

University of Ceylon Review

Vol. VIII, No. 2

April, 1950

The Convocation Address

Delivered by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru at King George's Hall,
on 12th January, 1950

MR. CHANCELLOR, Mr. Vice-Chancellor and fellow-members of the University of Ceylon, I am very grateful to you for the honour you have done me. I do not quite know why I have been singled out from amongst my distinguished colleagues and called upon to speak on this occasion. Nevertheless, I wish, if I may, to express my gratitude to you, on this occasion, and also express my gratitude through you to others in this pleasant Island for the great welcome and for all that they have done for us during our stay here.

We have met here on a special occasion—rather a unique occasion—and whatever we may do at our conferences elsewhere, the mere fact of people from distant quarters of the world, from different members of the Commonwealth, coming together to confer on matters of vital consequence is a matter of significance and a presage of the type of conferences that we may have in the future when more and more people will meet together without regard to those barriers which, in the past, have separated us, and confer, in all earnestness, in regard to the problems of the day.

In the citation about me I was referred to as a person who had, I believe, profound wisdom and political astuteness. I do not know how far I am politically astute but I must confess to you that the older I grow the more and more do I feel the lack of wisdom myself. Perhaps it may be that that very feeling is a sign of having some wisdom.

One sees around in the world today so many things which please one and so many other things which appear to one to be so extraordinarily wrong that one wonders why this world of ours, which has every opportunity of making progress, of co-operating together for the advance of humanity, yet loses itself always in conflict, in violence, in hatred and the like. We see, as it were, the clash of blind armies. We see the reproduction in the modern age of something which we thought we had done away with in the past ages. In the past ages we had, fortunately not so much in your country or mine but, nevertheless, in many other parts of the world, tremendous conflicts on some kind of religious

dogma: people fighting each other on some interpretation, sometimes even a metaphysical interpretation, of some dogma. We see, today, people becoming dogmatic in other fields apart from religion, and conflicts arising from that dogmatic approach to human affairs.

I should have thought that in the modern world we could have many approaches to life's problems, but certainly not the narrow-minded dogmatic approach. We may have a scientist's approach, a humanist's approach, and possibly other approaches too; but the dogmatic approach inevitably narrows the mind and prevents us from seeing much that we ought to see.

We see today in the realm of human affairs, and in international affairs too, this dogmatic approach, this narrow approach which brings conflict in its train, which brings want of understanding, hatred and violence. I do not know how we are to get over this; but unless we get over this narrow-minded approach, I have no doubt that we shall fail to solve the problems of the day.

Now, one of the brighter features of this age is—and I attach a great deal of value to it—that the barriers that separated the so-called East from the so-called West are gradually disappearing. That is a good sign. But, at the same time, other barriers seem to be growing in the East and in the West. We meet repeatedly in conferences and talk about these problems that face us, and it may be that sometimes we solve a problem or two, but then for each problem that we solve, half a dozen fresh ones crop up.

I remember that somebody made a calculation of the number of international conferences that were held after the conclusion of the first World War and before the commencement of the second World War. It was a prodigious number of international conferences. I do not quite know if we have passed that number since the second World War ended or not.

Anyhow, this is an age of international conferences. A conference is always a good thing, or almost always, because, at any rate, people meet together round a conference table and discuss matters with good humour and, even if they do not always succeed in finding a solution, the effort is nevertheless always worthy of being made. That in itself results in something that is good. But I have often wondered why there has been this failure in the past to find solutions to our problems. Is it due to a lack of wit in statesmen or to a lack of understanding? I do not think that is so because they have been able statesmen, earnest statesmen, desiring peace and co-operation but, somehow or other, solutions have escaped them. Why, then, is it so? I do not know, except that perhaps it may be that we work too much on the superficial plane, finding solutions to the troubles of the moment and not looking to the deeper causes. Perhaps, it may be that:

I put it to you for your consideration because something does come in the way and sometimes, with all the earnestness we may possess, we do not get over those barriers, old and new, which come in the way of mutual understanding.

THE CONVOCATION ADDRESS

Then I think that, in spite of our vaunted civilization, in spite of the advance of science and technology, we have lost grip on some basic thing of life, something that gives anchorage to life, something with which we could measure things, some standard to measure value. Perhaps, that may be so.

We have advanced greatly in science—I am a great believer in science—and the scientific approach has changed the world completely. I think that if the world is to solve its problems it will inevitably have to be through the means of science and not by discarding science. Nevertheless, I find that the sheer advance of science has made people, often enough, not scientific, which is an extraordinary thing to say. What I mean is that science has become so vast and all-pervading that scientists are unable to grasp the thing entire and become narrower and narrower in each individual subject. They may be very brilliant in some subjects but they seem to lose grip on life as a whole.

In the olden days, whether in India, old and ancient India, or ancient Greece, or in any of the ancient civilizations that one reads about, one has a sensation, at any rate I have that sensation, that people with much more limited knowledge at their disposal certainly had, at the same time, an integrated view of life. They were not so distracted; they could see life as a whole although they did not know as much, or nearly as much, as the average undergraduate knows today. And so that integrated view of life made them wise. They had a certain wisdom in their approach to life's problems.

Whether that is true or not I do not know because one is apt to look at the past with a certain glamour. It may be that I am wrong but, in any event, one thing seems to me to be certain, namely, that we of today have no integrated view of life, that we, however clever we may be, however much of facts and knowledge we have accumulated, are not very wise. We are narrower than the people of old, although every fact has gone to bring us together in this world. We travel swiftly, we have communications, we know more about each other, we have the radio and all kinds of things. Yet, in spite of all these things, all these widening influences, in our minds we are narrower. That is the extraordinary thing which I cannot understand.

I put this to you, this gathering of University men, because after all it is for the universities to tackle this problem more than for any other organization. Even if the universities do not teach some kind of basic wisdom, if they think in terms of producing people with degrees who want certain jobs in life, then the universities may, perhaps, have solved to a very minor extent the problem of unemployment or provided some technical help or other, but will not have produced men who can understand or solve the problems of today.

You and I live in Asia. Perhaps, one of the biggest facts of today is this new and changing phase of Asia. What is happening in Asia is a fact of tremendous historical significance. It is difficult to grasp it entirely or to understand it but I think any person must see that something very big has happened,

and is happening, all over Asia. There is a certain dynamism about it. We do not like much of what is happening. We may like something of what is happening but, whether we like or dislike it, the fact remains that tremendous and powerful elemental forces are at play in Asia. It is not good enough for us just to sit in our ivory towers and look down at them with like or dislike. If we wish to play any effective part in this world of ours we have to understand them. We have to understand the basic urges behind them. There was for long the basic urge of political freedom. For some hundreds of years, say 300 or, if you like 400 years, Asia, or a good part of Asia, was under some kind of eclipse.

If you read the history of Asia—it is a long, long history—you will find that during the greater part of these thousands of years Asia has played rather an important part in world affairs but during the last 300 or 400 years Asia became static, quiescent and rather stagnant in spite of all the virtues she might have possessed, stagnant in thought and in action; and, naturally and rightly, she fell under the domination of other more progressive, vigorous and dynamic countries. That is the way of the world and that is the right way. If you are static, you must suffer for it. And now you see a change coming over Asia and the change, because it is belated, comes with a rush, upsetting many things and doing many things that one does not like. But the major fact is that this big change is coming over us. I do not know—I do not suppose any of you know—what, ultimately, this change will lead to in Asia. We may perhaps just see the various trends.

You and I live in this changing Asia of today. Many of you—more than I, in the sense that some of us, whom you honour, have passed our prime and are in the afternoon of our lives; we have perhaps a few more years to work and labour and no doubt we shall do so to the best of our capacity and strength—will have the burden of facing these problems which are not of today or tomorrow, but which may last for a generation, or more than one generation, and so you young graduates of today will have to prepare yourselves in mind and body and, as much as you can in that deeper wisdom, to understand these problems and to function actively and help in the solution of them because it is not enough in the world of today for you to take up a distant and academic attitude and look on and just advise others or criticize others. Every man has to shoulder his burden of today. If he does not, well, he falls out; he simply does not count.

I have found, if you will permit me to say so, many of our young men and women—I am talking more of India than of Ceylon because I do not know much about Ceylon—full of enthusiasm, full of energy, full of earnestness, but singularly, shall I say, academic or singularly cut off from life's realities. During their student days they often debated and passed resolutions on this subject or that but afterwards, when they went out to the world, they seemed

THE CONVOCATION ADDRESS

to think that life itself was a continuous debating society where they could pass votes of censure or criticize others without doing much themselves.

Now, that is not a very helpful attitude. Perhaps it is because of the fact that for the past many, many years, most of us did not have much of a chance to do anything constructive as our main job was to fight for the freedom of our country in a destructive way, in an oppositionist way, and not in a creative way. The result is that we cannot get rid of this outlook, this negative outlook, this destructive outlook and, instead of helping to build something, we just sit down and criticize others who may be, rightly or wrongly, trying to build—anyhow, they are trying to build. I think that is a very unhelpful and bad attitude to adopt. Today what is required, in whatever country you may be, is a constructive, creative approach. Certainly something to destroy is always there, something that is bad; but mere destruction is not enough. You must build.

One thing more. A university is essentially, I take it, a place of culture, whatever "culture" might mean. But that takes me back to what I began with. There is a great deal of culture all over the place, in my own country too, and I find, normally, that those people who talk most loudly of culture, according to my judgment, possess no culture at all, because culture, first of all, is not loud; it is quiet, it is restrained, it is tolerant. You may judge the culture of a person by his silence, by a gesture of his, by a phrase of his or, more especially, by his life generally. Now, the peculiar, narrow idea of culture that is spreading is that culture depends on the kind of headgear you wear or the kind of food you eat or on similar superficial things which, I do not deny, have a certain importance but which, in the larger context of things, are very secondary.

Each country has certain special characteristics, cultural characteristics, and so forth, which have been developed through the ages. They are important and each country certainly retains them unless, of course, they do not fit in with the spirit of the age because each age has a certain way of its own, a culture of its own. So, by all means, adhere to the special culture of your nation. But, there is something that is deeper than national culture and that is human culture. If you do not have that human culture, that basic culture, then even that national culture of which you may be so proud has no real roots and will not do you much good. Today, more especially, it has become essential for us to develop, in addition to such national cultures that we may have, something that can only be called a world culture. There is much talk of One World and I believe that, at some time or other, that talk must bear fruit or else this world will go to pieces. It may be that we will not see that One World in our generation but if you want to prepare for that One World you must at least think about it. You have at least a culture to envisage and not live your life in narrow grooves, trying to think yourselves superior to the rest of the world.

Well, we live in this new year today, surrounded on the one side by all kinds of dark fears; probably the prevailing feeling of today in the world is fear. Almost everybody is afraid of something; every country is afraid of some other country and, of course, fear is a thing which leads to all kinds of bad results, bad consequences. Probably, fear is the most evil of sensations and we are living under this dominance of fear. Perhaps, if we could get rid of that fear to some extent, it would be far easier for us to solve our problems.

At the same time, besides that fear we also see a great deal of hope and earnestness in the world and a great deal of expectation of better things. We see creative and constructive impulses at work and we see also destructive and negative impulses at work. Well, I do not know which will triumph in the near future or in the distant future, but obviously it will be impossible for me and impossible for you to function adequately if we do not believe in the ultimate triumph of the creative and unifying processes of the day. Therefore we function; otherwise, we could not function.

However that may be, even the attempt to work for some great purpose, for some great cause itself, not only helps that cause but also helps us. We are not prophets and we do not know what the morrow may bring but it is rather satisfying for you to work for the morrow of your choice. It brings something into your life which makes it worth while. If you align yourself to any big purpose, something big, something elemental, then that ennobles you and whether the reward comes or does not come, the mere fact of working for it is reward enough.

We have to live in this world with all its degradation and all the evil that we see around us. But there is plenty of good in the world too, and we have to see that there is plenty in the individual, as in the group, of what I, as a Hindu, would call the element of divinity. If we can catch that and if we can have our feet firmly planted on the soil and not lose ourselves in imaginary vagaries, and at the same time have a bit of that divine fire in us too, then, perhaps, we might be able to balance ourselves and develop some kind of an integrated life. Somebody has said, I believe, and I would like you to feel that way:

“Lord, though I live on earth, the child of earth, yet I was fathered by the starry sky”.

I have come to Ceylon after ten years. I have also been here on two or three previous occasions. Whenever I come here, I do not feel that I have come to a strange country—I feel very much at home. Anyhow, your welcome makes me feel at home because of the friendly faces that I see everywhere. Quite apart from that, as you know very well, you of Ceylon and we of India are intimately related in our cultural inheritances and it just does not matter what shape politics take. You are an independent country, as you should be; and we are an independent country, as we should be; political barriers should

THE CONVOCATION ADDRESS

not be allowed to come into play when culturally our people look to each other. When I come here I feel very much at home and I am always sorry that my visit is rather brief. When I come here I think even more than I normally do—and normally I think a great deal—of that greatest and wisest and brightest son of India, whom you honour greatly and whom all of us in India and many other countries also greatly honour. The bond of Buddha and all that it conveys is a bond between India and Ceylon which nothing can break. Whenever one thinks of the Buddha, one inevitably thinks of his great teaching; and I often feel that perhaps if we think more of that basic teaching of the avoidance of hatred and violence, we may be nearer the solution of our problems.

I thank you for the honour you have conferred on me and for your great welcome. I wish you good fortune.