

35th Convocation Address by Jahar Saha
April 1, 2000

Mr. R.K. Laxman, the Chief Guest for the 35th Convocation, Dr. I. G. Patel, Chairman, IIMA Board of Governors, Members of IIMA Society, my colleagues, the distinguished audience and the graduating class of 2000:

On behalf of all of us, I would like to thank Mr. Laxman for accepting our request to be the Convocation Speaker and addressing the graduating class. When I requested him to be the speaker for the convocation, his reaction was, "Why me? What am I going to say to your management whiz kids? I am not an executive; I am a cartoonist". I am grateful to you, Mr. Laxman, for accepting our invitation and for being with us on this joyous occasion. Your words of wisdom would benefit the new management graduates in their future career path.

I take this opportunity to highlight some of the activities during the year just ended.

In our flagship program the Post Graduate Program in Management, we took several decision to make it an international program. In a few years time from now, we hope to have 50 students from overseas studying in our program. We have signed Memoranda of Understanding with some of the best management schools in Europe, Canada, Australia, and South East Asia for student exchange programs. Last year seven of our students went to some of the best schools in France, Germany, Denmark and Australia on student exchange programs for one term. In the coming year about 30 students are likely to go overseas for a term. We will also have about the same number of foreign students studying at the Institute for a term. The student exchange programs will be of tremendous help to our students when they will work with people from different countries; they would also give some exposure to business environment abroad. We are also trying to send our student's abroad for summer placements. Last year 9 students went to Switzerland, Singapore, and Indonesia and to a few other countries. This year 18 of our students have summer placement abroad. Some of these students will go to the United States, UK, Switzerland, and Japan.

During the year all the classrooms were airconditioned. Before the next academic year begins, work on acoustic, lighting, and installation of computerized projection systems would be over. These would complete the upgradation of classroom facilities.

A strong doctoral programme helps in generating new management insights and remaining at the cutting age of the chosen field of specialization. To attract top talent to the Fellow Programme in Management, we have started offering from this year Infosys fellowships for meritorious doctoral candidates desiring to work in the Information Technology sector. We have also considerably increased the Institute fellowships and introduced special merit related increases in the fellowships so that participants with excellent performance would receive an amount equivalent to industry fellowships. We have initiated discussions with leading academic institutions overseas for exchange programmes. Our efforts are directed at having the best students who are motivated to teaching and research as a career.

The Faculty Development Programme is a key element in our strategy to influence management practices in the country. Last year we accepted 15 faculty members from different academic institutions. The feedback from the FDP participants, like every year, has been very positive. We, however, need to decide whether we should expand this programme to meet the felt-need and open it to faculty members in neighboring countries. We need to create additional infrastructure in case we decide to expand the program.

Our Management Development Programs have always been supported well by the corporate sector. Although participation in many of the established programs has come down marginally, our performance has been almost the same as last year. The Management Development Program Committee is examining how to strengthen core programs like the 3-Tier Program, Management Education Program, and Small and Medium Industries Program to meet corporate expectations arising from the changed economic scenario.

We got very encouraging response to programs tailored to the needs of IAS officers from the Government of India and state governments. The new programs offered during this year included a program on Financial Markets, a program on Health Insurance and a program on Health Care Quality. During this year, we offered Tier-1 of the 3-TP Program twice. Our programs in Sri Lanka and Kenya were well attended. A two-day program for senior Executives conducted in Kenya had about 80 participants from six African countries. Our association with the Maharaja Group in Sri Lanka and Comcraft in Kenya will grow in future. We are confident that we would be able to achieve the aim of having large participation from overseas in our programs.

The Center for Management in Agriculture organized a workshop for government officers, business managers and academicians to share the findings of a study on the impact of WTO agreements on agriculture. At the request of the Ministry of Agriculture a regional consultation was organized on the same topic to generate inputs from various quarters connected with the agriculture sector.

Our endeavor always has been to take up and to give a sharp focus to complex managerial issues and finding out better ways of their resolution. We have set up three Centers: the Center for E-Governance, the 3 I Network (3In), and the Center for Retail Management.

The Center for E-Governance has been set up with assistance from three IT vendors, namely, Oracle Software India Limited, Compaq Computer (India) Private Limited, and Santa Cruz Operations Limited. The prime objective of the Center is to identify E-governance applications which will provide improved services to citizens and help the public administration in making planning, monitoring, and other administrative processes more effective.

The 3In is a collaborative effort of Infrastructure Development Finance Company Limited (IDFC), Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur (IITK), and the Institute. The purpose of the 3In is "to lead intellectual capital to commercially oriented infrastructure development".

The Center for Retail Management is a cooperative effort between Spencers and Company Limited, Chennai, and Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad. It will identify and articulate specific areas and issues that have either direct or indirect implication on the efficiency and quality of delivery of products and services to end - consumers in the retailing industry. The Center will also carry out research on these issues to develop analytical frameworks and solutions.

Different interdisciplinary faculty groups would undertake activities of all these Centers. I firmly believe that we will leave our mark on studies undertaken by these centers and influence management practices in these areas.

During last convocation, I had mentioned that we had organized a unique workshop on Indian innovation to understand the problems faced by innovators in converting their ideas into reality and to learn from successful innovators. I am very happy to report that a group of faculty members has concretized the process of setting up an incubator on

the campus. The incubator will have linkages with CSIR labs, technical institutions, and venture capitalists. It will be a resource, which will nurture innovation and help innovators successfully commercialize their innovations through an enterprise. It will actively scout for innovators. The Incubator will provide office space, infrastructure, and network resources that would help in commercializing their innovations. We think that this will expose our students to entrepreneurship and give the faculty members a laboratory to study how an entrepreneur could be developed. I am very happy to say that discussions are at final stage with SIDBI to establish this as IIMA-SIDBI Centre for Innovation.

We have reached an understanding with the SEBI to work together on issues related to financial markets. I believe that, in the long run, this will help in creating at the Institute an advanced center for research in finance.

During the year we organized a unique seminar on the "Balance Sheet of a Nation". The purpose was to examine as a nation what we achieved, what we did not, and how we could formulate a strategy for the nation based on the understanding of our performance. Many distinguished persons contributed to this seminar and a book will be brought out soon.

Many large projects have been undertaken during the year and some were continued from earlier years. These include work in the area of understanding the reform process and the process of privatization in India; energy and climate change; issues in the area of health and population; issues affecting agriculture in dry areas through greenhouse technology; bio-diversity and documentation of grassroot innovation; enhancing literacy and education and several others. All these achievements were possible because of the dedicated efforts of faculty members and staff members. I am privileged to acknowledge and applaud them in public for their contributions.

Students activities reached a peak this year. The Marketing Fair, Confluence99, and Chaos brought out their creativity and administrative skills. I also would like to mention the two wonderful plays staged by IIMACTS. This year we had organized millennium reunion in which students played a significant role. Students endeavoured to spread the movement of SPIC-MACAY across Gujarat successfully organized a state-wide festival called Virasat which featured many distinguished artists. All the non academic activities were professionally managed and I would like to congratulate the entire student body.

In his addresses in Hyderabad and Mumbai, President Clinton underscored the point that development and education make good economics. He also emphasized that protection of the environment and development are not opposites. The Indian policy makers are in agreement with this proposition. From the dawn of independence, the Government of India directed its efforts for bringing about rapid development of the impoverished economy. If India has a prominent place in the realm of Information Technology, it is largely because of Pandit Nehru's strategy for economic and social development. He made path-breaking efforts in harnessing science and technology for rapidly developing an economically underdeveloped country and a stagnant society. In my view, we do not need to restate the principle that President Clinton articulated so tellingly. Possibly, we need a newer strategy to translate the principle into reality. My suggestion is that the Institute must take a leading part in this. In the short time at my disposal, I must remain, however, content by outlining the contours of what the Institute can do for developing this new strategy.

The Institute is taking pioneering efforts to document the ancient knowledge about agricultural practices and herbal medicines. I, however, believe we should not confine our efforts to documenting knowledge. As the motto of the Institute suggests, we must apply knowledge for development. We must take the ancient knowledge to farms for improving productivity. Similarly, we must make use of our ancient wisdom about herbal medicines to cure the sick. In my view we should test the efficacy of the ancient

knowledge about agriculture in collaboration with farmers and firms involved in marketing agricultural inputs. Can this knowledge improve productivity within the constraints of irrigation facilities? Will the farm productivity increase at lower cost and without damaging the environment? I hardly need to stress the problem of low productivity in Indian agriculture. Now that the world view is veering around promoting free trade in agriculture, the need for ensuring high levels of productivity in the agricultural sector is far greater than ever before. Therefore, the time is opportune for the Institute to answer the questions posed through empirical work, and write a new chapter in Indian agriculture.

As an example, I would like to cite the impressive work that has been done at the institute in improving the packaging of tomatoes. Working jointly with Core Embalage, new boxes have been designed for transporting tomatoes from the centre of production to distant markets. This demonstrates the truth of the Institute's motto that application of knowledge leads to development and growth. I would like to applaud this work publicly.

We certainly need to develop a similar strategy to take our ancient knowledge of herbal medicines to the sick in the rural and urban areas. It is an open secret that the primary health care centres in the rural areas have not been effective in providing primary health care to the rural population. Similarly, about 40% of the urban population living in distressed areas do not have access to primary health care. I believe that we need a new strategy to provide primary health care in rural and urban areas. Dr. Uplekar of Mumbai pointed out that paramedics could successfully treat about 80% of the common ailments with proper training. Can the Institute take a lead in training some rural youth as para-medics? This strategy would kill two birds with one stone. One, it will provide effective and efficient primary health care to the citizens in rural and urban areas. Second, it would provide meaningful and gainful employment to the educated youth. To set up their practice, these young men and women would need capital. Could the Institute jointly with SIDBI, take a lead in providing venture capital to these young men and women? Would the IIMA faculty show that venture capital can play a crucial role in areas other than Information Technology?

Referring to the revolution that the Information Technology is bringing about in our lives, President Clinton said in Mumbai that a child in the remotest corner of the earth can have access to the best educational material developed anywhere in the world. Can the Institute make a modest beginning in providing such educational material to children at least in its home base? About 40% of the children attend schools managed by the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation. Should the Institute's Information Technology group take the responsibility of introducing Information Technology to these children?

Again in his budget speech, the Finance Minister said "Five elements of social and economic infrastructure are critical to the quality of life especially in rural areas: health, education, drinking water, housing, and roads." He added "Thus the overall provision in the budget for schemes concerning the five basic needs of the rural population is more than Rs. 13,000 crore." Of the five areas the Finance Minister referred to, the Institute has done work and is actively doing work in health and education. Would the faculty working in these areas play a leadership role by formulating a strategy for providing health and education in infrastructure facilities in a few villages?

We are all familiar with the new horizons of e-commerce that Amazon dot COM opened. The 27 December 1999 issue of the Time Magazine describes it lucidly. The magazine says "You name it, and Amazon will sell it. 'Anything,' says Bezos 'with a capital A.' And that's the point: Jeffrey Preston Bezos is trying to assemble nothing less than Earth's biggest selection of goods, then put them on his website for people to find and buy. Not just physical things that you can touch, but services too, such as banking, insurance, travel." Is the time opportune for the IIMA's Information Technology group and the marketing area to inspire some Indian entrepreneurs to scale these heights?

In short, my proposition is that let us take our ideas to humans at work. Let us again emphasis the Institute's philosophy that thought is the essence of action. To use Dr. Radhakrishnan's language, "Contemplation and life are distincts, not opposites. They can exist together. They imply each other and work together."

It is needless to add that such close association with the practising world would enrich our teaching programmes immensely. The faculty would be able to immerse students from our postgraduate and doctoral programmes in real life projects. The students would enjoy the thrill of seeing their highly abstruse ideas working in practice. In addition top executives in our executive programmes would have the benefit of discussing live issues of interest. We must practice the academics' view that "what we teach we must research, and what we research we must teach."

On behalf of all of us, let me congratulate the graduating class. The Institute designed its educational programme not to pour knowledge into the resisting brain but to change you from within. We certainly hope that we have prepared you well for living a full life. The salaries that you are earning at the beginning of your life are attractive indeed but the opportunities for development are even more attractive. Make the best use of these opportunities. Please remember that a person sows the seeds of his own destruction when he is highly successful. You should take justifiable pride in your achievements but let it not degenerate into arrogance.

While you are moving from one success to another, please remember the poignant words of Swami Vivekananda: "So long as the millions live in hunger and ignorance, I hold every man a traitor who, having been educated at their expense, pays not the least heed to them." In my view the least you can do to repay the debts to society is to excel in whatever activity you undertake. Guard yourself from remaining content at the low level of seeing "nothing beyond their little horizon of a few yards—the routine work: eating, drinking, earning and begetting, following each other in mathematical precision." I know that I am placing an awesome responsibility on your shoulders just when you are entering life. We have trained and educated you. Therefore, we are confident that you will not falter in discharging your responsibilities no matter how demanding they are. Whenever you feel tired and find the going tough, please remember that the faculty is there to whisper in your ear "well done, keep it up." I wish you all the best in all your endeavours.