

Twentysixth Convocation held on May 12, 1993

**Professor G. Ram Reddy\***

Mr. Chancellor, Mr. Vice-Chancellor, Members of university authorities, Students, Ladies and Gentlemen :

I thank you most sincerely for the honour you have done me in asking me to address the Convocation this year. It is indeed an honour to be the chief guest at the Convocation. The Convocation is an auspicious occasion and all students look forward to it because on this day they see the fulfilment of their dreams. In a sense it is a watershed in the lives of the out-going students-one chapter in their lives closes and another is about to begin. I would like to wish the out-going students a bright and prosperous future, and I am sure, the training received in this university will stand them in good stead. Talking of the university life Robertson Davies says "**Autumn to me is the most congenial of seasons; the university, to me is the most congenial of lives**". Those of you who will be leaving the portals of the university would remember that the most congenial of lives were spent here.

Established in 1961, University of North Bengal has grown from strength to strength. Today, it offers undergraduate, postgraduate and research programmes in a variety of disciplines. Although located in a somewhat remote area, its research and teaching programmes are impressive. During the last 30 years, it has contributed a large number of its alumni to national life and I am sure the alumni would remember that part of their success is due to their Alma-Mater.

While there is much about which the university could be proud of, it needs to look into the future and shape itself to suit the requirements of the coming decades. University is not a static institution; it should

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adapt itself to the changing circumstances. The main problem facing the universities in the country today is the management of change. Change is taking place but it is not properly appreciated by the managements of the universities. If managements of the universities are to be effective they must identify the areas of change and should try to manage. Otherwise, there will be a chaotic situation in the system.

It is said that in universities men should be constantly in the process of making up of their minds and then unmaking them (Quoted in Robert F. Goheen, *The Human Nature of a University*, p.52). Robert F. Goheen quotes a distinguished scientist, Professor Colin S. Pittendrigh, who often took his biologist's lens to the problems he faced in the area of educational policy and administration. He recalls an analogy drawn by Pittendrigh between the evolution of organisms and organisations. "All living organisms have built-in mechanisms which help them to adapt to new conditions, .... and a key factor in the process of evolution is the rate at which an organism manages to adapt. To survive, it must be able to react quickly enough to new circumstances. The same is true of human organisations, including colleges and universities. There come times when they must be ready to respond to new conditions, to modify or even abandon old habits and old notions. We must be prepared to hear, and not fear, the calls to newer, more challenging upland. To dig our heels in and resist institutional evolution is to invite stagnation and extinction" (Robert F. Goheen, pp.56-57)."

We, in the university system, therefore, need to respond to new conditions to modify or even abandon old habits and notions. Several Committees and Commissions have highlighted the important aspects of higher education in India - the most recent being the National Policy on Education - 1986 and the Report of the Education Commission - 1992 of the Government of West Bengal.

The Programme of Action, 1992 says : "The university system should move to the centre stage. It should utilise it's autonomy for

innovations and teaching and pursuing high quality research" (National Policy on Education, 1986 - Programme of Action, 1992, p.116). The Programme of Action refers to several problems in higher education which need to be attended to. Today, I would like to invite your attention to only two of them - design of courses and research in universities.

It has been recognized that the course structure and their designs are out-dated in higher education. There is lot of rigidity in the structure. Higher education programmes are to be re-designed to meet the growing demands of specialization, to provide flexibility in the combination of courses, to facilitate mobility among courses, to update and modernize curricula, to integrate work/practical experience and participation in creative activities with the learning process and to facilitate reforms in the evaluation procedure. The present rigid structures do not permit these reforms. The UGC has been evincing keen interest in the restructuring of courses at the undergraduate level in the faculties of Art, Social Sciences and Sciences. In the 5th, 6th and 7th Plans, this had been emphasised. The UGC set-up 27 Curriculum Development Centres (CDCs) to prepare model curricula in sciences, humanities and social sciences during the 7th Plan. As early as 1977-'78, in the Policy Frame UGC talked of radical restructuring of undergraduate education, and subsequently it has reiterated such restructuring. It is sad to note that upto the end of the 7th Plan only 9 universities and 290 colleges had restructured undergraduate courses in accordance with these guidelines. "The lack of momentum in implementation of the scheme could be attributed to non-availability of specialized teachers, limited opportunities for practical training and the absence of clear linkages between these courses and improved job prospects" (Ibid - pp.123-124). The CDCs set up by the Commission have prepared model curricula in 27 subjects. These have been circulated to all universities for adoption. Now the ball is in the court of the universities. I hope universities will pay adequate attention to these recommendations.

An important function of the university system is to engage in research, i.e., to discover knowledge and disseminate it. Research is as important as teaching in the universities. One criticism against university system has been that its research takes place in isolation. Its relevance is often questioned. There is hardly any linkage with the society around. Talking of research in the universities, the Report of the Education Commission of the Govt. of West Bengal says: "Universities should be increasingly more involved in research, both basic and applied. In selecting areas of research, those which are more proximate to Nation's or State's major problems should receive precedence". (p.321) Take the case of cooperation between the universities and the large number of Scientific Research Institutions. Despite repeated exhortations hardly any links exist between universities and such research institutions. What is happening today is that Research Institutions and Universities functions in isolation and they hardly interact. It is to the advantage of both to cooperate with each other and establish strong links. I am happy to mention that the UGC and the CSIR have taken an initiative to bring these institutions closer. Similarly, closer cooperation needs to be promoted between the social science research institutions and the universities. This is one of the important recommendations made by the Review Committees of the ICSSR. Despite such recommendations, situation is far from satisfactory. Thus, we are not making use of the excellent facilities already available in the country. A concerted effort has to be made to promote culture of cooperation between the universities and the research institutions in the country.

Similarly, universities need to establish linkages with the industry. We have been talking about such linkages, but not much has been done. Indian economy is in the process of being liberalised. It means Indian commodities have to compete in the global market which is possible only if they maintain high quality. The Indian industry cannot go on depending on the borrowed and imported technology. Therefore, research activity needs to be strengthened. Both industry and university

should come together-such collaboration is crucial and the nation's economy and survival hinge on it. A beginning has been made by a few universities. However, it is still on the back burner and we must bring it to the front burner.

The need to produce high quality research is evident but adequate funding is not available for research in the universities. Financial support for research in the universities is woefully inadequate. Shortage of resources and adverse foreign exchange rate has hit the laboratories and libraries adversely. Even in the well-equipped laboratories, adequate provision for spares, consumables and replacements of shortlived equipment is not available. The programme of Action is of the opinion that all funding is now from the government and almost none from the industry. Funding for research in universities need to be atleast doubled during the 8th Plan. (Ibid.)

In the International perspective the position of R & D in India is highly unsatisfactory. The expenditure on R & D as a percentage of GNP for the whole world in 1990 was 2.55% in 1980 to 2.62% in 1985 and further to 2.9% in 1990, whereas in the case of developing countries the corresponding percentages for these three years were 0.52%, 0.54% and 0.64% respectively. Most of the developed countries spend between 2% to 3% of their GNP on R & D. For instance, in France it is 2.3% Japan 2.8%, U.K. 2.3%, USA 2.6% and Israel 3.7%. On the other hand, in the developing countries it has been much less-in Egypt it is 0.2%, Venezuela 0.3%, Cuba 0.9%, Pakistan 1.0% and in India 0.9%.

Talking of government support for R & D, Dr. Mashelkar says: "Although the economy has opened up, it will be several years before the real results of this opening up will be visible. Our industry, so much used to non-competitive environment, cannot be suddenly expected to make massive investment in R & D. The government will thus continue to play the crucial role in supporting and promoting R & D in the coming decade".

It is clear that although our higher education is one of the largest in the world, support for its research in universities is not at all adequate. Recognising the importance of research the UGC has started programmes like COSIST and SAP which help the universities; but the resources available to the UGC are meagre. In addition to government, industry also needs to support higher education and research. The Programme of Action says that around Rs. 100 crores per year should come from the industry (p.165).

I have quoted extensively from the programme of Action because serious thinking has gone into some of the important issues facing higher education in the country, and they are reflected in the National Policy on Education.

Unless we create a culture of research and also science and technology it would be difficult for the country to survive. In fact, we would be left behind others. As the noted scientist Dr. C.N.R. Rao says: "The language of Science & Technology is needed today for survival. It has become a cultural need. Even the poorest of the poor and the smallest of the small countries need this language if only to decide on the options for development and policy for import". a period of benign indifference, argues Dr. Rao, will cause an irreparable damage to the fragile structure of Indian Science and Technology.

Curriculum reforms and research are in fact two sides of the same coin. At higher education stage, a teacher is actually walking his students through the very frontiers of human knowledge. Unless he on his own right participates in the exploration of the uncharted territories of knowledge, he is perhaps not competent to guide the aspirants to negotiate through those tortuous paths. In other words, it is research that gives authenticity and legitimacy to the teacher's professional claim that he can teach students of higher education. Unless the teacher has a feel of the "heuristics" of the discipline of which he claims to be a master, he may perhaps not succeed in effectively initiating aspirants

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