

29th Convocation Ceremony on March 20, 2021

Convocation Address by

Ms Nirmala Sitharaman

Honourable Minister, Government of India

Good Evening to everybody!

Dr Karsanbhai Patel, President of Nirma University, the faculty, the students, the parents and all those who are interested in good quality education in India. I am extremely glad to be participating as a guest in the 29th Convocation which is being held today. It's only a virtual participation and I'll admit I look forward to a day when I can physically appear and be there in the University and understand more and more about the good work that you all are doing. Established only in about 2003, within slightly over a decade you have made immense contribution to higher education in India. And on that score I think the teachers, the management, and the cohorts of students who have passed out have really made a milestone achievement in university education in India and on that score I wish to place my appreciation.

Convocation are days when students look forward to receiving their degrees, certificates of good performance, medals and all kinds of commensurations which are due to them. But every time we pass out of universities we also implicitly commit ourselves to building a better country, better society, better future for ourselves and for the generations to come. And therefore every convocation is a very sacred event. If you ask me, each Convocation builds one more brick in the fundamentals of India's society essentially because the brick is made out of the soil of this land, the spirit of our forebears and also the cultural inheritance which actually colours and also gives the strength to the brick itself and therefore I would think it's important for us to understand that whilst it gives us extreme and good joy, memorable event that it may be, a convocation is the day that foundation is getting strengthened both by the institution and also by each one of us who participate in this event and particularly the students who have to take from that day a greater responsibility towards their own career and also towards India and its future. And in this I concede the role of the government is from the platform of a duty its government's duty to support education, to support young population, and students because it is they who look forward to building with their skills, with their knowledge a better society and after all it is a compact between the citizens and the government and the state that it is necessary for facilitation the government in the larger public good does everything to enable and facilitate the students and it is in that spirit that the New Education Policy (NEP) of India has been brought out recently and it has really been welcomed by all stakeholders in the education sector. I think it gives the students the flexibility which is required to do interdisciplinary study. I am one of those who benefited from interdisciplinary nature of education. If it is provided that actually gives a wholesome and holistic

approach to education itself. So our government's focus I suppose like many others before us is very clearly on to focus on not just imparting education but also making students employable and that is where most things we have done to the student, their education, their skill imparting have all been to awaken that enterprise spirit that lies in every individual. That spirit may be useful for one particular set of trade or another particular set of trade, never matter. That spirit is what is important and I know Nirma University being in Gujarat, a land of entrepreneurship doesn't need a lot more to be said on it. But the education policy itself it focuses on not just rote learning, not just imparting in the class between the teacher and the student a certain kind of exchange of knowledge, exchange of information; it's more to draw that spirit from within each student and that is why it is important. I would like to with great pleasure recall the words of Swami Vivekananda on this where he speaks about the purpose of education.

Purpose of education he says is to build life, to build character so life building – character building engagement is what is education for him. And life building and character building also leads to assimilation of ideas. An assimilation of ideas is not just for itself. Whilst assimilating these ideas the key ideas will have to be completely imbued by us, absorbed by us, and not just absorbing it, living by it. Only when you live by certain of these key ideas which you may later call as your goal, your objective or your principle but unless those ideas which you assimilated, imbued within yourselves are set as your goals or principles to live by them you really don't become an educated individual. And I am only paraphrasing Swami Vivekananda's thoughts in this where he says someone who lives by the principle, lives by the key ideas that he has accumulated in the process of education is a far better educated and knowledgeable person than he who has just memorized say thousand books. Absolutely true. Wouldn't you agree because it is not by rote learning that people have become great men, it is more the way in which ideas have been absorbed, lives and exemplar life and living an exemplar's life he actually stands out as one of those knowledgeable wise men and women around and that is why that spirit of Swami Vivekananda is what is guiding this government whilst we revamp education. And education system whether it is in the primary level or in the higher education level.

One or two announcements in the budget recent one, February 1, 2021 may be very pertinent in this context for me to recall. We have come up with a National Apprenticeship Training Scheme for providing post education apprenticeship, training of graduates particularly those in engineering with diploma and graduation and I have given an outlay of Rs 3000 crores for this particular thing because most of the time when you speak to the corporate leaders, business leaders; they do say India produces a large number of graduates in every one particularly in the STEM area, you know Science and Technology, Engineering and Medicine. You have a lot of graduates coming out of universities but most often even in those sectors where the churn is a lot more people in the business areas, business leaders often say yes we have these graduates coming, we get them recruited but it takes nearly a year, complete year for them to even understand and fit in into the groove. Employability becomes an issue. Many of the employers therefore spend not just one year in investing in that employee who has just joined them but yet to contribute to them in making him

employable. So it is the necessary skill set which are for employment which are probably not adequately present even after the college or the university education. And that is where this Apprenticeship Training Scheme that we planned for which outlay is been made is of importance. There are also negotiations going on which again I mentioned during the budget with countries like the UAE, with Japan; each one according to the kind of skill sets that they would need for the various kinds of job offers that they have in this post corona world. So these kind of engagement with those governments clearly indicates to us what is actually required of many of our graduates so that opportunities are galore. Most of these countries do want our Indian graduates because they contribute with a certain amount of sincerity, with a certain kind of dedication which is so typical in the Indian students and I am so happy for that but dedication requires the suffusion of these extra skills, whether it is language or whether it is certain set of skills which is required in those particular countries and we are ensuring that the engagement is going to give us that advantage with which our youth can be better trained. And therefore I would want to say, Indian education system gives several such knowledge based talents, knowledge based endowments to the student but a bit more of value addition in the form of those skills required is what is being driven by government so that students have that lead advantage when they face the market for their jobs.

Now also I wish to recall that we had announced even in 2019 setting up of a National Research Foundation which would pool together all government's money which is scattered around, scattered across various departments and therefore not giving us that lead advantage. Now because we pooled it all up to form the National Research Foundation, I am glad to say a 50,000 crore allocation has been made for over five years in which this entire money would be available for additional research, innovative research and also looking at strengthening of those ecosystems which prevail for research in this country. There are about 24 of them. All of them need greater strengthening. They have been there but the synergy of these 24 ecosystems for research and for greater innovative thought is not yet prevalent and therefore this 50,000 crores over those five years will hopefully strengthen and give that value addition for our research and research related activities.

I am sure many of you are aware that private sector has been given a lot of importance in this budget and in that we have opened up several areas which were till now completely reserved only for government and why do I have to say this in the university context particularly during a convocation. I say it only because the areas which are being opened up are so rich in possibilities, these are the areas in which university graduates, students who are coming out of university have immediate possibility to get in and be an entrepreneur. To innovate and support, to contribute with the newer thought, to bring in that youth energy which these sectors constantly survive and prosper with. For example, Space and Atomic Energy can immediately benefit from that energy that you have towards contributing with positive thoughts and also with your fresh skill sets and therefore space and atomic energy being opened up for private participation immediately offers immense scope for even individuals and not necessarily large companies who can contribute to that area of activity and there are immense possibilities. And therefore I quickly say that we have also in the

recent budget allowed for one person companies to come into play. They can grow without any restrictions on paid up capital or on turnover. So when you have given this opportunity for one person companies to come in areas like space and atomic energy can easily have your inputs for their betterment and for your greater satisfaction that you are able to contribute to a premier frontier sector which is required in this country. Many startups have also during the Covid phase, I say this only because that is the kind of thing which Indian ingenuity has brought in. Covid pandemic was a lockdown, majority of the time you had to be partly of fully restricted in your movements. But even that did not deter our entrepreneurs. Look at the newer areas into which many of our startups have moved in saying oh even during a pandemic this is where my contribution will have to be and even then they have grown to become unicorns. Startups that have turned unicorns thanks entirely due to the corona restrictions. I can name a few, Raise the pay, Unacademy, Nykaa, stand out as entrepreneurs who have found niche areas thanks during the lockdown. So that a tendency, a good and positive tendency which exists in our minds as Indians to find newer opportunities, to find opportunities even during challenging times is what the spirit of being Indian entrepreneur is. And these are the times when most of us can find that energy, can find that positivity and find that typical Indian spirit of not just survive but prosper even if there are challenges.

I request, appeal to each one of you students who are getting your degrees today to look for that with a greater quest because that's what is going to make you as a strikingly different graduate, as a strikingly different youth, strikingly different youngster to stand out as an example for say several more youngsters. In this, even as I talk about students what they can do, what particularly enterprising individuals can do I will not forget the role of the teachers in this digital era. Look at the unsung revolution which is happening in primary schools. Children are probably looking to have company, they want to be physically next to their friends and which is right. But even than what is the contribution of the teacher, the online classes to which many of our teachers have very quickly adapted is something I would like to talk in every street corner. Today a teacher, a simple private primary school teacher has quickly adapted all kinds of technologies to reach out to their students who come from very different backgrounds. Not all of them even possess a phone in their hand but teachers have made sure that the communication is kept, imparting of learning is happening, and children from diverse backgrounds are being kept on contact, they are in the loop. Yes, it also has highlighted the big disparity between those who can access technology and those who cannot. But the fact remains that the teachers have tried bridging this gap and have also kept the momentum abound without betraying the fatigue which can set in. I can for one surely tell you moving from one to another, back to back on video conferences can be an exhausting exercise. But never mind, these teachers have not betrayed that exhaustion, that fatigue which can set in. And therefore teachers in our society, particularly in this rapid setting in digital era have done brilliantly for us and no wonder when the Prime Minister speaks of India which can be a Vishvaguru, it is this which makes them, it is this which Prime Minister and also all the ancient seers who have told us India has the potential to be a Vishvaguru. It is this kind of quality in a teacher which can rapidly adapt to changing circumstances, but not lose connection with their

students. And that is where Indian teachers have got that kind of a quality which makes us particularly as one of those who can be honestly teacher to the entire world.

I have spoken a word about the entrepreneurial spirit of Gujarat. Very many things have always happened for the first time there. I look at Nirma University as not just an educational institution of immense national pride but also as string medium through which this entrepreneurial and resilient spirit of India which is disseminated throughout the country.

As you stand as a strong medium, I wish you all the very best but one thing I would appeal to all the students, Covid or no Covid, jobs and jobs accessing being a challenge, notwithstanding and also this whole thing of do I match up with expectation of different people, do I really match up the expectation of my peer group, do my teachers like me, do my teachers understand me, understand my skills; none of this should be as a fear in your mind. I appeal to all of you, you've accessed some best of education through your university but I would like to tell you that young minds should have no fear, normally they don't, but I still say they should have no fear, particularly I would appeal that you shouldn't be worrying about approval by others. It is important to contribute your own, it is important to understand what desire, what drive, what energy lies within you and contribute to the society without a sense of fear.

I like to quote from Bertrand Russell, one of the very important thinkers in the English speaking world. In India we do somewhat read some of the western thinkers. As we say in Rigveda, knowledge coming from anywhere is good for us we will hear from all sides of the world. The window will be left open for knowledge to come in like a gentle breeze. I like to quote from

Bertrand Russell on this particular aspect, Fear of public opinion; I'm quoting here:

Fear of public opinion like every other form of fear is oppressive and stunts growth. I repeat this line, fear of public opinion like every other form of fear is oppressive and stunts growth. It is difficult to achieve any kind of greatness, it is difficult to achieve any kind of greatness while the fear of this kind remains strong. Unquote. This is a line I've taken from Bertrand Russell's book 'The Conquest of Happiness' he wrote it in 1930s. Today it is still valid. Fear of any kind of approval, or any kind of public opinion should not tug at the heart of young minds. You are there to be unfettered and to go forward and to contribute this great country's progress.

Thank you very much Nirma University for having given me this great opportunity to be with you all and to interact with your students.

I wish all of them a very best of future and the university a bright future too.

Jai Hind!