

## Eleventh Convocation held 17th on September, 1976

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Respected Chancellor, Mr. Vice-Chancellor and friends, I thank you all, specially the authorities of this University, for the kind opportunity I am given to speak out to you some of the problems we face in our academic life and the remedies that I consider fruitful.

#### *The Central Problem*

(i) How best under existing circumstances to educate our boys and girls (and senior adults too) and (ii) Whether or not there is anything basically wrong with the circumstances themselves—these are the two questions which it is high time that our Universities consider in all seriousness and act up to immediately as satisfactory answers are found. Most of the answers that have hitherto been given—and many of them sought also to be implemented—concern only the first questions. The second, however, which I consider more important has not been sufficiently attended to till now. I turn to it first, though I confess I have not been able to find an answer.

The present system of education in our country, from the University stage down to that of primary schools, was just an ad-hoc imposition, some two hundred years ago, on the then Indian society with its distinctive economy. It was wholly foreign and would have been, like an external lung transplanted, ejected right then but for the enormous might behind it to keep it in its appointed place. Naturally, the new education began to eat into our social and economic vitals. What resulted from this primary maladjustment was an ever growing alienation of a handful of elites from the vast mass of Indian people. These people were not at that time uneducated; they had their indigenous education which was of a high order of excellence, and it was well

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catered to all and sundry. Higher education that was strictly academic and abstractional was imparted through small centres of learning to a deserving few, many of whom were, in turn, under a social obligation to translate academic research, as far as possible, into social activities and arrange that it could be made intelligible to lay public through mass media. But even though it was so brilliantly coordinated and firmly established it could not compete with the new education which was backed by the state authorities of the time and their Indian representatives, the elites. It was a sort of backing that was never through brute force. The pressure exerted was economic and political; and, to add to this, stories of the technological success of the new science-centric education and some of its displays right in front of their eyes simply over-awed our people, much more effectively than it did in the land of its birth. By itself the new education is not bad. Perhaps nothing is bad by itself. Badness is due primarily to mal-adjustment to context. Western education with Science at its core, for which its general attitude is called scientific, was considered bad even in Europe when it first emerged there. Yet, a genuine growth after all, it could effect some form of reconciliation there, though after fierce struggle—a form of reconciliation where science was allowed to retain its central position. Sooner or later the Europeans accepted the new education. If in recent days we find reversals here and there, that too is a natural development, a spontaneous effort to correct unnatural tilts.

In India it is a different story altogether. Forced on our social system with its distinctive economy and social aspiration, the new education continued and went on dominating, all through the exercise of the same force. Necessarily the resulting maladjustment too continued, adding newer dimensions as years rolled. This ever-increasing maladjustment has continued for a pretty long time and there is no visible prospect yet of our society accepting the foreign body as wholly its own, we shall presently see why, I never for a moment suggest that we should throw it off and return to our good old days. That would be uselessly nostalgic. The whole face of our country with its economy

and social organisation has in the meantime changed so considerably - may be, because of this very education- that we shall have to effect some healthy compromise, either by adjusting ourselves to this new education or it to what ourselves are now and aspire to become.

But before that let me list the wrongs that have accumulated on account of this serious maladjustment. Were there any the least possibility of our getting westernized, lock stock and barrel, in any foreseeable future, we would not worry much over the unhappy contradictions in our life. But as things stand today, that possibility is extremely remote, if not nil. This is why our problem is so acute.

### *List of Evils*

(1) Only a few, some 30 % of our people, are educated in this new line even after a lapse of some two hundred years, and to these educated people who dominate our society the remaining 70% are academically and culturally backward and, because of a wrong correlation of modern education with economy, in perpetual poverty.

(2) Alienation of the two groups is almost complete today. A blatant form in which it exhibits itself is the overbearing and condescending attitude of city people toward village population, paralleled by a growing discontent and resistance on the part of the latter. If the discontent of the village folk has in recent days been sought to be softened, that has mostly been done in the same condescending attitude again by elite reformers.

(3) This alienation is further accentuated-and that in no small measure-by the extraordinary prestige accorded to English language even today. We have not been able to rid ourselves wholly of the idea that proper higher education cannot be imparted except through texts written in English. Assuredly, there are difficulties in the way of switching over to one's mother tongue. But they have to be surmounted, and that as soon as possible and in all seriousness.

(4) Unnatural fondness for English has not only aggravated the alienation spoken of above, it has, in addition, driven the new educated class to look at the broad problems of life, and a number of details too, from the western point of view, and a worse tragedy is that these people impose this changed outlook on others because they have managed to rule the society. There would be nothing wrong about it if the newly educated class had westernized itself completely. But that has not happened. A large part of the social and individual life of the majority of people belonging to that class is still substantially Indian which means that much of their time they waste over struggle between the lingering Indian tradition and the western outlook, all resulting in a failure of assimilation as much of western ideas as of those which are truly Indian.

4. (a) On a smaller scale, though significantly enough, we find this even among our teachers and students as they try to master western concepts through English. Not only is time lost unnecessarily; except in scientific subjects the concepts too are often not properly mastered. That they have not been mastered properly is evident from the text books written nowadays in mother-tongue. As long as the concepts were studied through English the English terms presenting those concepts passed off smoothly like counterfeit coins, no one detecting the fault. As soon, however, as one tries to present them in his mother tongue, which is a living language with him touching the fine nuances of life, he faces the music. Unable to manage the concepts, he mints counterfeits afresh, this time though in mother-tongue, and students are forced to accept them.

So far we have discussed two broad evil effects of the new education. They are (a) vicious separation of the small but powerful educated group from the general mass, which has prevented spontaneous outflow of ideas from the former to the latter, and (b) some sort of separation of the artificial half-anglicised life of the elite from the life that is traditionally Indian, a separation that prevents the elite from understanding among whom they are to disseminate new academic ideas.

Most of what an educated elite says and writes is meant primarily for the same elite group whose children alone they feel they are to teach—a process of inbreeding that naturally leads to deterioration of quality. If these ideas have as a matter of fact percolated lower down to the mass, that is because of economic pressure and political rivalry and, to some extent, the elite just condescending to lift up the ignorant. The general mass of people have only found it economically profitable to follow the elite, and vicariously, they have learnt to treat the new education as a status symbol.

Certain other evils follow by way of chain reaction. There occurs a craze explosion for obtaining University Degrees and this leads to graduation explosion. Then, as more and more graduates come to be available in the employment market employers begin to insist on graduation as the minimum requirement even for insignificant posts. Again, as the number of posts does not increase commensurately with the number of graduates what follows is increasing unemployment, not only of graduates but equally of the lesser educated and the uneducated. Unemployment buttressed by the lure of status symbol leads in its turn to rush for admission in Colleges and Universities. It is difficult for the educational authorities to resist this rush, but once you admit undeserving boys and girls the standard is bound to deteriorate. The easiest way it deteriorates is by making education examination-centric. Pursuit of knowledge gives way to passing the examination and showing off there, and teachers too fall a prey to this turn of events. Examination-centricity leads naturally to cramming and all sorts of indiscipline which can be controlled, if at all effectively, only by the executives in educational bodies and, when they fail, as they often do, by the state authorities who come forward to rule the institutions in a capacity that is not properly theirs. Universities in particular come to mean Registrars' and Controllers' departments primarily, and in extreme cases state Education departments. Poor teachers and students and their academies come only to play a secondary role.

One more evil and the list will be complete. As the educated class segregates itself it builds an ivory tower to live in and calls it 'academic world' euphemistically. Living there, it finds itself so far above the common run of people that it feels as though it has no social obligation to them except teaching their wards. Whatever else it does remains confined to itself. The problems it raises and the way they are handled are often some empty brain-waves and often thoughtlessly imported from elsewhere, and the whole intellectual feat, in spite of superb cleverness displayed, ends in smoke-useless hair-splittings and construction of models that have little relevance for our country. Often, again, the educated class just broods over things that are long dead and past and even wastes its energy in fighting imaginary foes; and all this passes under the exalted name 'academic excellence'. Not that all hair-splittings and construction of models are useless, nor so are all archaeological studies. But those that are useful are so only so far as they have wider social significance; which means that genuine academicians cannot dodge the issue why at all they are dealing with certain specific problems: they will have to show that the problems have some social significance. We do not mean that the same man who works out theory will have to consider its practical side. What much is necessary is that if some academicians are pure theorists there must be others in the same academic field to look to the practical side, to prepare, one might say, feasibility reports. Obviously, the best brains are to be harnessed to the theoretical task and the next best to that of calculating feasibility; and those who are in the immediate neighbourhood are to be assigned a third task, viz. Actual application of ideas to social situations, the task meant for those who are to be professionals. This is the normal academic set-up. But in our country it all goes the other way around. Pure theory is held so much in false esteem that it is allowed to occupy the whole field as it were, every teacher and even every student being permitted, sometimes even forced, to take up pure theory. This has done incalculable harm to the theory side, while, on the other hand, for selecting candidates for professional and higher technological

courses we insist on the very best brains of our society. As for feasibility course, this is unknown in our academic circle except restrictedly in a few science subjects.

### *Remedies Proposed*

The University Grants Commission and other authorities have for some years been thinking hard on how best to remove some of the evils mentioned. Recently the Commission has come forward with two proposals of far-reaching significance and are serious about their implementation. One of these formulates a drastic change of the present day examination system and the other is about orienting academic courses to social requirements as far as possible. Semesters with continuous internal assessment is an excellent idea; it will go a long way to free education from vicious examination centricity and, through that, from other consequent evils listed above. Older ideas, however, die hard, and I understand that different Universities have interpreted the new idea in different ways, all more or less in the language of what they have hitherto been accustomed to, much as we interpreted decimal currency when it was first introduced in our country. Anyway, decimal currency has stayed and our old way of interpretation is clean gone. Let us hope that, given a few years' trial to the new system of examination, we shall understand it rightly and act accordingly. When that is done it will be a splendid achievement. Only, let us not be impatient and revert one fine morning to the old system. Many things, of course, like the apprehension that we teachers may unduly favour some students, that in the absence of public examinations with external examiners in the list people outside may lose faith in our assessment, etc. are likely to stand in the way of our going over to the new system entirely. But apprehensions like these are baseless. They only betray our long nurtured diffidence. Can't we, teachers, be a little more honest and cultivate some self-confidence? People outside will judge our performance, as they do even today, not by how we assess our students but by what we have made of them. Sooner or later they will discover which Universities

and which Departments are efficient and which not, and that does not depend on results of public examinations. Besides, why should an educational institution conduct a public examination at all? Its duty is to educate boys and girls (and, of course, through research to advance the cause of learning in institutes of higher education), and if it holds any examination it is only to see how far these boys and girls have progressed, not to satisfy unthinking outsiders or help employers recruit people. If public examinations are at all to be held, let the state or employers' associations organise and manage them. Universities should be left free to their work of teaching and research. The second new measure proposed by the U. G. C. is to orient academic courses to social requirements. This, however, is a difficult proposition. If it means just starting some new courses, leaving the traditional courses untouched, that would be doing too little. If, again, we mean discouraging purely theoretical study-I mean analysis and construction of possible theoretical models- it will cut at the root of all progressive knowledge. Obviously, the authorities do not mean either of these. It cannot also mean extolling the practical side, though only in idea, at the cost of the theoretical side, for that too would be equally damaging. In every subject there must be some best brains absorbed in purely theoretical pursuit. What, then, the proposition means is only that the present-day exaggeration of theoretical study at the cost of the already seen. Except a few best brains absorbed in theory let all other academicians feel that they are as much members of the society they live in as others are and that it is only in deference to a healthy division of labour that they have been placed in the academic province of the Indian society. This will go a long way to correct their exaggerated self-esteem vis-a-vis others. All depends, of course, on the academicians' honesty and integrity which, however, we need not dispute. If we have doubted it, that is because in the present days we suspect everybody in every walk of life.

One more word about orientation of education to social needs. We never mean that the present-day social structure with its needs and aspirations is to be accepted as final. The structure itself has to be

constantly improved and the needs and aspirations shaped accordingly. What is required is only that specific ideas must come from academicians—from social scientists directly and from others indirectly, though substantially nonetheless. What minimum the academicians can do to facilitate this is to modify the courses of study in such a manner that one may feel he is dealing with living problems, not remote ones like those that are historically dead or those just borrowed from other countries and grafted unscientifically in our academic life.

To consider now one or two smaller measures enforced or recommended by our educational authorities. Till this year the standard prescribed for admission of students in colleges and Universities was much too low, and I understand that it has been raised this year and the raised standard enforced. The intention is irreproachable. But have the authorities worked out feasibility? As already said, undeserving boys and girls seek admission for three reasons. First, they have nothing else to do; secondly, our society is so faultily organised today that in the absence of higher education you cannot have an employment of the minimum standard required; and, thirdly, for good or bad, higher education is now a days a status symbol in our country. Until these three notions are removed forced curb on admission may not succeed. If the problem of general unemployment is solved satisfactorily employers will no longer insist on higher education for their common recruits and the craze for admission in institutes of higher learning will eventually cease. All depends, of course, on how the state authorities and planners open up different avenues of employment. Employments have to be productive in the long run, not too much of a politically motivated unproductive sort or mere stop-gaps. For then the problem will recur sooner or later. I do not for a moment suggest that till this is accomplished unrestricted admission is to go on as before. I only mean that any restriction should be commensurate with the avenues of employment opened up, or if wrong admission is considered to be worse than unemployment the state should be more hard put to creating

fields of Productive employment . Fortunately for us, the process has started in right earnest, and let us hope that the zeal will not slacken.

All the anomalies in educational institutions have sometimes been traced to politicians thrusting themselves ( or their ideologies ) in our academic life and sometimes to teachers and students losing personal contact with one another. The two theses are largely true; but they are only secondary phenomena, the first depending on the second and the second on a third not commonly noticed. Politicians could at all intrude because the said personal contact was lacking. Has their game succeeded, for example, in religious societies where members live in close personal relation with one another? That personal relation was in abundance in our educational institutions even fifty years back. If it has disappeared, that is primarily because of the maladjustment we spoke of above . People not having enough faith in the new education, there was an unthought of response to the "Boycot classes" call of Congress leaders and teachers too did not hold back the truants. Added to this, to dampen the spirit of teachers, there were the petty pay-packets thrown at them and the consequent social neglect.

Even admitting that it is the politicians who have defiled our educational institutions, the problem is- what is to be done? Mere request that they may not interfere will be of no avail and the admonition that they should not will only be crying in the wilderness. Senior politicians will never hold back their subordinates. Should we then wean away our teachers and students from active politics, by force or otherwise? First, this can be more easily said than done. Secondly, why should we wean them a way at all? Active politics is one of the central motives of our present -day social life. Should not our people be educated in this field too, and that not only in theory but with reference to actual practice, as in other subjects? They cannot be debarred, again, on grounds of immaturity. Teachers are not immature, and our present-day students are not innocent children. Heavens would not fall if academic people take to active politics. All that is required is some self-imposed

restriction, and that can be worked out if there is good personal relation between teachers and the taught. Assuming there is this relation, teachers, looking naturally to the over-all good of their wards and knowing what is what in active politics, will prescribe limits for them and for themselves too; and the good personal relation being there, there is no reason why students should disobey. Under these circumstances there would be no vacuum left for outside politicians to fill. We have seen how that good relation was impaired. But now that our teachers are paid almost as much as administrators they will get back the social recognition that they lost, and if under such circumstances they are left free to administer the academic world things are bound to improve. Initially there may be misuse and minor setbacks. But for that there are others to intervene when they are legitimately called upon to do so. Politics, in our country, has grown into a tyrant only because it had not to pass through the process of academic filtering. Once our Universities produce filtered active politicians things are bound to look up.

### *Final Remedy*

All things said, there is still the basic maladjustment we spoke of, untouched. It is the maladjustment of the new education with our traditional Indian outlook. Till this is corrected there will be no substantial gain. Two ways of correction we suggested earlier, either to adjust the lingering Indian life to the new education or the latter to the former. We need not harp ad nauseam on the merits of Indian and western cultures vis-a-vis one another. The fact remains that both the Indian outlook and the new education have stayed and somehow they are in mutual struggle. Our task is to find a way out. If we could, as we have said, westernise ourselves completely, even in some foreseeable future, the problem would be solved, though we may have to bid adieu to some of our cherished Indian ideas. But that is not to be. A vast number of our people are still ideologically Indian as distinct from western, this is evident from the struggle of the two ideologies we experience daily in our life. True, the western ideas are slowly percolating down to the

mass. But the size of the mass is so formidable that we may have to wait till the doomsday to see it wholly westernised. We have, therefore, to turn to the other course left open: we have to adjust the new education to our life. That, of course, we have been doing through years, though slowly. What is required now is some weighty change at the root. Too little attention has till now been paid to this basic issue, and that makes it difficult to formulate it in precise terms, not to speak of suggesting remedy right now. The slogan, however, is already in the air and in recent days our statesmen have turned to it. People have been feeling it for long decades, but no one knows where exactly the shoe pinches. The slogan has, therefore, to be spoken large through all sorts of media in order that people learn to introspect and locate the sore correctly. Academicians should think over it vigorously and in cooperation through seminars, conferences and private talks. In short, the problem has to be converted into a vital issue, as vital as that of economic and educational upliftment. It is only then that a clear picture will emerge, and once the evil is pinpointed, correction will not lag behind.

I once again thank the teachers and authorities of this University, and to the *santakas* I say:

Be true citizens of your country. Work hard for its all round development. But do not forget that there is a whole world outside where you have your brothers and sisters even though they are not Indians.

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