

## **Deshratna Dr. Rajendra Prasad Memorial Lecture on 'Building India into a Knowledge Society and the Relevance of Nalanda'**

It is an honour for me to have been invited to deliver this year's Deshratna Dr. Rajendra Prasad Memorial Lecture. Dr. Rajendra Prasad was one of the most distinguished among the first generation of statesmen who led India to independence and then played a key role in laying the foundations of a vibrant democratic republic. Rajendra babu, as he was affectionately known to his many admirers and disciples, presided over the Constituent Assembly, established soon after India's independence. The extremely important political task of framing India's Constitution, was shepherded with great acumen and sagacity by Dr. Prasad. He was deeply respected for his erudition, his consensus-building abilities, his unfailing modesty and good humour. When the country became a republic in 1950, the Constituent Assembly elected him as its first President. He continued to serve as the first citizen of India till 1962, the only president to have served in this highest office twice. Once he demitted office, Dr. Rajendra Prasad came back to his native Bihar. I still recall visiting him in the company of my father, Dr. Raghunath Saran, who had served as his personal physician. It was in a very humble cottage at Sadaqat Ashram where he spent

his last days until his death on 28 February 1963. He was the perfect embodiment of “high thinking and simple living” and Bihar should be proud of one of its most illustrious sons.

The Constitution of India is a very important document not only because it sets out the structure of the Indian State, its institutions and processes of governance, but also because it reflects a breathtaking vision of India’s future which our founding fathers sought to embody in its contents. The vigorous debates among the very distinguished members of the Constituent Assembly are fascinating. They reflect the diversity of India, the multiplicities which defined its existing reality, but at the same time, a broad consensus on what India and its people should aspire to become. There was an acknowledgement that the political, social and economic reality of India called for differential arrangements to advance those sections of society, which had suffered oppression and disabilities of various kinds through the ages. The country’s immense diversity also necessitated safeguards for deeply held social and cultural identities. However, there was an over-riding vision of a unity which would not suppress, but would transcend diversity to create an enlightened society, based on individual rights and obligations of equal citizens in a plural and secular democracy. The

Constitution of India upholds a polity which is citizen-centric and the State is committed to safeguarding individual-based rights, while community or group-based entitlements are temporary detractions, which must eventually give way to the full enjoyment of the individual rights enshrined in the Constitution. It is important to recall this fundamental character of our Constitution and the vision of its founding fathers, which underlie its specific provisions, at a time when the narrower and sometimes even anachronistic community or group based entitlements are being perpetuated and threaten to erode the original spirit of the Constitution.

Why is this original spirit of our Constitution so important in dealing with the contemporary challenges which we confront as a nation? The makers of the Constitution envisioned a society which would enable every citizen to achieve his individual genius and the potential of his or her personality to the fullest extent, without regard to caste, creed or religious persuasion. It would be a society which would ensure equality of opportunity and not equality of entitlement, and equality of opportunity could only be created if there was universal access to education, to health, to security and absence of discrimination. It is only when the country marched ahead towards this goal, would it be able to

unleash the creative and innovative energies of its people to confront and overcome the challenges of widespread poverty, disease and social and economic equality. In a very basic sense the Constitution of India recognized that the most precious resource available to the country was its people and that it is the quality of human resources which would determine its future.

This understanding reflected the outstanding intellectual abilities of the members of the Constituent Assembly. It was a veritable knowledge pool, or gyan-sagar, which set a compass for India to march ahead to its destiny. But this was also a unique assemblage of people steeped in the civilizational values which, through the millennia, had given India its unique identity in the family of nations. Reading through the records of the Constituent Assembly, what we find truly striking is the quality of debate, the sharpness of argument, the ready embrace of dissent and the unfailing mutual respect for differing viewpoints. There is a confidence with which these debates were undertaken, confidence – indeed conviction – that it is only through this clash of titan minds would emerge the Constitution which their beloved India deserved.

The Nobel Laureate, Amartya Sen, has celebrated the Argumentative Indian in his book of essays with the same title. He has drawn attention to the long-standing tradition of public debate and intellectual pluralism that is the hallmark of India. Nowhere was this tradition more in evidence than in the great university of Nalanda in Bihar, which is being re-created in a contemporary incarnation. Until recently, Amartya Sen was its first chancellor who dedicated himself to recreating the spirit of Nalanda in its modern incarnation, becoming a centre of excellence in the pursuit of knowledge in all its myriad dimensions. Most importantly to become a venue for intellectual debate, a place which the argumentative Indian and friends from around the world could call home.

It will be of interest to this audience to know that the idea of reviving the ancient monastery has been around for several decades. In fact, on 19 November, 1958 Dr. Rajendra Prasad, as President of India, inaugurated the Nava Nalanda Vidyalaya, which is a predecessor of the current more ambitious university.

The monastic university of Nalanda flourished from the 5<sup>th</sup> century A.D. to the 13<sup>th</sup> century A.D. and was the acknowledged knowledge capital, famed for the excellence throughout Asia. Over the 800 years of its continuous existence, Nalanda gathered a massive library, not unlike ancient Alexandria. Unfortunately, it

suffered the same tragic fate of being destroyed at the hands of iconoclastic invaders. It is said that after Bakhtiar Khilji destroyed the monastery and the attached university. The vast collection of books and manuscripts in its famed library was still burning more than a month thereafter. You can imagine the intellectual impoverishment this resulted in. This was a loss not only for India but the whole world.

I wish to dwell a little more in detail on the legacy of Nalanda and the relevance of the Nalanda spirit in the task of nation building.

It was the Chinese pilgrim, Xuan Zang, who came to Nalanda in the seventh century during the reign of King Harsha of Kanauj. He studied and then later taught at Nalanda University and has left a very interesting account of his alma mater in his celebrated book, Xi You Ji, or Journey to the West. Here is how he describes Nalanda:

From Tibetan accounts we learn that Nalanda housed a substantial library, probably the most valuable repository of knowledge in the ancient world. The library known as Dharmaganja comprised three large buildings, the Ratnasagara, the Ratnadadhi and the Ratnaranjaka. The Ratndadhi was a nine

storey building and stored some of the university's most sacred and rare manuscripts including the Prajnaparamita and the Samajguhya.

During the time Xuan Zang spent at the university, its rector was a widely renowned scholar, Silabhadra Maha Thera. There are historical accounts of scholars from China, Japan, Korea, Sri Lanka, Tibet, Indonesia and Thailand and even Turkey coming to study at the university.

Nalanda was the most reputed of the ancient Indian universities, but there were several others enjoying high reputation. These include Vikramshila near modern Bhagalpur and Odantapuri, said to be located barely six miles from Nalanda. These, too, were centres of excellence and conditions of entry were unusually strict. Again from Tibetan accounts we learn that there were six Dvarapanditas, or "keepers of the gate" referred to by Xuan Zang, deployed at Vikramshila. These dvarapanditas were all eminent logicians and came from various parts of India. The list is worth noting:

At the East Gate, Ratnakarasanti

At the West Gate, Vagivarakirti of Benares

At the North Gate, Naropa, probably from Tibet

At the South Gate, Prajnakaramati

At the First Central Gate, Ratnavajra of Kashmir

At the Second Central Gate, Jnana-srimitra of Gauda.

Scholars from Nalanda and the other universities in Bihar were in great demand all over Asia. It is estimated that nearly three thousand Indian masters from these centres of learning had travelled to China between the 4<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries AD, until this traffic was interrupted by the Muslim invasions into India. They undertook the translation of a large number of Buddhist texts from Sanskrit into Chinese. Tibetan Buddhism was also enriched by Indian masters like Atisa, who had served as rector of Vikramshila in the 10<sup>th</sup> century. Before him we have Guru Padmasambhava who was born in Uddayana in present day Swat, now in Pakistan, but who is said to have studied at Nalanda in the eighth century. In fact, His Holiness the Dalai Lama considers Tibetan Buddhism to be the precious legacy of the Nalanda tradition, whose great exponents were Nagarjuna and Asvaghosa, both products of Nalanda University.

What then was unique about the Nalanda tradition and why is it important to contemporary India? I would once again wish to turn to Amartya Sen who has spoken about the Nalanda Trail marking the spread of knowledge across the continent of Asia from the knowledge hubs that flourished in ancient Bihar. He points out that

The Nalanda Trail “ emphasized the spread of knowledge and understanding from one country to another across Asia driven by intellectual curiosity and interest rather than pursuit of material profit.” This was in line with Lord Buddha’s message of seeking enlightenment without borders, for all people irrespective of caste, creed and nationality. The mission of the new Nalanda University set up through an Act of Parliament in 2010, talks of being “open to the currents of thought and practice from around the world.”It is a vision which has been enthusiastically supported by several Asian countries including China, Japan, South Korea, Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Malaysia ,Vietnam and Australia and New Zealand as well.

There is no doubt that the key driver of growth of modern economies is technology and technology advances through the accumulation and application of knowledge. The successful societies of the future will be knowledge societies which encourage and enable creativity and innovation. Though we live in a world very different from the age of Nalanda, its success in creating a platform for intellectual debate and liberal discourse, holds lessons for us today as well.

Nalanda, Vikramshila and Odantapuri were centres of excellence, but were open to all who could pass through the gates of the mind irrespective of caste, creed and nationality. As a

democracy we need to follow a policy of inclusion but this should involve, over time, raising the largest number to higher levels of skills and erudition rather than bringing everyone down to the least common denominator.

The history of these great universities also underscore the immense value of open debate, of allowing the clash of ideas, of respecting differing viewpoints and advancing knowledge dialectically through intellectual discourse. In a plural democracy like ours, there must always be room for dissent even eccentricity; imposing conformity stifles creative thinking. Education must provide a student with the tools for independent thinking and a congenial setting for intellectual exploration. And this is only possible when society encourages and upholds individual based rights and obligations in line with the citizen-centric fabric of our Constitution.

We have reason to be proud about the very significant achievements independent India has made in the frontier areas of science like nuclear energy and space exploration. Our IITs enjoy a well-earned reputation for academic excellence. There are other islands of excellence as well. However, islands of excellence will remain islands unless they expand to become a vast continent of accomplishment. And that is the transition which the Constitution of India envisions for this great country.

And a final message of Nalanda is the openness to other cultures and societies. Nalanda flourished because it attracted great scholars from across Asia and in turn, became the point from which knowledge radiated outwards. It was truly the knowledge capital of ancient Asia and had the Nalanda tradition not been cruelly interrupted and virtually demolished in the twelfth century perhaps India's history would have been different.

But the spark of Nalanda lived on in the memories of the people and has today become an inspiration for creating the knowledge society which the eminent framers of our Constitution, including Dr Rajendra Prasad, envisioned for a free and independent India. It is the Nalanda trail which has the signposts to a future which blends modernity with the civilisational qualities of India.

I thank you for your attention.