

Address at Graduation Ceremony, 1 April 2011

Chancellor Dr. Ian Gould, Vice Chancellor Professor Hoj, Pro-Vice Chancellor Professor Pal Ahluwalia, assembled dignitaries, graduates and alumni, I am deeply beholden not only for the honour that has been shown to me today but also for the opportunity I have been given to share my thoughts with you here.

A graduation ceremony is always a rite of passage. For those graduating today it opens up a new world and that is the way it looked to me more than fifty years ago when I first graduated from a university in a city most of you, I am sure, have not even heard of. It was for me a time of celebration as it is for you today. I congratulate those of you graduating and your parents and share your joy.

But for me, too, this is a rite of passage in another sense. I have been looking with some trepidation into my steady decline into respectability during the last few years and, today, I guess, the honorary degree that I have been awarded is not so much an accreditation as probably a public declaration that I have had my say over the years, that I must now learn to live on past accomplishments and yield place to others. While I am immensely grateful for the award, I also suspect that it is premised not on the promise of future performance as in your case, but an invitation to acknowledge that my job is now not so much to display intellectual virtuosity as to nurture the creativity of the next generation.

It is with this awareness that I must draw your attention to the changing nature of the contemporary university and the new responsibilities that this imposes on all of us. Traditionally, the universities served two main functions. They generated new knowledge and they scanned and evaluated all knowledge, whether generated in universities or outside, on behalf of society. Even when they educated the young generation and gave priority to teaching over research, the main aims remained the same. These functions fortunately are still there.

However, two other goals that were subsidiary till the middle of the twentieth century have now almost unchallenged priority within the culture of a university. More than generating knowledge, the universities are now concerned with organizing and disseminating knowledge. This can be considered a by-product of the global information deluge, often called the information revolution. Second, while the universities still scan and evaluate knowledge on behalf society that scanning and evaluation is increasingly confined to knowledge produced by universities. More and more the universities talk to themselves or with each other and are becoming more isolated bodies that mainly produce professionals. Their conversations with knowledge generated outside have either ceased or are tapering off. Some universities have virtually become federations of semi-autonomous professional schools, which do not converse even among themselves. As a system, one might say, the universities are becoming more narcissistic.

Fortunately, the university where we are today seems to have a robust tradition of innovative cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural work and I like

to hope that it will continue to represent in the future the best of a traditional university, with its age-old goals and open boundaries, without neglecting the new concerns of a contemporary, global university, which often forgets that the global is not necessarily the universal.

I thank of for your patience. The best universities, I believe, are the ones that nurture the art of listening. Not ordinary listening, but what one psychoanalyst once called listening with the third ear. Even in the twenty-first century, humanity needs that sensitivity to listen to unknown and little-known voices, voices that are not trendy or loud enough to out-shout or override the cacophony of the global media and entertainment industry. As for the world of knowledge, not only do the meek sometimes inherit it, the weak, the subdued and silenced do so too. I thank you once again for your generosity.

— Ashis Nandy