

University of Hyderabad

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Address by Professor T V Ramakrishnan

Rediscovering our Universities

I am very thankful to the authorities of the University for inviting for this occasion a plain academic, one who has had no direct involvement with serious academic administration, or with governmental and political positions. I feel very much at home in this gathering, as a lifelong student.

Many of you are beginning a life outside. For them, and not only for them but for all of us, the injunction of the teacher for graduating students occurring in the Taittiriya Upanishad and ritually repeated at every convocation in Banaras Hindu University where I got my degrees, seems relevant. One phrase from there that has stuck in my mind is 'swadhyayanmapramadaha', namely 'do not deviate from self study'. What we have learnt at this university enhances immensely the value of this faculty, innate in us, and the results could be absolutely dramatic. Especially at this stage in our society, people with minds exposed to different parts of higher knowledge and with their skills honed by constant self study as well as self reflection, can play a critical role in its growth. The value of swadhyaya for each one of us, for our growth and even for our survival, is immense. This swadhyaya (which is not quite self study, but also includes in its

meaning self reflection) may help you accept the society, it may make you a rebel; it may make you see the futility of all things. Whatever it does, it will affect you strongly. You do not need any external assistance or prompting. You have been educated at one of the very best places, in wonderful surroundings. Its value will become clearer and greater to us with swadhyaya; so, swadhyayanmapramadaha.

On such occasions many people like me express concern about the state of higher education in India, and some try to do something about it. In the spirit of 'thinking globally and acting locally', I will put before you some thoughts and hope that local action will result somewhere, sometime soon, from some of you. This is a subject on which each of us has strong and different views. Such differences and even clashes of view are welcome (action would be even more welcome).

When this university was founded, about forty years ago, as a response to a movement for Telangana, it was conceived as an academically world class institution and a number of young and old outstanding people came together to form its faculty. From that time, we have witnessed in this country a great decline in these institutions, specially in their 'radius' of action and in the area of creation of knowledge.

This is odd, because human experience over centuries and over continents has been that the university is one place where all knowledge (humanities, the arts, science, technology, medicine, law, business, agriculture...) is at

home, and where undergraduate education, postgraduate education and research are all together. This is not a new idea. It was said of Nalanda, perhaps the greatest of Indian universities, and one which lasted for about a thousand years, that you could go in at the age of sixteen and come out at twenty six, and could learn almost everything that was possible to learn at that time.

One reason could be that a caste system has taken hold of our higher education enterprise, through our minds and actions. Somewhat like the fourfold caste system of our society, higher education in India seems to have a triune caste system. The castes are the institutes, the universities and the colleges. That is the hierarchy. The broad functions are: research but no (or very little) teaching, principally postgraduate teaching, and mainly undergraduate teaching. (There are, of course, many exceptions and survivals). There is not much intercaste mobility or mingling; subcastes are emerging and are getting established. Casteism, and to borrow a phrase, 'votebank politics' are becoming stronger. The strong interaction of this with the fourfold caste system, which itself has taken new forms in our polity, affects it greatly. Most of us have accepted this system. Some reasons, a combination of which could be operating, are the following. It resonates with something we all believe in and practice without thinking. It is the likely course of higher education in a country with limited economic and financial resources and one in which therefore focused attention to quality and academic values is possible only in small separate patches. It is in tune with the direction of growth of our society. It is necessary for

rapid nation building. It is a consequence of the desire for ‘fortification’.

It is not that these different functions in higher education and these factors do not exist in other countries, and not that they have not had serious consequences. In the nineteen thirties, for example, in France, the rigidities of the university system and its inappropriateness for flexible large scale support of research led to the establishment of the CNRS, a remarkable and successful network of laboratories in all of science. There is, now, a great deal of churning in France about how to reintegrate the two major structures, namely the university system and the CNRS, closely. A former President of the CNRS commented a few years ago that the integration of the CNRS into the University system and the consequent rejuvenation of both is an imperative! In Germany, after the second world war, the chain of Max Planck Institutes was established partly for a quick building (in some cases a rebuilding) of research strength. A recent review of these world class centres has led to the establishment of the IMRS, namely International Max Planck Research Schools in which individual universities are necessarily entwined academically with appropriate Max Planck Institutes. Germany has also embarked on an ambitious Universities Excellence Initiative in which on the order of a dozen universities have been chosen with the explicit aim of making them among the very highest ranked in the world. Many countries in Southeast Asia have consciously built up their higher education system dramatically, via universities, both quantitatively and qualitatively, in the last two decades.

We seem to be going strongly against these trends. They express the basic fact that our societal and individual need for higher education at all levels, and for new knowledge, is best realized in the university environment. While at certain times, for some time, and for some purposes, deviations are needed, this does not seem sustainable. The university is one of the most long-lived institutions we have. Some contemporary universities are about a thousand years old. It has changed its form dramatically with time. In the West, from a largely teaching oriented body it has developed into a research university in the eighteen sixties or so. The modern university is very resilient; it has responded quickly and positively to changing societal demands for specialized kinds of education, and to creating knowledge of relevance to the society without becoming something else entirely. Research institutes and colleges exist in other countries in the world too, but the centerpiece of the overall higher education system is the university.

The solidification of the above kind of 'caste' system and the continued emergence of monocultural institutions, many of them calling themselves universities in a naturally diverse, multireligious, multilingual society such as ours is worrisome. A whole generation has grown up in India for which the threefold arrangement is the natural fact. Also worrisome is the absence of reality checks of equity and global quality. It seems to me that there is urgent need for our universities to become, through appropriate changes in themselves, institutions in which higher education and all its functions are at home in relatively peaceful coexistence, or briefly, to rediscover

themselves. I will mention now some of the things that occur to me in this connection. These suggestions are quite likely to be naive and 'impractical'. I believe, however, that in the long run, if we are to be a knowledge economy in the global village, we have no choice but to see that our universities are comprehensive and are home to academic values. Only that will empower our students in numbers, and make it possible for them to have the kind of skills and values that are needed over a lifetime. The challenges and directions were succinctly stated by the Prime Minister, Dr Manmohan Singh (himself a former academic) , while launching the Knowledge Commission nearly eight years ago. He said that the time had come for India to embark on a 'second wave of institution building'. 'Denied this investment', he said 'the youth will become a social and economic liability. At the bottom of the knowledge pyramid, the challenge is one of access to primary education. At the top of the pyramid there is a need to make our institutions of higher education and research world class'. This statement is specially meaningful in the light of the fact that India will be home to a population bulge of the largest number of young working age people in the world, starting in a few years. Like a soliton, this bulge will travel undistorted, for several decades. Obviously we need to attach to this fact, and to our future as a knowledge economy, the importance they demand.

Most universities in the world function as single campuses or as relatively autonomous few campus bodies driven by the academic values shared by the academic community. They are major independent intellectual sources of

strength of the society. Fundamentally, it seems to me that this kind of mindset needs to be there in much of the society. I have not been able to appreciate why it is so uncommon in our society when both traditional Indian and modern Western values converge here. In the absence of such a mindset, human ingenuity will find a way out of almost any maze of policing.

Universities in our country need to grow in the image of real universities; they need to expand their scope in at least three directions, namely the following. i) The disciplines in which higher education is possible in a university need to be many more (to include, specially, professional categories such as technology, medicine and agriculture). ii) Undergraduate education, as well as research, in addition to postgraduate education needs to be there in a big way. The universities widely admired by us have this. For example, Stanford University, a great private university, has about 7,000 undergraduate students and 11,000 graduate students, postdocs etc. . For the University of California, Berkeley, a great public university, the corresponding numbers are about 26,000 and 10,000. iii) Working to our strengths. As an old culture which is so differently rich in different regions, our exploration of this wealth is not sufficiently lively or deep.

A striking fact about our universities is that in most of them, the three aspects of a university, namely the campus which gives it an identity, affiliated colleges, and examinations ending in degrees, are all conflated. Most often, the latter two overwhelm the first. In many universities, the natural concerns of say the affiliated

colleges and their dynamics, consume the energies of individuals and bodies responsible for the university. A recent release from the MHRD says that the average number of colleges per university in India is about 300. Apparently the highest is 901, this being the number of colleges affiliated to Osmania University. (Pune University has about the same number).The Rashtriya Uchcharat Siksha Abhiyan (The National Higher Education Initiative) aims to reduce it to 200. My preference is for zero. I think the three functions should be separated, and the campus made independent of the other two, administratively and academically.

I am specially happy that this university is a place all this is being done, naturally. The university has had an imaginative and pioneering undergraduate programme for the last half a dozen years or so. The latest research centric major institution on campus is the interdisciplinary centre of the TIFR. The university (like BHU and JNU) does not affiliate colleges; it is a purely campus object! I am hopeful that the Central University of Hyderabad will help us rediscover universities in India.

I am sure that your growth in the campus coupled with your swadhyaya will take you far.

Thank you all.

Jai Hind.