

76th Convocation of Andhra University

(Vishakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh – December 5, 2009)

Convocation Address by Hon'ble Sh. K.G. Balakrishnan, Chief Justice of India

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am deeply grateful to the Andhra University for conferring an honorary doctoral degree on me. I am overwhelmed by this gesture and it will hold special importance in my life. I must especially thank the Vice-Chancellor for the citation that has been presented.

This convocation address presents a useful opportunity to reflect on some vital issues related to higher education in our country. In recent years, India has emerged as a global destination for knowledge-based businesses and many Indians have also demonstrated their diligence in various fields abroad. In particular, computer scientists and doctors from India have made a very good name for themselves in foreign countries. Many of the best teachers in the leading universities of Western countries are Indian nationals or Persons of Indian Origin (PIOs). However, despite these visible successes there are several structural problems with the nature of higher education in our own country.

While the National Knowledge Commission (NKC) has stressed upon the need for improving the overall enrolment rates, concerns have also been expressed about aspects such as the quality of education being administered, limited access for disadvantaged

sections and the ill-effects of increasing commercialization of education.

The foundational problem is that of inadequate personnel and resources for providing quality education in publicly-funded educational institutions. While one can point to exceptions such as the IIT's, IIM's and a few Central Universities, the harsh reality is that most of the government-run institutions are chronically underfunded and hence they find it difficult to attract and retain motivated teachers. Such a situation has arisen on account of poor service conditions and relatively low social prestige for university-teachers. Most of the talented graduates of the leading institutions are attracted by lucrative opportunities abroad or in the private sector and there are no strong incentives for joining the teaching line.

While the implementation of the Sixth Pay Commission's recommendations has considerably improved the salaries for teachers in government-run universities and colleges, there is also a need for some innovative practices to incentivise teaching careers. Teaching staff should be actively involved with research activities and outreach programmes in their respective fields through which they can make meaningful contributions in the various areas of business, governance, culture and the voluntary sector. This means that universities and colleges must encourage programmes and initiatives wherein their staff and students actively engage with social problems and external institutions instead of merely focusing on theoretical learning. Such collaborations for research and outreach activities can

also help educational institutions to secure funding from public as well as private sources – which can be invested for the long-term growth of the institutions. The educational experience needs to extend beyond the routine focus on classroom teaching and evaluation in order to include experiential learning and exposure to practical aspects. The same is being done in some institutions through internships and projects involving local communities.

In an increasingly competitive economy, the quality of education – especially for professional courses, also depends on the provision of infrastructure such as well-maintained classrooms, hostels, library facilities and access to electronic resources. While thousands of government-run colleges all over the country fare very poorly in this regard, similar problems have been pointed out in numerous privately-run institutions as well. While it is not correct to make generalizations, there are legitimate concerns about the mushrooming of private educational institutions which charge considerably higher fees but do not provide the facilities required for a sound academic setting.

While there are some notable privately-run institutions which have indeed done very well, a considerable number of private colleges have come to be viewed as profit-making enterprises rather than centres of education. The Courts have been repeatedly approached to restrain malpractices such as disproportionate management quotas in admissions, collection of capitation fees and allegations of irregularities in the administration of institutions. These

aspects are indeed worrisome since there is intense competition amongst students for admission to professional courses such as engineering, medicine and management.

Even though educational institutions must be given a certain degree of autonomy in respect of aspects such as curriculum-design, there is a clear governmental interest in making interventions to check profit-seeking behaviour. It must be kept in mind that even though the Constitution mandates reservations for candidates belonging to the Socially and Educationally Backward Classes (SEBC), the overpricing of education can frustrate the objective of this affirmative action policy. If there are no controls over profit-seeking behaviour, then candidates from the disadvantaged sections will be increasingly deterred from even applying to colleges and will face immense hardships even in the instances when they are admitted.

On the other hand there is also a need to rationalize fee-structures in public institutions, wherein the government subsidizes education to a large extent even though students are capable of paying higher fees. A balance needs to be drawn between the motives of ensuring financial viability of the institutions as well as preserving equitable access to educational opportunities for all sections of society. The same can be done through targeted financial aid programmes that account for the individual circumstances of needy students.

It has been rightly said that our Universities and Colleges are amongst the most important sites of social transformation where young people are exposed to diverse ideas and cultures. The foremost objectives of higher education should be the absorption of liberal values, the capacity for critical inquiry and the skills necessary for competing with the best in the world. There is no doubt that India's emergence as an economic and intellectual powerhouse is entirely dependent on how we improve the state of higher education in our country.

I would like to once again express my sincere gratitude for the honorary degree conferred on me today.

Thank You!
