It is hardly necessary to expatiate on the merits of the proposal, particularly as hitherto literary education has enjoyed an undue predominance. But there is a tendency nowadays among the students which gives rise to the apprehension that the pendulum is rapidly swinging to the opposite extreme. It is a well-known fact that there is now a rush among the best students for new courses in Engineering and technical subjects and only a very few of them voluntarily take up courses in humanities. I look upon this as unfortunate. We need today leaders of thought and action as much as Engineer and technicians of all description, and from this point of view, neglect of the study of subjects like Literature, History, Economics and Philosophy by our best intellects is to be very much deplored.

So far I have mainly dealt with the external or organisational side of education. But we cannot be blind to its other and more important aspect. It is an admitted fact that the standard of general education is becoming lower and lower every day. According to the Kothari Commission, "holders of the first degrees in Indian Universities are now generally equated with Matriculates in Western countries." This is partly due to the lack of proper academic atmosphere in educational

institutions and the prevailing spirit of discontent of leading to strike, disturbance, and violence. The recent disturbances in the Presidency College, Calcutta, and many other less known instances of that kind leave no doubt that pure academic atmosphere has become a thing of the past. But the strike of the students does not stand alone. A novel phenomenon has been added by the strike and protest-procession of teachers of all categories of educational institutions from Primary Schools upwards, a thing unheard of before. All this must have deep rooted causes. Indiscipline, violence and an utter lack of a sense of duty and responsibility are by no means a special feature of the student community alone, but pervade almost all walks of life. With pardonable exaggeration one is almost tempted to say that there is a nationalisation of corruption, inefficiency, and indiscipline. While therefore the university must seek to cure the malady, so far as the students are concerned, by all means, we cannot hope for material improvement unless the level of national character is raised.

The Commission also recognises this great truth when it says that "educational and national reconstruction are intimately inter-related" and that "it will not be possible to make much headway in education unless that basic problems of life are also squarely faced and resolutely tackled." The same view is put forth in a different context in the following words:

"Today the nation is facing, as never before, the challenge of hunger, unemployment, ill health and poverty. A vital element which would help the country to meet this challenge is a revitalized education which, in its turn, can only be created if a leaven of idealistic teachers and administrators exists." The Commission, however, did not carry these ideas to their logical conclusion. It would be obvious to many that if there were really such idealistic teachers and administrators, most of the evils, whose remedies fill the pages of the bulky Report, would probably never have come into existence. And as such conditions do not exist and the basic problems of life caused by hunger, unemployment,

ill health and poverty are not likely to be solved soon by a magic wand, it follows that it will not be possible to make much headway in education, in spite of the elaborate recommendations of the Commission and an annual expenditure of four thousand crores of Rupees. The logical inference, therefore, from the Commission's own statement is that we must not rush headlong towards the Educational revolution planned by it, till at least the basic problems of life, such as never confronted us before, are at least partially solved and lead to the growth of idealistic teachers and administrators.

Ladies and gentlemen, I apologise to you for tiring your patience by this lengthy discourse, and would now like to address the Graduates who have assembled here to receive their Degrees. My young friends, I congratulate you and wish you god-speed in the journey of life that lies before you. That journey in most cases is not likely to be a very smooth one. Bengal is now passing through an acute state of unemployment and it hits the University graduates the hardest of all. But that is not the only problem that faces you. You are in the midst of a period of transition in all spheres of life. The old order has changed but has not yielded place to something new and definite to bring hope and solace to you. You are certainly more fortunate than the preceding generations of students who lived under a foreign yoke. You have a new status, a new dignity, and new avenues of higher employment open to you, but these are counterbalanced by new perils of which you are not probably fully conscious. For reasons which need not be discussed, most of you have, rightly or wrongly, lost all faith in old moral standards and social conventions of life, but now new standards and new convention have yet clearly emerged to give you a right or safe guidance. You will soon find yourself sailing in an uncharted sea, with your vessel tossed by waves of a bewildering welter of new political, social, and economic dogmas. These are strong allurements that may easily lead you astray, but you must grid up loins to fight them, As you have lost all old moorings, and have left the beaten track, you have to adapt yourselves

to the changed environments and forge new weapons to wage the new type of struggle. In this, as in any other crisis, the University education ought to be of the greatest help to you.

But in order to profit by this help you must make full use of the opportunities that this University affords, namely to acknowledge, gain experience, and develop character and personality association with teachers and fellow-students of diverse intellectual and social types. The period you spend here is the period of preparation for your life, You must keep your eyes and ears open to all that goes on in the world outside, but your mind should be concentrated on study and must not be diverted to activities which interfere with it. You should never forget that the pursuit of knowledge for the sake of knowledge, a broad universal culture, and the most perfect discipline of body, mind and intellect are the highest ideals of university life which you must seek to imbibe to the fullest extent. I must also ask you to remember that you would be false to yourself and to the University which has educated you if you care only for yourself and forget the service and devotion you owe to your country and community. Apart from considerations of patriotic and national duty, you should not forget that it is the hard earnings of the common men which maintain the educational institutions whose products you are. You therefore owe a debt to them which you can discharge only by rendering service for which higher education has equipped you.

In whatever position of life you find yourself it will be in your power to render some service, however small, to your less fortunate fellow-countrymen, Most of what I have already said, I said deliberately in order to make a deep impress on your mind that our country is today faced with some of the acutest problems in every department of life, and we are groping in the dark for remedies. To our dismay we find that the solution of the problems has baffled the ingenuity of the older generation, for it demands the emergence of a new order of things which presupposes a new outlook unaffected by prejudice and prepossessions of this age. I feel sure that the

University education properly conceived supplies the best possible equipment for this task. The distinguishing criterion of University education is its humanism which carries with it not only a mode of thinking but also a way of living. It accepts reason as the only arbiter and also certain principles like truth justice, equity, goodwill, charity, kindness and honesty as guides of conduct. It makes the youth feel the urge of the higher spirit in him and enables him to triumph over the allurements of petty sordid gains which easily fascinate his imagination and excite his interest.

More than two thousand years ago, there was in our country a ceremony very much like the one we are having today, in which the Guru or Preceptor addressed the students on the eve of their departure after finishing their education. A specimen of such address is preserved in an Upanishad and I would like to repeat some of the words uttered, by the Guru by way of admonishing this pupils. "Speak the Truth. Do your Duty. Do not neglect what is useful. Do not miss opportunities to become great. Whatever works are blameless those should be followed, not others."

My young friends these words uttered two thousand years ago are true for all ages and countries, and I take leave of you in the hope that the message of Ancient Indian sages will ever inspire your conduct and character.

26.11.67