

Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University



Second Convocation
Sunday, 5th February, 2017

Convocation Address
by

Professor Ravindra Kumar
Vice Chancellor (in-charge)
Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU)
New Delhi

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His Excellency the Governor of Assam, Sri Banwarilal Purohit Ji, Hon'ble Education Minister of the Government of Assam, Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma, Hon'ble Vice Chancellor, Dr. Hitesh Deka, Members of the Statutory Authorities of the University, Dear Students and Ladies and Gentlemen,

I deem it an honour to deliver this convocation address at the K. K. Handiqui State Open University situated in the historic city of Pragjyotishpur, also known as the city of eastern light and a very eminent seat of learning for the art and science of astrology blessed by Goddess Kamakhya Devi. Dr. Hitesh Deka, the Hon'ble Vice Chancellor of the University has kindly provided me this wonderful opportunity of meeting these extremely promising graduates and other pass-outs from the University and sharing with them some ideas and reflections about Universities and the pristine values they are expected to instill in all those who pass through their precincts as students. I begin by congratulating

all the students for their scholarly achievements and wishing them a bright and meaningful future. I also pray that each one of them is guided truthfully in the pursuit of her/his desired goal in life and that each one achieves a more fulfilling life hereafter. As a teacher I also bless that they tread the righteous path and no trouble or impediments come in the way of achieving their life ambitions. Now that they have gained a scholarly stature as pass-outs from this prestigious University, it is also time that they reflect upon some general but serious concerns relating to education, specifically University education, in our country and contribute their mite in correcting the contortions that are devouring the very ethos of our education system for more than hundred and fifty years.

I start by assuming, and why not, that all those present in this enclosure where this ceremony is being conducted are all Indians; and to think of one-self as being "Indian" is to think of oneself as having one's roots going back to a long temporal past. To be an "Indian" is thus, to be constituted by this long past and to feel responsible for its continuance in the future. But, why continuance and are we sure about its continuance- because there is today a real danger of its not surviving any longer in the future in the face of the current globalization and dominance of the "western" species over all the rest. Let us all know that the whole history of humanity, including that of the older civilisations, has been written in such a way as to give rise to the impression that the present day Western civilisation supersedes them all and is the only true representative of man's future for all those who have, for historical reasons,

lagged behind. Shockingly, this way of looking at man's past has now been "internalized" by almost everyone. We have, therefore, to be aware of the situation in which we are placed so that we may simultaneously think of the past and the future of our civilisation and relate it meaningfully to the present. It is important to relate the past to the present because by a strange, historical accident, we have been cut off from the memory of the cognitive past of our civilisation which constitutes its very "being" at the level of self-consciousness.

This has given rise to a civilisational "amnesia" which has in fact been the result of the educational system the British had instituted in this country, resulting in an "apartheid" between those who pursued the traditional modes of learning and those who studied what was considered to be "modern" with no intercommunication between them.

If one were to trace the history of the development of universities around the world, only a handful of names jump off the page. One would be hard pressed to come across an educated individual who has not heard of the Harvards and the Oxfords of the world. At the same time, we in India reminisce over the long lost greatness of education centres such as Nalanda, Vikramshila and Taxila and what could have been achieved had they survived. The India of 2017 is a 'behemoth' in its most literal sense. At the time of India's independence, there were fewer than 700 colleges and a total of only 11 universities, and in the past seven decades we've come a long way to have more than 600 universities with more than 10 million graduates. But more seriously, we today have no connect between

the Nalanda and Vikramshila and our universities that are so many in number and are imparting education in all parts of the country. The numbers are surely staggering, and yet not satisfactory. This has much to do with the nature of evolution of education in India, and as a natural corollary, of higher education as well. Without dilating too much on it I will only bring out what I consider as the essential deviations that have plagued our system since the days of colonial dominance.

The Indian traditional system of education, as many are aware of, comprised of the 'Gurukul System'. An individual desirous of gaining knowledge would depart from his home and reside with his teacher for the duration of his education, with the sole purpose of imbibing as much as he could from his teacher. A similar system of apprenticeship prevailed in the professional field, wherein the intricacies of a trade were handed down generations from the master craftsman to the novice apprentice. Thus the hallmark of traditional education was continuity in the search and dissemination of knowledge.

The entrenchment of the Raj altered this tradition for all times to come. The individualised nature of education metamorphosed into a system designed to generate masses, albeit bare minimum in number, of educated persons. The motive of education was no longer to 'educate', rather it was to serve a restricted purpose. The institutions of the Raj era were selective in their admissions and appointments, and they gave rise to what may be termed in today's phraseology as the 'middle class'. In a sense, the new 'middle class' and its colonial rulers complemented and

perpetuated each other. This development assumed importance for the fact that education in India was imparted a deliberate and designed character at this point of time in history, a character it has still to shake off.

It is pertinent to note that the development and nurturing of an educational institution isn't exclusively contingent upon the degree of support, both financial and political, that it may receive. If the history of the world's great universities is traced, the values for which European and American universities stood were almost completely absent in the colonial effort in India. Unfortunately, the preoccupation of the Indian higher education establishment was with an almost mundane churning out of 'graduates' from its 'assembly line'. In addition to being out of reach of most Indians, our universities exclusively catered to the needs of producing clones. It is rather sordid to note that a somewhat similar thought process continued to hold sway over independent India's education establishment. This is not to say that certain remedial measures were not taken post-independence, however the efforts have been far and few in between the sea of mediocrity.

The 'assembly line' education in India might well have given us 'informed minds'. However, to take the nation into the realm of world beaters, what India needs is a crop of 'sufficiently formed minds'. The subtle difference between the two terminologies can very well be traced back to the tenor with which Indian universities came about. Historically speaking, perhaps our institutions were always hard pressed to produce an 'informed mind', one that would guzzle information without also gauging it. Nonetheless, the Indian

institutions of higher education were never able to dislodge themselves from their initial purpose; to be a graduate producing factory. The single most important pressure group in this regard was the middle class, and post-independence, this class has not only remained but has grown exponentially. With the middle class acquiring new found importance in the India growth story, the responsibility to produce graduates has not abated.

In the year 2017, therefore, as I have noted above, the need is to fully explore the university 'behemoth' and unravel all the multiple possibilities that emerge from this exploration. Briefly, I would say an institution will scarcely deserve to be called a university if it undertakes only teaching and no research, or only research and no teaching. And it will not deserve that name if it is devoted exclusively to only one single discipline. There is no reason to move from an extremely wide to an unduly narrow band of subjects. The viable university that I have in mind will have a cluster of disciplines with, perhaps, a core and a periphery. Not all universities need to have the same core or the same periphery. A model university will check most of the right boxes. And, above all, it will integrate our past with our present without creating a line of demarcation between the two. It will not deprive us of the valuable intellectual and cultural heritage that is such a precious asset of this ancient land.

Dear Students, I do not want to be didactic at such a joyous moment. But it is important for all of you to remember, after donning the coveted convocation gown and formally receiving your degrees, that you are the worthy daughter/

son of your motherland. You will best serve her by following the dictum so succinctly enunciated in the couplet:

VIDYA DADATI VINAYAM, VINAYAD YATI PATRATAM
PATRAD DHANMAPNOTI, DHANAD DHARMAH TATAH SUKHAM.

The learning brings humility, and humility bestows worthiness;
Only the worthy earn wealth, and wealth spreads righteousness, that ultimately leads to satisfaction.

I will conclude by calling upon each individual to allow her/his talent to blossom to its fullest potential and not brook worldly obstacles to come one's way. It has been rightly said:

GURUPADESHADHYETUM SHASTRAM JADDHIYOAPYALAM
KAVYAM TU JAYATE JATU KASYACHIT PRATIBHAVATH.

Thanks.

