

*Address by Nirupama Rao at the Ashoka University Convocation, May 18, 2018*

Chancellor Mukherjee, Vice Chancellor Mehta, Professor Pollock, distinguished faculty and dear graduating students who I felicitate-

I am so glad to be at Ashoka today. I have admired you from afar for I am a passionate advocate of our young people having opportunities for a world class education in the liberal arts. I have always held that more than becoming a great power, which is a goal that our policy makers are deeply attached to, it is important that India be a great democracy. By which I mean that we aim at becoming the gold standard in open governance, enshrining respect for human rights, internalizing a respect for the history that makes us what we are, a diverse and plural society, and a rejection of the closed mind.

Why do I say this? It is because you and me, as Indians populate a map of many migrations. India speaks to both East and West when she demonstrates the fact that labels like Hindu, Muslim, Christian are no more than starting points. We are a blended nation. Our long traditions, our languages, our home states, these cultural geographies have blurred and indistinct boundaries, interrelated contexts of meaning. There are many echoes, spirits and voices that inhabit our gardens. Separation and distinctiveness are not their defining features. Human life is not about separation but about connection.

What is a university? A university, as it has been said, does not just dole out qualifications. It has a greater role in shaping the whole individual. The first thought that comes to my mind of my ideal of a university, is one that existed

in ancient Bihar, when it was a land of viharas and vigorous intellectual debate, the very heart of *Bharatavarsha*. That was the University of Nalanda whose name literally signified the giver of education, the fountainhead of learning, the imparter of knowledge. Nalanda to me epitomized pilgrimage – which is what life essentially is – it epitomizes exploration – which is also what the quest for knowledge signifies – an act of faith, a labour of love. I believe in our search for the enlightenment that knowledge should provide, we must be like those itinerant monks and explorers – who became the Nalanda cohort and alumni - who scaled the oxygen-starved peaks and passes of lofty mountains, traversed the vast emptiness of black-stoned deserts, chartered courses on turbulent seas and roamed dark, dense and enveloping forests - in search of the same light. And this was not about spiritual exploration alone for subjects taught at Nalanda – the original liberal arts curriculum – spanned the study of science, astronomy, medicine, logic, metaphysics and philosophy. Here was a family or two thousand teachers and over ten thousand students who recorded their precious findings in tomes that made the famous library that burned for months when it was destroyed in the last decade of the 12<sup>th</sup> century – the Dharma Gunj. And when I remember this great and protective ambience of knowledge being thus fostered I am also reminded of Tagore and his recalling the image of the great mango grove – the Aamra kunj -to signify the coming together of students from every planetary direction – under the verdant shade to learn the true meaning of *vishwabodh*, or awareness of the whole world.

Why do you come to university? It's not for that piece of parchment called a diploma or a degree. There is a concept Babasaheb Ambedkar spoke of called *Prabuddha Bharat*- I say to myself, let us call it a place, a place called Hope, where humanism is the practised religion, the

embedded faith. Our job is to create those *Prabuddha Bharats* – from Kashmir to Kanyakumari. We come to university to learn and express; ...in Cardinal Newman's famous words it is a place for the communication and circulation of thought, a place where inquiry is pushed forward ... discoveries verified - mind with mind, and knowledge with knowledge. We want to create a pure and clear atmosphere of thought, which the student also breathes. These words spoken more than a hundred years ago, should animate our thoughts constantly, causing us to ponder and reflect. There is much that goes on around us in the world today, that is so angular, that respect for that alternate point of view, the willingness to debate it without anger but with calm and measured argument, we must strive to. A liberal arts education must provide the sustenance and capacity for our youth to build the great democracy that India must be – and aspirational India must speak of wanting to be the greatest of democracies in the same breath as we embrace the grammar of economic and strategic strength, wealth and power.

Having crossed your portals today, I cannot ignore Ashoka, the Chakravartin, the wheel turner of the world, Dhamma Ashoka, that prince of peace. In the India of today, there are those who see him as having weakened the Mauryas with his talk of ahimsa paramo dharma and because his ways, after much meandering, became the ways of gentleness and all his paths those of peace. The journey from Naipaul's wounded civilization to an aspirational, rejuvenated India seems to be predicated on the embrace of raw and muscular masculinity and bellicosity to anything and anyone who symbolizes the 'other', the foreign, the non-believer. We are partitioning our identities. To me, Ashoka's story shows that the values of freedom, tolerance, inclusion, reason and logic are not western values, they are the Indian foundations of what a great democracy should be built on. We need the

self-correcting mechanisms of the Indian way of life to weigh in at this time.

We don't want narrow minds. Narrow minds that are born of narrow specialization. We need the thinking, reflective mind that reasons, compares, that analyses. A university education should provide, again as Newman said, for that "clear, calm, accurate vision and comprehension of all things" that allows the individual to make good judgements. And, practice what Gandhiji called "*viveka*" – that effective Sanskrit word for that particular faculty which enables a man or woman always to distinguish between what is desirable and what is undesirable, what is right and what is wrong. Translated into English, the nearest meaning is discrimination – to separate the chaff from the grain, truth from falsehood, facts from fiction.

And above all, learn to swim in troubled waters, for life cannot be always smooth. Your education should obviously prepare you for the world. Live your lives in the Open University of Human experience. Education must initiate us into the centuries to come, to our developing soul as a country, and the question we confront is between the present and the future and not between the present and the past, for as Sri Aurobindo said, let us address India in terms of her future need, to the greatness of her coming self-creation, to her eternal spirit. But remember also that despite our sense of uniqueness, we are not separate from the world, we are in it, India in the world.

Our goal is to see a world that is safe, settled and happy. Prosperity and security reinforce each other. That safety and security comes from economic progress, from innovation and enterprise and technological invention, and the openness of democratic governance.

And before I conclude, let me speak briefly of the concept of public service. There is a sign displayed at the entrance of the Vidhana Soudha in Bangalore that “government’s work is god’s work”. We are rather ungodly in our application of this principle today. Electing to pursue a career in public service is what our country needs you to do – you who have imbibed the values of a liberal arts education – you who are specially equipped to lead, to envision, to imbue the democratic ethos with real value and positive meaning. Be the steel frame of 21<sup>st</sup> century India. Bureaucracy today, needs what the ancients called, Sva Kranti, the revolution within self, a move away from perennial navel-gazing.

I wish you all the joy that you can wish. May you have the absolute sense of the fulfilment that comes from service, truthfully, transparently and sincerely done. May your tryst with destiny awaken the world.

And before I leave you, let me recall some lines from a poem I have long loved. It is “Ithaka” by C.P. Cavafy. I am transposing Ithaka with Ashoka here for Ashoka is also a state of mind, a beginning and a destination.

“Hope your road is a long one.  
May there be many summer mornings when,  
with what pleasure, what joy,  
you enter harbors you’re seeing for the first time;

Keep Ithaka (or Ashoka) always in your mind.  
Arriving there is what you’re destined for.  
But don’t hurry the journey at all.  
Better if it lasts for years,  
so you’re old by the time you reach the island,  
wealthy with all you’ve gained on the way,  
not expecting Ithaka (or Ashoka) to make you rich.

**Wise as you will have become, so full of experience,  
you'll have understood by then what these  
Ithakas/Ashokas mean.”**

**Thank you**