

ST. XAVIER'S COLLEGE (AUTONOMOUS), KOLKATA

CONVOCATION & VALEDICTORY 2010

JANUARY 17, 2010

VALEDICTORY ADDRESS

BY

P. CHIDAMBARAM

Rev. Dr. George Pattery, Provincial and President of the Governing Body, Rev. Dr. Felix Raj, Principal, Prof. Suranjan Das, Vice Chancellor, Calcutta University, Shri Sudarshan Ray Chaudhuri, Minister-in-Charge, Higher Education, Rev. Dr. Dominic Savio, Vice Principal, Members of the Governing Body, Members of the Academic Council, Faculty, Students, Alumni, Parents, Ladies and Gentlemen!

I am grateful to you for the invitation to participate in the valedictory of the celebrations marking 150 years of St. Xavier's College at the service of education. Through the corridors of these buildings have walked many giants of knowledge and scholarship and politics and business. Among them were Sir Jagdish Chandra Bose, Shri Jyoti Basu, for whose recovery we pray, Shri Siddharth Shankar Ray, our Vice President, Shri Hamid Ansari and our Chief Economic Adviser, Dr. Kaushik Basu.

Higher education, I am happy to say, has at last found its way to nearly the top of the country's agenda. It was not always so. For well over forty years we believed that it was sufficient if we were able to give school education to our children; make them literate and numerate; and turn them out into the world in the hope that they would find jobs or work. We were also content with the fact that a small number of school-leaving children got the opportunity to acquire a vocational skill through run down ITIs and polytechnics.

Higher education remained the preserve of a very small number of students. As you complete 150 years, you would be surprised – nay, shocked - to know that no more than 11 to 12 per cent of school leaving children are able to find a place in a college or university. The world average is 45 per cent. It is an undeniable truth that any opportunity or privilege that is restricted in size or scale will keep out large numbers of people who are otherwise disadvantaged, socially or economically. That, in my view, is the sole reason why large sections of the population, especially the minorities, the backward classes, the scheduled castes, the scheduled tribes and the numerically small groups of people, were denied – and continue to be denied – the one instrument, namely education, that would have given them the chance to break out of their closed and poverty-stricken environments.

School education is indeed important. The promise of universalisation of school education was an important promise, but it remained unfulfilled because we neglected higher education. Without higher education, how will we find the teachers to teach in our schools? Without higher education, how will we find the scholars to teach and train our teachers? Without higher education how can we add to the body of knowledge about teaching methods and the subjects that have to be taught? Without higher education, how can we harness technology to provide quality school education to our children in the farthest corners of the country? Among all the reasons that are behind the unfulfilled promise of universalisation of school education, the foremost reason is the neglect of higher education. Since we neglected higher education, inevitably, we also devalued the place of the teacher, the professor, the researcher and the scholar. Once upon a time, they occupied the highest rung of the social ladder in any village or town. Alas, today, not many aspire to join the noble profession of teaching.

Higher education – or what goes for higher education in India – itself is, save a few shining examples, either a money spinning business or a moth-eaten system. On one side, we have many

colleges and universities that are run by governments. They are no different from any other government office. As a matter of tiresome duty, they produce graduates and post-graduates every year, the vast majority of whom are no more “educated” at the end of a three- or five-year term than they were when they first enrolled in the college or university. Next to them, there is a group of premier institutions, run with the support of the government. The right word would be “elitist”. Until last year they opened their doors only to those who were regarded as “meritorious”, without regard to the fact that, while science tells us that merit is evenly distributed, not all sections of society have the same ability to convert that merit into marks in an entrance examination. For a long time, and perhaps even now, these premier institutions turned out first rate graduates many of whom had – and have – graduation as the first goal and emigration as the next. The values are no doubt changing, but painfully slowly. There is a third set of institutions of higher education. For them, education is commerce. Since demand for seats in colleges far exceeded the supply through legitimate sources, there was a huge business opportunity that was grabbed with both hands by shrewd business persons. The bulk these self-financing colleges and self-styled universities are no more than money-spinning businesses that exploit the demand–supply gap. Giving them comfort are the regulatory bodies that laid down

regulations that promoted not quality education but profitable business.

It is in this dreary world of higher education in India that we have shining examples such as St. Xavier's College. It was founded by the Society of Jesus. Long before Shri Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, Dr. S Radhakrishnan, Dr. Zakir Hussain, Dr. Humayun Kabir and my good friend Shri Kapil Sibal, there was an intrepid soul by name Fr. H Depelchin. Along with six Belgian Jesuits he arrived in Kolkata and founded the St. Xavier's College. The college has been in the service of the nation for 150 years. Not only in Kolkata, but in many other parts of India, the Society of Jesus has rendered yeoman service to the cause of education. Its 153 high schools, 38 university colleges, 14 technical institutes and 5 business administration institutes teach, at any given time, over 230,000 students belonging to every section of society. St. Xavier's alone has over 4000 students. Like every Jesuit educational institution, St. Xavier's College has an admission's policy that is biased in favour of the poor, especially the socially and financially marginalized, and I commend the college on its sense of social responsibility. We are beholden to the Jesuits for the unwavering dedication, the sense of duty, and the strict discipline that they bring to their work and to the institutions founded by them. I

passed through a Jesuit institution and I fondly remember the great teachers: Fr. Murphy, Fr. Sequira, Fr. Coyle, Fr. Lawrence Sundaram, Fr. Amascua and Fr. Yedanapally. It surprises me even today how so many of them could leave such an indelible impression in a period of barely one year.

We are still debating the norms and values that must prevail in an institution of higher learning, and especially the place of the non-government sector in providing higher education. I recognize and support the role of the private sector in higher education, but I am absolutely clear in my mind that the private sector in higher education ought not to mean private business in higher education. No one should be allowed to profit from offering higher education. As far as I am aware, no great university in the world was established for the purpose of profit. I believe that some activities in a society must stand outside the world of profit and higher education, in my view, ranks first amongst such activities. For over 150 years the Society of Jesus has done just that in Kolkata, in Chennai and in many other towns and cities. For that and for many other blessings that they brought to India, we thank them and we salute them.

It is my sincere hope that when the Government's policy on higher education is fully laid out, we will be able to ensure that higher education is a domain that will have no place for profiteering and that it will be reserved for those who believe in service, charity and the search for knowledge.

I congratulate the governing body, the academic council, the faculty and the students of this great institution on the completion of the sesquicentenary, and I wish the St Xavier's College and the Society of Jesus many more centuries of service in the cause of education.

God bless you. Nihil Ultra.

Thank you.