

SPEECH BY THE PRESIDENT OF INDIA, SHRI PRANAB MUKHERJEE AT THE INAUGURATION OF MAHARAJA AGRASEN UNIVERSITY

Solan, Himachal Pradesh: 25-05-2013

1. It gives me great pleasure to be here today for the inauguration of Maharaja Agrasen University, which is an outcome of the vision, commitment and effort of the Maharaja Agrasen Technical Education Society.
2. Investment in education is an investment in future. I compliment the Himachal Pradesh Government for their foresight in facilitating the establishment of this higher educational institute in the State. I hope this University will fulfill the unmet need for higher education in this region.
3. Ladies and Gentlemen, education is a powerful tool for social transformation. The recent increase in cases of brutal assault on women and children has shaken the collective conscience of our nation. These unfortunate incidents call for effective measures for their safety and security. It also underscores urgency for us to introspect and find solutions to arrest the erosion of values in our society. Our educational institutions beginning from schools should take the lead in meeting the moral challenges of our times and ensure that our civilizational values of love for motherland; performance of duty; compassion for all; tolerance for pluralism; respect for women and elderly; truth and honesty in life; discipline and self-restraint in conduct, and responsibility in action are fully entrenched in the young minds.
4. The evolving demographic profile of our country, with two-third of our population expected to be in the working age group by 2025, presents before us an opportunity for greater development. This demographic dividend is for our taking, but for that, our youth must be qualified and trained to participate in national progress.
5. We have adopted a strategy of high economic growth to mitigate poverty and ensure development touching the lives of all citizens. Our economic progress will rely increasingly on the knowledge economy. It is crucial that the knowledge-based sectors like information technology, bio-technology, architecture, management, accountancy and law are equipped with competent personnel. I am hopeful that this University will be able to set new benchmarks in professional education.

6. Ladies and Gentlemen, we have expanded the higher education sector significantly. The total number of students enrolled in this sector was 2.6 crore at the end of the Eleventh Plan period. This number is projected to increase to 3.6 crore at the end of the Twelfth Plan period. We have over six hundred fifty degree awarding institutions and over thirty three thousand colleges. But we are short of good quality academic institutions, on account of which, many bright students prefer going abroad for higher studies.
7. As per an international survey, there is no Indian university amongst the top two hundred universities in the world. For about eighteen hundred years in history, Indian universities had dominated the world education system. Takshashila was a global university established in the 6th Century BC. It became the point of assembly for four civilizations – Indian, Persian, Greek and Chinese. Renowned personalities like Chandragupta Maurya, Chanakya, Panini, St. Thomas, Faxian, Charaka and Democritus came to this University. There were other famed universities like Nalanda, Vikramashila, Valabhi, Somapura and Odantapuri that added to the outstanding Indian higher education system. These universities functioned efficiently as a system before the decline set in the 13th Century AD.
8. Albert Einstein had said and I quote: *“We owe a lot to India who taught us how to count without which no worthwhile scientific discovery could have been made”* (unquote). It is possible to revive the lost glory of our higher education system and take at least a few of our universities into the global top league. But for that, we have to make innovative changes in the way our institutes of higher learning are administered and education in them rendered. We must allow adequate flexibility in different aspects of academic management. There is a need to instill a culture of excellence in them. Every university should identify at least one department that can be made into a Centre of Excellence.
9. Many bright students are circumstanced by geographic location or economic difficulty from seeking higher education. Despite India’s higher education system being the second largest in the world, the enrolment rate for the 18-24 years age group in India is only 7 per cent. This is very low compared to Germany where it is 21 per cent, and US where it is 34 per cent. There is an urgent need to increase accessibility. This will not only improve the enrolment rate in higher education but also enhance of quality of graduates produced by the system.

10. We must harness technologies like e-education to take quality education to masses. The National Mission on Education through Information and Communication Technology is an important initiative for facilitating information and knowledge sharing. It is possible to share important lectures through e-classrooms with students studying in far off locations.
11. Today, it is not enough for our graduates to be only academically proficient. A highly competitive world calls for holistic development of an individual. It is, therefore, necessary to infuse the students with life skills like self-awareness, empathy, creative thinking, problem-solving, effective communication, inter-personal relationship, and stress and emotion management. Our educational institutions should include such skills training in its course curriculum and also develop expertise to impart them.
12. Ladies and Gentlemen, the private sector should be encouraged to play an important role in expanding higher education in our country. International experience shows private sector and Alumni participation being behind the success of top universities like Harvard, Yale and Stanford. Even today, private institutions account for nearly 60 per cent of the total enrolment in our country but there is a need for better management to improve service delivery, ensure minimum benchmark and promote excellence.
13. Shortage of good faculty can hamper our efforts at quality improvement. We must take immediate steps to fill up the large number of vacant faculty positions. We must also use technology-based solutions to tide over this crisis.
14. Mahatma Gandhi had said and I quote: "*A man is but the product of his thoughts. What he thinks, he becomes*" (unquote). Our academic institutions have teachers capable of shaping the thoughts of the young minds. They can make their students appreciate a subject from a wider perspective and encourage them to question their own knowledge. By their conduct and life example, they can inspire their students to imbibe correct values. These 'inspired teachers' should be identified, recognized and encouraged to share their knowledge, wisdom and philosophy with larger number of students.
15. Ladies and Gentlemen, innovation is the key to future progress. As per an international survey, only 3 amongst the 100 most innovative companies in the world are Indian companies. Research as an academic programme accounts for

less than 0.4 per cent of our higher education student population. The drive for innovation is weak in our country as we lack the systems that encourage and generate innovation. There is a need to strengthen the system of research fellowships, inter-disciplinary and inter-university research collaborations and industry incubation parks. We must attract Indian scientists and technologists working abroad to come to India for short-term assignments.

16. This decade is the decade of innovation. Our drive towards innovation should benefit those at the bottom of the socio-economic pyramid. There are many grassroots innovations that require technological and commercial assistance for converting them into viable products. The higher education and industry sectors should mentor such initiatives. To deliberate on the changes necessary in our higher education system, a Conference of Vice Chancellors of Central Universities was held this year. A recommendation was made for setting up Innovators Clubs in the Central Universities to facilitate interaction between the teaching and student communities and grassroots innovators. Recently, I had the chance to open such clubs in two Central Universities in Uttar Pradesh and Assam. I also attended innovation exhibitions organized in these universities and in the Nagaland University, and was happy to see the innovations of our young people. I call upon this University to take such an initiative in its formative years so as to build a strong innovation culture.
17. I am told that this University has started academic disciplines in the fields of technology, architecture, management and law. It has envisaged expanding their programmes to include courses of contemporary relevance like health science, indology, mass communication and journalism. I am confident of this University providing a strong impetus to the growth of professional education in our country. I dedicate this University to our youth and nation. I once again congratulate all those involved in setting up this University and giving shape to its academic programmes. I wish you all success in your future endeavours.

Thank you.

Jai Hind.
