

Convocation Speech, IIM Calcutta, April 6th, 2019

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Most respected Shri Narayan Murthy, distinguished and honourable guests, our dear graduating students, their families, Director Professor Anju Seth, Deans, Program Chairs, our loved and respected Faculty colleagues, dear Staff members and the IIM Calcutta community. Namaskar.

Before I start speaking to you, my fellow students – and I call you fellow students because I wish to remain a student. I wish to continue to learn and I hope that I have not yet stopped learning.

Last year at the IIMC convocation, my Guru Prof. Srikant Datar made us all pause a moment and reflect. He made us look into our hearts and acknowledge the contributions of our parents. This act of his, I believe was so sublime that I would wish for it to become a “pratha”, a “tradition” at every convocation of IIM Calcutta. Real treasures, must be revisited again and again. There is only gain in doing so. So, as he did last year, this year too, and I quote, “I would like for us to take a moment to recognize the parents who are gathered here to celebrate in your achievements and distinctions. It is the many sacrifices that they have made and their desire that you have a better life than them that has brought you to where you are today. I know the pride and joy they feel. It makes what you have accomplished that much more worthwhile. In honouring you today, we are also honouring them and of course, your teachers, who gave you one of the most precious gifts anyone can give – their knowledge”. Today, I would like all of us here to pay our tribute to the teachers and professors, not just here at IIMC, but across our nation, who spend their life in the most significant, but unadvertised work. They form the bedrock on which a nation develops. Their dedication bears witness to the selflessness of the human spirit. Could I request you to please rise and join me in thanking them.

My dear graduating class, today is your day. Today you graduate from IIM Calcutta and enter the world of professionals. In your time as a student at IIM Calcutta, this probably will remain the single most important day on campus. All the hard-work and toil is being recognized and culminating in you becoming the newest members of the family of the IIM Calcutta alumni – an incredible distinction and a coveted privilege. Please accept my heartfelt congratulations and admiration for all of you. You will now become full independent earning members of “mother IIM Calcutta’s family”.

Here, I wish for you all to pause a moment and think of those of your colleagues who are not here today – not celebrating. Not graduating. Delve in your hearts and ask – what could you

all have done to help them, so that they too could have been here today. Keep them in your hearts and remain friends. Help each other. Life is long, very long and the balance sheet of life is only balanced at the end of the journey. So recognize early on, what of your actions will become assets on that “balance sheet”.

Last year, on January 31st, 2018, the IIM Act came into force. Under the provisions of this Act, The Board of Governors is now responsible for the general superintendence, direction and control of the affairs of the Institute and has the power to frame or amend or modify or rescind the regulations governing the affairs of the Institute to achieve the Vision and the Mission of the Institute.

As Chairman of the Board of Governors, and on behalf of the BoG, I had promised you, that we will strive to the best of our abilities to serve the best interest of IIM Calcutta. We will strive to extend IIMC’s eminence, not only nationally, but also globally. I recall saying – “True eminence will be ours, the day our best students will start wanting to come back to IIM Calcutta to take up the mantle to teach the next generations”. It is my privilege and honour to share with you that, we have succeeded in taking the first step in this direction. One from among our many distinguished alumni, Prof. Anju Seth, agreed to come back and lead IIMC. Thank you Prof. Seth for accepting the offer of the BoG to be Director. You agreed to lead IIMC in these first few crucial years post the IIM Act. We are confident that you will help IIMC benchmark itself to global standards and truly extend its eminence. We on the BoG and the faculty will support you fully in this journey. Just this morning the BoG approved a very generous and gracious offer by one of our alum, to endow the Institute with a Chair – named after two other of our alumni. The “Krishnan and Meena Ganesh” Chair. The BoG has offered Prof. Seth this Chair Professorship. This is in recognition of the excellence that Prof. Seth has achieved in her long career as a teacher.

I believe that you, the graduating students of IIMC, are the elite among the elite. You are among the most privileged and gifted sons and daughters of “Bhaarat mata”. After considerable deliberation, I decided that it is best to speak to you on thoughts that often arise in my heart now-a-days. I wish to share with you, my thoughts on two inter-related topics:

- Nation building and
- Nationalism

Nation building and nationalism are very vast topics. As you are among the privileged best sons and daughters of this nation, it is therefore also your first duty to explore and understand what nation building and nationalism mean to you. This is a topic that is close to my heart, but I must confess that I have never held a public office nor have I had work experience to support my views. But I will take the liberty of sharing with you my views on “nation building and nationalism and what they mean to me”.

At the beginning I admit that as a man, my thoughts on various subjects are largely coloured by what I believe, and what I believe is largely coloured by what I have experienced. My parents (who by the way are here sitting amongst you), are people of exceptionally strong character. It is they who instilled in me the love of my country. It is they who allowed me to nurture courage in my convictions.

What constitutes a nation? Are we a nation? What is nation building? What is nationalism? I struggled with these questions in my youth and till very recently. Then I met the teacher of my life – and I received from him the chance of many life times. A chance to walk with him, across this great nation, from Kanyakumari to Srinagar – on foot. Over the 476 days that I walked with him, I got my own insights, and answers to these vexing questions and my doubts melted away. I realized that these answers addressed the core of my own existence. They helped me address my role with all aspects of my life. They help me define my role in not just building a family, an organization, but at its widest, also in nation building. Hence, today, I don't come to you with any prescriptions. Rather, I would like to share with you my own experiences. I hope to make each of you think, question and seek your own answers. It is my hope that what took me 30+ years to conceptualize, you all should in a much shorter span. Is that being very ambitious – I think NOT! This sharing of knowledge selflessly is in my experience the most important first step in “nation building”.

Now that I shared with you the first factor critical to nation building – “sharing of knowledge and experiences selflessly”, let me go further.

It is the courage of my convictions and the desire to seek “root causes” of the problems and issues that life makes me experience, which has aided me in my life. And if my ordinary life can benefit from these qualities (gunas in Hindi), I am convinced that so can yours. A nation is its people. A people who have the ability to conceptualize positive learning from their lives are an asset. A nation which has more and more of such people is blessed. **So, getting to the root causes of problems fearlessly is another factor that is critical to nation building.**

So let me repeat: “sharing knowledge and experience selflessly” and “seeking root causes of problems fearlessly” – they are critical factors that go into building a nation. Once we imbibe in our lives these two critical aspects we need to explore what next. In my own experience, I believe that our collective ability to ask HONEST questions and equally importantly, our ability to seek HONEST answers will determine the quality of the nation we wish to forge. So dear graduating class, have the courage to ask “honest questions” and seek “honest answers” – NOT convenient answers. This requires courage – so be fearless. This also requires an ability to seek root causes. And finally you will require to practice. Relentless practice. Practice with every situation life throws at you. With sufficient practice you will find yourself thinking “clearly” and “independently”. You will then have not only the courage but also the emotional stamina to take on what at first glance will seem as impossible problems.

Let me now touch upon some very basic thoughts. I stress – these are not my thoughts; these are not new thoughts, but I believe you MUST be made aware of these thoughts.

Nation building is important if we think of ourselves as one nation? So what makes us one nation? Bhaarat, is unlike other modern nations. Modern nations are based on language; religion; race; ethnicity or even to some extent ideology. Essentially it is the sameness of people that goes into making a modern nation. But we, as Bharatvarsh, have never defined our existence on “sameness”. If you ever walk this nation, like I did, you will notice that every 300 km or so, things change – people; clothes; the dialect of a language; food; customs etc. So I asked, what makes us one nation? It is not language, it is not race, it is not religion – yes, this nation even predates religion. In my experience, I found that this is a land whose foundation is the “universal law” – “sanatan dharma”. While I don’t claim to have read the Vedas, the Upanishads or the Bhagawat Geeta – I will be surprised if anyone can find the word Hindu in them. But one does find the word “dharma”. While most other nations are made up of believers, the people of this land have always been essentially “seekers”. Seekers of “truth”, “liberation”, “moksha” – call it by what name you want. And this “seeking”, is not something that was invented. It is the nature of all human intelligence. Any human being whose basic needs have been satisfied wants to know; realize and liberate himself. No matter how conditioned they are by science, technology or any ideology. **And in this seeking we found ONENESS.**

This then is a nation seekers. And seekers can seek in infinite ways – they are never aligned to any one particular thing. So in my experience, here-in lies the root cause of our plural nature. It was during the 476 days of the Walk, that I realized that “being inclusive”, is our nature. This is a land where thousands of years ago, our ancestors proclaimed – “sarve bhavantu sukhinah” and “loka samasta sukhino bhavantu”. They taught us to seek happiness for entire “srishti” – “all of creation”. This understanding liberated me of most of my confusions about my roots. And I hope you too will understand this very clearly. While the 42nd amendment of our Constitution stresses that we are a Socialist Secular republic – let me reassure you, that our secular nature has been in existence much before the 42nd amendment to our Constitution. It is in our DNA. Always remember this. For me, during my Walk, I experienced this spiritual heritage of ours. “Sanatana dharma” – the heritage that makes us seekers of truth and liberation. I believe it is this that binds us as one nation. This is the life breath of Bhaarat mata. Don’t ever allow this life breath to cease.

You may want to now ask, why is nationhood important? Why cannot we think of the whole world? This is exactly the line my inquiry took. In the spiritual world, there is no concept of nations – there is only all of creation – all of humanity included. But in reality, a nation is today the largest piece of humanity that you and I can commit ourselves to. **So being committed to a nation is expanding the scope of one’s passions, involvement and concerns beyond the**

narrow likes and dislikes of our own self. Isn't this a leap forward – a great step? When you have such emotions – this is nationalism.

We all cherish our diversity, and our national boast is – unity in diversity (said in Hindi, it is *vividhata mein ekta*). But, when I see the problems our nation has, and when I delve into my heart and fearlessly seek the root causes, I notice that at the least, since the 42nd amendment, if not since independence, our leaders have focused on “diversity” to a point where we have forgotten that the key operative word in our boast should be “unity”, “*ekta*”. Without unity, there is only weakness. Without unity, there is weakness even in homogeneity. Therefore, in my view another key factor that goes into defining nationalism is – “unity”.

Actions and utterances by each one of us, individually or collectively that strengthen our unity should be considered as nationalism that aids national development. Conversely, those actions and/or utterances that strike at our unity and try to tear our social fabric must be scrutinized; questioned and discarded with all our combined strength.

I wish to now distinguish between 3 distinct concepts, which have wholly different connotations. As a practicing manager understanding the difference in them helped clear my conscience and allowed me to seek root causes to issues and implement initiatives fearlessly. It may help you also.

The ill-informed are often confused about: equality; equality before law and equal opportunity. Now equality before law is the very foundation of a nation. This isn't very difficult to understand. Most developed nations therefore have a Uniform Code of law for both civil and criminal matters. Just as companies and institutions have uniform rules and regulations and codes of conduct. Equal opportunity on the other hand is the very foundation of “social justice”. Hence, dynastic succession or entitlements due to birth undermine equal opportunity and strike at the very roots of social justice. If allowed to perpetuate, they will hollow out institutions that are pillars of a nation. Only people with a sense of entitlement tend to write out cheques that you and I the citizens have to help pay up. So, it is our duty to be alert and beware. My great grandfather Gandhiji advocated “*shram daan*”, or “bread labour”. You work and you earn. This was followed strictly even in his ashram. There were no free lunches. Our Chief Guest today, Shri Narayan Murthy embodies everything that Gandhiji was. Contrast his approach, where his desire for equitable distribution of wealth became the policy of the company he founded. He became the change he wished to see. He set the benchmark for Corporate India. He is a living example of what is true humanity. Now a word on equality. Given equality before law and equal opportunity, different people will attain different positions in life, depending on their intelligence; their character; their capacity to work hard and their capacity to take risks. Therefore it is my experience that in progressive nation's equality among all people is unachievable even where equality before law and equal opportunity exist.

Soon you all will be leaders of men and women. In organizations or even at the national level. So let me share with you my experiences:

- Any organization or a nation is its people – human resources are the true asset. You would be well advised not to take your eye off making investments to increase the human capital – via investing in nutrition; health; education and training. This is in contradistinction to investment in physical assets such as infrastructure and factories.
- You will have control over men and women – so let me give you the first of the two talismans that have served me in my life, so remember this, apply this and you will succeed:
 - The safety, honour and welfare of your country comes first always and every time.
 - The honour and safety of the men you command come next
 - Your own safety, honour and welfare come last always and every time
- Our nation's security is very important. It is only in peace that there is scope for development. And the muscle behind national security is manufacturing. So I urge you to support initiatives that encourage local manufacturing. For the many engineers among you, do consider careers in manufacturing also as I did.
- Similarly a nation as big as ours needs serious depth of talent to manage infrastructure. Do consider career options in management of infrastructure also.
- All growth depends on energetic activity. There can be no development without work. An honest day's work is in my view the only instrument for national advancement. **It would not be an exaggeration to say that "the country direly needs dirtier fingernails and cleaner minds" – think about it.**
- Just as we aspire and dream for our children, so also must we dream for a nation. Our national dreams and aspirations must be lofty. "Failure is not a crime, aiming low is". So please "continue to strive and continue to have a dream". Never stop. Nation building is not a part time job. It is complex "social engineering". It takes time. It takes effort. And it takes love and dedication for the nation. Don't ever stop.
- In my career, I discovered that problems are solved by wiping tears and joining hearts. Of this I am convinced. I pray that each of you discovers this soonest. This will enrich and ennoble your lives.
- As I wrap up, let me share the second talisman that has served me unfailingly. This is a talisman which my great grandfather Gandhiji urged us to use – and I quote:
 - Whenever you are in doubt, or when the self becomes too much with you, apply the following test: Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest man (woman) whom you may have seen and ask yourself this, "if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him (her). Will he (she) gain anything by it? Will it restore him (her) to a control over his (her) own life? Then you will find your doubts and yourself melt away.

- I have used this talisman often, Yes in corporate situations also – and truth be told, I lost nothing, not even money – certainly not my soul.

In ending, I believe that our nation – Bharat is not just a nation, it is the “world inside a nation”. Never forget this.

May the Divine enshrine in each one of you “fearlessness” and “courage of conviction”.

Keep in touch this is your Institute.

Thank you for listening to me patiently. My best wishes to all of you, always,

Jai Hind