

THE PLACE OF KNOWLEDGE AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF THOSE WHO ACQUIRE IT

(Being the speech delivered by SYED ABUL HASAN ALI NADWI on receiving the Degree of D. Litt. (Honoris Causa) at the Seventh Convocation of the University of Kashmir held on October 29, 1981.)

FOREWORD

The name of Maulana Syed Abul Hasan Ali Nadwi never fails to evoke sentiments of respect and deep affection. He is an outstanding personality not only of India, but the whole Islamic World, and is regarded with high esteem by all sections of the people, the elite as well as the laity, for his learning, broadmindedness, piety, humility and charm of manner. He is a thinker as well as a writer, a historian as well as a teacher, and is gifted with such a refined literary taste that his speeches and writings are marked by the lustre and fragrance of poetry along with the depth and solidity of wisdom.

The brief address the Maulana delivered at the recent Convocation of the Kashmir University was widely appreciated. Everyone, here, was impressed by it, including the critics, teachers, students and experts in both the ancient and modern sciences.

By declaring, at the very outset, that knowledge was a unity, a single whole, that could not be divided into parts, he showed how necessary it was to rise above the ramparts of the ancient and modern branches of study and keep in mind and be regardful of the entire stock of human thought and learning. The Maulana laid stress on the worth and significance of knowledge in Islam by referring to *Sura-i-Iqraa* (Al-Quran : XCVI) of the Quran, and called attention to such action, together with this knowledge, that could lead to the welfare of mankind.

The most formidable problem of the modern Age is that while, on the one hand, a tremendous progress has been made in the field of knowledge, and through it, man has acquired an astonishing power and ascendancy over the forces of nature, -the advancement of science and technology has not only made it possible for him to plant his feet on the moon, but he is, also, peeping into the boundlessness of space with the help of his instruments-, on the other, in the words of Iqbal, "he who enchained the sunbeams," is proving himself utterly incapable of "unfurling the dawn on life's dark night". Despite all the achievements in the mental and material spheres, man is slipping fast into a moral and spiritual vacuum. The Maulana is not opposed to this progress. What he wants is that, side by side with it, we remained alive to the real purpose of life and our ultimate destiny. Vulgar materialism and craze for money are robbing man of his humanity and pushing him into a cesspool of self-seeking, slothfulness and lust for power.

The chief end and purpose of educational institutions is character-building and generation of social and moral consciousness through knowledge, but, in fact, what they are producing are creatures of books, not the masters, literates rather than the educated. There is no genuine thirst for knowledge either in the teachers or in the taught. They simply want to obtain positions of power and wealth through education. Everyone insists on his rights, and cares nothing for his duties. Education has come to be regarded merely as a means of earning one's livelihood, but even that purpose it is not fulfilling today. The Maulana has made use of an old parable to show how the students are failing to gain the desired coast in the ocean of life.

They neither know the art of living nor can accept death with a smile. The following words of the Maulana are worthy of being written in letters of gold:

"The art of leading a good, useful and dignified life consists, basically, of Godfearingness, humanitarianism, self-restraint and willingness to subordinate one's own advantage to the common good. Unselfish interest in the welfare of others, respect for mankind, the urge to protect the life, property and honour of fellow-men, preference for duties over rights, defense of the weak and the downtrodden and strength to stand up against the oppressors, firmness in opposition to those who have nothing to be proud of except power and money and refusal to be over-awed by them, the courage to speak the truth at all times and in respect of one's own country, belief in an All-knowing and All-seeing Power, and fear and anxiety of being recreated after death and called upon to render a full account of one's doings on the earth,- these are the essential conditions of a good and noble life, and fundamental requirements of a healthy society, and a strong and self-respecting nation. To arrange for training and instruction in these attributes and to create an environment that may be conducive to their growth and development is the primary responsibility of the educational institutions."

Unfortunately, we, all, have fallen a victim to the lure of transient politics. We live only for the pleasures of the moment. The appeasement of the senses has become the ambition's end, and we have rendered ourselves incapable of comprehending the reality of time. Cheap politics, excessive interest in oneself and longing to enjoy power and wealth have warped our minds and led us astray. Our faculties of understanding and discrimination have been blunted and we are ready to fall in line with every fast-moving traveller. We ought to understand the law of nature, realise the significance of both, continuity and change, and cultivate an awareness of the basic truths and realities of our existence. We should safeguard our individuality, but not for selfish advantage. On the contrary, we should seek, through it, to fulfil our role in the caravan of humanity. It is not enough to make sure of one's own Paradise, but the question is of turning this world of ours into an actual place of bliss. The task is not easy, but it is worth living for.

I am sure what Maulana Abul Hasan Ali Nadwi has said in his address will lend radiance to the minds and warmth to the hearts of the readers. What the Maulana desires is not different from the wish expressed by Iqbal in the following verse:

What you pray for is that my desire is fulfilled, What I pray for is that your desire may change.

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In the Name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful

Mr. Chancellor, Mr. Pro-Chancellor, Mr. Vice-Chancellor,

Teachers and Scholars of the University, and distinguished guests !

Knowledge, I believe, is one and indivisible, and to separate it into parts, into ancient and modern, eastern and western, and ideological and practical is incorrect. As Iqbal has said:

Talk of modern and ancient is
The sign of narrowness of vision.

I regard knowledge a truth which is a gift of God and does not and should not belong to a particular race or community. I see unity even in its diversity. That unity is truth, the search for truth, the aptitude for it, and the joy of its realisation. I am grateful to the Chancellor and other officials of the University that their choice for this high academic honour fell upon a person who is associated with the traditional system of education.

Whatever the branch of study, literature, philosophy or science, I do not conform to the view that he, alone, is a scholar and an intellectual who appears in its 'uniform', and whoever does not clothe himself with it is not worthy of recognition. The same, unfortunately, is the case even with poetry and literature, and it has come to be taken for granted that any one who does not display his wares in the shop-window or show himself off in the trappings of a poet or writer has no place in the realm of letters. The world has not forgiven even born litterateurs who did not put on the 'uniform' or were not lucky enough to obtain one from the 'store-house'. I believe in the universality, vigour and freshness of learning that has always been favoured with Divine guidance. If earnestness is there and the urge is genuine, the-grace of the Lord is never withheld. It is always-reaching.

At this Convocation of the University of Kashmir, situated as it is in a beautiful valley of the heaven-kissing Himalayas, I am reminded of the incident that had taken place, 1400 years ago, in the arid land of Arabia, and on a Mountain which was neither high nor verdant. (The Maulana added that though the land was barren and the mountain was naked and tree-less, it had been aptly said by Hafeez Jullunduri that :

Neither grass grows here nor flowers bloom,

Yet heavens bend themselves low to meet it.

The tremendous impact it made on history, and the imperishable effect it produced is, absolutely, unique in the annals of our race, and, significantly enough, it, too, was related to the 'tablet' and the 'pen' upon which rested the entire structure of knowledge and civilization, and without which neither the magnificent seats of learning would have come into existence nor the huge libraries. I mean the Divine Revelation that was sent down to the Prophet Mohammad, (Peace and Blessings of the Lord be on him,) on or about February, 12, 611 A.D., in the Cave of Hira, near Mecca. It said :

Read (O Mohammad) ! In the Name of thy Lord who created-

Created man out of a (mere) clot of congealed blood,

Read ! And thy Lord is Most Bountiful,

He who taught (the use of the) Pen,

Taught man that which he knew not. (Al-Quran : XCVI : 1-5)

Even in this initial installment of the Revelation, this first shower of the Rain of Mercy, the Lord and Cherisher of the Worlds did not put off the proclamation that the destiny of learning was bound up with pen. To be sure, it was in the solitude of Cave Hira where an Unlettered Apostle had gone to seek Message from Almighty God for the guidance and instruction of humanity and whose own state was that he could neither read nor write. Can the like or equal of it be found at any stage of history? And to imagine the sublimity of it. The Revelation is sent down, for the first time, to the Unlettered Prophet in an illiterate country where what to speak of educational institutions, even bare literacy was rare, and contact is established, after hundreds of years, between the sky and the earth, and it begins with Read. He who did not know how to read or write is being commanded to Read. It signified that the community that was to be given to him would not be a mere student, but teacher of the world and bearer of knowledge. It would promote learning among mankind. The era that had been granted to him would not be an era of darkness and ignorance, but of progress and enlightenment.

It declared : *Read! In the Name of thy Lord who created --*. The great misfortune was that the bond between knowledge and the Creator had been broken, and, consequently, learning had lost the sense of purpose and direction, and gone out of the right way. The broken link was restored now when knowledge was glorified. Besides, the warning was, also, given that knowledge should start with the Name of God for it was a Divine gift and could make a steady and balanced progress only under His guidance. It was the most revolutionary and epoch-making call the world had ever heard. No one, indeed, could have conceived of it at that time, and in those circumstances. Had it been put to the thinkers and writers of the world to guess as to how would the Revelation that was going to be received begin and what would take precedence in it, I am sure, no one with an idea of the mental and cultural condition of the Arabs would have said that it would commence with Read.

The announcement that the voyage of knowledge should begin under the guidance of the Omniscient and All-knowing God was unprecedented. It marked a watershed in the world of learning. The journey was long, hard and perilous. It was full of pitfalls. Caravans were robbed in broad daylight. A perfect guide was essential, and who could it be save The Supreme Being, The All-wise? It was not abstract knowledge that was aimed at. Not the knowledge that consisted of ornamenting with colours or playing with the dolls was meant simply for entertainment or for fighting with one another or filling the belly. Not the knowledge that taught only the use of the tongue. But :

Read! In the Name of thy Lord who created-

Created man out of a (mere) clot of congealed blood,

Read! And thy Lord is Most Bountiful.

He who taught (the use of the) Pen,

Taught man that which he know not.

The proclamation was clear, firm and positive. Read! Your Lord is Most Benevolent. How can He be unaware of your needs and weaknesses? *Read! And thy Lord is Most Bountiful,-He who taught (the use of the) Pen*. What could have elevated the pen in power and dignity more than that? Who could have given greater glory and honour to it? Remember, it was the first Revelation of Cave Hira and in a town where, perhaps, there was no pen in any home. If you

needed one, you would have had to go to a Warqah bin Naufel (An Arab scholar who lived during the days of the raising up of the holy Prophet, He was well-versed in the Hebrew language and was considered an authority on the Torah and the Bible) or someone who had received education in Persia.

It, further, unfolded the great reality that knowledge was infinite. It was without end. He taught man that which he knew not What is science? What is technology? Man is going to the moon. We have conquered space, and pulled the ropes of the earth.

Is it not a miracle?

Gentlemen !

I shall crave your indulgence, now, to offer a few suggestions as an ordinary wayfarer of the valley of learning.

The foremost task of the Universities is character- building. Their endeavour should be to produce men who, in the words of Iqbal, may not be willing to sell their conscience for "a handful of barley". Under the influence of modern ideologies and current order of things, it has been presumed that everyone carries a price. There is no one who cannot be bought in exchange for something or another.

The real success of a University lies in moulding the personality of its scholars in a way and giving such citizens to the society who do not put themselves up to auction nor can be lured away by a destructive ideology or misguided movement worthy specimens of humanity as can say with Iqbal

By Thy grace, I am not without honour, No Toghral's or Sanjar's, (Names of ancient Turkish Emperors) slave I am; Though world-seeing is my nature, I am no Jamshed's cup.

Secondly, our Universities ought to send forth men who may be ready to sacrifice their lives for the sake of truth, knowledge, reform and uplift, and derive the same satisfaction from going without food as people, generally, do from eating and drinking to their heart's content, and to whom loss appears to be more worth- while than gain.

The Universities should see to what extent they are being successful in producing men of real worth and merit. The greatness of a country does not depend on the number of the Universities it has. This criterion has, now, become out-dated. The real thing is how many of its citizens are endued with an awareness of their duties and obligations and can come forward to dedicate themselves to the attainment and promotion of knowledge, growth and development of moral virtues, and suppression of evils like corruption, greed, cruelty and injustice. How many of them are able to rise above personal considerations and lift the country to a higher cultural and spiritual level?

The fundamental aim and purpose of knowledge is to impart a new life and a new soul to the country and the nation. I shall read out to you a few verses from Iqbal which though not addressed directly to the poets or writers are applicable to all the branches of learning.

Valuable is the taste for Art, ye men of vision,

But vision that perceives not reality is futile.

The song of the poet or-the minstrel's strain,

Worthless is the zephyr which makes the garden depressed.

The goal of Art is the flame of immortal life,

Not a spasm or two that vanish like sparks.

Before I conclude, let me say a few words to the fortunate brothers who have successfully completed their studies and obtained the degrees or are still under instruction here. I shall take recourse to relating a parable which may sound more agreeable to the ears after the exhortation I have just inflicted upon you.

Once, some students were enjoying a ride in a boat. The time was pleasant, the air was cool, and the young men were in high spirits. With the simple-minded boatman, also, being there to serve as a target of fun and entertainment, who could make the students sit quietly? One of them asked the boatman, "Uncle! What subjects have you read?" "I have read nothing," the boatman replied. The young man sighed, and said, "Oh! Have you not read science?" "I have not even heard its name," replied the boatman. "But you must be knowing Geometry and Algebra," said another young man. "These names, also, are altogether new for me," came the reply. It was now the turn of the third student to sharpen his wit. "You would have, surely, studied History and Geography," he said. "Are these the names of men or towns?" asked the boatman in reply. At it, the boys burst into laughter, and inquired from the boatman what his age was. "Forty years or so," he said. "You have wasted half of your life and learnt nothing," remarked the young men. The poor boatman remained silent. Soon afterwards, a storm arose in the river and the boat began to be tossed on unruly waves. Disaster seemed imminent, and the students who had no experience of journey by water felt extremely nervous. They were seized with the fear of their lives. The boatman, then, asked the young-men, with feigned seriousness, what they had learnt. Failing to grasp the real intent of the boatman, the students began to give a long list of subjects that were taught in the colleges. When they had finished, the boatman said with a smile, "You have read all these things. But, tell me, have you, also, learnt swimming? If, God-forbidding, the boat over-turns, how will you reach the coast?" "Uncle!" the youngmen replied, "This is the one thing we do not know. We never thought of learning it." Upon it, the boatman laughed aloud and remarked, "I have wasted half of my life, but you have lost the whole of your lives. Your education is not going to help you in the storm. Only swimming can save you today, and you do not know it,"

The so-called powerful and advanced countries of the present-day world are confronted with an identical situation. The boat of humanity is in grave peril, the tides are moving menacingly towards it, and the shore is far away. The worthy passengers of the boat know every-thing, but are wholly ignorant of the art of swimming or navigation. Or, in other words, all the intellectual and scientific achievements notwithstanding, the modern man does not know how to live like a civilised and God-fearing human being. Iqbal has drawn pointed attention to the dismal state of affairs, the strange contradiction, which has set up the biggest question mark before the Twentieth-Century world and brought it at the cross-roads of destiny.

He says.-

He who enchained the sunbeams could not
Unfurl the dawn on life's dark night;
He sought the orbits of the stars, but failed
To travel his own thought's world;
Entangled in the labyrinth of his learning,
He lost count of good and evil.

The art of leading a good, useful and dignified life consists, basically, of God-fearingness, humanitarianism, self-restraint and willingness to subordinate one's own advantage to the common good. Unselfish interest in the welfare of others, respect for mankind, the urge to protect the life, property and honour of fellow-men, preference for duties over rights, defense of the weak and the down-trodden and the strength to stand up against the oppressors, firmness in opposition to those who have nothing to be proud of save power and wealth and refusal to be over-awed by them, the courage to speak the truth at all times and in respect of one's own country, belief in an All-knowing and All-seeing Power, and anxiety of being recreated after death and called upon to render a full account of one's doings on the earth,- these are the essential conditions of a good and noble life, and the fundamental requirements of a healthy society, and a strong and honourable nation. To arrange for training and instruction in these attributes and to create an environment that may be conducive to their development is the primary responsibility of educational institutions.

Occasions like the Convocation we have the honour to be attending today offer an excellent opportunity to look into ourselves and see how successful our educational institutions are in the realisation of these ends, and what is the worth and caliber, in that regard, of the scholars produced by them, and draw up plans for the future.

I thank you, once again, for the honour bestowed upon me, and the affection and trust you have been kind enough to express through it.