

NORTH BENGAL UNIVERSITY CONVOCATION

CHANCELLOR'S ADDRESS

Mr. Vice Chancellor, Hon'ble Minister of Higher Education and fellow academic, learned colleagues, graduates of the year, students, ladies and gentlemen

It gives me great pleasure to be present at yet another Convocation of North Bengal University. Hearing the address of the Vice-Chancellor I was delighted to know of the progress that has been made by the University during the previous year. I was concerned to know about the problems, especially those caused by the constraint of resources, which the University is facing. I have no doubt that the Hon'ble Minister will do his best to help the University overcome its difficulties.

2. Unfortunately, most of the Indian Universities are faced with serious financial difficulties and this is interfering with the discharge of their duties. The Association of Indian Universities has viewed with alarm the financial crisis which is being faced by the Universities. The budget of almost half the Universities are in serious deficit. Some Universities are unable to make regular payments to the teachers. Even more serious is the problem of the other necessary expenses which a University has to incur but due to inadequacy of funds it cannot do so. Books and journals, which are so essential for higher education, are becoming more and more expensive. Many Universities are finding it impossible to continue their subscription for journals or to buy the new books that are being published. Scientific equipment in many Universities has become old and out of date. It cannot be replaced by the new equipment and instruments that are being evolved day by day. Many of the valuable pieces of equipment are no longer in use because of disrepair. Lab-running expenses are being curtailed and this is adversely affecting experimental work. Funds are not being provided for other academic activities. Many Departments are running short of specialist teachers and vacant posts cannot easily be filled. The building programme, especially of the newer Universities, is virtually at a stand-still in many Universities. Students are not being provided the amenities so essential for corporate living and for their intellectual growth. I have every confidence that even with the constraint of financial resources the Hon'ble Minister will do his best to help out the Universities in the State.

3. What is however worrying me is the growing tendency, even among a section of intelligentsia, that too much is being spent on higher education and that this is at the cost of elementary education. The Government is being accused of creating a sectoral imbalance by emphasising higher education as against elementary education. A respected journal of our country remarked in its editorial that during the First Plan Period elementary education had been allocated Rs. 93 crores out of a total allocation for the educational sector of Rs. 169 crores. On the other hand, in the Seventh Plan Period, the allocation for elementary education was Rs. 1,963 crores out of a total Rs. 5,733 crores. Thus, the percentage of allocation on elementary education came down from 55% to 34% and this was due to increase in the allocation for higher education. Another statement that has been made is that by spending more on higher

education without charging more fees from students the education of the rich is being subsidised at the cost of the poor. A suggestion is continuously put forward that enrolment in higher education should be restricted, that fees should be raised, though it is also said that more scholarships should be introduced so that the deserving poor students may not be deprived of the benefits of higher education.

4. These ideas need careful examination. The first point I would like to make out is that the allocation for all sectors of education has been going down. It was around 10% of the total First Plan allocation, and it came down to 7% during the Third Plan Period. It has gone down to around 3% during the Fifth Plan Period. The Central Advisory Board of Education had recommended that a sum of Rs. 3,300 crores be allocated for the sectors of education and culture. Out of this, Rs. 1,850 crores be allocated for elementary education. When the Fifth Plan was finalised the total allocation for education came down to Rs. 1,850 crores. The Central Advisory Board of Education then proposed that out of this reduced amount Rs. 1200 crores be allocated for elementary education. But, because of the political changes, allocation for elementary education fell to under 700 crores whereas no substantial addition was made to the Plan outlay for higher education. The total expenditure on education as a percentage of Net Domestic Product in 1970-71 was 2.8%. Notwithstanding the enormous increase in the number of students this percentage in 1984-85 had risen only to 4.4%. However, the total expenditure on Higher Education as a percentage of Net Domestic Product remained stagnant as 0.5% from 1970-71 to 1984-85. In 1950-51, the total enrolment in higher education was 1,73,696. By 1988-89 this figure has risen to 39,47,922. Calculating on the basis of per capita expenditure on higher education it would appear that in terms of constant prices the per capita expenditure has been going down, even though the needs of modern higher education can only be met by rising substantially the allocation. An equally disturbing trend is that in 1960-61, 30% of the students enrolled in higher education were in the faculty of Science. In 1988-89 this had fallen to under 20%. The Education Commission, commonly known as Kothari Commission, had recommended that 40% of the students in higher education should, at the present stage of our development, be enrolled in the Science faculty. This short-fall in Science enrolment can cause serious obstacle in the path of development. The situation becomes more acute if you bear in mind that barely 3% of young people in the age group of 18-24 have the opportunity to enter the portals of a University or College. In developed countries, over 30% have access to higher education. The Kothari Commission made a very modest recommendation that 6% of young people in the relevant agegroup should have the access to higher education. Considering the constraint of resources it was felt that enrolment in colleges and Universities should be restricted. The rate of expansion was brought down from 13% in 1969-70 to around 2.5% in 1977-78. To compensate for this restriction, the country went in for distance education. Not only has the Indira Gandhi National Open University been established, but many Universities in the country have introduced successfully correspondence courses. It is now possible to tell our people that you 'learn while you earn'. A deliberate decision has been taken to provide facilities for life-long education, which is so necessary in a progressive modern nation.

5. It is a matter of great satisfaction that access to higher education which had remained more or less confined to the upper and well-to-do classes at the time of Independence has now actually reached the vast majority of our population. It is because of this that the country can think of providing reservation in higher jobs to the backward classes of society. Today our graduates are running the largest welfare State in the world. Our engineers, doctors, lawyers, teachers, civil servants, industrialists and researchers have been able to shoulder the burden of social transformation. We are able to provide skilled and educated manpower not only to our own country but also to neighbouring developing countries. Even in the most developed country, namely, United States of America, Indian Doctors, Scientists, researchers and engineers have earned for themselves a place of honour and respect. Today we can boast of the third largest corpus of technical and scientific manpower in the world. If the country is to move forward and the bulk of our people to be rescued from the drudgery of hewers of wood and drawers of water and transformed into a skilled labour force comparable to the best in the world, if we have to solve the problems of technological growth so as to change the quality of life of our people, we can only ignore higher education at our own peril.

6. There cannot be a dichotomy between higher education and elementary education. One complements and supplements the other. If a holistic view of development is taken, education cannot be fragmented and false dichotomy created between elementary education and higher education.

7. I hope that by their conduct and behaviour the new graduates of this University will provide yet another proof to society that its investment in higher education is fruitful. To the new graduates I offer my heartiest congratulations and best wishes for every success in life. Taking advantage of my old age I give them blessings. May they bring joy and happiness to their own families and to the greater family to the Indian Nation.