

SPEECH BY THE PRESIDENT OF INDIA, SHRI PRANAB MUKHERJEE AT THE ANNUAL CONVOCATION OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CALCUTTA

Kolkata: November 28, 2014

1. I consider it my good fortune to be here this afternoon for the Annual Convocation of the University of Calcutta, an institution whose origin is near about synonymous with that of modern higher education in India. The Education Despatch of 1854, also called the Wood's Despatch, sent by the Court of Directors of the East India Company had suggested the establishment of Universities at Calcutta, Bombay and Madras. This University came into being when the legislative edifice – the University Act – was passed on January 24, 1857.
2. The colonial rulers envisaged this institution to cater to the educational requirements of the nobility and upper classes of India. Yet, University of Calcutta in due course became the guiding light for revolutionary ideas and nationalistic pursuits. Speaking on the occasion of the Centenary Celebrations of this University in January 1957, Dr. Rajendra Prasad had said and I quote: “*The Calcutta University was associated with the Indian renaissance and the awakening of nationalism through its alumni..... I might say that the fountain-head of this nationalism was largely opened up by the products of this University*” (unquote).
3. Allow me a moment here to recollect my connection with this historic University. Suri Vidyasagar College, where I did my education, was then affiliated to this University. I also pursued a Law degree from the Department of Law. It is my good luck to have been associated with this esteemed Institution at a time when a young, free Indian nation was making rapid strides at national development. As you honour me today by conferring on me the *Honoris Causa*, I express my profound sense of gratitude to the University of Calcutta.
4. I also thank the University for bestowing upon me the Asutosh Mookerjee Memorial Medal that was introduced a year ago to commemorate the 150th birth anniversary of this towering personality of Indian education. Sir Asutosh Mookerjee was a man of great intellect, courage and exceptional administrative ability. Under his stewardship as the Vice Chancellor of the University of Calcutta, which he headed for five two-year terms, he transformed this institution into an important centre of learning and

research. It is indeed a rare honour to be presented with a decoration instituted in his name.

Dear graduating students:

5. Let me congratulate you all on your success and achievement. You are richly deserving of the applause and admiration. Convocation signifies the culmination of the phase of formal education, which you have secured through labour, resolve and devotion. It also symbolizes the beginning of a new journey where the knowledge you have gained and the skills you have acquired will be put to sterner test. You will achieve success but at times you may face adversity. It is in mitigating those trying circumstances that you will prove your mettle. Your discipline, commitment and determination will help you navigate through the rough terrain.
6. Remember that leaving this academic universe does not imply you having to forfeit any further learning, as there is knowledge to be gained anywhere, anytime ahead. Life rewards those who engage in life-long learning.

Friends:

7. Education supports two elemental objectives of human existence: proliferation of knowledge and formation of character. Higher education especially has a unique role to play in preparing the torch-bearers of tomorrow who will endeavour in different fields - from medicine to engineering, teaching, administration, business, politics and social service – to lead our nation to the high tables of global power. It is therefore incumbent on our seats of higher learning to mould the next generation by inculcating in them the core values of patriotism, honesty, responsibility, discipline, respect for pluralism, respect for women and compassion.
8. In crafting socially-responsive behaviour, educational institutions ought to lead by example. They owe to the society a duty to pay heed to its needs and aspirations. They can do so by actively participating in social development through actionable programmes. The Government has recently initiated the *Saansad Adarsh Gram Yojana* to set up model villages having improved facilities, smooth access to rights and entitlements and wider social mobilization. The scheme also envisages financial inclusion, provision of digital infrastructure and cleanliness campaign. I have called upon the Central higher level institutions to adopt five villages each and transform them into model villages by providing solutions to problems using resource persons and expertise available. I urge this University to pioneer this drive in the adjoining areas.

Friends:

9. The standard of higher education determines the level of development of a nation and the quality of life of her citizens. Though our higher education

sector has rapidly expanded over the last few years, we have less to trumpet about the quality of our institutes. None of our institutions are ranked in the top two hundred positions by reputed international surveys. While I believe that a few renowned Indian institutions can be better placed with a little more methodical approach, a vast majority of our institutions are mired in mediocrity.

10. If we delve into our past, one could find seats of higher learning – Nalanda, Takshashila, Vikramashila, Valabhi, Somapura and Odantapuri – having dominated the world for eighteen hundred years beginning sixth century BC. Scholars from round the globe flocked to these ‘poles of knowledge’. A different scenario is noticeable today. Many meritorious Indian students pursue their higher studies from foreign universities. Nobel laureates – Har Gobind Khorana; Subrahmanyam Chandrasekhar; Dr. Amartya Sen, who studied at the Presidency College; and Venkatraman Ramakrishnan – did their graduate or post-graduate studies in Indian universities before they went abroad for higher learning.
11. It is ironical that our higher education system, which is capable of producing world-class scholars, loses them to foreign universities.
12. Up-gradation of physical infrastructure apart, we need to improve the quality of teachers and the learning capacity of students. I was a teacher before I entered public life. I know how gratifying it is, as a teacher, to give students the joy of learning; to make them appreciate, reflect and differentiate the strands of thinking.
13. I wish all those associated with this University the very best for the future. I also wish the students Godspeed in their endeavours.

Thank you.

Jai Hind.