

Sixth Convocation held on December 14, 1971

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Mr. Chancellor, Mr. Vice-Chancellor, Ladies and Gentlemen. Fifty years ago when I matriculated my friends told me that once I was in college I would be treated by my professors as a gentleman. The legend was that one of them, a man who had been to England, even offered cigarettes to his student visitors. I was not a smoker and had no occasion to test the truth of the tale but I quickly realised that there is a great difference between school and college. At college I felt more independent, though at that historical moment it was the fashion to denounce colleges as slave factories of British Imperialists. I found no trace of any such mentality among my professors or when I met and talked to the Englishmen among them. On the contrary, they did all they could to encourage independent thinking. College life is therefore associated in my mind with the acquisition of independence of mind. It was also a time of preparation for life, not only for a livelihood. In fact I never gave much thought to a career. It seemed to me that if a man is well-equipped he can find some place some where in the world. The future did not worry me. Certain responsibilities were thrust upon me later on that forced me to make up my mind. The Indian Civil Service suggested itself.

I am speaking of these things in order to warn you that I am not an educationist or a scholar. Men like me are seldom accorded the honour of being Chief Guests at University Convocations. It is a mystery to me why the learned Vice-Chancellor chose to invite me. It may be because not long ago I wrote an article on our educational system in the context of the recent disturbances. As a writer I have the freedom to air my views on any subject but not, I am afraid, the authority to address a convocation of university alumni. I shall therefore content myself with the drawing of your attention to certain fundamental questions about which I, as a layman, have been thinking.

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In the history of civilisations there have always been some people entrusted with the acquisition of knowledge and its preservation and development. The community has considered this activity no less important than the acquisition of wealth and power. These custodians of knowledge have been expected to add to it, to revise it, to renew it continually and keep it in tune with reality. Yet these custodians are not immortal. All their knowledge and skill will be irretrievably lost when they pass away unless it is imparted to the generation that follows after them. It is their duty to educate the young, to give them all they themselves have learned.

These custodians have another, a fourth, function. Being in the vanguard of progress it is also their duty to influence society, mould opinion and give enlightened guidance to the country at large. Many are the movements that have taken place down the centuries under their direct or indirect leadership. Would there have been a Renaissance at all unless the professors of the universities in Italy had made it possible? Without the Eighteenth Century Enlightenment in France would there ever have been a Revolution?

The Rishis of ancient India and the philosophers of ancient Greece had ashrams and academies where the old and the new met on an intellectual level, where the young sat down beside the old and learned from them while adding new insights of their own. From these retreats rays of light and wisdom radiated far and wide. Buddhist, Christian and Hindu monks took up their work during the Middle Ages, playing the part the rishis had played previously. In the great monasteries they built were schools and libraries. In the beginning the new was given as much attention as the old but towards the end of this period languor set in. Thought became static, even rigid. The monks feared for their faith and its deeply established tenets. Those who came to study under them were taught to repeat the ancient texts like parrots.

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everywhere. In India a corresponding development came only in the nineteenth century. By that time a break had occurred in our traditional educational system. The new system did not take over from the Maths and Viharas in the natural course, nor from the Madrasses for that matter. The new system was imported from Western hemisphere, a transplant, like tree taken out of one garden and set in another. Its growth followed the pattern of growth that characterised the English university system. This has given rise to much misunderstanding. Most people do not know that it was our Indian leaders themselves who insisted on its introduction. It was not imposed on this country by the British.

In Europe a separate chair was established for Philosophy, an event which marked its independence from Theology. It symbolised a shift in the focus of our interest from the Divine to the Human, from the Supernatural to the natural, from the religious to the Secular, from faith to Reason. Attention also shifted away from Latin. Italian, French, English, Spanish, German came into their own as distinct and important languages. Monks and aristocrats gradually lost their importance. University populations came to consist more and more of householders, of members of the middle classes. Attention turned away from Lords spiritual and Temporal to the Commons.

Philosophy divided into many branches, developing from Natural Philosophy into Science. From Science came Physics, Chemistry, Biology and so on, each subject developing its own several departments and combinations. Political Philosophy branched out into Politics and Economics. The social Sciences followed. Law was an old subject before the renaissance and after it became more and more important. Legislation is now the concern of duly elected Parliaments, run in accordance with a Constitution. The Divine Right of kings was abandoned long ago. Ecclesiastical courts no longer exist, nor is there an inquisition. Medicine was another of the earliest subjects of study but its practitioners were ignorant of human anatomy. The dissection of corpses was forbidden. All this was changed by the Renaissance. Marvellous progress has been made in Surgery and medicine.

All these things which had come to Europe in the course of three centuries were brought to India and established here in the course of only three generations. The total effect was an Indian Renaissance . With it came an Indian reformation. If three centuries are telescoped into three generations a certain degree of confusion is bound to be created in the minds of people. Those who have derived comfortable nourishment from thousand-year old customs and traditions resent the intrusion of a new, novel reality. It unsettles them. As long as the British were here we blamed them for the unpleasant consequences of the new wine we ourselves were pouring into our old bottles. Now that they are gone we have found a new scapegoat in the Indian bourgeoisie . And we see the spectre of British domination lingering in the English language.. There are some who even deny that an Indian Renaissance ever took place. How could it, they ask? Was India not a subject country?

Latin was the medium of instruction in Europe. Gradually it yielded its place to the regional languages, French, German, Italian, Spanish as these languages attained higher and higher standards. It was a change over that did not come about overnight, in hot haste. In India the old university system broke down seven hundred years ago with the fall of Nalanda and Vikramasila. The number of students admitted to the Sanskrit Tols was limited, a handful of Brahmin boys who lodged in the house of their guru. The Sudras were denied Sanskrit education altogether. Even the Kshtriyas and Vaidyas were unable to learn Sanskrit unless they happened to be wealthy enough to be able to engage Brahmin tutors. The Madrassas, however, were open to all Hindus on one condition. They were obliged to learn Persian and Arabic. The Kayasthas and the Vaidyas took advantage of the opportunity, subsequently rising to high positions in the State. They formed the medieval elite of North India. With the arrival of the British they had no difficulty in learning English. Once again their adaptability and readiness to learn carried them into the top positions. They forged ahead of the Muslims who lagged behind because of the reluctance to give up Persian and Arabic. Some Brahmins in spite of their devotion to Sanskrit, were realistic

enough to learn Persian and Arabic as well and English later. They rose higher than the Brahmins who did not. Generally speaking no distinction between man and man was made under the new system of education in English. The Sudras of the other deprived castes had not had it so good since the days of the Buddhist Mahaviharas.

Under the new system the Sudra was enfranchised intellectually and the regional languages, often referred to as vernaculars, also came into their own. These languages had been considered fit only to be used in the elementary stages of schooling. They were introduced into the Middle Schools along with English, then into High Schools and at last even into Colleges. In my childhood regional languages were used for teaching purposes only up to the Fifth Class. From the Fourth Class on I was taught in English. Since then regional languages have acquired more and more prestige and will rise still farther as textbooks become available. But until adequate textbooks are available the displacement of English will be premature. Universities exist primarily for advancing the cause of learning and the acquisition of knowledge. Neither will be served unless high international and inter-state standards are assured. Contact with the modern world must be close or we shall once again become frogs in the well as we were when sea voyages were banned and foreign travel disapproved.

Non-Bengalese in Bengal are genuinely apprehensive that they may be forced to accept instruction in Bengali willy-nilly and that their own languages may not become teaching media. Bengalese outside Bengal are equally apprehensive. They are already being compelled to acquire their education through the languages of the places where they happen to live at the moment, through Hindi, Marathi, Oriya etc. In the Large industrial complexes that are being set up in every province speakers of all Indian languages will be working. They are already present in the large factories of Calcutta, Bombay, Jamshedpur and Delhi. How can the population of an industrial complex be educated through fifteen or sixteen language media without forming themselves into small, water tight units? A common medium of instruction is an

obvious necessity. The student should be given a choice between Hindi and English. Left to themselves it is possible most students will choose Hindi but many may prefer English. Men Like me object to compulsion. Nobody should be forced to educate himself in a language he does not care about learning. It is his birthright to be able to study and educate himself either in his own language or in any other he chooses.

Some universities in India, it appears to me, should be allowed to retain English as the medium of instruction. Other universities can change over to Hindi if they like. Universities in general should be encouraged to develop the regional language of the area in which they are situated to a point where it can be used effectively at the highest levels. This is, inevitably slow process. It means that postgraduate research will one day be carried on in languages like Nepali.

Belgium, one of the smallest countries in Europe, has been split into two linguistic zones, Flemish and French, by the chauvinism of language. The university of Brussels, I believe, has duplicate sections for every subject, one in Flemish and one in French. Even the hospitals have duplicate departments and duplicate equipment. We may perhaps safely predict that in the Delhi University and the Jawaharlal University a similar development will take place and that every subject will be taught through multiple linguistic departments. The same thing may happen both in Calcutta and Bombay. It is equally possible that there will be Tamil Universities and Gujrati Universities in Calcutta, Bombay and Delhi. A process of this kind will not be checked by the substitution of Hindi for English. Indianisation may mean that the Indian Army and Civil Service is staffed by Indians, not Englishmen but it does not mean English has to be replaced by Hindi alone in all the colleges and universities.

The ashrams and academies of old were situated at a distance from the cities and kept themselves aloof from commerce and industries. It was not possible for either teachers or students to become involved in the affairs of the world either in order to

enrich themselves or to agitate for a better state of things. The medieval universities were secluded cloisters where the din of the mundane workaday world was not heard. The modern universities of the world still have a residential fringe but most of them are peopled by students and teachers who live outside the campus, often considerable distances away. It is impossible not to become involved in worldly concerns in such circumstances. The demarcation between the cloistered study and the bustling world is blurred. Students and teachers both have votes. The law of the land permits them to elect their own representatives to Parliament, to make or unmake Presidents and Prime Ministers, declare war or make peace. How can they be expected not to take interest in public affairs?

Nevertheless, a distinction between the cloister and the market place remains. Both teachers and students regard academic institutions and their campuses as sanctuaries into which the State cannot intrude by sending police to apprehend offenders against the law of the land or prevent crimes from being committed. The problems such a situation gives rise to are now acute. In India we are confronted with them for the first time. We are puzzled. Let us glance at the history of Prussia. In the nineteenth century one university after another was closed down, some of them for long periods, some of them forever, because they came into conflict with the State over the question of democratic rights. History is repeating itself in Communist China. All the universities are said to have been closed down during the Cultural Revolution. They are now beginning to reopen, hesitantly. Most are still under lock and key. State authorities have decreed that every student who completes his secondary education must spend three to five years either in the fields or in a factory before he is considered

sufficiently trained to be eligible for admission into a university.

It will be extremely unwise for our teachers or our students to invite closure over an issue that is not directly concerned with their academic pursuits. They are of course citizens, loyal nationals of free India but they are also teachers and students. For them knowledge has priority, the knowledge of which they are the proud custodians. If they confuse their duties they may, inadvertently, bring the whole edifice crashing down on their heads some day. It is easy to demolish, difficult to build or rebuild. People may have different ideas about how it should be undertaken. The decision should not be left to a State that is All Powerful. It may not be recognised that there are some people who are specially trained and specifically equipped for the job of preserving and advancing knowledge as ends in themselves. These people may be forced to use their talents for other purposes. Yet their special job is to impart knowledge and the skills of the mind to the younger generation, taking care to pass it on whole, undistorted and undiminished. This is a task of supreme importance. Knowledge cannot be lost. Progress in the future can be made possible only as progress in the past had been made possible, by the preservation of existing knowledge and additions to it. Unless knowledge is preserved, cultivated and widened the continuity of a culture is broken and an entire civilisation may disappear from the face of the earth.

We in India should be particularly on our guard in this matter for we have suffered from a break in the cultural tradition of our country, the break as a result of which Nalanda and Vikramasila fell into ruins. If a break of this kind is serious enough a vacuum is created, a vacuum which may be filled by the importation of a system from some other part of the world, with unpredictable consequences. This time the new system may come from People's China. Many may rejoice at the disappearance of an elite from among the population but the time is sure to come when they will realise that after enduring the hard grind of agricultural labour or industrial apprenticeship for three to five years

few will have either the physical or mental energy required for hard intellectual discipline. They will dream no dreams, see no visions. What will they have worth preserving? In What way will they be able or equipped to exert any influence whatsoever on their society or their times? How can any new movements in human history come into being?

There is, of course, much to be said against the present system in India. A society can certainly afford to keep the best of its young man in comparative idleness to the age of twenty or so in order that they may acquire knowledge and skill. But in our country millions of young people enrolled in schools and colleges and universities are producing nothing, creating nothing, wasting our resources. And what about the teachers? How many keep up with the advances being made in their special subjects or contribute something themselves? Most of them are taken up with their own personal advancement career-wise and economically. The worship accorded to the goddess Saraswati is nominal. An academic degree is valued for the advantage it brings its holder in the job market. In the marriage market too.

In a Welfare State every citizen is entitled as a matter of right to a higher education and a career of his choice. But millions of our young people are engaged in pursuits for which they have neither an aptitude nor a liking. A lucky few win the favours of fortune. It is almost like a lottery. Little benefit accrues to the country from the large sums hopeful parents expend on the education of their sons and daughters. Frustrated and angry these young people, in impotent rage, set fire to libraries and smash laboratories, destroying priceless treasures of art and science. If an entire generation becomes so obstinate and perverse there will be no one capable or willing to teach the generation that follows. What hope will there be for the future? What influence can the custodians of knowledge exert upon man's destiny? Man does not live by bread alone, nor by ideologies alone.

The idea that the common people had no access to higher art made me unhappy when I was a student myself. Art was for the rich,

access to it a privilege. It was for that reason that Tolstoy decried it. His book, *What is Art?*, disturbed me deeply. So I went to Tagore and asked him, "Is Art too good to be human nature's daily food?" He thought for a moment and answered with a question, "Can everybody understand higher mathematics? Do you think it can be watered down to the common level?" I had nothing more to ask.

Do you think everyone can understand all the subjects taught in universities is a similar question we may well ask today. "Do you think they can be watered down to the common level?" Unfortunately there is no answer. Most of our students are more interested in passing examinations than in learning. When all the devices they can think of fail to secure a degree for them, they decry examinations and demand their abolition. There are men who are venerable enough who support their demands. Even at my age I still sometimes dream I am a college student, that my exams are imminent and that I have not studied as much as I should or attended all my lectures. What will my fate be? Nightmarish terror seizes me.

Examinations or no examinations, the brute fact is that the system cannot provide the millions of young aspirants who crowd through the doors of the existing educational system took shape long before the age of capitalism and long before the bourgeoisie rose to a position of any power. Why give the dog a bad name?

In a country like ours it is hard to find the money needed to provide elementary education for all children. Many parents do not send their children to schools even where these exist because the children earn and their families need their earnings. Children educated above their class also often later give themselves airs and refuse to engage in their caste or family occupation. The same applies to Secondary education. A child who has his secondary education will not be willing to earn his livelihood by manual labour. He remains a consumer, a consumer with growing needs, while ceasing to be a producer. Employment in some white-collared job has to be found for him, even in a country where

production is still undeveloped.

Gandhiji foresaw all this and sought a remedy in the co-ordination of intellectual and manual labour. He wanted learning and earning to go together and remain together. It was an experiment worth making. I am not sure how far it has succeeded. Tagore was no less conscious of the need to bring together the educated upper classes and the rural masses. He developed the idea at Sriniketan. Again I am not sure to what extent his ideas have borne fruit. His was also an experiment that was worth making. The Rishis of ancient India insisted on manual labour. The Christian monks call it bread labour. In a Zen Buddhist monastery I was shown a path paved with stones laid by the head of the monastery himself. Yet the Zen Buddhists are intellectual giants. His disciples begged him to desist for he was very old. They even took away his tools. "No work, no food," he said and started to fast. His disciples relented and he continued to work as long as he lived. The example he set has kept the monks busy working for their bread ever since.

The life of schools, colleges and universities in every country has always been frugal, hard, self-denying. Such a life is an excellent preparation for the years that lie ahead. Students who are self-indulgent, who resent hardship, are very likely to be self-indulgent and resentful also in the futures. No country can tolerate wild and unrestrained conduct in its students for long. Self correction is wisdom. Why should any need for extreme measures arise at all?

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