EDUCATION TOWARDS RESHAPING DESTINY

Convocation Address at the 130th Convocation of Madras University

E.C.G. Sudarshan
Institute of Mathematical Sciences, Madras 600 113

Your Excellency, Vendar Thiru S.L. Khurana, Thunavendar Thiru B.B. Sundaresan, Sangeetha Kalanidhi Thirumathi Dr. M.S. Subbulakshmi, new graduates, esteemed parents and guests:

It gives me great pleasure to be addressing the 130th Convocation of Madras University. Thirtyfive years ago I was in my first cap and gown here to receive my first degree of B.Sc. (Hons.). Since that time I have studied, travelled, taught and learnt many things. I have been continuously engaged in research and teaching since that time. Today I would like to share some of my observations with you. My own professional involvement has been in Science and so many of my observations would refer particularly to Science, but I believe that most of them are valid more generally.

Education and Achievement

There are three strands to the life of a scholar: discipline, experience and insight. It is not for nothing that we talk of academic disciplines; but part of that discipline is direct experience. No scientist is a scientist unless he is a practising scientist. And all learning and all experience is of marginal use unless illuminated by insight. To be an academic, to choose a life of scholarship is to accept this discipline for life. The appellations of acharya and rishi are reminders of this lifetime commitment. While abilities and achievements may vary amongst teachers all of them have be committed to these three; those who don't feel the commitment ought to pursue some other calling.
For the student, the academic discipline is for a limited time, but the education is for life. He/she is to find his/her aptitude and talent and to make every effort to learn and to excel. Studying is a part of it but learning is the whole of it. And the student years are for learning and preferably for learning alone; to utilize the time and resources wisely.

But for the teacher it is a lifetime of being a student, because truly one never stops learning. He finds his fulfillment in the acquisition, nurture and propagation of knowledge and in the instilling of the love of knowledge of those who come to him. Both the initiation of others into knowledge and the discovery of new knowledge as well as the dawning of insight provide a joyous life for those who are destined to be acharyas. These processes rejuvenate themselves so that curiosity and wonderment usually associated with children become theirs for life. For ever they are involved with student life and serve as exemplars for them.

For those people who leave the life of the student for a place in the mainstream of society the insights and experiences remain and illuminate their concerns in later life. They become grower of food, or makers of things, soldiers for their country, or administrators and managers for commercial and government enterprises. Some of them even become managers of science or education. They could return to recharge their resources to educational institutions but the short period of student life must provide by and large the material for the rest of ones life. And those of you who have gone for alumni reunions or parents' weeknds know how nostalgic student life looks when one is older.

The achievements of individuals who have become exemplars of excellence is not only to their own credit but also to the credit of the society that nurtured criticized and appreciated them! The roster of the excellent from the near in space and time includes jewels like, Annie Besant and Krishnamurti,
scientists like Ramanujan, Raman, Chandrasekhar and Ramachandran; philosophers like Hiriyanna, Radhakrishnan and Mahadevan; historians like Neelakanta Sastry and archaeologists like Sivaramamurthy and Nagaswamy; musicologists and musicians like Sambasiva Iyer, Dhanamal Mahalingam, Balamurali Krishna and Subbulakshmi, the incomparable dancer Balasaraswati; writers like Subramanya Bharathi, Kalki, Narayanana, Raja Rao, Jayakantan, Sivasankari; and statesman like Rajagopalachari, Kamaraj, Ramaswami Naicker, Annadorai, Venkataraman and Subramaniam. These men and women of greatness not only tell us how great can be human achievement but also that our society could bring forth such people from amongst us. But the society that takes credit for their achievements should also take the responsibility for the relative sterility and the fall in standards in all walks of life. In this context we recognize that society must demand excellence of all its members particularly the talented. By being easily satisfied, by being lenient, society denies excellence the chance to blossom. The classical music scene in Madras is an excellent example of how encouragement together with exacting standards can bring forth excellence.

**The Present Predicament**

Birds and animals do not foul their nest but man despoils his environment. Look at the pollution of our water supplies, food resources and general living environment; and then try to convince ourselves that we are intelligent beings! Alas, not satisfied with environmental pollution we have despoiled the educational environment mostly out of misguided notions and concentrating on short term gains. In our passive acceptance and active degradation we are surely facing the danger of mediocrity being institutionalized and perpetuated. This is insidious; and should be viewed on par with shipping substandard
medicine and tampering with baby food, all in the name of commercial profit. Perhaps the emphasis on profit and the bottom line is what our children learn from us? Today we do not demand excellence from our children, but we impress on them the importance of accomplishing certain professional attainments; and train them from childhood to be performing in some competitions. We make our boys and girls into horses! We prefer the balance sheet rather than the human being. Do we make our teachers also misdirect their students in this manner?

The Government support of science and technology and the misplaced zeal and penchant for shortcuts during the past four decades of independence seem to have deemphasized basic science and other fundamental disciplines, robbing them of prestige and legitimacy. This is coupled with a misallocation of resources, and thus choking the wellsprings of talent. If the universities which are the mothers are starved, their offspring would be stunted and unequal to their tasks. We know that the governments often express deep commitment to excellence in education; but I wish that the national government would be involved with head, heart and hands and not only lips in the cause of education and the nurture of excellence in the universities.

Parents and family are largely responsible for the mercenary yardstick of the majority of students. Too long have they been indoctrinated with the paramount need to make a living; and no one seems to think that students can take delight in the toil and the sweat of hard academic work and starve for excellence.

Shaping our Destiny

All societies go through cycles of development. Ours is no exception; it appears that our society is going through a period of degeneration on the
education front. We have scholars and scientists who have the name but who lack the experiential component and the insight. They speak with loud voices and steal our birthright and decide the level of resource allocation to us. We have students who do not want to learn or who have not known the joy of discipline and discovery. And we have teachers who think of their work as a mere means of livelihood.

Four decades may be too short a time span to judge the course of a society and I may be unnecessarily pessimistic and impatient. But I confess that I am selfish: I want to see the regeneration of our society within my lifetime. Hopefully it is what we all want.

If that is so it is time that we all work to alter the course of events. That begins with a reassessment of our own values and priorities, and not being shy to impart it to our children and our students in terms of a value orientation in higher education. We must impart the sense of ethics in all aspects of our lives; and require that we all take responsibility for the predicament in which we find ourselves at all times. Thus we may shape our own destiny rather than allow history shape it.

* * * * *