



Address by Hon'ble Chief Justice of India, Shri KG Balakrishnan

At the Eighteenth Convocation of Indira Gandhi National Open University,
New Delhi
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I feel privileged to participate in the proceedings of the 18th Convocation Day of this great institution, named after one of our foremost nation builders, who did not ever doubt the infinite potential of our people and our nation - in this she defied the logic of her times, when it was almost fashionable to give into pessimism and lament our destiny. Indira Gandhi followed up her optimism with undaunted courage to go ahead and shape the path of our advancement - our achievements in space related technologies is but one example. It is quite natural for all of us to be excited in the present times about the phenomenal prospects and pace of the Indian success story - some even predict a global future with India at its core - yet we cannot but acknowledge the debt we owe to our founding fathers who gave us a Constitution that creates the ambience for us to realize our potential; also to our nation builders.

At the outset I greet Prof. V.N. Rajasekharan Pillai, Vice-Chancellor, Directors of Schools, Professors, Other teaching and non-teaching staff of IGNOU for their contributions and services in preparing young generations to face the present day challenges of the world. I congratulate Prof. M.S. Swaminathan, well-known Agricultural scientist, who has received the D.Sc. Honoris Causa today. I congratulate all the students who have received degrees, diplomas and special certificates of recognition and distinction today.

I do realize that this solemn occasion marks the acknowledgment of new achievements for the students of this University, which can boast of being the largest University in terms of enrolment. The achievements of the IGNOU, in terms of the sheer numbers that it represents, contribute significantly to realization of the dreams of our youth. I understand that the Open and Distance Learning (ODL) format of higher education is the fastest growing segment at the tertiary level of education. Indeed, even the modest achievement of some 11 million students in our campuses of higher education owes in some measure to the enrolment in the IGNOU, the State Open Universities and the ODL programmes of conventional universities. Yet, we must all be acutely aware that the problem of access to higher education continues to be formidable; and therefore, must remain a priority for our society.

The ODL, which derives its strength from the application of technological advancements, does give us some hope in this respect because technology after all is a great leveler. The ODL system, it may easily be seen, enables access without discriminating on the contents or the pedagogical parameters allowed by the system. I wish to confine myself to the question of access to higher education. If the purpose of education is to bring about harmony in society, the structure and processes of education have to be carefully tailored, lest education itself ends up as a cause for divisiveness and lack of harmony.

Such division is possible when the capacity of the education system, when limited, becomes the bone of contention due to rising aspirations and demands for education. However, the problem of scarce capacity can be addressed through creation of more capacity - greater allocation of resources to achieve the desirable level of capacity, even though such increases take time; and where there are finite limits to creation of capacity in the conventional institutions the ODL mode presents a viable and potent option. There is an even more damaging cause of potential division in society which could be attributed to the structure of education that is followed or the policies of education that may be pursued. I shall elaborate. The principles and values enshrined in our Constitution imply that there is a certain right to access a comparable quality of education to all children in an equitable manner - irrespective of such considerations as caste, class, creed, language, gender, economic background, geographic location or disability. Viewed in this manner, the purpose of education could be easily identified as that of creating conditions for an egalitarian society which alone can benefit from the concept and practice of equality. Failure of the education system to do so would have the undesirable consequences of increasing social segregation which the D.S.Kothari Commission Report of the National Commission on Education (1966) leading to the National Policy on Education (1968) called "widen and perpetuate class distinctions". Prof. Kothari articulated this thought while advocating the need for a Common School System of Public Education as the basis of building a National System of Education.

A well-functioning education system is essential to modern societies, and higher education has a pivotal role to play in the renewal of education systems and development in general. The institutions have an influencing role to play on all societal activities. Education is central to addressing the paradoxes and inequities that challenge our society today.

I am pleased to note that IGNOU is also ably addressing the challenge of imparting knowledge and skills that is relevant in enhancing the human resources of our country to make us globally competitive. The graduates who earned their degrees today are the fortunate ones, having gone through the ODL system which involves a blended media approach. Blended learning which combines classroom and online study, new learning methods with open source software and courseware and altogether a learner-centered pedagogy, the teachers being facilitators, have prepared you to venture into the knowledge-driven world of today. With the kind of training you had, you should be part of the knowledge revolution that is sweeping across the world. You need not be obsessed with the "career prospects" alone but the pursuit of knowledge should also be included in your goals. Through the ODL system you are equipped for it since the main thrust of the ODL system is capacity building of learners.

You would agree with me that Higher Education comes at a later stage in life. Important as it is in defining creation, harnessing, imparting and dissemination of knowledge, the schooling system provides the building blocks to the tertiary system of education. It is not too difficult for us to imagine a society, dynamically transformed and integrated through what the Kothari Commission called the Common School System or any other pragmatic variant of it, where entrants to the higher and professional levels of education compete with the same or similar advantages - ready to compete on a level playing field, without fear of iniquitous opportunities that provide a distinct advantage to only a few. Such a melting pot of schooling would undoubtedly provide unique opportunities to all sections - rich and poor alike - to understand the social and economic, political and cultural realities of India. Arguments and counter arguments of merit vs. opportunities would be redundant in such a society where no section, however weak or marginalized in other respects, can claim to have been discriminated and therefore needs special protection at least in the field of accessing knowledge at any level of education - primary, secondary or tertiary.

I understand that the Central Advisory Board on Education, which is the highest policy advisory body in our federal structure, had some time ago reiterated the need for moving towards the goal of a common school system. I recall that way back in 1998, the Law Commission of India, in its 165th Report, had also recommended a somewhat similar approach to school education. It is important to understand what such a system should imply - it should not try to bring down the quality of education to any common denominator - but make it imperative to raise the quality of all institutions, whether public, or private; in elite neighbourhoods or in modest locations; meant for farmers, labour or peasants or for the white collared.

While on the purpose of education, there comes to my mind no better conceptualization than the one Swami Vivekananda elucidated - that "education is the manifestation of the perfection already in man. Therefore, the only duty of the teacher is to remove all obstructions from the way." Today, the teacher remains as relevant but is fortunately in a position to leverage technology to bring out the perfection already in our children and youth. Open and Distance Learning allows this leveraging of technology. The great sage's description of the essence of education as not the collection of facts but control of the mind may have sounded mystifying in his times. The advances in technology and the access to facts and information in today's world reveals to us, how true Swamiji's assessment was. If access to facts and information alone were to be considered as education, those who are fortunate to be on the information highway and those unaffected by the digital divide would all be "educated" in comparison to all those who are at a disadvantage. In my opinion, the process of education must focus on the "controlling of mind" by imparting to our young citizens the tools that would equip them with the powers of synthesis and the powers of analysis. I believe, from what I understand of the ODL system, that this format of education can do so sometimes entirely on its own and sometimes by assimilating pedagogical devices and processes of the conventional system.

The flexibility provided by the ODL system needs only a passing reiteration. In comparison to the traditional methods of education, there are flexibilities in terms of age, gender, learning habits, capacity barriers, pedagogical or mediating processes, time and place, learner mobility, cost-effectiveness etc. As we all know, there are finite limits to the capacities that can be created in the conventional system of campuses. The need for resources in higher education is only one aspect; and there

is no doubt that by all estimates enormous resources would be required to take our Gross Enrolment Ratio (access rate) to the levels prevailing in the developed societies or that a doubling or tripling of the access rate would be required to match the developed countries. The problem is that even if resources were to be available, there would be a time-lag before the infrastructure - physical as well as academic - can be ready for providing access. In contrast, it seems to me that the ODL system offers us a quicker approach in multiplying capacity. I understand that the infrastructure is already in place - the dedicated Educational Satellite (EDUSAT) and several other alternatives that already exist can be utilized. The IGNOU, which has done some commendable work in hand-holding of State Open Universities, has already created relevant contents. Therefore, I foresee a great future for the ODL efforts.

One particular area of interest to all of us who are concerned with the welfare of our education system is that of quality. Quality in education must permeate every level of education - beginning with the primary level itself. How do we ensure quality at the primary level? We can ensure so, by revisiting the purpose of education as the "manifestation of the perfection already in man" for which the teacher is the most critical stake-holder. How exactly do we ensure that we create an entire generation of teachers who are imaginative and resourceful, knowledgeable yet humble enough to draw out the best in a child and guide in giving shape to the inherent potential of perfection in him or her. You would agree with me such an effort must begin at the level of higher education in the myriad ways of training and preparing graduates and good teachers. The numbers required are mind-boggling by any standards. It is certainly not possible to create such staggering numbers without sacrificing quality - unless, we take advantage of the potential of technology and the format of the Open and Distance Learning that IGNOU and other similar institutions can offer. Herein lies the challenge for the IGNOU and on this occasion I urge the University community to focus on this challenge.

We must all take pride in the fact that Eastern culture has been renowned over the centuries for encouraging academic debate and discussion, and intelligent disagreement. Such a tradition brings to the fore multiple perspectives and has helped India maintain its pluralist traditions. The faculty and students must thus inculcate a strong convention of such debate and turn students into not just degree holders with knowledgeable but also responsible citizens. I am pleased to note that IGNOU has made a worthy contribution towards this tradition.

I also find this an appropriate occasion to remind ourselves of the importance of ethical training in education. Today, we are faced with a situation where the evil of corruption has permeated all sections of our society. We live in a society where increasingly one tends to respect wealth without perhaps enquiring into the source of such wealth. Therefore, it is the duty of the teaching community in our country to impart a strong sense of ethical values amongst our student population.

I am certain that the graduates of this university should who will embark on their jobs with their newly acquired skills will pledge to maintain the highest standards of ethics and professionalism in whichever profession they choose to undertake.

While healthy competition amongst students is a prerequisite to maintaining and raising academic standards, we must not forget our duty to those who may not have had access to acquire such knowledge and education. It is thus also the

responsibility of students like you who now hold the wisdom of knowledge to be equally competitive in sharing it with those who have not had such opportunities. I hope each one of you will render all necessary and possible contribution for access to education to the downtrodden and the poor and uplift them to the main stream of the society. My best wishes to the students graduating today. Good luck and a bright future to you all.

Thank you