

22nd Convocation Address

By

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Hon'ble Chancellor of the University of Kalyani, Shri Gopalkrishna Gandhi ji, Vice-Chancellor of the University, Prof. A.K. Das, distinguished academician Prof. Irfan Habib, faculty and staff of the University, students, parents, members of the media, ladies and gentlemen. It is a great privilege for me to be present on this occasion as Chief Guest, and I would like to thank the Hon'ble Chancellor as well as the Vice-Chancellor and the faculty of the University for giving me such a coveted opportunity on this occasion. I am sure this institution will rise to the ranks of the best in this country given the enormous support and attention it is receiving from the government and society at large and the strength of its leadership and faculty. The relevance of institutions of higher learning to achieving much higher levels of welfare of Indian society could not have been greater at any stage of our history than it is today. The 21st century, as is now widely accepted, will lead to what everybody believes would be a knowledge society. It is the production and application of knowledge which will give us a basis and a direction for what we should do, but knowledge would also have to give us clear signals on what we should not do. For much too long the world has

followed a path of development which is now proving to be disastrously unsustainable. Not only have some of the most dominant economic systems in the world shown signs of decay and failure, but a large range and variety of ecosystems across the globe have also reached a level where even their survival is now questionable. Perhaps the most dominant challenge of our time, addressing which is becoming increasingly urgent, lies in the problem of human induced climate change. In the 20th century average surface temperature increase across the globe was recorded at 0.74°C. Our projections for this century indicate a further increase of anywhere between 1.1° to 6.4°C. And if we exceed the range of 1.5°-2.5°C, 20 to 30% of species assessed would be at risk of extinction.

Since industrialization human society has consumed larger and larger quantities of fossil fuels and intensified industrial activities consuming scarce natural resources and adding wastes to our atmosphere, water systems and soil, to the extent that substantially exceeds the capacity of our ecosystems to withstand. The Fourth Assessment Report (AR4) of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has clearly brought out the fact that warming of the climate system is unequivocal and that most of the warming that has taken place in the last five decades or so is the result of human actions. Even more serious as a finding is the range of impacts that climate change is already exhibiting in different parts of the world. These include an increase in the frequency and intensity of extreme events such as heat waves, floods and droughts as well as impacts on agriculture and water resources. Perhaps the most serious impact of climate change that will be felt across the globe is the problem of sea level rise, which is already leading to destruction of property and threatening human lives

as a result of cyclones, coastal flooding and other problems. In West Bengal itself, the Sundarbans are extremely vulnerable to the effects of sea level rise as indeed are two countries in our neighbourhood, the Maldives and Bangladesh. The fact that the Norwegian Nobel Committee awarded the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize to the IPCC and Mr. Al Gore is on the basis of their understanding that links climate change with peace. Indeed, the possibility of hundreds of millions of climate refugees and the likelihood of conflicts resulting from growing water stress and scarcity as well as reduced food security can lead to disruption of peace in different parts of the world.

Climate change is only a part of a much larger problem, which is essentially the prolonged pursuit of a uniform pattern of development which is unsustainable. We in this country had a unique opportunity to transform our traditions and values that were based on a deep reverence for nature into a modernized form of development that would still remain sustainable. Science and technology and innovations of various kinds could have been directed towards this objective, but somewhere we lost our way and set about emulating exactly what the industrialized world had done. Today, late as it may seem, we can bring about a major correction and ensure that we harness knowledge in every field of human endeavour to move us towards a path of sustainability. And in this mission universities such as the University of Kalyani would have to play a leading role and light up a path which is currently obscured by the lure of short term gains and illusory benefits. The current downturn in economic activities which has gripped the world gives us an opportunity to rethink growth and development strategies and move in a direction that eliminates the weaknesses and flaws

inherent in past practices. If India is to establish a pattern that maximizes economic welfare without plundering nature's resources, which on moral grounds should really be seen as the property of future generations, then not only would India benefit, but we would also be able to establish a model that others can emulate. If my Institute, TERI and the TERI University are to be located on this campus, it would be our endeavour to work with this university and other actors and help move society in this region in a direction that accords with the vision that I have just placed before you, a vision the fulfillment of which is a moral and an economic imperative.

There is an equally important imperative which essentially requires human society to rapidly shrink its ecological footprint, or else we would witness negative impacts which are becoming increasingly evident. In the case of climate change, for instance, the impacts would fall unevenly on the poorest communities. What is tragic is the fact that those who are most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change are precisely the communities which have had hardly any share in causing the problem. The global community, therefore, has to mobilize all its technological, financial and institutional resources to put in place a set of measures and actions by which the emissions of greenhouse gases are mitigated substantially and urgently. There is a great attraction in this approach, because mitigation of emissions of these gases would lead to inestimable benefits in the nature of what is known as co-benefits. These would include lower levels of air pollution and, therefore, health benefits for those thus affected, higher levels of energy security, stable agricultural production and the possibility of increased employment and economic output, which would be the consequence of large

scale use of renewable energy and attainment of higher levels of energy efficiency even with conventional fuels.

The current economic downturn provides a unique opportunity to restructure our economic system, because if we have to revive economic growth we have two options. The first would be to continue with business as usual with all the negative implications of continuing with such an approach. On the other hand we could restructure the economic system to bring about much lower dependence on fossil fuels and much higher respect for nature and its resources. Indeed, it appears that President Barack Obama has understood the merits of the latter approach and has made green investments an important component of his recovery plan. His task will certainly not be easy, but if he is able to accomplish a large part of what he has set out to do, it would mark a shift in the right direction even at the global level. In the end it would be useful to quote Mahatma Gandhi. He emphasized the importance of the moral force that needs to be mobilized even in a democratic system. "Democracy must in essence therefore, mean the art and science of mobilizing the entire physical, economic and spiritual resources of all the various sections of the people in the service of the common good of all". Let us resolve in our quest for knowledge to keep our sights on the common good of all.
