

# UNIVERSITY OF NORTH BENGAL

## 29th ANNUAL CONVOCATION



*Address by*

**Professor Muchkund Dubey**

**Chief Guest**

**RAJA RAMMOHUNPUR**  
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I regard it as a great honour and privilege to have this opportunity of addressing the 29th Annual Convocation of the University of North Bengal. I visited this university two years ago to participate in a seminar and since then I have taken a great fascination for it. I am charmed by its beautiful surrounding, nestled as it is at the foothills of the mighty Himalayas. I have been impressed by the outstanding calibre of the teachers whom I came to know during my brief stay here. And I am aware that this university is engaged in the lofty task of catering to the educational needs of a backward region of India. This evokes my natural admiration and goodwill for this university.

I would first like to convey to the students assembled here as well as those who could not come to this convocation, my deepest affection and best wishes for success and achievements in their lives. Let their education in this university instill in them the confidence to face the multiple challenges of the fast and fundamental changes that are taking place all around us.

I thought in a gathering of teachers and students in a university, the most appropriate subject to talk about would be the present state of education in India. It would not be an exaggeration to assert that the educational system in India is in a very bad shape today. With the exception of some of the South Asian countries, India has the highest rate of illiteracy in the world. It is estimated that at the turn of this century, over 90% of the world's illiterates would be living in the Indian Sub-continent ; and most of them in India. This is inspite of the fact that Article 45 of the Indian Constitution provides that "the State shall endeavour to provide within a period of ten years from the commencement of the Constitution, for free and compulsory education for all children until they attain the age of fourteen years". That 10 years period was over in 1960. And yet 37 years after that, more than 90 million children of school-going age in India are not going to any school.

Article 46 of the Constitution of India provides : "The State shall promote with special care the educational ... interests of weaker sections of the people, and, in particular, of the Scheduled Castes

and the Scheduled Tribes ...". In spite of this obligation assumed by the State, there is little evidence of the equalisation of the educational opportunity in our grossly unequal society. In fact, the gap in the educational opportunity is widening. The highest incidence of illiteracy is still among these weaker sections of the society. Women and the girls have the least educational opportunities in India. There cannot be any hope for achieving an egalitarian educational structure in India unless vastly expanded and improved educational opportunities are provided for these groups. In his article published in one of the recent issues of the Economic & Political Weekly, Myron Weiner writes "Deep class/caste divisions have been barriers to the development of a national drive for mass education by those who have made it to the upper strata. It will take a major coalition of locally-based groups, active participation of media, the contributions of researchers, the support of investors, educators, social activists and trade unions ... to get India to address the way it treats the children of the poor".

As the government does not have the resources to provide schools for all those who need to be educated, private schools are mushrooming all over the country. They generally cater to the needs of the children of the well-to-do parents, with English/non-English distinction coinciding with the private/public management. This divided system of education deepens the malaise of an already divided society. Since even the relatively less affluent parents in a bid to provide the best possible education to their children, resort to these English medium private schools which charge higher fees, this leads to the further impoverishment of the lower middle class in the country. In the general atmosphere of corruption, proclivity to make easy money and absence of any effective quality control mechanism, most of these private schools have poor academic standards and are opened mainly for spinning quick money. This involves a colossal waste of national resources for education.

There has been a rapid growth and wide diversity of institutions for education at all levels. The diversity reflects differences in incomes and wealth, proliferation of disciplines and diversification of market and industrial requirements. The educational system now includes a number of educational institutions which offer quality education. But the quality of the system as a whole has gone

down because of the decline in the standards of old institutions which were the bulwark of the system and centres of excellence.

The quality of education in universities has declined sharply. The single most important factor for this decline is the paucity of funds, which has resulted in poor maintenance, shabby appearance, decay in the infra-structure like the laboratories class rooms, auditoria, public services etc. and very inadequate investment in books, journals, equipment and teaching aids.

The universities have also come to reflect, in the acutest forms, the general distortions and tensions in the society. Strikes, walkouts and gheraos have become endemic, seriously impeding teaching. In some universities, examinations have fallen 2-3 years behind, thus putting the students of the university at a great disadvantage in seeking admissions to higher classes in other universities or taking competitive examinations for succeeding in the job market. The criminalisation of politics is now extended to universities and some of the universities have become the den of criminals.

A sense of all-pervasive purposelessness stalks many of our universities. Education in these universities neither endows the students with discriminating ability, —নীৰ ক্ষৌৰ বিবকিনী বিদয়া—nor unlocks for them the mysteries of nature and life, nor enables them to cope with the complexity of modern world, nor provides to vast majority of them job opportunities. The university education has thus become a charade which the bulk of the students, who can afford it, go through hoping that some miracle of a job opportunity will come their way.

The universities are no longer the fountainhead of research breakthroughs in India. The really serious research work now takes place in the privately or otherwise specially-financed institutions. Unlike the universities, they are built on a narrow base. This has resulted in the general weakening of the research infra-structure in the country. It is, therefore, not surprising that the research base of the Indian economy is very weak in international comparison.

The reason for the vast number of the educated unemployed is clearly the excess of supply over demand. Our economy is simply not expanding fast enough to absorb all the graduates

and post-graduates that our academic institutions are churning out. To some extent, there is also a mismatch of supply and demand. We are not training the kind of the people who are required by the industry. A proper manpower planning and the calibration of the educational facilities to such a plan can no doubt mitigate the problem of educated unemployment. But in the ultimate analysis, the real answer to the problem will be found only by sustaining a dynamic economy over an extended period of time and consciously working for imparting employment orientation to the development strategy.

It is no longer true that students in India go in for higher education as a status symbol. That was the case when B. As. and M. As. were very few in number. Now there is hardly any status symbol attached to these degrees. If a survey is taken, it would be demonstrated that if diversion to vocational and technical training can guarantee jobs, then a vast number of students would opt for such training before reaching the higher secondary or university levels. Only a small percentage of the high school graduates will opt for higher education. Besides, these days higher education even in the specialised fields, like engineering, carry no job guarantee. That is the main reason why an increasing number of engineers try to compete—and indeed succeed in competing, for civil service jobs. And a large number of students go in for general degrees because they know that if they are going to remain unemployed even as engineers, then why should they not remain unemployed as B. As. & M. As., particularly as these degrees are less rigorous and expensive. Thus the excess of supply over demand among university graduates and post-graduates persists not due to the pursuit of status symbol, but because the economy is not dynamic enough and society not organised enough to mop up the excess.

There is a global consensus on the key role of education in society. It is now universally recognised that education is both the means as well as the end result of development. It is one of the basic needs of the people and their human right. Article 41 of the Indian Constitution enjoins upon the State to “make effective provision for ensuring the right.....to education”. And, finally, education is by far the most powerful instrument for the empowerment of the people.

There is a Sanskrit saying “सा विदया अभिमुक्तये” that is “it is knowledge alone that liberates”. The motto in Farsi is “हर चेरा दाना बनद तबाना बबद” that is “Everyone who is wise is also the one who is strong”.

Literacy or the knowledge of the three R's is the first essential tool for empowerment. For it opens up wide avenues of knowledge. And knowledge alone has the capacity to empower. In Satyajit Ray's famous film “Hirak Rajar Deshe”, the Minister advises the King :

যদি পড়ে তবে জানে

যদি জানে তবে মানে না

If someone reads, he knows

If he knows, he does not obey.

Total Literacy Campaign designed to spread literacy was a unique experiment launched in India in 1988-89. This venture entirely under the public sector depends on total mobilisation of the people to achieve its goals.

Though it is far from realising its objective of total literacy and the campaign has had its ups and downs, it has proved to be a very effective entry point for the mobilisation of people, particularly women, for serving wider purposes of social equality, human rights, gainful employment etc. A remarkable achievement of the Campaign has been its transformation into a movement for fulfilling wider aspirations of women in India.

Drawing inspiration from messages in post-literacy literature, the Campaign led to the anti-arak movement in Andhra Pradesh and the movements for women's credit co-operatives and employment generation elsewhere in the country. In Midnapur, surveys have shown that the vast majority of the neo-literates have been able to achieve considerably high levels of political and social consciousness and scientific temper, particularly among women.

This shows that literacy as merely a knowledge of the three R's is not enough. It is the post-literacy effort to promote self-reliance, expose social evils and inculcate human rights and gender sensitivity that triggered movements for empowerment.

For the empowerment of the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes, it will be necessary to go beyond literacy and assist them in acquiring university degrees which can ensure for them access to government jobs, public positions and professional services. Thus for these weaker sections, higher education of both general and specialised varieties becomes an instrument of empowerment.

Emphasising the development function of education, Gunnar Myrdal had stated in his Asian Drama : " . . . . in almost every respect, a correlation exists between education deficiencies and a low economic level ; deficiencies are the largest and most prevalent in the poorer countries". Gunnar Myrdal then refers to a U. N. report which says : "We can assume that it is virtually impossible to spend too much on education, provided it is efficiently programmed . . . .".

Mass literacy provides the mass human resources base to ensure the success of a development strategy irrespective of whether it is a State-controlled or market oriented one. Mass human resource base is essential to create the literate labour force necessary for a competitive economy. India has unfortunately a long way to go to build a mass human resource base without which its present market-oriented development strategy is unlikely to succeed. Education is the most important factor facilitating labour mobility, and labour mobility is essential for the operation of free market forces.

Education has suffered badly under the World Bank/IMF imposed structural adjustment programmes. This has been the experience of almost all the countries which have implemented these programmes. And India is no exception to it.

In India, there was a severe retrenchment in the education sector during the first two years of the structural adjustment programme. This resulted in a severe cutback on research activities and a more rapid decay of the infrastructure for education. Though resources for education were partly restored subsequently, they are nowhere near the optimum level.

In Africa, retrenchment under the structural adjustment programmes led to a substantial erosion of the tremendous gains made in the educational field in the immediate post-independent period. The level reached during that period is yet to be restored because in

most of the African countries the SAPs have proved a failure and economic recovery is yet to take place. This is one of the principal reasons why Africa has been described as the wasteland of liberalisation.

As a part of the liberalisation policy, it has been suggested that education should be progressively privatised and that access to it should be made subject to the payment of appropriate prices. The Government is, therefore, encouraging the establishment of a larger number of private schools, private research institutions and even private universities. Universities are being encouraged to earn money by taking up projects, including those from the private sector and foreign institutions and they are given the incentive of a matching grant for the money they thus earn. In the process, they are being starved of funds for carrying out normal educational activities. Established institutions are being bypassed with the Government patronising new institutions set up with private funds. As a result, the traditional educational structure on which vast amount of resources have been invested over a long period of time is enfeebled and going out of use. This is a social wastage of a colossal dimension. Its inevitable consequence is the narrowing down of the human resource base.

Very few departments and centres of universities hold out an appeal to the market forces. The result is that the vast majority of the departments and centres are discriminated because they are not eligible for matching grants. Links with outside agencies with a view to earning money, brings the universities under the influence of foreign foundations, think tanks and research establishments which have their own axe to grind. This can have even adverse security implications.

The fact is that the market forces cannot play much of a useful role in the field of education. For, vast number of our people are outside the pale of the market force. And the greatest challenge of our education policy is to take education to these people. This challenge can be met only if they can have access to quality education free of charge. As a matter of fact, because of their economic disabilities which prevents them from incurring any expenditure whatsoever on children's education and which obliges them to keep their children at home to attend to household and other income-

earning chores, it is necessary to provide them with incentives like mid-day meals, free supplies of textbooks, learning material, uniforms, etc. and exemption from admission and miscellaneous fees.

Market forces will not go to the wide and very crucial areas of education where there is no return on investment. This includes basic research and the entire sector of elementary and primary education which will have to be provided free of cost. Of course, finances from the private sector, particularly from charitable institutions, should be welcome. But the ultimate responsibility of ensuring the funding of and running the educational system in these areas must rest with the government.

The private sector cannot provide public good like education. Nor can it become an instrument of organic and fundamental social transformation which is a principal purpose of education. The motive which drives the private sector is profit and not wider social purposes.

That mass education should be provided by the State was never a controversial subject in the Western countries. Almost all these countries still provide compulsory and free elementary, primary and even secondary and higher secondary education. In some of them which are the brightest examples of the effective operation of free market forces, even university education is highly subsidised.

The irony is that the package in which liberalisation is recommended by the IMF and World Bank to the developing countries, is nowhere practised in the Western countries. In all these countries competition is not allowed to come to the defence and several sectors of the education market place. Their social service and social security system is regarded as the hallmark of the Western civilisation. There is nothing even remotely comparable to it in any of the developing countries. The question may be asked: why in spite of this, they are putting pressure on developing countries to liberalise indiscriminately? The answer clearly lies in their ruthless pursuit of economic self-interest. They clearly want to pave the ground for an ever-increasing intrusion of all the sectors of the economies of developing countries, by their transnational corporations. And in this effort, they are co-opting the elites of our society. Specialised private sector academic institutions and lure of project by foreign agencies are instruments of such co-option.

Several of the new regimes under the WTO are also designed to serve the same purpose. Some of them have far-reaching implications for education. Education services are in principle covered by the General Agreement on Trade in Services ( GATS ). It is very likely that the developed countries would in the very near future ask for negotiations for liberalising educational services. In the negotiations, they will demand introduction of price mechanism in the education sector, and opening up this sector for competition by the private sector, including their own private companies. On the other hand, our trained manpower continue to be denied entry into the markets of developed countries. This was clearly demonstrated in the negotiations on the movement of natural persons concluded in 1995. The offers by developed countries for entry of our professionals into their markets was minimal and circumscribed by all kinds of conditions and restrictions. Thus in an area where we have clear competitive advantage, we are not allowed to integrate with the global economy. Globalisation of educated labour services stops at the border of the developed countries.

The Agreement on the Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights ( TRIPS ) would have the effect of freezing the present level and pattern of technological development in developing countries. The TRIPS regime is designed to ensure that major innovations in science and technology take place in developed countries which would also produce the goods and services based on such technologies, and the developing countries would provide markets for such products. By the year 2005, the introduction of product patents in areas where only process patents are granted in India, will throw out of job thousands of scientists and technicians in units established in sectors where process patents alone are granted at present. In the long run, such provisions in the TRIPS Agreement, as virtually no provision for compulsory licencing, imports of patented products being as good as the working of the patents etc., will seriously impede the development of technology in the country.

The various regimes established by developed countries to control the export of dual purpose technologies, substances and equipment ostensibly in order to prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and some of the environmental regimes which have either been set up or are likely to be set up, will have the same

effect of restricting the development of technology in developing countries.

What then should a developing country like India do in these circumstances. First of all, there is no reason for us, either in terms of legal obligations or going by what developed countries are themselves doing, to go in blindfolded for globalisation and liberalisation. We should integrate with the global economy at the axes of our choice and not indiscriminately in all areas. This is precisely what China is doing.

Secondly, we should adopt a mission approach for developing frontier, key and sensitive technologies. This may involve partial delinking with the world economy. We should provide for all the resources and protection that are needed to achieve the desired results in these areas.

Thirdly, there can be no denying the role of the State in the areas of education, infrastructure and science and technology. The State should, therefore, assume full responsibility for fulfilling the Constitutional obligations in the field of education. As a first step, the already declared policy of spending 6% of GNP per annum on education should be implemented without delay.

But as the Total Literacy Campaign has demonstrated, government's effort alone will not suffice. The government's indispensable role must be supplemented by the effort of the civil society—that of the voluntary agencies and above all the universities and schools. Reliance would need to be placed on the existing massive structure of education in the public sector i. e. the vast number of schools, colleges and universities funded, supported and run by the government. Any policy of discriminating against them, co-ercing them to earn money for what they do and by-passing them will run contrary to our avowed purpose in the field of education.

In our tradition, the purpose of education has been regarded as inculcation of basic values among the students. Today, the values that are on ascendancy in the campuses are those of greed, money-making by any means, display of material possession and pursuit of western consumption pattern.

In some of the private schools run by religious denominations of various kinds, a different set of value system is pursued which is

equally pernicious for a pluralistic society like India. These are the values of religious fundamentalism, communal intolerance and false chauvinism.

The crying need of the hour is the inculcation among students right from their early childhood, of values which constitute the very core of the Indian ethos and which are duly and amply reflected in our Constitution. These are the values of human love and brotherhood, compassion, tolerance and the basic unity of the human kind—the values which Gandhiji summed up as truth and non-violence.

Swami Vivekananda said, "Education is the manifestation of perfection already in man" and its ultimate mission is "man-making". True knowledge opens the door to the divine. The purpose of education is not merely to collect and cram information. Swamiji had further said : "If education were identical with information, the libraries would be greatest sages in the world and encyclopaedias the rishis". To this list should now be added the computers and the internet.

I would like to conclude in a nostalgic note. When I was growing up as a student, people used to approach education with a sense of reverence. Parents used to miss their meals to send their children to schools. Teachers were highly respected. Books were regarded as the abode of Saraswati, the Goddess of learning. As soon as we used to get a book we immediately used to put a cover on it and treasure it as a valuable possession. I remembr having walked several miles to get a book from a student who had graduated from the class I was to enter into. What we need today is to revive the same spirit of reverence towards education.