

## **Speech by The President of India, Shri Pranab Mukherjee delivering memorial lecture to mark the 150th birth anniversary of Sir Ashutosh Mookerjee**

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I am happy to participate in the celebrations to mark completion of 150 years of the life and work of Sir Ashutosh Mookerjee, one of the towering figures Indian education has ever seen - a man of great personality, courage and extra-ordinary administrative ability.

I congratulate the 'Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Kolkata Kendra' and the 'Ashutosh Mookerjee Memorial institute' for having taken the initiative to institute a Memorial Lecture in his honour. I specially congratulate Justice Chittatosh Mookerjee, the grandson of Sir Ashutosh Mookerjee who is sitting with me on the dais and heads both these institutions.

The Vidya Bhavan was established in 1938 by Dr. K.M. Munshi, freedom fighter, writer, educationist and ardent environmentalist. Munshiji believed that freedom would be meaningless and worthless unless cultural, ethical, and moral values are enshrined in the hearts and minds of our people. He therefore felt the need to create an institution that could begin to bring about in a small way a tangible change through education. Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan which was started as an institution is now a massive cultural and educational movement. I am told the Bhavan now has 119 centers in India, 7 centers abroad and 367 constituent institutions, spreading quality, value based education on subjects ranging from Sanskrit and Vedas to Information Technology. I take this opportunity to congratulate Shri S.G. Mehta, the President of this prestigious institution for the achievements of the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan and his leadership.

Returning to Sir Ashutosh Mookerjee, it is rare to find in one man the combination of such qualities of academic brilliance. Sir Ashutosh showed an aptitude for mathematics at an early age. When he was young, he met Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar who was a major influence on him. In 1879, at the age of fifteen, he passed the entrance exam of the Calcutta University in which he stood third and received a first grade scholarship. In the year 1880, he took admission in the Presidency College in Kolkata where he met P.C. Ray and Narendranath Dutta who would later become famous as Swami Vivekananda. In 1883, he topped the BA examination at Calcutta University. In 1885, he completed M.A. in Mathematics and in 1886, Masters in Physics, making him the first student to be awarded a dual degree from Calcutta University (MA in Mathematics and Physics)

Sir Ashutosh was an 'integrated' persona. He began his career as a mathematician, but went on to become an outstanding legal luminary. He was thus a wonderful example of an interdisciplinary scholar. In recognition of his brilliance, Sir Ashutosh was offered a job in the Department of Public Instruction. But, he chose to turn it down and instead complete a degree in Bachelor of Law. During this time, he also continued publishing scholarly papers on

mathematics and physics. At the age of 24, Ashutosh Mookerjee became a Fellow of the Calcutta University.

Sir Ashutosh was a linguist, steeped in the knowledge of ancient Indian scriptures as well as humanities and science. He was learned in Pali, French and Russian. He was further an outstanding lawyer who rose to be Judge of the Calcutta High Court and a brilliant administrator who rose to be the Vice-Chancellor of Calcutta University for five two year terms.

Sir Ashutosh Mookerjee's achievements continue. He was responsible for the foundation of the Bengal Technical Institute in 1906 and the College of Science of the Calcutta University in 1914. Sir Ashutosh Mookerjee was thrice elected president of The Asiatic Society. The Calcutta Mathematical Society was founded by Sir Ashutosh Mookerjee in 1908. He served as the President of the Society from 1908 to 1923. In 1910, he was appointed the President of the Imperial (now National) Library Council and his personal collection of 80,000 books were donated to the National Library, which are arranged there in a separate section.

He was the President of the inaugural session of the Indian Science Congress in 1914. The Ashutosh College was founded under his stewardship in 1916, when he was Vice-chancellor of University of Calcutta. Along with Dr. Ziauddin Ahmed, Sir Ashutosh was also appointed member of the 1917-1919 Sadler Commission, presided over by Michael Ernest Sadler, which inquired into the state of Indian education.

Under the guidance of Sir Ashutosh, Calcutta University became a major center of learning and research in the Indian sub-continent encompassing students from Lahore to Rangoon. Despite resistance from the Viceroy and the British Government who viewed Calcutta University as a cradle of trouble makers, Sir Ashutosh set up several new academic programs in subjects such as comparative literature, anthropology, applied psychology, industrial chemistry, ancient Indian history and culture as well as Islamic culture. He also instituted post-graduate teaching and research in Bengali, Hindi, Pali and Sanskrit. He used to say "the term "Sanskrit" though composed of eight letters connotes in the domain of knowledge an empire by itself".

Sir Ashutosh was fiercely independent. He was often called the "Tiger of Bengal" for his high self-esteem, courage, academic integrity and a general intransigent attitude towards the British Government. The French scholar Sylvain Lévi once commented: "Had this Bengal Tiger been born in France, he would have exceeded even Georges Clemenceau, the French Tiger. Ashutosh had no peer in the whole of Europe. "

Lord Curzon's Education Mission in 1902 identified Universities including the Calcutta University, as centres of sedition where young people formed networks of resistance to colonial domination. The cause of this was thought to be the unwise granting of autonomy to these universities in the nineteenth century. Thus in the period of 1905 to 1935, the colonial administration tried to reinstate government control of education, which Sir Ashutosh strongly resisted. Reflecting his sterling character, he refused the post of Vice Chancellor in 1923 when Lord Lytton tried to impose conditions on his reappointment.

To quote Sir Ashutosh, "Dynasties may come and go, political parties may rise or fall, the influence of men may change, but Universities go on forever.. as undefiled altars of inviolate truth." Sir Ashutosh had a clear vision of the kind of education he wanted young people to have and he extracted it from his colonial masters with acumen and courage.

Sir Ashutosh was, forever, a man working towards excellence in Educational Institutions – the theme for today's lecture. Through determination, zeal, hard work and above all remarkable leadership skills, he raised the University of Calcutta to heights never seen before.

What are the lessons modern day educational institutions and Administrators should learn from Sir Ashutosh?

Friends, Sir Ashutosh strived to raise Calcutta University to the ranks of leading institutions of the world. Similarly, we must transform our Universities into world class institutions. Indian civilization has a long standing knowledge tradition. Our ancient universities - Takshashila, Nalanda, Vikramashila, Valabhi, Somapura and Odantapuri – were renowned seats of learning that attracted scholars from outside. In fact, for almost 1500 years, from the founding of Takshashila in 3rd century BC to the collapse of Nalanda in 12th Century AD, India was a world leader in the field of higher education. Sadly, today our universities lag behind the best universities in the world. None of the Indian institutions figure in the top two hundred ranks according to international surveys. We must urgently salvage the declining standards of our country's higher education as a top priority. Our leadership in fields such as science and technology is incumbent on the level of competence in our scientists, academics, engineers and doctors.

Secondly, modern day Indians must learn from Sir Ashutosh the importance of ensuring cross fertilization of ideas through interaction of scholars from across India and abroad. Our educational institutions should break down the silos in which different disciplines function and strive for a harmonious interchange of thoughts between the humanities, science, languages and other disciplines. This was the atmosphere which used to prevail in Nalanda and Takshashila in their days of glory.

In an address in Mysore, Sir Ashutosh said "we cannot sit on the lovely snow-capped peaks of the Himalayas absorbed in contemplation of our glorious past. We cannot waste precious time and strength in defence of theories and systems which, however, valuable in their own days, have been swept away by the irresistible avalanche of worldwide changes..... we can live neither in nor by our defeated past and if we would live in the conquering future, we must dedicate our whole strength to shape its course.... Let us raise an emphatic protest against all suicidal policy of isolation and stagnation".

Thirdly, Sir Ashutosh recognized the importance of research being a Mathematician of substance himself. Under his patronage Sir CV Raman went on to win the Nobel Prize in Physics, the first for science in Asia.

Currently, research is a neglected domain in our higher education structure. Successful research programmes offer vast possibilities to make a difference in the lives of people. A developing

country like India has to address the grand challenges of renewable energy, climate change, drinking water and sanitation. Research in these areas will have spin-offs unimaginable in terms of benefits to the common man. Our universities have to be the breeding ground for creative pursuits. They have to be the source of cutting edge innovation and technological developments. Universities must through their inventions and discoveries lead in the registration of patents for our country.

Fourthly, we must recognize that good faculty is a critical component of our education system. Our universities must be able to identify 'inspired teachers' who can motivate students to think from different perspectives and spur holistic learning. Such teachers should be encouraged to mentor junior teachers and students. Sir Ashutosh was instrumental in discovering the talents of Sir CV Raman and Dr. S. Radha Krishnan. Teachers of Calcutta University in his time included Meghnad Saha, Satyendranath Bose, Brojendranath Seal, H.M. Percival, Ganesh Prasad, P.C. Mitra, S.P. Agharkar, A.R. Forsyth and Acharya Prafulla Chandra Ray. He brought many scholars from European Universities to teach at Calcutta University. He did not hesitate to go beyond the realms of academics and recruit people like Sir CV Raman who was an employee of the Calcutta Mint. Sir Ashutosh, thus demonstrated courage of conviction and an ability to take risks - a quality worthy of emulation by our Vice-Chancellors of today.

Fifthly, academic autonomy should be preserved at all costs. Sir Ashutosh in his famous speech in the Senate (December 1922) said '.... I call upon you, as members of the Senate to stand up for the rights of your University. Forget the Government of India. Do your duty as Senators of the University, as true sons of your Alma Mater. Freedom first, freedom second and freedom always – nothing else will satisfy me'.

In another address in 1923, Sir Ashutosh said, "We stand unreservedly by the doctrine that if education is to be our policy as a nation, it must not be our politics; freedom is its very life blood, the condition of its growth, the secret of its success....there stands forth unshaken the conviction that our insistent claim for the freedom of the University is a fight for the most sacred and impalpable of national privileges".

Lastly, students of Universities should be actively encouraged to have a passion for their alma mater and to contribute actively to its growth and development once they leave the portals of the university. Speaking in his last Convocation address, Sir Ashutosh said "Fellow-graduates, you speak of this University as your Alma Mater. Do you always realize the nobility of this commonplace expression? What a singular endearment it voices, our fostering mother-what a fine relation is that for a great institution of learning to bear to all those who throughout the years have learned wisdom at her feet and have gone out into the world, sustained by her strength and inspired by her lofty example..... In whatever sphere your lot may be cast, whatever be your hopes and fears, turn back to your Alma Mater with filial piety and attachment...."

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, transformative ideas are required to steer our educational institutions from the muddy waters of mediocrity. Governance structures have to be supportive of innovative ideas and also facilitative of faster decision-making. The expertise and experience of alumni, who are well-established, can be utilized for effective university management. Studies have shown how alumni participation in university governance improves academic performance.

Our universities, especially the older ones, should make a definitive move towards engaging alumni in their activities.

Friends, education separates light and darkness; advancement from backwardness; excellence from mediocrity. If one investment can truly define a subtle linkage to future progress, it is education. Countries built on the strength of education and knowledge has achieved development over longer periods of time. Such countries have exhibited greater adaptive powers to changes in resource endowments. Education has afforded them the ability to overcome resource constraints and build an economy on a high technological base. If India has to be one of the front ranking nations in the world, the way ahead is only through a robust education system.

Sir Ashutosh Mookerjee, if he had wanted could have become an expert on Asian studies or a great mathematician or a famous jurist. But, instead he chose to gift the best years of his life to be an Educational Administrator.

On the passing away of Sir Ashutosh, Michael Sadler wrote ‘In Ashutosh Mookerjee, India has lost one of her greatest men; the world, one of its commanding personalities. He was mighty in battle. He could have ruled an empire. But he gave the best of his powers to Education because he believed that in Education rightly lies the secret of human welfare and the key to every empire’s moral strength’.

Speaking about Sir Ashutosh, Gurudev Tagore wrote: ‘Men are always rare in all countries through whom the aspiration of their people can hope to find its fulfilment, who have the thundering voices to say that what is needed shall be done; Ashutosh had the magic voice of assurance. He had the courage to dream because he had the power to fight and the confidence to win – his will itself was the path to the goal’.

India needs today many more such individuals willing to dedicate their lives to improving the quality of education in our country. I call upon the leaders of our educational institutions to follow in the footsteps of this great son of India.

I thank the organizers for having invited me to deliver this lecture. Let me offer my humble tribute to this great soul in whose honour I speak today and my best wishes to the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan and the Ashutosh Mookerjee Memorial Institute for all their future endeavours.

Thank You.

Jai Hind.