



## 62<sup>nd</sup> Convocation Address by Dr. Amrita Patel

Vice Chancellor Prof. Kamat, Members of the Senate, Members of the Management Council, Dr. Rani Bang, faculty, graduating students, ladies & gentlemen.

It is indeed a privilege to be invited to the 62nd Annual Convocation of the SNDT Women's University, a truly visionary institution, and to be present on an occasion previously graced by persons far more distinguished than myself. Each one of us present here, and especially the students graduating today, can draw tremendous inspiration from the founders of this University who appreciated the social value of higher education for women in times so very different and far more conservative than today.

I would like to congratulate Dr. Rani Bang who has been honoured today with a doctorate. Though I do not know Dr. Bang personally, I have known of her and her husband's work at Gadchiroli. Located as it is in a tribal and Maoist dominated area, Gadchiroli is hardly a place where you would expect a person qualified from Johns Hopkins University as Dr. Rani Bang is to settle down in. In the world of today increasingly being left devoid of role models, Dr. Rani Bang stands tall with her courage, dedication and concern for the less privileged amongst us and is a fine role model for young medical graduates.

My address would be around Peoples Institutions – The building blocks in Nation Building and I intend to talk to you on three issues today. Looking back, I can see these as three dimensions of my existence. Firstly, the woman that I was born as and destined to live. The second dimension – as an architect of peoples institutions – the dimension that governed most of my professional life. and lastly, a passion for Nature – Nature, the cradle of civilisation, which remains the beacon of my life. and for good reason, all the three are connected. I intend to locate these issues in the context of the broad contours of our contemporary society, the opportunities and challenges. and I hope I can weave a message from this interconnectedness, a message which could be meaningful to the young graduates before me today.

Having been a lone female student in the Veterinary College and a lone female employee in the cooperative that I joined after graduating, I have experienced the challenges faced by women pursuing their dreams in roads less taken even by men. Thereafter taking on responsibilities in a completely male dominated organisation which in a way was into nation building and striving at every stage to preparing and giving women their rightful place in the business of milk. But times have changed. Today young women like you are able to explore a whole range of and aspire for even greater accomplishments. Considering the levels of education a few decades ago or even education today in so many parts of the country, I believe you need to appreciate that you are amongst the very few fortunate ones who have had the privilege of passing out of such

a university and pursuing higher education. At the same time, one cannot underplay the structural disadvantages that women continue to confront. and for this reason, it would do us well to understand the opportunities and challenges that stand before us today, not just as women, but also as the educated citizenry of a democratic country and in community with others who face discrimination on the basis of caste, class, ethnicity etc.

We have evolved as a nation by adapting to the changing requirements of society and economy. Some of the fundamental changes that are visible are -Untouchability – where fellow humans were treated subhuman - being reduced considerably and freedom of large numbers of people from the clutches of bonded labour. We were also reasonably successful in controlling Small pox, Polio and Leprosy – diseases which plagued our country. Our life expectancy has increased and so have per capita incomes. We have fared well in contributing to global knowledge in science, and have created a new economic space in software engineering. The spread of mobile phone technology has transformed communication systems which has also instilled confidence in women.

Developments like the efforts to decentralise to Panchayats through the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment to the Constitution and the recent Right to Information Act, Forest Rights Act, and the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act are among the legislations, which have the potential to further democratise India.

Economically, we are informed that rising disposable incomes, increasing urbanization, improved market access, and growing FII and FDI all point to a robust economic future. While I hope for such an India, I am deeply concerned that we might be chasing a chimera if we believe that it is only in unbridled economic growth that the development and well-being of our nation lies.

Let us also capture the areas in which we are not doing well.

We have a number of estimates of the number of poor and downtrodden. No matter which line we take into account, about 30 to 40 crore people, more than a third of our country, are not doing well, AT ALL. and there are another third who are just about managing both ends meet.

I am not surprised about the increasing numbers, knowing well, that over the last few decades we have done very poorly in taking care of the ecological health of our country. We talk of infrastructure development as Ports and Dams without realising that for rural India, the infrastructure that makes a difference to people's lives are soil and water, nutrients and biodiversity. In the last few decades, we have allowed our forests to reduce by half. Many of our rivers have gone dry and virtually three quarters of our country are water stressed with severe

## 62<sup>nd</sup> Convocation Address by Dr. Amrita Patel

ground water shortages. I am not getting into the quality of water. Suffice it to say, we have moved into bottled water.

The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment that was released some years ago pointed out that the changes made to ecosystems while contributing to substantial net gains in human well-being have also come at a growing cost in the form of increasing degradation often shifting costs from one group of people to another or deferring these costs to future generations. The findings clearly state that the degradation of ecosystem services is causing harm to many of the planet's poorest communities and is at times the principal factor causing poverty. We do know that the Earth's temperature has increased by 0.6 degree Celsius in the last 100 years and barring any intervention it is destined to get dangerously warmer i.e., 2-6 degrees Celsius within the coming 50 years.

What is equally important to understand, and in fact act upon, is that these changes will not happen overnight; they are happening as we speak. Flows of water have diminished and deteriorated due to loss of forest cover. Not just the tiger, but hundreds of other species, including birds, bees, insects, reptiles and flora, which are lower on the popularity ladder but equally important actors in our ecosystem, are becoming extinct every day.

While these may sound distant and as if this would hit only the rural areas and that our cities are islands of safety, I don't need to remind the citizens of Mumbai of the wrath we witnessed in the flooding of the Mithi River a few years ago. It is only when we recognise that we live as an ecological whole, that we will become alert to the fact that we don't survive as islands, but as a larger rural urban continuum.

This brings me to another issue, which concerns educated persons like yourselves. While the number of people becoming literate is increasing, I question, is our education leading us to become better citizens? and whether better citizenry entails civic engagement at all? While our founding fathers could raise the standards of expectations from the State to undo major social evils like untouchability and slavery, does the outcome of our current education bring us even close to shun violence? Is today's society more tolerant of other religions and beliefs? and does our education lead us to a better conscience of our planetary responsibility and the burden of our ecological footprint?

### Experiences with Peoples Institutions

In order to help put our fingers on what could be done to remedy the situation; I share with you a few experiences of my professional life, which I believe are important

examples of civic engagement and growth of Peoples institutions.

I share with you my views on Peoples institutions for several reasons. Firstly, institutions help mediate between people and nature and how natural resources are governed. In a way, this connects with our larger need of conserving nature and managing our natural resources in a more sustainable manner. A serious shortcoming in today's world!

Secondly, Peoples institutions are basically rules and regulations of people who are into collective action. Besides drawing individuals to engage with the larger society they are a part of and depend on, they also help keep the greed of individuals in check.

Thirdly, when institutions gather momentum they in turn energise further action into various other dimensions of life, helping shape vernacular law and improve local self governance.

So, what are the features of these Peoples institutions and what do we learn from them?

The dairy cooperative movement that I have been closely associated with is a landmark in our country's recent history, not just because it has revolutionized milk production and led India to becoming the largest milk producer in the world, but because of the way in which this was achieved.

What changed the face of dairying was a farmers' cooperative set up over 50 years ago to fight against exploitation. The environment offered by post Independent India which was going through dramatic social reforms provided a favourable setting. In fact, cooperatives provided spaces for the unfolding of a representative democracy in the villages. Small, marginal farmers and landless came together to pool small quantities of milk. They put in place an institutional structure from production to collection, processing and marketing. Today over 14 million milk producers are members of their respective cooperatives across the country receiving as payment for their milk annually over Rs 25000 crores – a vital source of income for many as it is their sole source of livelihood, as the distribution of cows or buffaloes in rural areas is seen to be much more equitable than the distribution of land which is skewed. So the important lessons we learn from such an institution are firstly it is controlled by the farmers whose livelihoods depend on the successful running of the institution. Secondly, it is not dependent on government or any external force and they manage their own affairs by hiring the right professionals and perform best when the government allows them to govern their own affairs.

Coming back to the ecological crisis that I talked about earlier, the institutional dimension - poor ecological governance and decline of institutions – has an important role to play. When it comes to natural resource related

## 62<sup>nd</sup> Convocation Address by Dr. Amrita Patel

institutions, the problem is perhaps more complex and crucial because of the very nature of these resources when coupled with problems of socio-economic inequality.

Let me briefly share with you the lessons from natural resource institutions. As natural resources are mostly common pool resources better managed as common property regimes, by design the principles of inclusion, equity and access to basic needs are important, lest they marginalise the very people who depend on them. The failure of a clear articulation on operating values such as inclusion of the poor and meeting basic sustenance needs could defeat the ecological and social ends of such endeavours.

Another set of institutions we could learn from are the Self Help Groups. Though it has landed in controversy for different reasons, the Self Help Group movement not only improved access to financial resources to women, it has also gone a long way in establishing their significance in the household economy and has been a great source of self-confidence for them. In many cases, these groups have also become platforms where other important issues such as health, nutrition, sanitation and hygiene are discussed. Of course, much remains to be done for women to achieve full equality with men but certainly, liberal spaces have opened up for women.

While I have shared with you some lessons that I have gained from my experiences, there must surely be many more institutions that exist on the ground, which we discount as informal institutions but which are very formal to those who are a part of them and engage with them.

The reasons I went into these examples is firstly to highlight that these Peoples institutions stand testimony to the potential of civil society in general and women in particular, in managing their affairs at local levels. When complexities and scale increase, they fare better with some professional help and nested layers of self governance. I believe, it is in the functioning of these institutions, these local democracies that keeps India on the move. And secondly, I fear that our increasing urbanization and modernization is either eroding these civic values and atomising us or our governance models are not building on this innate social infrastructure.

I shall now come to the last part of the talk with a proposition:

### The Building Blocks

A colleague of mine who attended the Earth Summit held in Johannesburg in 2002 narrated to us what a couple of important people had to say at a panel discussion at the Summit. A gentleman who was then heading the World Business Committee for Sustainable Development, talking

about business realities said, "it is incomprehensible for a businessman to imagine that there is a limit to growth". He went on to say, "it is equally incomprehensible for the business mind to think about redistribution of wealth". As if that was not strong enough, another panel member who had been a Governor in the US in the past added, "In the US, politicians come a poor second to businessmen".

Discussing the poor ecological governance and the number of scams and institutional failures that one gets to read almost on a daily basis, it would appear that in recent decades the State has become subservient to market forces. Moreover, unfortunately, it also appears that the prevailing governance institutions are not strong enough to take a long-term view and plan for the health of the planet or the people who depend on it.

So, James Speth, the former Dean of Yale School of forestry asserts, "... (what is needed is) a revitalisation of politics through direct citizen participation in governance, through decentralisation of decision making, and through a powerful sense of global citizenship, interdependence and shared responsibility". In other words, we need stronger citizen engagement with governance issues and processes.

One may ask, if such small structures from down below, like the Peoples institutions I referred to, can be the basis for a macro solution, without nesting various levels of hierarchy of authority and control? My reply to this is, can a macro solution succeed without some genuine engagement with a decentralised participatory and self organised system? Can a national democracy be

responsive without a multitude of local democracies? The point is not that national or macro level institutions are not important. Both are. However, there is a large space, which a plurality of local democratic institutions need to fill. Civil society today has become a rising social force and can be significantly transforming; it can mediate between different people and between people, the state and market, while also guarding against the excesses of the state and market.

Perhaps the most important mission we need to inculcate in our education, in our life and work, is what I wish to call 'ecological commons' – holistic world-view, one that can visualize the inter-relatedness between people, and between people and nature. Ecological Commons, as a governance paradigm, could bring about inclusion, inclusive growth and sustainability.

I wish to conclude by borrowing a proverb from our neighbours, the Chinese. They say 'women hold up half the sky'. But often they do so invisibly. It is time that women, and especially educated women like yourselves, realize this so that women can claim and exercise rights that are due to them. Decentralization, people's movements and institutions, civil society



## 62<sup>nd</sup> Convocation Address by Dr. Amrita Patel

organisations are some of the spaces that have opened up for women and other disempowered sections of society. There will never be a dearth of challenges and obstacles, and my experience says that where we see success, it is because of the commitment of the persons involved and their tenacity to endure.

And so to the graduating students I would like to say that I hope that in the spirit of this institution from where you graduate today, you would consciously engage with these challenges. Equally importantly, education must lead you to engage with society and you must remember that civic action is a fundamental responsibility of every citizen. It is educated persons like yourselves who must go out into the world and be the change that we want to see in others.

Thank you.



**Dr. Amrita Patel, Chairman, National Dairy Development Board, Anand (Gujarat) on 18<sup>th</sup> December, 2012**



**Dr. Rani Bang was awarded Honoris Causa**



**Addressing to audience by Dr. Rani Bang**

