Speech by Shri Sudeep Banerjee, Chancellor, NUEPA

At the 4th Annual Convovation of Maulana Azad National Institute of Technology, Bhopal
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It is a matter of great honour for me to be here with you this afternoon on the occasion of the Fourth Convocation ceremony of this important national Institute. I take this opportunity to congratulate all the students who will be receiving their credentials today as token of the successful completion of their studies here. I also compliment the academic staff who have been behind the success of all these students.

It is with a great sense of satisfaction that we are honouring today Prof.P.Rama Rao, a distinguished scientist, academic and administrator, who has contributed enormously to the development of scientific and technical education in the country. In honouring him, we are setting before our youth a great example of inspiration.

Similarly, we are also indeed happy to honour Prof.B.Mungekar, a distinguished economist, academic administrator, now at the helm of planning the social sector in the Planning Commission. He is a great champion of the cause of education in the country as also for ensuring justice to the weaker sections of our society. His has been a life of dedication to the cause of the under-privileged in the country. Unfortunately, he is unable to join us on this occasion because of prior commitments.

Today, it is only proper that we recall the spirit behind the setting up of these institutions in free India. Within a decade-and-half of our Independence, practically all the major national institutions like IITs, Regional Engineering Colleges and so many other premier institutions and universities were established. We were a new nation and had a commitment to our future and had great confidence in our resources. We were not deterred by the fact that these new institutions will suffer because of an inability to build infrastructure or laboratories or getting teachers. Nevertheless, our foundational efforts paid off. Today we take pride in the fact of being a major player in the newly developing global knowledge economy. Having said that, I must note that in the recent years, there has been a certain amount of

collapse of that bold imagination of the earlier decades of our freedom. Today, we are crying about the lack of faculty and other resources and not being able to set up as many institutions of excellence as we did in those first few years. We need to reflect over this and it is our duty to see that the academic community engages with this question. We also cannot allow people who have no knowledge of educational issues to decide the fate of our higher education system.

Our premier technical institutes have provided excellent scientific and technical knowledge to our students. This is no mean achievement. However, there are certain issues of concern that have received attention in recent years. Institutions of higher learning cannot merely be institutions for the dissemination of knowledge. It is imperative that they are also producers of knowledge. The research undertaken in our institutions is both quantitatively and qualitatively short of realising both its own potential as well as of any comparable institutions in the world. To contribute substantially to the knowledge pool, teachers need to engage with frontier areas of research, and not just borrow knowledge. Otherwise, we will tend to get out of date. I hope our institutions in general, and particularly MANIT Bhopal, will take up this challenge.

The second area of concern is the narrow focus of our technical education. We have neglected basic sciences in our institutions. More so, we have totally neglected social sciences, humanities and the arts from the curricular attention in these institutions. Therefore, though we call these institutions universities, they remain one dimensional polytechnics, giving only skill sets to the students. The original concept of IITs did include engagement with other disciplines and indeed there was some effort to introduce other areas of study in the IIT system. However, over the years, this became a marginal and symbolic activity. NITs lagged behind even then. During the last couple of years, we have encouraged institutions to develop programmes in basic and social sciences and humanities. I am very happy that some of the IITs have taken up this work and are now becoming really integrated centres of knowledge.

I say this to underline the point of view of these other disciplines and to highlight the opportunities that these disciplines must get. In a holistic university system, students do not just learn from the narrow stream of specialization that they are a part of, but also from the overall ambience of a campus in which multiple areas of intellectual activity is explored. Students and teachers, of technology and sciences, interact with social scientists and writers and artists, and together they produce that student which has a special stamp of that institution. In the absence of such an exposure, we produce one dimensional graduates. This is unfair to our students. It is, therefore, our effort that all these institutions including MANIT Bhopal, become vibrant centres for pursuit of knowledge in every field of human development, and we do hope, in the coming years, we will be able to develop this kind of an ambience in this campus.

Another concern that I wish to highlight is the institute-centric approach to knowledge dissemination. In such an atmosphere, we do not learn from our surroundings, and indeed are immune to things happening around us. Bhopal is a beautiful city, particularly because of the magnificent lake it has. I do not know if students of this institute, particularly of the Civil Engineering Department, wonder who made this lake and what was the technology behind it. Some of us would be surprised to know that this lake was built by a Gond Queen named Kamla. The

Kamla Park on the upper lake is named after her. Similarly, there are ruins of a dam near Bhojpur. Why was it abandoned is an issue that should fascinate engineering students. Bhopal is also a city of magnificent buildings. I do not know if the students of Architecture in this institute know about some of these magnificent structures. Apart from the modern-day works of great beauty like the Vidhan Sabha and the Bharat Bhavan by Charles Correa, there are also medieval and ancient marvels in and around Bhopal; the Stupa of Sanchi to the Bhojpur Temple, the structures in Islamnagar and Taj-ul-Masajid in Bhopal, are all great architectural achievements. Do we ever wonder about the architects of these marvels, about the tools they worked with, about the engineering concepts that they engaged with ? Do we engage with such questions in our classrooms ?

We do not even see and recognize the living great among us. Bhopal is home to the largest collection of Syed Hyder Raza paintings in Bharat Bhavan. Raza is from Madhya Pradesh and is arguably among the greatest of the modern Indian painters. Habib Tanvir is among the greats of all time in Theater. He lives in Bhopal. Raza and Habib Tanvir bring glory to Bhopal, all over the world. But students of a premier institute do not get a chance to relate to them.

Among the young artists, Gundecha Brothers have made Bhopal their home. They are celebrated all over the world but do we provide an environment that enables our bright students to appreciate their Dhrupad and these contemporary exponents of this great tradition. Arundhati Roy is one of the foremost public intellectuals in the world and lives next door in Panchmarhi. Thousands throng to her meetings in the university campuses across the world but we do not create a space in which our bright youngsters could experience the thrill of her presence and engage with the isues that she so powerfully champions.

A narrow curricular focus again restricts our potential to develop with many dimensions. As a result, the products of fine institutions also develop a narrow techno-centric vision of their work and indeed of their lives. Because we do not look outside, not only do we miss out on the physical aspects of reality around us as I just mentioned, we also miss out on the living reality around us. We are not aware of the surrounding nature. Even more critically, we do not notice the community of people living around us. The more educated we become in such a scenario, the more alienated we become from our own people. We do not notice the hopes, expectations and fears of vast sections of our community engaged in a grim battle for survival. A narrow vision given by the institutions makes us perceive reality in terms of statistics, and we are unable to fathom the real meaning below those sets of figures. We see the way the economy grows or the sensex moves up and down, but we do not see thousands of suicides of farmers. Having spent years in Bhopal, we do not see the ongoing suffering of lakhs of victims of the Bhopal gas tragedy. We do not see the hardship that children and women face in our society. A narrow techno-centric knowledge dissemination system diminishes us as human beings. It should be, therefore, our collective endeavour to develop these institutions of excellence within a holistic frame, such that not only competent engineers are produced but also aware and engaged human beings.

I am, perhaps, over-stating my point. I am sure all the students have developed many insights about our surroundings and our people, despite these handicaps. But still, I am mentioning this fact because if students reflect over this, they will be able to identify any lack of ability to appreciate life in its varied

dimensions and even after leaving the portals of this great institution, will try to overcome handicaps, if any, that they carry with them. Many students feel that their learning curve has peaked as they pass out of an institution, but students will discover sooner or later that the knowledge that they carry from the institution does not take them very far. In a certain sense, real education begins only after one completes one's formal education. Then one has to be one's own guide. It is up to each one of us to carry the knowledge that we have received at an institution as a baggage or as an empowering tool to further explore reality. In the real exploration of life, one has to move forward with the enormous internal resources that each one of us has. One has to become a lamp unto ourselves as the great Buddha said, "*Atma Dipo Bhav".* We have within us the potential to be the source of light, not only unto ourselves but also for those around us who are in need of a little helpful light.

With these words, I once again thank the institution for giving me this great honour of being with you this afternoon and convey my very best wishes to all of you who are graduating into the world with a stamp of approval and encouragement from this beloved institution.