

SPEECH OF SHRI PRANAB MUKHERJEE, FORMER PRESIDENT OF INDIA ON 'REDEFINING EDUCATION' ORGANIZED BY SGT UNIVERSITY

Good evening ladies & gentlemen,

I deeply appreciate this opportunity as it provides an occasion to dwell on education, a subject that is very dear to my heart. As all present here shall doubtless agree education is critical for the development of a nation. India's own history over the ages, glimpses of which have been mentioned in Professor Singh's talk, is an outstanding example of the role that meaningful education emanating from high caliber knowledge systems can play in the economic well being of a nation.

2. In my own opinion, many of the features that characterize an enlightened approach towards policies and practices that characterized the great knowledge systems of our past such as Takshashila, Nalanda, Vikramashila, Vallabhi, Somapura and Odantapuri, are there to guide us in our current endeavors. Some

of these features were largely the characteristics of an enlightened approach towards the development of institutions. This approach essentially underscored that the role of the state was to be a benign yet proactive enabler of good practices that fostered the growth of quality institutions. The other features that can be imbibed from our rich past include a universal and healthy appreciation of different streams of thought, which rode on the wheels of trans-discipline and a very distinct practical dimension of knowledge. It is thus no surprise that when Aryabhata espoused his theories about the rotation of the Earth and its spherical shape, there were many at Nalanda who differed with him, and yet he was made a professor at the young age of 23.

3. Professor Singh has clearly mentioned how knowledge systems were used to aid the economy over several centuries. So what is the challenge for us in India of today? Somewhere perhaps India owing to various pernicious external particularly in the 19th century lost its moorings in large measure. Yet the

ever resilient spirit of India refuses to get suppressed and strives nobly and with vigour.

4. This is also evidenced by the strivings of many great souls from the start of the twentieth century. Prominent among them were Rabindranath Tagore, and Mahatma Gandhi, who were concerned about the lack of educational institutions that were suited to India's needs and to give utterance to, as Nehru put it – its soul. Though Tagore and Gandhi had slightly different approaches, the similarities in their philosophies and practices were also striking. Both gave expression to their ideas in the form of institutions when Tagore set up Shantiniketan and Gandhi set up Gujarat Vidyapeeth and Kashi Vidyapeeth. In essence they were both emphasizing the need for knowledge and knowledge systems to be connected with the world around them.

Distinguished Guests, Ladies & Gentlemen,

5. In the decades since independence, many worthwhile achievements have happened in the realm of

knowledge in India that are evidenced by the application of knowledge for the wellbeing of society even though the paths followed may not be in conformity with what Tagore and Gandhi had espoused. If today India claims to be the largest producer of milk in the world, or if it proclaims loudly its intention and capability to put a man on the moon then these are not accidents; rather they are outcome of knowledge systems that have been fruitfully utilized. Lest we get the impression that all is well then let there be no doubts that here is much that needs to be done and Professor Singh has highlighted some of these challenges.

6. Given these needs and challenges, India cannot afford to lose direction nor can it afford to go astray as we are in a race against time. India's challenges stem from its need to harness the energies of its teeming millions in a very young age group and give them direction. India can and should strive to use this young population pool to not just stay competitive in a globalized world but also set the pace of growth and development as it did in the past. Some of these chal-

allenges have been highlighted by speakers before me and I do not wish to dwell too much on them. However I do wish to draw on my own experiences and learning throughout my career to add to them.

Dear Friends,

7. In such a situation the role of the state becomes critical. No agency can hope to replace the strength of the state when it comes to the question of providing resources and legislative support. No doubt much of what we have seen over the years up to the present, which can be deemed as positive and productive, owes a great deal to the support of the state. However, what is of paramount importance is to create an environment where some of the mistakes of the past can be pruned away and the good and positive achievements can be further strengthened and supplemented. Let me illustrate how state intervention and support in the realm of education leads to benefits for society. In the eighties, the late M. G. Ramachandran as the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu launched the Mid Day Meal scheme for school students in state

run schools of Tamil Nadu. One of the direct and lasting benefits of that scheme has been the increase, in a sustained manner, in the enrollment ratio for school children of Tamil Nadu leading to very high literacy rates particularly for girls. In turn this has also led to a significant drop in the population growth rate of Tamil Nadu. The scheme-at its inception-was responsible for over 65 lakh children being fed nutritious meals and the reduction in number of children suffering from malnutrition corresponded with an increase in the number of children going to school. The success of the Mid Day Meal scheme as implemented by the Union Government is a testament to the vision of MGR who was the first to successfully run such a programme. Let there be no doubts; such a programme can really be sustained and supported by the state.

8. I would like state interventions to be of such a nature and there are many more such instances. On the other hand there are other instances where state interventions can be counter productive and perhaps it would be useful to dwell upon some the points in this

regard. I concur with Prof Dinesh Singh that there does not seem to be much evidence in India's past or in the modern history of some of the advanced nations that could seem to suggest that state policy engenders great educational institutions beyond a point. At least not, if policy results in micromanagement. So one must realize that though Nalanda, and Vikramshila did depend on the resources of the state as have our IIT's, but they were largely left to their own devices in terms of their direction and growth. This is also the case with many of the celebrated institutions in other advanced countries.

Distinguished Guests, Ladies & Gentlemen,

9. There is another matter on which I wish to dwell a little. As it happens, the President of India serves in an ex-officio capacity as the visitor of almost every central university, IITs, IIMs, IISc, and IIITs. I had taken it upon myself to seek to engage in various non-intrusive ways with most of these universities and institutions on a regular basis. I believe this was a fruitful practice that allowed many ideas to be exchanged

and developed in a fairly conducive atmosphere. However, I must admit that one of my biggest concerns was the lack of much innovation in not just the administrative processes of these institutions but also in the substance and pedagogy as prescribed in their curriculums. I had consistently felt that barring a few exceptions, there was not much that would foster creativity and innovation in the minds of their students particularly the undergraduates. Perhaps, Professor Singh is right in his suggestion that unless we pay greater attention towards creating a more meaningful curriculum that engages in a more 'hands on' manner with the needs and challenges of the society, which will in turn excite young minds, universities will not be able to achieve the standards that need to be achieved.

10. I am also concerned about the lack of preparedness of a vast body of our youth for the coming challenges. It will be wise if educational institutions also realize that artificial intelligence and advances in computer science and in information technology shall

bring about unseen opportunities as also disruptive worrisome changes. The only way that we can be ready to meet these challenges is to work on a priority basis in getting our own knowledge generation and knowledge acquisition processes-in these areas-moving rapidly and using these same processes to simultaneously create opportunities for our youth by exposing them to these ideas and advances. We must also bear in mind that the sooner we bring about the dissolution of the walls and boundaries that exist between disciplines and between the sciences and humanities, the better. This is not just supported by India's past but also by many of the great knowledge advances of modern times

11. Most importantly, we must expose and train the youth without overburdening them and by motivating the and by creating interest. They should be enabled enough to embark on quests of their own based on their choices, skills, inclinations and opportunities. They should also be enabled enough through a

healthy combination of skills and knowledge for facing the future.

Distinguished Guests, Ladies & Gentlemen,

12. When we talk about re-defining education, we are really not creating anything new, we are essentially reinventing in a more suitable manner, the learning's from the world around us. I tend to agree, based on my own experiences over a fairly long period of time, that knowledge exists all around us and it does not respect physical or geographical boundaries. There must be a two-way process where knowledge from the real world should be exposed to the minds of the young and what the young and their mentors produce should also seek to have connections to the real world. I pick once again on just one of the major challenges that is round the corner for India. The young millions need to be exposed to meaningful education, training and skilling lest our demographic dividend turns into a demographic disaster of unemployable youth. Perhaps if India can harness the advances in technology and artificial intelligence, we can create an

easy and accessible platform to help bring about and implement this redefining of education where deep theoretical concepts go hand in hand with entrepreneurship, social obligation, and self-fulfillment.

Thank you

Jai Hind