

**INAUGURAL ADDRESS AS CHIEF GUEST BY SMT D.
PURANDESWARI MOS (HRD-HE) AT THE INTERNATIONAL SEMINAR
ON “HIGHER EDUCATION IN INDIA: GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES”
ORGANIZED AS PART OF THE PLATNUM JUBILLE CELEBRATIONS
OF THE DAPARTMENT OF ECONOMICS ANDHRA UNIVERSITY
VISA KHAPATNAM ON 14 FEB 2009.**

Mr. Vice Chancellor, faculty members of the university and other distinguished guests and friends I deem it a great honour and privilege to have been invited to deliver the inaugural address at the Platinum Jubilee celebrations of the Economics Department of the Andhra university. The subject matter of symposium namely, “Higher Education in India: Global Perspectives” has been very thoughtfully selected in view of its relevance in the modern day global scenario.

The accelerated economic growth leading to demand for skilled man power and to enhance competitiveness in a globalised economy has made the higher education a priority sector today. However, the sector is faced with great challenges in terms of quantity and quality of education delivery, funding, inclusiveness, research & development, employability of graduates and equitable access to the benefits of international cooperation. To-day the two major concerns of Higher Education in India are low General Enrolment Ratio (GER) at 11 per cent compared to world average of 23.2 percent and low public spending per student in India at US\$ 400 compared to the average developing country spending about US\$ 1000. it

may be relevant to point out that China spends about US\$ 2500 and the USA spends US\$ 10,000. In addition shortage of faculty, inability of universities to attract and retain top talent, lack of timely curriculum updates, etc further adversely impact the growth of higher education in India.

India has survived with relatively a mediocre higher education system for decades. In the context of our compulsions in a globalized world we now require highly trained professionals so as to face the stiff and fierce competition particularly from China, which is investing heavily for improving a small group of its best universities to world class standards and to convert them into internationally competitive research institutions in the coming decade. Other Asian countries are also upgrading higher education with the aim of building world class universities.

While higher education in India has achieved remarkable progress in regard to increasing number of institutions, faculty, teaching-learning infrastructure, and enrolment, there are yet a number of challenges that need to be addressed urgently. The foremost priority, to my mind is the problem of enhancing access to higher education. The Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) at 11%, compares poorly with 60% in USA and Canada, and over 40% in several developed European countries and more than 20% in many developing countries. International experience shows that no country could become an economically advanced country, if GER in higher education is less than 20% which on all accounts seems to be the threshold level of higher education to contribute to rapid and sustainable

economic progress. The Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) has therefore to be raised to a minimum threshold level of about 20 percent for sustained economic development but then the target of 20 percent shall require us to substantially increase the intake capacity. So the 11th plan has set the target of 15 percent to begin with. As we do so, we have to also ensure that the higher education is made equitable and inclusive, meaning thereby that the regional and social imbalances prevailing in the higher education system will have to be tackled. No less critical is the issue of relevance and quality of higher education. Quality and excellence in higher education has been a matter of concern and we have to take necessary steps towards promotion of excellence in teaching-learning processes and outcomes in the forms of research, publications and creation of intellectual capital. These call for improvement in the higher education system, particularly focused on the implementation and operationalisation of a host of measures that have been recommended since the Radhakrishnan Commission of 1948. This is crucial in order to make our higher education system responsive to the needs and challenges of the knowledge economy. It is high time that we undertake thorough stock taking and review of the higher education scenario in the country.

Higher education in India has expanded manifolds during the past six decades. Since the advent of independence in 1947 the number of universities in the country has increased from 20 in 1947 to 378 whereas the number of colleges, which were no more than 1500 at the eve of independence, has gone up to 18064. No less significant has been the increase in the number of teaching staff, which has gone up from a meagre 15,000 to nearly 4.80 Lakhs during the same period. The number of

students enrolled in higher education too has gone up from 1 Lakh in 1950 to over 112 lakhs in 2005. Obviously, the institutional capacity of higher education has increased by several folds. Increase in educational institutional capacity has improved access to higher education and enrolment ratio increased from less than 1 % in 1950 to about 10% in 2007.

To compete successfully in the knowledge-based economy of the 21st century, our country needs universities that not only produce bright graduates for export, but, which can also support sophisticated research in a number of scientific and scholarly fields by producing sufficient manpower needed to manage the expanding economy. Addressing issues of equity and excellence are very crucial. Information Technology and space based communication systems are changing the needs and character of higher education. I feel that the newly emerging private sector in higher education cannot spearhead academic growth. Though several well-endowed and effectively managed private institutions maintain reasonably high standards, it is not clear whether such institutions will be able to sustain themselves in the long run; being mostly confined to narrow targeted goals. Further, most of the private institutions do not focus on advanced training in science subjects. So the country needs to urgently gear up selected universities, for building a higher education system oriented towards achieving its goal of joining the developed world economies. The entire issue of higher education reform needs to be addressed holistically from the socio-economic perspective. This is a matter of intellectual interdisciplinary exercise and is critically required to reinvent education system on track in the best national interest. Quality and innovation will be the major determining factors of the survival of the University system.

I must however, add that the Government has recognized the importance and role of higher education for nation building. How much and how long the governments should continue supporting higher education is a key question but the basic reality that the quality of higher education cannot be attained without government's support and patronage. World Development Report 1998 observes that the capacity to adopt and disseminate rapid technological advances is dependent on better public support for tertiary education. Also one can see that the gulf between Central Universities and the State Universities is quite substantial and increasing day by day. This two tier system which was adopted as a policy needs to be revisited and the gap narrowed down, if not wiped out completely. Given good governance and policy frame work, our advanced educational systems like IITs, IIMs, IISc, a few elite institutions and central universities that have developed as world class institutions of excellence only prove that we are capable of creating a robust educational system. We need a paradigm shift in our education policies and its firm implementation, rather than doing ephemeral changes here and there. I would like to draw your attention to the recent initiatives of the Government in setting-up more Central Universities, Indian Institutes of Science, Education & Research (IISERs), NITs Central Institutes of Technologies, IITs, IIMs and access to education through open and distance learning. These institutions would no doubt be provided with sound internal governance mechanism capable of attaining the chief objectives for which these institutes are created.

However mere access to higher education is not enough for the purpose. Making quality education accessible is as important as the access

to higher education. We must also ensure that the higher education system is able and made capable of providing quality education and achieve excellence in the area of creation and dissemination of knowledge. Our higher education system is characterized by varying degree of inter-institutional differences in quality and excellence. I understand that as per the rating of universities and colleges by the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) a dominant majority of the higher educational institutions can at best described as average or below average. This position is completely unacceptable in the backdrop of a globalised world.

With a background of about more than 150 years of Modern Education in English medium, this languishing trend of quality education in the country is beyond one's comprehension. One really needs to ask as why it is so, despite India having a long tradition of English-based higher education in over 350 Universities and institutes at comparatively cost-effective prices. If our IITs and IIMs today have a global brand value, why shouldn't we groom our universities and colleges across the country to acquire similar national and international approbation and acclaim? However, to do this, we need to carefully understand the reasons for the success of the IITs and IIMs and ensure that the lessons drawn therefrom are also followed in the field of higher general education. We must do some self-introspection and heart-searching to find why we are unable to improve the brand image of our universities.

The spread of higher education was achieved through active state support whereby public funding was considered essential in order to

provide equitable opportunities of higher education to all. It has, however, been a proclaimed policy of the country to also encourage private investment in higher education so long as they are driven by charitable and non-profit motives. Although the Government has considerably increased spending on higher education, it is obvious that the need far outstrips the provision. The increased allocation of Rs. 85,000 crore in the 11th Plan from Rs. 9,600 crore in the 10th Plan would be too high from the Govt alone to share the burden. Hence, we need to adopt innovative and flexible methods of leveraging the financial, managerial and teaching resources in the private sector. It is however imperative that a regulatory frame work is put in place so that there is no commercialization or commodification of education and also that there is no racketeering and exploitation in this regard. Subject to this, we have no inhibition to allow private players to function in the country with a reasonable degree of autonomy and freedom for providing quality education. Incidentally, the National Knowledge Commission headed by Sam Pitroda, too, had advocated large-scale private-public participation in higher education.

I hope that these and other cognate issues will be considered and discussed at the symposium so that some meaningful consensus could be arrived at which could provide inputs for policy formulations.

With these words I wish the symposium all success and once again thank the Andhra university authorities for giving me a chance for sharing with you my perception of the subject matter of to-day's discussion.

Jai Hind.