

Convocation Address at Gujarat Vidyapeeth

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Translation of the Hindi Text

Chancellor of Gujarat Vidyapeeth, Ela behen Bhat, Vice Chancellor Dr. Rajendra Bhai Khimani, Trustees, Faculty, Graduating Students, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for inviting me to deliver the Convocation Address today. First and the foremost, congratulations to dear graduating students – this is the day that every graduate eagerly waits for. Well done. Today, we celebrate you and your efforts. You are the direct inheritors of the ideas of the founder of Gujarat Vidyapeeth, Gandhiji, because your education carries the imagination of peace and truth and the fragrance of tolerance.

Let me first remember all those who have been adversely affected by the pandemic. To our students who are graduating today, you are perhaps the most tested and resilient set of individuals and this will help you face the world with courage and humanity. You have experienced social upheaval, you've been forced to use an unfulfilled technology, and you've experienced pain at a very early age. A belief in Gandhiji's principles and the struggle to come out of this global pandemic has prepared you for every test of life. You have inherited this courage from Vidyapeeth and you should be proud of it.

Today, I want to talk to you about two things. First, what changes will you see around the world as you graduate? How is the world changing around you? And second, how should you use your education to keep moving forward in this ever-changing world? Basically, what is the meaning of education in today's environment? Does education at all teach us to face those challenges which violate the principles of humanity and fraternity?

Let me start by talking about three drivers of change that are fundamentally affecting the way we live, the way we think, and the way we act. They are technology, urbanization and the related issues of employment and climate change, and democracy. They are closely related to each other. The question is, how are they affecting you now, how will they affect you as you enter the real world, and what could be your possible reactions to them?

Technology, TV and internet in particular, has brought us closer to the lives and thoughts of others in our country and the world. When we were your age, coming to Delhi from a small town was like coming to a another country. Today, the aspirations of rural youth are derived from the world. Technology makes them aware of the happenings in the world. The full utility and impact of technology is visible to them as they go to work in a factory or an office.

Technology has surely become pervasive. You carry the whole world in your pocket and your purse or at least that's what we think. We can reach others quickly, digitally. If we want, we can see each other more often; we can find out what others think, what others do, how others behave, how other places look like, what others eat, how do they dress, etc. We are starting to shape our thinking through others. Some of it is

positive because it helps us overcome our own prejudices. This is making us and our life much better in some ways. However, in the process, we also seem to be losing our ability to pause and think fundamentally.

The promise of technology was to help us understand ourselves better and improve ourselves. No one thought that this would lead to us all becoming 'clones' of each other - all trying to look the same, all talking in the same way and most importantly, thinking the same way. Technology was expected to help us develop our own individual and unique way of thinking. Are we able to assess correctly what the reality is today? Are we able to assess the extent of truth in what politicians say? Are we at all able to discern if what a public intellectual claims is based on research or not? The question is whether we have an internal compass, within our mind and heart, that will help us decide what is truth and what is not?

Anything or anyone that makes you behave like others or tells you that you do not conform to some self-created social norms is to be questioned. For us humans, belief in our own uniqueness, our independent thinking, and the desire to keep one's community together has to be an important goal to protect. This would require that we listen from our heart and mind as to what we are thinking and not what technology is telling us.

The second major change that we are experiencing is urbanization. For the first time we see that more than half of India's population lives in urban areas. Census data from 2011 shows that 31% of India is urban, but satellite images suggest that India's urban population is more than double that figure. Transformation of villages is underway and everything that is related to rural life is changing. Young have been

coming to cities for a long time in search of opportunities but there has been a significant increase in the numbers in recent times. This has had two major social effects - one that is positive is the democratization of the city and the accompanying social mobility. Yet another, that has had a negative impact, is the loss of identity and availability of talent in rural areas. Let me explain this further. Some facilities, such as schools and colleges, internet services, new kinds of food and clothing, etc. have definitely reached small towns and rural areas of India. However, the last Socio-Economic and Caste Census of 2011 shows that more half of rural households, which are 17.11 crore out of 24.39 crore households in the country, still do not have meaningful jobs or value-added entrepreneurship opportunities based on new skills or decent healthcare or clean neighbourhoods and supporting services etc. - in essence they are under deprivation. The same is true of most small towns. A high quality contemporary life is simply missing. The farmers movement has revealed how a large majority of farmers live in poverty and this is a threat to the food security of the nation. This year, untimely rains and extended summers have had a debilitating impact on their crops. So, the idea of migrating to the city is an obvious one.

The same Socio Economic and Caste Census of 2011 reveals that 30.10% of rural households were involved in cultivation, 51.14% were involved in manual casual labour, 14.01% relied on government & private jobs, 2.5% on domestic service, 1.61 percent on own agriculture enterprise, 0.37 percent on begging and 0.23% on rag picking. This is unsustainable development as is, travelling two hours every day to work, working on challenges that one does not relate to, working in an environment where work life is uncertain or casual etc. It is a life that leads to complete dissatisfaction and has the possibilities of being

burnt out. So, I want to say to you - look out for opportunities and help build such opportunities that sustain a balanced, long term quality of life whether it is in a small village or a small company or a small town.

The third issue is that of democracy. Globally, we are experiencing that the promise of democracy is much more than just the right to vote. From China to Afghanistan, from Brazil to Venezuela, from Egypt to South Africa, rights and voices of citizens are constantly being muffled. Tolerance is being tested daily. We are not even trying to develop an understanding of our differences. Nor are we understanding the value of diversity or promoting it. Disagreement is being seen as a marker of protest. It is being suppressed everywhere due to which, both, common life and the political environment, seem to be moving towards aggression and intolerance. People carry their biased preconceptions and look at others through that lens. It appears that there is no longer a common understanding between us as to what are the basic characteristics of a good and caring democratic society and the roles and responsibilities of its citizens. Since last year, the peace index fell in 73 out of 163 countries. India was rated low in terms of peace (135 out of 163 nations). If we are to strengthen our democracy then ideas that are contrary to our own thinking will also have to be allowed to be discussed in the society. There is also a selfish thought associated with it - if we want to protect our own right to express our views then we must also protect the voices of those whose views we disagree with.

This brings me to the second part of this address - what does education tell us about how to navigate this changing world and how to build our own relationship with it. In essence, what is the purpose

of education and is our educational system fulfilling this objective? I am an academic so I would like to say something about it.

Education is about learning, but learning is much more than acquiring skills and more than conceptual thinking. It is about understanding the environment around you and understanding your own reactions to situations that arise. This is the grammar of education!

In my view there are four purposes of education – first is the ability to earn a livelihood; second is to develop a love for life long learning ; third is to build a citizen for the nation and the world. The fourth purpose can be stated in the words of Nida Fazli - जिन चिरागों को हवाओं का कोई खौफ नहीं, उन चिरागों को हवाओं से बचाया जाए (lets save those lamps from the winds that do not fear the winds). In today's environment, teachers and educational institutions need to think seriously about these purposes. There are many questions related to them that you will have to reflect on, in your life - what kind of a citizen does our country need to prepare; how does what we have learned at the University teach us to live with all and especially those who are different from us and how do we progress together? Education teaches us to search for answers to such questions. It is not the job of education to provide students with ready solutions. It is about building an ability to slowly remove the layers of ignorance over time. It is about thinking seriously about an issue. It is about learning to ask the right questions. It is about arguing on the basis of evidence. Its about investigating right and wrong and then arriving at an independent conclusion. It is about understanding life and the inner beauty in life. These are the fundamental objectives of education. Everything else, in my opinion, is a distraction.

Education is about developing options – whether it is about a political point of view or any social situation. Education is a medium to continuously discover the right ways to bring about change. As you graduate, the big question before of you will be how to use these ideas of education and the fundamental propositions of Gujarat Vidyapeeth for enhancing your own well-being and equally importantly, that of the society. And, therein, also lies the excitement of the future.. The process of finding the answer is something like this - whenever you are confronted with an issue, first, you will have to show empathy towards it, no matter how different it is from your own views. This will force you to think about every aspect of the issue. Next, you have to embrace that issue - understand and assimilate every element of it. After that you have to find your disagreement with the elements of the issue, redesign it and then implement it. This process of “empathise, own, dissent, design and do,” informs you how to use your education in the right way. It is very important to have sympathy for an idea and then dissent or disagree with it. This is the process of critical thinking in education. This is a process that a musician, singing raag bhairavi, would use to express his dissent with the politics of any time. Or how a tabla maestro would reflect through his instrument and express his inner feelings. That is what it means to understand the environment around you and to understand your reactions to situations that are arising. This is the means of using education and its purpose.

Let me also mention that today's education and educationists, and that includes me, have not allowed this kind of critical thinking or independent thinking ability to flourish in their classrooms. This is an important reason why we are neither able to stop the fierce war going on within us nor are we able to give a new direction to it.

Dear graduates, I would like to say one more thing to you. Do not ever give up hope in your life. When you're in despair, remember those people who have struggled to assert their own individuality and their uniqueness. When you encounter a bigot, remember the calm and tolerant face of the founder of your institution. When you meet someone who doesn't understand your pain, remember that they need help too. In this remembrance, lies your own evolution. It is this spirituality that you must focus on. Only then will you be called a real graduate, a real educated person.

My congratulations to you, your families, and your teachers on your graduation. May all your dreams always come true. Thank you.