

Convocation Address  
by Shri N.A. Palkhivala

The Chairman Mr. Keshub Mahindra, Dr. I.G. Patel,  
Learned Members of the Faculty, Distinguished Guests, Ladies  
and Gentlemen:

I feel very proud and happy to have been asked to address the Convocation of this renowned Institute. I am deeply grateful to the Chairman Mr. Mahindra, for his most generous and handsome words about me. For me it has been a real experience to be here tonight. The sense of law and order, the sense of discipline, that I find on this campus, I have seldom found in any university of India in the last twenty years. I now begin to understand why the alumni of this Institute are in such great demand when they go out into the world and enter the struggle for life.

My congratulations to those who received their titles and diplomas today and my special felicitations to the winners of the gold medals. May Providence grant you all to fulfil in your mature years the promise of your college days.

I was specially touched by the fact which Dr. I.G. Patel communicated to me that it was the students who, exercising their usual prerogative of choosing the speaker for the Convocation, were gracious enough to choose me. From their choice, some of you might well conclude that the spirit and practice of self-flagellation has not died out in India!

In fairness to my young friends, I would like to tell them what kind of a country we, of the older generation, have created for them and which they are about to work in when they leave the portals of their secluded, sheltered campus. Our motherland is undoubtedly a country which offers the most exciting opportunities. But one must confess that there are four major crises which have overtaken this nation in recent times. If I deal with them, it is in a spirit of constructive criticism, without which all progress is impossible.

I would first like to say a word about the main crisis, which is the crisis of character. Mr. Mahindra, in his opening remarks, did make a reference to the problem. The crisis of character is, to my mind, the most significant crisis facing us today. If the present trends continue, this decade will be the decade of disorder; and disorder comprises violence, indiscipline and corruption.

A word about violence. In the land of the Mahatma, violence is one the throne today. Its victims, among others, are helpless passengers in trains, loyal workers in strike-bound factories, and innocent citizens on riot-stricken roads when the Bandh-mongers claim the freedom of the city. Our militant trade union leaders are well-qualified to adopt

the words of Konrad Lorenz, the Nobel prize-winning naturalist, "I believe I have found the missing link between animals and civilized man - it is we".

In recent months "the banality of evil" has come home to us with a strange poignancy. The recurrent looting of banks in broad daylight arouses as little public attention as the going down of the sun in the evening. Not since the abolition of thuggery by Lord William Bentick in the 1830s has violence characterized our national life on a scale so widespread, so persistent and so unchecked as today. Our legal system has made life too easy for criminals and too difficult for law-abiding citizens. A touch here and a push there, and India may become ungovernable under the present constitutional setup.

Indiscipline - the exact opposite of what you see here this evening - has become the order of the day. I am amazed at the number of convocations in different parts of India where there is absolutely no discipline maintained even at so solemn a function. The last convocation I attended was the convocation where I had to remind the students that there is some difference between a convocation and a football match. It is a moot point whether Hindi will be universally accepted as the national language of India, but in the meanwhile agitation has undoubtedly become the national

language throughout the country. Some people believe, not without reason, that agitation is the only language which the authorities understand and it is the only language in which the people can converse with their rulers. I am not on the point whether the belief is right or wrong. I am only on the point that agitation has unfortunately become, in a pre-eminent sense, the national language of India.

Take corruption. I do not have to seek to convince you about its prevalence - if you are readers of newspapers, you would know as much about it as anyone else. Sometime ago a humorist said that the world is neither round nor flat, it is just crooked. And in this country, we are not at a loss to understand what the significance of that remark is.

The second crisis is the crisis of identity, - our identity as a nation. It is a very grave crisis which is facing India in a more acute form than during the past 33 years of our existence as a Republic. You find some happenings in the Punjab, some happenings in Assam, some talk of greater autonomy for the States. Geographically, they seem to be unconnected incidents. But there is a vital connection between these happenings. They are the pangs of our re-birth as an integrated single nation. Never in history was India one single nation till 1950. We are undergoing the pangs of our re-birth, I repeat, in our struggle to find our



identity as one single, integrated nation. What will come out of this ordeal is anybody's guess. Two scenarios are possible. One, that the nation may disintegrate; the other, that the nation may emerge stronger from the ordeal. Whether the reality of the future will be the first scenario or the second, depends on the leadership which we can give our people at this juncture. Leadership is all important. History has shown time and again how one individual with vision, dedication, and determination can make all the difference to the future of a country. I would like to tell my young friends, who are about to begin their career, how much difference it would make to the country if people who have learnt discipline, who have imbibed knowledge in a great institution like this, were to take upon themselves the task of educating their fellow-citizens who have been less fortunate in the sense that they have not had the benefit of the quality of education which has been imparted to you.

The third crisis which is facing the country is the crisis of inadequacy of administration and of leadership. One finds, as one looks at the problems facing the country, that the quality of administration is not adequate to cope with our problems. We have far too much government and too little administration; too many civil servants and too little civil service; too many controls and too little welfare;

too many laws and too little justice. The inadequacy of leadership again is very much in evidence. If you view the Indian scene today, it looks like a stage where small men are invited to play outsize roles. There is an atmosphere now prevailing in this country which can only be said to be an atmosphere poisoned by collective bad faith and polluted by individual avarice. It is difficult in such an atmosphere for the nation to progress. This is one of the basic challenges facing the young generation today.

The fourth crisis is the crisis of underutilization. I am not aware of any significant country of the world where human and material resources are so underutilized as they are in India. We have the tragedy of underutilization of our plants and of our people. Both are of tremendous significance, and we underutilize both. Intelligence, the spirit of enterprise, skills, craftsmanship - name what you will to make a country great, and India has it. But we suffer from a chronic disability to make the optimum use of our human and material resources.

I think one of the reasons why Japan is on top of the world is that the Japanese Constitution expressly provides that a minority of the cabinet ministers may be chosen from outside the Japanese Diet, i.e. from outside the

legislature. I would strongly urge that in our Constitution also there should be a simple provision to say that the minority of the ministers at the Centre and in the States may be selected from outside the Parliament and the State legislatures respectively. We need to induct technocrats like you who have received your titles and diplomas tonight; we need well-furnished minds to transform this country. It is my firm conviction that such transformation cannot be brought about by professional politicians. In the United States no cabinet minister can continue to be a member of the Congress. In France, no cabinet minister can be a member of the French legislature. This is not peculiar to the Presidential system. It is perfectly compatible with the Westminster type of parliamentary democracy that we have. In Japan, there is no presidential system, it is the parliamentary system of our type. Yet, they have the provision that out of the maximum number of 21 cabinet ministers, as many as ten, a minority, can be selected from outside the parliament.

The economic potential of this country is literally unbounded. We have failed to bring that potential to fruition. There has been a clear failure to make human investment as distinct from physical investment. Human investment consists in education, public health, nutrition, family planning. The World Bank Report released last year re-emphasised that countries

which make human investment progress much faster than countries which make physical investment. It is important to have steel plants, but if the choice is between spending Rs. 3,000 crores on a new steel plant and educating the people, providing for public health, providing water for villages - three-fourths of our villages are without drinking water - then any day, any time, it is better to have the human investment than the physical investment. You can import iron and steel from abroad. You cannot import human happiness. You cannot import discipline and the necessities which are essential for the dignity of the individual.

A moment ago I referred to education, I think this is not an inappropriate occasion to say a little more about the subject of education. I am afraid we have failed to maintain the standards which distinguished our renowned universities in the past. I remember that when I was a student of the Bombay University, the discipline and the sense of law and order were what I am so happy to find here tonight. We had standards of discipline and decorum, of decency and dignity, which have disappeared. When we became a republic, we forgot that freedom is like alcohol - forgive me for referring to this subject in a prohibition State - freedom is like alcohol; you must have it in moderation. We seem to think that freedom means licence. It does not mean licence. In fact, no country can remain free for long without discipline, and licence can be the death of democracy.

The Bombay, Calcutta and Madras Universities are one hundred and twentyfive years old. Nature has kindly denied us a sense of history and therefore we are saved the anguish of realizing the contrast between what these educational institutions were during the first hundred years and what they have been reduced to in the last twentyfive. In their first hundred years, the college buildings did not leak - nor did the examination papers. Today the university student is aware that what he knows does not count in the examination half as much as who he knows.

We are very poor at maintenance - whether it is the maintenance of our power plants or factories, historical monuments or buildings, cities or universities. Look at the way the Palace of Versailles is maintained or the way 150-year old houses are maintained in the United States. And here is our country with historical buildings and monuments going back a thousand years and more, and look at the deplorable way in which we maintain them. Our cities have been allowed to fall into a state of abysmal decay. I come from Bombay which is today an excellent city to live in, - if you can accept the impossible, do without the indispensable, and bear the intolerable.

Article 45 of the Constitution enacts, "The State shall endeavour to provide, within a period of ten years from the commencement of this Constitution, for free and compulsory education for all children until they complete the age of fourteen years". Ten years from the commencement of the Constitution ended in 1960. We are in 1983. Sixty seven per cent of our people are still literally illiterate. I am not talking of the educated illiterate. To have two-thirds of the nation literally illiterate is a profound tragedy. We pride ourselves on the fact that we have the third largest force of scientists and engineers in the world. But that is with two-thirds of our people illiterate. Consider what the strength of India will be, what its fantastic potential will be, when education becomes universal. Evidently some people have a vested interest in illiteracy, because illiteracy ensures them political support. If people were educated, they would know how to cast their votes, and that would erode the political base of many in power today.

Every university, every institution like the Ahmedabad Institute, is a nation-builder. The quality of the education that we give to our children today will determine the quality of life in India tomorrow. Let us make no mistake about that.

The child is father of the man. What you learn when you are young colours your entire life. The habits that you form in childhood and youth, the values which are inculcated in you in the formative years of your life, make all the difference between a truly civilized man and his opposite. This idea was never more beautifully expressed than by the Irish poet George Russell:

"In ancient shadows and twilights  
Where childhood had strayed,  
The world's great sorrows were born  
And its heroes were made.  
In the lost boyhood of Judas  
Christ was betrayed."

What a beautiful thought - "In the lost boyhood of Judas Christ was betrayed"!

The economic recession is, no doubt, disquieting, but infinitely worse is the moral and spiritual recession. The roots of disarray are in our minds and not in the price of rice or fruits. Inflation, the erosion of our currency, we have been able to check; but not erosion of our national character. The moral and spiritual recession has unfortunately infected our educational institutions. At best our present-day universities are academic cafeterias offering

junk food for the mind. At their worst, they are the breeding-grounds of corruption and indiscipline, dishonesty and irresponsibility. The Ahmedabad Institute of Management is a shining exception. It is precisely because your Institute is not an academic cafeteria offering junk food for the mind, that business houses put such a value upon the students who acquire titles and diplomas of this Institute. I think Mr. Mahindra was not overstating the case when he said that if you list the management institutes of the world which are in the front rank, the Ahmedabad Institute must undoubtedly find a place in that list.

The best educational institutions must generate excellence: they must be elitist. I am a deep, confirmed believer in democracy. But I also believe equally strongly that no democracy can survive unless it has an aristocracy of calibre, talent and character. In every democracy you need, not an aristocracy of birth, but an aristocracy of ability, culture and values. The whole function of an elitist educational institution should be to turn out movers of people, mobilizers of opinion.

H.G. Wells wisely observed that human history is becoming more and more a race between education and catastrophe. A nation can either take the path of education, or it can head for catastrophe. It cannot, without education, avoid catastrophe.



Thomas Jefferson, one of the founders of the United States of America, remarked, "If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, it expects what never was and never will be". When a republic comes to birth, it is the leaders who produce the institutions. Later, it is the institutions which produce the leaders. The question - where are the leaders of tomorrow? - can only be answered by the other question - where are the nation-building institutions which can produce the leaders of tomorrow?

Education must always be distinguished from training. Animals can be trained; only human beings can be educated. Education involves personal participation and transformation by the student. It cannot be given to anyone; it has to be inwardly appropriated. There is a fine story of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru writing to his Professor in London when he became the Prime Minister of India and thanking the Professor for what he had taught him. And the Professor replied, "I did not teach you anything - you learnt". A student can only inwardly appropriate what is placed before him. You can lead a horse to the water, but you cannot make him drink. You can lead a student to a university, but you cannot make him think.

Culture has been defined as what remains after you have forgotten all that you consciously set out to learn. It is the undying quintessence of what a student has assimilated in the most profound sense.

T.S. Eliot has a very happy line - "We had the experience, but missed the meaning". That is a very pregnant thought. As we go through life, all of us have experience, but most of us miss the meaning. The whole purpose of true education is to ensure that you do not miss the meaning.

May I take the remaining time at my disposal in giving a few words of advice - if I may be so impertinent as to do so - to my young friends, whose bright, eager faces I noticed as they received the titles and diplomas at the hands of the Chairman. And I said to myself, what bubbling spirit, what bright ebullience, how much could be achieved by the zest and spirit which can be displayed only by the young! As you go through life, you become jaded, you become tired. It is the young spirit which can transform the country more rapidly than the people of my own generation. I have always been reluctant to give advice since I read the maxim of a French thinker who said, "There are two kinds of fools in the world: those who give advice, and those who don't take it." I propose this evening to belong to

the first category of fools, in the hope that you will not belong to the second.

Your education will have been in vain, unless it has taught you a sense of values. The longer you think, the more you reflect over the problems facing you, your family, your country, the more you will be convinced that, in the last analysis, it is a sense of values which counts more than anything else. Civilization is an act of the spirit. Hence I am myself inclined to think that ancient India was more civilized than modern India with its satellites in space. True education not only cultivates your mind, but it gives you that sense of values which forms your character. You begin to realize that fame and popularity, power and riches, are all right, but ultimately it is character which counts more than anything else. Fame is a vapour, popularity an accident, riches and power take wings; and the people who cheer you today will curse you tomorrow. Only one thing endures - character. If you have learnt that, you have learnt perhaps the basic, the most fundamental, principle of a liberal education.

When you are young, you are prone to be sometimes radical at heart. The unacceptable face of capitalism is a curse of any society. But I would like you to remember that just as capitalism has an unacceptable face, it has also

another face - the attractive face of capitalism - the type of face which is represented by the Mahindra Group, if I may say so without embarrassing the Chairman. The attractive face of capitalism is also in evidence in our time and land, - do not be cynical enough to think that it does not exist. Cynicism corrupts, and absolute cynicism corrupts absolutely. We have become far too cynical these days. We do have businessmen who do not suffer from a fatty degeneration of conscience. It is necessary to keep your conscience in good trim, as much as it is necessary to keep your body in good trim.

That brings me to the point which, I think, is of paramount importance, - the ancient tradition in our great country of obedience to the unenforceable. It is a great thought which you can talk about only to educated human beings: Obedience to the unenforceable. You obey the Indian Penal Code because if you don't, the State knows how to take care of you. But there are unenforceable values which you will obey because your instinct, your upbringing, your education, tells you to do so. No one can compel you to be generous to your fellowmen. None can compel you to be kind to animals. But the principles of obedience to the unenforceable will teach you how to behave, although there is no law compelling you to do so. The greatness of England is this - that traditions have been built up which are respected as much as the law of the land. In modern India

you need to have laws on every point because when even laws are so outrageously disobeyed, you can well understand what would happen if you left things to the doctrine of obedience to the unenforceable. That shows how far we have to go in reaching maturity as a democracy, particularly in our public life. Obedience to the unenforceable is far more significant than we have realized upto now.

You have been the alumni of this Institute in order to be able to go out and earn a good income for yourself. That is right, because you must make strong your base before you can move the world. But at the same time you will realize, as you get along in life, that single-minded pursuit of money impoverishes the mind, shrivels the imagination and desiccates the heart. You can be in commerce without having a commercialized outlook. You can cultivate your mind, but not merely with a view to offering it as a commodity for sale in the market place. You must contribute to the Gross National Product, but it is even more important that you contribute to Gross National Happiness. You should go into business to do well, but you must stay in business to do good.

I would like to leave with you three maxims, and it is for you to consider whether they are worth remembering. The first maxim I would commend for your acceptance is that you must not desert the ship because you cannot control the

winds. Here is a lovely country. Foreign countries will offer you far greater opportunities of making money, of a comfortable life. But to the bright men and women who have received their diplomas and titles, I would say - decide to stay back here because it is this country which needs the finest talents, the finest character. Your motherland needs you. If you love the land which gave you birth, you may still find it more satisfying to forsake the life of comfort and comparative ease which you can have abroad, in favour of a life of struggle here. A life of difficulty, but a more fulfilling life, because you would be doing your duty by your country. I believe that if a man is born in a country, he has a duty towards that country. You may regard my belief as infantile. But I cannot shake off that belief, and that is why reiterate that you must not forsake the ship because you cannot control the winds. It is true that there are difficulties, but all difficulties are challenges. It is only in an atmosphere of difficulties that character is formed, that you get your training as citizens. If washing was as easy as the soap advertisements make it out to be, if gardens did not have weeds, if metal did not rust, life would be more relaxed, but character would not be formed. The great lesson of our ancient epics is that all life is a battle. You will remember the saying that when the going is tough, the tough get going; and that is what this Institute expects of you.

The second maxim is that it is better to try to do something and fail, rather than try to do nothing and succeed. You are bound to succeed if you try to do nothing. But is that success worth it? Try in your own way not only to improve your own lot, which is a perfectly laudable objective and endeavour, but also the lot of your countrymen. The human raw material here is excellent. If only our people are not misled, if they are not misguided, you have as good raw material here as anywhere else on earth.

The third maxim worthy of your consideration is that the rebirth of dharma in our public life will involve a long period of gestation and the delivery is likely to be painful, but there is no greater cause to which you can dedicate your life.

I would like to end by quoting the lines of an unknown soldier. In the United States there is a very touching custom of holding a National Breakfast at the beginning of each year. Every January, the President of the United States, the Vice-President, the Members of the Cabinet, learned academics, and comparatively ignorant people like ambassadors, get together in Washington. That is what gave me my chance of being present at two National Breakfasts. The opposition is there, the ruling party is there. They come together and offer thanks to God

for what God has done for them in the year which has ended and seek His guidance so that in the ensuing year they may do better. Over three thousand people assemble in one hall, and have their breakfast together. A few speeches are made. At the National Breakfast in January 1979, A Judge of the U.S. Supreme Court recited the lines which I am going to repeat here. Incidentally, to digress for a minute, I wish we had some such national event which would bring all of us together, as a break from the perennial animosity, bitterness and enmity between political parties. Can't we, one day in a year, come together and say with one voice, "Let us all work in harmony to do our best for the motherland,"? That is the spirit in which the National Breakfast is conceived and held in the U.S.A.

The lines which the Supreme Court Judge recited were written by a soldier whose name no one knows. We only know that he was poor. He suffered from ill-health. He had no advantages in life, but he had a great spirit, a buoyant spirit which kept him cheerful all his life. He lived in the 1860s when the Civil war was going on between the North and the South in the United States. The lines are:



"I asked God for strength, that I might achieve,  
I was made weak, that I might learn humbly to obey.  
I asked for health, that I might do greater things,  
I was given infirmity, that I might do better things.  
I asked for riches, that I might be happy,  
I was given poverty, that I might be wise.  
I asked for power, that I might have the praise of men,  
I was given weakness, that I might feel the need of God.  
I asked for all things, that I might enjoy life,  
I was given life, that I might enjoy all things.  
I got nothing that I asked for - but everything I had  
hoped for.

Almost despite myself, my unspoken prayers  
were unanswered.  
I am among all men, most richly blessed."

The best wish I can extend to the young ladies and gentlemen who are about to leave this Institute is that the spirit of the unknown soldier may abide with them always! And for this academy, my prayer is - May this Institute continue to educate and elevate, to motivate and stimulate, generations to come. The institute has much to look back to with pride, and much to look forward to with hope.

Thank you very much.