



## Dr Shashi Tharoor

### Convocation address 2019

### “Higher Education: Forming Global Citizens”

It is a great honour to be invited here on such a momentous day in the history of St. Xavier's University, where we are celebrating the very first convocation ceremony of this young but nonetheless old institution. I studied for three years at your sister institution, St. Xavier's Collegiate School, and pass in front of St Xavier's College, as it then was. I am all the more delighted to have the opportunity to address some of our country's brightest minds, to whom I would like to extend my best wishes and congratulations on getting to where you are today.

I must point out that we do have a lot in common already. We are all products of the effervescent ethos and dynamism placed on education by the Jesuit mission. As a product of two Jesuit schools, Campion Mumbai and St. Xavier's Kolkata, I have had first-hand experience of the Jesuit spirit of education. The Jesuits have a fascinating vocation for education, with a focus on multifaceted and holistic human development. Their emphasis on moral and intellectual leadership and the pivotal place that the development of human character holds within their school of thought is profound, and admirable. I am confident that the education imparted at St. Xavier's University is in keeping with this ethos, and that all of you here leave not only as experts in your respective academic fields but also as leaders, change-makers and as powerful voices of justice. My congratulations to the graduates who will receive their degrees at this First Convocation of this proud new University, dating to 2017 but built on the foundations of the reputation of St Xavier's College, established in 1860. I hope this experience has been transformational for all of you, as you move out of these hallowed portals to transform the landscape of our great nation, contributing to its wealth of knowledge with your achievements.

Now, if one looks up the etymology of the term 'convocation', they can find its origins in the Latin term '*convocationem*', literally, "to call together", and indirectly in the Old French word '*convocacion*' with a similar significance of an "assembly of persons". If there is any time in our history where the importance of coming together could be vehemently emphasised, it is now. One does not need a stint at the United Nations, as I was privileged to have in multiple capacities over nearly three decades, to realize that in a fractured, impatient and yet hopeful international community, education is the most significant instrument of maintaining international peace and harmony, upholding human rights and fundamental freedoms and resolving disputes through democratic dialogue and effective leadership.

The 21st century has presented us with unprecedented challenges. Deep-rooted poverty, the expanding nexus of discriminatory politics, resource curses and crises, fragile treaties and deepening political gaps, and most importantly, the greatest threat of our times, the rapidly deteriorating environmental situation, are the strongest reminders of why education should be and remain our first priority. Malala

Yousafzai and Greta Thunberg have seized the imagination of the world even before going to college. In India we too have thousands of young graduates like you. It is time you too traversed the world with your innovations, inventions, unique skills and expertise. Educated young people are our vital bulwarks against complete global chaos and societal breakdown. Young people, and their ideas, would be the edifice upon which our future will be built, and this is the future we in India should be investing in.

We are at a moment in time where the success of a civilization can be measured through its educational apparatuses and institutions, tools of knowledge acquisition and dissemination — attainments which trump all others and are increasingly becoming the prime determinants of a nation's worth. Indeed, this was not the case for the greater part of human history, where martial prowess and mercantile abilities were accorded greater importance. Indian society, however, has historically emphasised the importance of education as one of the supreme objects of human existence, while celebrating a strong foundation in imparting education through traditional and non-traditional methods. Traditional methods of *guru-shishya parampara* thrived in ancient India, giving rise to many monasteries that emerged in what is now modern Bengal and Bihar as seats of learning. Six of these monasteries—Vikramashila, Nalanda, Somapura Mahavihara, Odantapura, Jaggadala and Takshashila—were premier educational institutions which created a co-ordinated network amongst themselves nearly two millennia ago. Among all these, Nalanda University, in particular, enjoyed global renown when the Oxford and Cambridge were not even gleams in their founders' eyes, employing over 2,000 teachers, opening its door to 10,000 students from countries ranging from Korea, Japan, China, Tibet, and Indonesia in the east to Persia and Turkey in the west, in a remarkable campus that featured a nine-storey tall library 1500 years ago, teaching subjects which included fine arts, medicine, mathematics, astronomy, politics and the art of war.

In addition to monasteries and formal establishments of learning, informal institutions and methods of education also flourished in India. Our oral traditions of recording and learning have enabled the education imparted in different time periods, even our most ancient knowledge, to survive. Mahatma Gandhi, who found inspiration in the ways that knowledge of the Vedas and other foundational Hindu texts like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata were passed orally from one generation to another, memorably advocated oral education in place of the prevailing emphasis on textbooks: as he said, “The true textbook for the pupil is his teacher” And so, in the little ashram that he created in South Africa, named Tolstoy Farm, he taught his students through his voice, imparting his convictions orally, disregarding the need for formal written work. As a child at school, I remember being exhorted to impart the alphabet to our domestic helpers under the Gandhian 'each one teach one' programme; and many of us were brought up on Swami Vivekananda's writings about the importance of education for the poor as the key to their upliftment.

While the ethos remains the same, the efforts have become more global. Take the internationally applauded activism of Sunitha Krishnan which has saved the lives of innumerable sex-traffic victims, by reintegrating them into society through education, or Kailash Satyarthi's life-long campaign to end the exploitation, sexual abuse, slavery, forced labour and crimes inflicted upon children, which culminated in international initiatives like the Global Campaign for Education and the Global Partnership for Education, and many other movements which aim to provide quality education to children across the globe, without discrimination. Education as the bedrock of progress and development has been recognized by the United Nations itself, through its Sustainable Development Goals: the fourth goal, SDG 4, is Quality Education.

From this vision emerges the concept of a 'global citizen', the reshaping of our identities beyond the

confines of national borders, sharing the merits of transnationalism and very often — its dilemmas and debacles. When I left India for my graduate studies in the United States in 1975, the term “globalization” was nonexistent, and now it is inescapable! The creation of universal goals, multicultural identities, liberal economics and the movements they encourage, which transgress boundaries, remain our sources of hope and optimism. This spirit, which can be realized through exchanges of education, knowledge-systems, expertise and so much more, generates an awareness of our shared challenges and encourages us to translate these into collaborative solutions, as 'global citizens' of the world. We take recourse to the force of education to challenge the hate-mongering and divisive agenda of narrow-minded and bigoted politicians who have risen to power in many countries of the world, repudiating the humane and liberal values of most civilizations.

As a nation, we have come a long way. Our educational system, which for millions has become a beacon of hope in a tumultuous world, has not yet become our greatest glory, but it can. It is of course imperative to remember our humble beginnings on the eve of the Indian independence. Britain's crippling and debilitating colonial rule left us with only 17 per cent literacy, barely 30 universities and about 700 colleges with an enrolment of just 4 lakh students. While India struggled for the next five decades as the poorest, the most illiterate, the most malnourished, and the least gender-sensitive major country in the world, with over half the world's illiterate adults and 40 per cent of the world's out-of-school children residing in India, the trajectory of our progress to our present state is remarkable. With Jawaharlal Nehru's vision and efforts to systematically build up a very large system of education and create a large pool of men and women equipped with robust scientific and technological capabilities, sensitive humanist and philosophical thought, and profound creativity, we started an education revolution and revival. The catechism in education policy were two Es: expansion and equity – expansion in the number of institutions and equitable access to them for those who had previously been denied educational opportunities because of their caste, their gender, their religion, their region.

In the process we did not always focus enough on a third E, excellence. But there were shining exceptions. Today Americans speak of our IITs with the same reverence they used to accord to an MIT. The image of India has changed from that of a backward developing country to a sophisticated land that produces engineers and computer experts. I met an Indian the other day, a history major like me, who told me that while transiting through Schipol airport in Amsterdam, he was accosted by an anxious European saying, 'You're Indian! You're Indian! Can you help me fix my laptop?' The old stereotype of Indians was that of snake-charmers and sadhus; now all Indians are seen as software gurus and computer geeks.

Now in 2019, when I reminisce my days as a young graduate, I think of how few the options available to us in our college days, in the 1960s or 1970s were, as compared to the plethora of opportunities presented to graduating youngsters nowadays. Especially in higher education, there are many more subjects available to study, and courses that didn't exist in my college days. India is keeping up with the world: the IITs have now launched certificate programmes on Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning and one has set up a Centre for Artificial Intelligence. At its very foundation, our Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru called IITs 'India's future in the making,' and now young professionals from these institutes are making global history.

We are doing this at a time when many nations are facing a serious demographic squeeze, the rest of the world is ageing, and India is thriving as the youngest major economy in the world. By 2020, when the average age in Europe is going to be 46, in Japan 47 and 40 in America, 29 will be the average age in

India. Almost half of our population is under 25 and approximately 65 per cent under 35. As a young, dynamic, competitive and productive workforce, Indian graduates are primed to take over the world, responding to not only India's but the international society's greatest challenges.

However we do face some serious structural challenges that need to be addressed exigently. Our education system must add 'employability' to the catechism of Indian education policy thinking, to meet the forces of markets, the demands of research, the pursuit of knowledge and the imperative of building an equitable society. We are suffering from a systemic problem of skill mismatch between qualifications and jobs undertaken. The skill mismatch situation has seen marked improvement in certain sectors over time. I remember reading with shock and horror about the Madhya Pradesh Police Department in 2016. The Department had advertised 14,000 constable posts; 9 lakh candidates applied for these 14,000 jobs. Among them were nearly 10,000 engineering graduates and a dozen PhD holders, plus 1,90,000 graduates and 15,000 postgraduates. The minimum qualification for the post was just a Higher Secondary education. We are releasing graduates into an ecosystem that does not know how to use them; they settle for a constable post as an alternative to frying pakoras as some have advised them to do. A policy that encourages vocational study so that non-graduate technical and non-technical diploma/certificate holders are better equipped for occupations would help to close the skills gap and reduce the pressure on graduate higher education.

Too many of our graduates are over-qualified for the jobs available. For the talent we have, we don't seem to know what to do with it. Some 60 per cent of our engineers, for instance, find themselves in jobs that do not require an engineering degree (and I am not even counting those engineers who get no jobs at all). I am sure this won't be a problem for the graduates I am addressing today. But you must be aware of the broader national picture.

If we are to work to close this quality skill gap in high graduate intensity occupations, such as engineers, advocates, medical and legal professionals and other high technology service industries, we need to identify the actual demand from these sectors before we increase (or decrease) seats for these in our institutes of higher education; policymakers must be increasingly cognizant of market demands during policy formulation.

Our vision for the 21st century must be to make India a knowledge society. What do I mean by that phrase? To me, a knowledge society is one that is capable of both creating theoretical knowledge of global significance and then materially benefitting from it; a society where the pursuit of learning and innovation should not be constrained by any lack of access, infrastructure or support; where education is relevant to society, and provides the skills and competencies that society demands. We must understand clearly that we are talking of a knowledge society—one that is committed to excellence as an end in itself—and not just creating a knowledge economy.

It is well known that a strong culture of research and innovation is a very important driver to ensure technical and technological leadership, which ultimately translates into the growth of a strong, robust and self-sufficient economy and society. A look around the world today very clearly proves that investments in long-term research have a very direct impact on that nation's continued future success, intellectual as well as material. However, we are lacking rather miserably on this front as for such a high population: we have only awarded a meagre 50,226 MPhil and Doctorate degrees over multiple disciplines in the year 2014-15 (Department of Science and Technology, GoI)(1). Moreover, for the 2016-17, the number of patent applications filed was 45,555, with a dip of 3.2% compared to previous years

(Intellectual Property India Annual Report 2016-17, Office of the Controller General of Patents, Designs, Trademarks and Geographical Indications, GoI). As the Economic Survey 2018-19 highlighted, India's spending on R&D, at about 0.6 percent of GDP, is well below that of major nations such as the US (2.8), China (2.1), Israel (4.3) and Korea (4.2). Long-term economic growth depends ultimately on innovation and inventions, and there is a strong correlation between innovation and productivity. It is, therefore, of critical importance for academia and industry to participate and focus on research and innovation for growth. We will need to create an environment where research-led innovation plays a significant role in the day-to-day life of an average Indian citizen and change the world's perception so that India is seen as a global leader in providing worldclass education, cutting-edge research and a land of ample opportunities. We obviously aren't anywhere near there yet, which is why this is a long-term goal.

The accompanying worry is the outflow of Indian students due to the lack of opportunities available within the country. We need to reverse the doctoral brain drain by adapting the best practices from across the globe, not only in terms of overall infrastructure development (such as labs with state-of-the-art equipment), but also advancing the state-of-the-art in research, with milestones defined towards those targeted outcomes. Additionally, we also need to tackle the large numbers of dropouts in higher education—the major reason being a weak financial background.

- 1) <http://www.nstmis-dst.org/PDF2017/Table12.pdf>

However, a win-win situation can be achieved by introduction of vocational education at the secondary level. In South Korea and Australia, for example, around 25-40% of students adopt these vocational studies and are ready for job after 12th standard; many then join the university for further studies after they become financially sound. Whereas in the case of India we are struggling to provide fair access to motivated students. Last week, the students of Bangalore's National Law School University, who already pay 1,80,000 a year, were suddenly told, with no prior warning or consultation, that their fees were going up by 50,000 more. The impact of this on students studying on loans or scholarships and belonging to economically weaker backgrounds, is perhaps unfathomable. This is arguably the best legal university in the country, and a sound legal education is a foundation for our democracy. But our present Government will not invest in subsidizing scholarships for our best students, preferring to waste its money on grandiose statues instead. The case was no different at TISS Hyderabad, where students were forced to drop-out as the administration changed its rules, now demanding upfront payment for hostel and mess charges. The brunt of this has been felt the worst by students from the SC, ST and OBC communities, and all those who are pursuing their studies on scholarships and loans which have suddenly become inadequate.

Very often the regulatory systems we have in place result in making matters worse. I have great sympathy for the view that our higher education system is over-regulated and under-governed. The University Grants Commission and its ilk spend too much time telling universities what size of classrooms they must have and what courses they can teach, instead of focusing on learning outcomes and encouraging universities to develop their own standards of excellence in their own ways.

The fundamental problems that we face in our institutes of higher education often emerge from the way our schooling sector works. I vividly recall a visit during my time as the Minister of State at MHRD. It was a whitehaired lady who was running a school for tribal children on the fringes of Silent Valley and seeking a CBSE affiliation for her students, 60 per cent of who belonged to tribal families who had never

gone to school before and 40 per cent who were from below poverty line family backgrounds. CBSE told her: your results justify CBSE affiliation. But under our rules you need a No-Objection Certificate (NOC) from the state government.

So the lady trudged off to the state capital, where after some hours of waiting she was ushered in to see the relevant bureaucrat. No problem for the NOC, he told her; just pay the fee and you will have your certificate.

Relieved, she inquired what the fee was.

The official fee, she was informed, was seventeen rupees; however, before she could pay that and obtain the certificate, she had to pay the unofficial 35 lakhs, or more than 200,000 times the official fee.

Despairing—since that sum exceeded her annual budget for running her school—she took a flight to Delhi instead and came to see me. Upon hearing her story, I immediately called the capable and efficient bureaucrat heading CBSE. Why, I demanded, did we require a certificate whose very existence only served to provide a rent-seeking opportunity to state government officials?

The official saw my point and agreed instantly to recommend to the CBSE governing body that the NOC requirement be dispensed with. Unfortunately, a new Government came into power and scrapped the recommendation, as a result of which the lady's tribal school remained unaffiliated to the CBSE. The story has a happy ending: her affiliation finally came through this year. But she should never have had to go through what she did.

I tell this story not out of any sense of point-scoring but because I am acutely aware that there must be hundreds of other regulations—all well-intentioned in origin—that set back our efforts across the country to give our most deprived children the opportunity of a decent education. The state of our students are reflective of their teachers as well. We hold the world record for teacher absenteeism, with teachers who are too-often underpaid and, therefore, under-motivated. A national shortage of 25 lakh (2.5 million) teachers is one of our greatest problems. This insidiously translates into students with untapped skillsets and abilities, and a general withdrawal of interest from pursuing higher education as well. We do not have enough professors, researchers and scientific scholars in our university system, and we do not make it attractive enough for others to join their ranks. As it is, many qualified teachers are leaving university jobs to join the remedial institutes set up by private companies, where the conditions and the rewards are much better. Yet, the funds for teacher training, that most experts agree is key to the success of our education sector, have also been slashed, moving down from 871 crores in the last Budget to a meagre 125 crores in the current Budget.

Given the size and potential of our population, even foreign universities are now showing a keen interest in creating institutions in India. However, as with other sunrise sectors of our economy such as, telecom and aviation, the entry of private players in this socially sensitive sector has raised various concerns with regard to equality of access and quality of outcomes. To address these issues, the previous government had prepared legislation which could have created a more flexible and creative regulatory framework for this absolutely vital segment of our economy and society. However, it didn't pass the Standing Committee of Parliament. On this front, the major problem remains that our national educational policy remains completely out of step with the times. Whereas countries in the Middle East, and China itself, are going out of their way to woo foreign universities to set up campuses in their countries, India has been reluctant to fully operationalise the process of welcoming international campuses on its grounds. There is no doubt that given our current political scenario, many opportunities are being lost, and the true spirit of cosmopolitanism with it.

What is encouraging, however, is that new institutions are emerging in India of the quality of St. Xavier's University, to offer an Indian education to Indian students in keeping with the best available worldwide. The case at present seems to be one where the few excellent institutions, such as this one, represent islands of excellence floating in a sea of mediocrity. To keep up with demand—and the needs of the marketplace—shouldn't we have more quality institutions in every field that would serve as pillars of excellence?

Even institutions that we pride ourselves upon globally, have not seen much of a change. The government also talks about developing world class institutions in India and has allocated money for this in its latest Budget, but has also coupled this with slashing allocations for existing world-class institutes such as our IIM's whose share of central allocations have fallen to 445 crores from the 1036 crores they received last year, as well as a reduced allocation for the Higher Education Financing Agency. The increased allocation for research under the National Research Foundation, which is a welcome body in theory, opens the door for other concerns. Only time will tell if the government will use this body as a means to centralise government control of research, clamp down on academic and intellectual freedom on our campuses and hold research aid to our universities to ransom, subject to the kind of research they produce.

But the onus is upon you, our youth, to set the pace and be the changemakers. We have the opportunity to prevent our demographic dividend from becoming a demographic disaster. 225 million young people in the age group of 10–19 are poised for higher education. We must equip and enable these young people to become the work engines of the world. In order to harness young India's potential, we will require a pool of highly educated and exceptionally motivated individuals to provide leadership across all sectors. Therefore, if we educate, train and are able to transform our young people into productive members of society, we will succeed; if we fail, if allow millions of young people to grow up unequipped to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the world of the 21st century, then we will merely add to the cohorts of Naxalites and Maoists with no stake in our future, for nothing is more dangerous for a society like ours than a legion of uneducated, unemployable and frustrated young men.

The problems are evident to us. There is no dearth of ideas, originality or the willpower to introduce change in India, but ideas require one elementary but elusive thing — a change of policy at the top. There is a crying need to sweep the cobwebs out of the education policy and oblige the government to rethink the policies that are manifestly failing the country, and move towards capacity-building and excellence promotion.

Meanwhile, I rest my faith with you all and your abilities to not only recognise India's greatest weaknesses and turn them into our strengths, but also in your capacity to uphold universal goals and values that create a stronger world for generations to come. The bright minds beaming with youthful energy and vibrancy in this room today deserve nothing but the best.

As the Nobel Prize-winning Chilean poet Gabriela Mistral (a schoolteacher herself) so poignantly said, 'We are guilty of many crimes, but our worst sin is abandoning the child; neglecting the foundation of life. Many of the things we need can wait; The child cannot. We cannot answer Tomorrow. Her name is Today.'

So let a thousand educational flowers bloom. Now.

Jai Hind!