

**Sardar Patel University  
Vallabh Vidyanagar**

**58<sup>th</sup> Annual Convocation**

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**Convocation Address**

**Bhikhu Parekh**

I am most grateful to the Vice-Chancellor and the Senate and Syndicate of Sardar Patel University for conferring upon me the degree of Doctor of Letters (Honoris Causa) and inviting me to be the Chief Guest at this year's Convocation. Sardar Patel University is one of our distinguished universities founded and subsequently led by individuals of great distinction including my good friend Professor Harishbhai Padh. Many of its academic departments are nationally and some internationally known and respected. The University is located in an area that was Vallabhbhai Patel's janmabhumi, for part of his life his karmabhumi, and is rightly named after him. In being formally associated with it by virtue of an honorary degree, I am also linked to one of the greatest leaders of our independence struggle. This is a great honour and I only hope that I shall prove worthy of it.

Convocation of a university is an occasion when it invites its students to receive the degrees they have earned during the course of their studies. Although the occasion naturally involves university authorities, it primarily belongs to the students. It is their day, a culmination of their hard work and an end of their formal association with the university. It is therefore proper that I should put them at the centre of my address, and say things that in my view might be useful to them in years to come.

You, who are receiving today your degrees, will soon be leaving the sheltered environment of the university and entering a world with all its raw harshness. I want to say something about the challenges of that world, and the capacities and sensibilities you will need to cope with them.

The world you would soon be entering is a dangerous and unstable place. Not a day passes when some group does not attack and kill another in the name of this or that cause. The cause gives it a reason, a motive, a justification for its deeds, and hence a clear conscience. Look at what is going on in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Yemen, Libiya, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Egypt where thousands of people have been butchered and even more rendered refugees. Cast your eye a little further and you feel the blow back in Europe and the U.S.A. We saw the twin towers in New York brought down some years ago.

We saw violent actions in Madrid, London and twice this year in France. For the first time in its history Belgium was virtually shut down for days and its schools, universities and metro were closed. Children are kidnapped and conscripted into local armies in parts of Africa. Innocent Individuals in Syria and elsewhere are publicly beheaded on trumped up charges. Refugees are pitilessly turned away from Europe and the U.S.A. and left to die horrendous death. Nearer home in our own country, violence, though nothing like in other parts of the world, continues to occur on religious, political and other grounds, making the Dalits, women, the minorities and others its targets. In all these cases it is not just the violence that is deeply disturbing. Its savagery and brutality as well as the intense hatred that accompanies it are even more worrying. One reads morning newspapers and watches the evening T.V. where all this is offered as a daily diet, leaving one deeply sad and wondering if the world would ever get better.

These hundreds of small and large, silent and noisy, acts of violence occurring daily have many causes. Some spring from the desire to dominate others; some others from a passion to take revenge for past humiliations; yet others from a struggle to keep modernity at bay. One of the common and most important factors fuelling these acts of violence has to do with the search for and maintenance of one's identity. I want to concentrate on it and explore what it means and why it spawns so much violence.

We all need a sense of identity, a sense of who we are and what we stand for. It acts as an intellectual and moral compass in our lives and guides our conduct. Without a sense of identity we would not know what choices to make, what decisions to take, what to avoid at all cost, and would be completely lost. In the normal circumstances the sense of identity is given to us by our society and its moral code. The society in which we are born and raised tells us what a good son, father or brother should be like, what ideals a good Hindu or a Muslim or a Christian should aim to live by, what it means to be a good Indian or a good human being, and what things we should at all cost avoid. Not all these identities and the norms associated with them are always acceptable. We critically reflect on them, accept those that survive scrutiny, and revise and even reject those that do not. We fashion our identity in the course of an ongoing critical engagement with our society, and in the process change both ourselves and our society.

A difficult situation arises when our society is unable to play this vital role of defining our various identities and their guiding principles. This can happen for a variety of reasons. Major institutions of society might have broken down or become discredited and carry no authority. Society might be subject to conflicting pressures and may not know how to handle or balance them. It might be changing at a bewildering pace and

in ways it does not itself fully comprehend. Whatever the reason, it cannot provide its members with guiding principles, an intellectual and moral compass. This causes a moral panic among them, and its deeply disoriented members turn to whatever appears to them to be a reliable source of certainty, usually a religion or its secular equipment. The kind of identity these panic stricken individuals seek and find is not like the one a stable and well-structured traditional society gives. It is not fluid, open to revision, growing out of lived experiences, broadly in harmony with the society's history and traditions. Rather it is an artificial construct, consciously crafted in response to widespread anxiety, capable of being manipulated and imposed from the outside. This new kind of identity is at work in many cases of violence today, and I briefly wish to analyse it.

This new kind of identity has several distinguishing features, of which four deserve to be highlighted. First, identity is defined in adversarial or oppositional terms. According to it, to know who one is, one must know what and who one is against. One's identity is believed to be indeterminate, blurred, lacks a clear focus unless it is sharply contrasted with its opposite. It is my enemy who is supposed to define me, and it is in the course of my struggle with him that I become fully aware of who and what I am. I am opposed to represent what is true and good; by contrast he is demonised and seen as a symbol of evil. My identity is not something I quietly enjoy; rather it has to be constantly protected against the designs of my enemy, and that calls for unceasing watchfulness and struggle.

Secondly, identity is believed to be capable of only one interpretation, and all who share it must define it in an identical manner. There is only one way to be a good Hindu, a good Muslim or a good Indian, and those holding different views

are dismissed as misguided deviants whom one has a duty to bring in line. Identity is supposed to unite us against our enemy, and it cannot do so if each of us could freely decide what it means and involves. Since identity is constantly under threat, internal discipline and unity in an organisation are considered of utmost importance.

Thirdly, identity is expected to inform all areas of one's life and make it an integrated whole. As a Muslim I should pray, eat, dress, run my business and in general conduct myself in a way prescribed by the *Qur'an*. To exempt any area of life from the jurisdiction one's Islamic identity is to be untrue to it, to be an incomplete and hence a false Muslim. Identity brooks no compromise, and its demands must be rigorously followed in all that one does. One either is or is not a Muslim, and if one claims to be a Muslim, one must follow the *Qur'an* in all its details. To pick and choose what one likes from it is to violate its integrity, and commit the blasphemy of pitching one's judgement against it.

Finally, each of us has multiple identities, and they point in different directions. It is argued that the only way to structure one's life and bring order in it is to subordinate them all to a single overarching identity. One might be a professor, a Brahmin, a Hindu, an Indian, and many other things, but these are all structured by and their demands regulated by whatever is taken to be one's central identity, usually the religious or the cultural.

When identity is understood in this oppositional, essentialist, uniform and singular way, it becomes a source of considerable hatred and violence. It divides humankind into hostile groups, sharing no common bonds and each seeing the other as a mortal threat to its identity. Within each group all its members are shaped in a single mould, and their differences and disagreements are

suppressed. One who disagrees is a false brother, a traitor, and should be eliminated. The richness and variety that characterizes an individual's life is also flattened, and much violence is done to him. Since identity sets the framework or the context of one's thought and life, its demands are put beyond the reach of rational judgement. In short, identity becomes both a source and a means of justifying egregious self-directed and other-directed violence. What began as a search for a moral compass ends up as a crude device to silence moral scruples and violate all that is worthwhile in human life.

This view of identity is deeply misguided, and each of its central theses is either false or highly exaggerated. In order to be a Hindu or a Muslim, I need to base my life on its guiding principles, not see non-Hindus or non-Muslims as my enemies. While these groups are different, they are not necessarily adversaries unless some other factors are at work. What is more, they also share much in common as neighbours, as Gujaratis or Bengalis, as Indians, or as human beings. During his campaign for the partition of India, Jinnah took the view that Hindus and Muslims represented two totally different civilisations sharing nothing in common. As the Head of the newly created Pakistan, he realised how wrong he was and began to talk about how much they shared in common. We simply cannot judge ourselves along a single axis and deny all that binds us together. To do so is to impoverish human beings to a level when they are no longer recognisable.

Not all individuals sharing a common identity must or as a matter of fact do or can take an identical view of it. For some to be a Hindu is to follow the caste system; for others it is to follow the great moral ideals of their culture including rejection of the caste system; for yet others it is simply to recognise one's affiliation to a particular tradition without substantively subscribing to any of its concrete doctrines or practices. One could be a Hindu in a

religious, civilizational, social or historical sense, and it is wrong to take only one of these as its defining feature. Furthermore the long and rich Hindu way of thinking and living includes much internal plurality. A Hindu can aspire to be like Rama, a maryada purusha, a man limited by the prevailing conventions, or a highly complex and many-sided person like Krishna. It is silly to ask which of these two is a true Hindu.

It is again wrong to place identity above reason and claim that it cannot be rationally judged. If someone said that his identity involved killing all infidels, Jews, black people or all who ate beef, we would question his sanity and refuse to respect his identity. All identities make demands on others, and need to satisfy the most basic moral principles that govern human relations, such as not taking others' lives or causing them harm. Our respect for an identity is necessarily conditional and cannot be indiscriminate.

We have several identities based on our gender, ethnicity, religion, nationality, class, politics, profession and interests, and each necessarily limits the others. Take a religiously minded cricketer. As a religious person he thinks he should pursue the well-being of others and help them in all ways he can. If he decided that while playing the game of cricket, he should deliver easy balls to help the batsman make his maiden century, or give away his wicket to let the bowler do his hat trick, we would think poorly of him and criticise him for subordinating his identity as a cricketer to that of a religious person. Cricket is a game with its own rules and competitive ethos. To play it is to observe its rules, not those imported from religion. One can be religious and a cricketer but not a religious cricketer. Since different human activities have logics, they cannot all be subsumed under any one of them.

Identity, then, is not and cannot be singular, closed, unchanging, and immune to rational scrutiny. It is by its very nature plural,

open to diversity of interpretations, subject to revision and in extreme cases even to rejection. It is in this context that the education you have received in this university becomes most relevant. The university is an institution of higher education. Higher education is not the same as further education. It is obviously further education in the sense that it takes you further than the school education, but that is not its distinguishing feature. Higher education represents a qualitatively different level of education. In the school one is taught certain bodies of knowledge about different areas, and is expected to accept them as authoritative. In the institution of higher education one adopts a radically different approach to them. One learns how these bodies of knowledge are arrived at, by what methods, whether these methods are appropriate, whether their concepts are valid, and the different views that obtain on these and related questions. In other words one looks at their modes of legitimation or their grounds, and participates in the process of formation of knowledge.

One learns to apply this way of viewing knowledge to one's own beliefs and convictions, and asks to know their basis or grounds. It is this capacity to examine the grounds of one's beliefs that the university exists to cultivate. As the great philosopher Immanuel Kant put it, one learns to ask by what right one holds a certain view or belief. Probing the basis of one's beliefs and actions is the hallmark of an educated person; uncritically accepting whatever is on offer represents the opposite. Higher education is not about the accumulation of knowledge. Rather it is about the cultivation of the capacity to think analytically and critically. An educated mind is reflective, self-critical, inquisitive, constantly asking why things are as they are and if and how they can be different. As a classical Sanskrit maxim puts it, sa vidya yavimuktaye. That alone is true education which liberates us from inherited and

uncritically accepted beliefs and prejudices. An educated mind is engaged in constant self-examination. He sheds beliefs and prejudices that appear to him wrong, 'grows from truth to truth' as Gandhi called it, and becomes a liberated or free person. He has an open mind, a mind that is open to and at ease with new ideas and sensibilities, and is engaged in the unending activity of peeling off layers of preconceived ideas.

Even as an educated person seeks to liberate himself from the inherited prejudices, he respects the similar freedom of others. He knows that others are engaged in a similar journey to his own and may rightly reach different conclusions. Indeed he sees these differences as resources to be used for his own self-development. They stimulate him, provide him with new ideas, supply him the platform from which to take a critical look at himself, and enable him to carry his journey yet further. An educated person does not seek to mould others in his own image; to the very contrary he respects their freedom to be different. His attitude to their differences is one of civility, tolerance, mutual respect, and dialogue. He does not just tolerate them because that implies patronising them; rather he respects differences as expressions of human freedom and preconditions of human growth.

Higher education further has an element of universality built into it. The knowledge that it teaches is not the product of a single nation or ethnic group. Different individuals from different parts of the world have all contributed to it, and it is a product of their collective effort. This is as true of the natural as of the social sciences and the humanities. As a university student studies various subjects, he imbibes this ethos and appreciates their universal basis. In a subtle way the university liberates him from narrow loyalties and affiliations and makes him a universal man, vishvamanav. He simply cannot break up humankind into neat and exclusive groups because he would

then contradict the basis of the very knowledge he hopes to acquire. This does not mean that a university educated person might not be patriotic or a nationalist, but rather that he cannot be just that. He is aware that the university stands for universality, that it is Vishvavidyalaya, representing the great achievements of the human spirit, and thus a microcosm of the entire humanity.

While cultivation of the intellectual capacity is the primary concern of the university, it is not the only one. The university is also concerned to fashion the character, to shape the moral disposition, of the student, and to instil in him the love of the good. When one loves the good, one naturally wants to realise it and make it a worldly reality. Love of the good is taught in the university in various ways and through all subjects. It is taught by requiring a student to rise above his preconceived ideas and seek and accept the truth, to rely only on verifiable evidence, not to plagiarise, not to cheat in an examination, to conduct oneself as a responsible member of the academic community, to respect its rules, to behave in a civil and respectful manner towards other students and staff, and so on. The university instils the love of the good and shapes the character of the students by creating a certain ethos, discipline, method of teaching, forms of friendship and pattern of institutional loyalty. A student shaped in this way would not dream of lying, cheating, stealing, using violence, and doing anything base or ignoble because he would not then be able to respect himself as it goes against the kind of person he has become. This internalised love of the good and corresponding sense of right and wrong becomes a guiding principle of his life and a powerful source of his conduct.

Respect for human dignity and the associated idea of equality is central to the sense of right and wrong, and deserves a particular emphasis in the Indian context. Thanks among other

things to our centuries old caste system, our self-consciousness is deeply distorted by a sense of hierarchy. Individuals judge their worth in terms of their place in the social hierarchy. One is nobody unless one is somebody, and one is somebody only if one is above someone. Even the erstwhile untouchables have an internal hierarchy and their own untouchables! This is also evident in the way individuals are often introduced to strangers, listing their bearers' degrees and past and present official positions lest anyone should inadvertently forget to respect the demands of their status.

In a hierarchical society, one lords over those below and debases oneself before those above. Even as one expects one's inferiors to acknowledge their inferiority in countless subtle and crude ways, one acknowledges one's own in relation to one's superiors. As in other hierarchal societies, in India status affects one's very humanity, and extends to all areas of life. Those of inferior status may not sit when their superiors are standing, disagree with them, or demand to be governed by the same rules. Not surprisingly Individuals cannot take even their basic dignity and equality for granted.

The hierarchical view of life goes so deep that as the caste consciousness is weakening, wealth and political power are taking its place. Wealth is not just quietly enjoyed but flaunted, so as to make the owner's superiority blindingly obvious to all, and used to demand and secure exemptions from norms that bind others. Political power takes even uglier forms. Those in power demand and generally get police escort and security guards even then they do not need them, because their purpose is not so much to protect them as to proclaim their superior status. When they visit places, roads are supposed to belong to them and closed off to normal traffic. The more high ranking a person, the greater is the inconvenience to the public. These

inconveniences can be easily avoided as they are in the West, but that kind of equal treatment is precisely what the superior people find threatening to their status and cannot accept.

This deeply ingrained sense of hierarchy not only damages Indian life at many Levels, but also corrupts the individual's sense of right and wrong and the quality of interpersonal relations. It must be eradicated and replaced by equal respect for everyone's basic and inalienable human dignity. The change is coming, but it is very slow, tentative and fragile. Our educational institutions are the best hope of our society and, if they cannot produce men and women imbued with the spirit of equality, who will? And how degraded would our lives be?

Let me bring this address to an end. I've argued that an educated person exemplifies several distinct and commendable qualities. He is capable of self-criticism, has convictions but not dogmas, delights in differences and dialogue, has a strong sense of right and wrong, and respects the common humanity that binds together all men and women. He respects others' right to be different and has no desire to mould them in his image. He knows that all knowledge is a collective product of humanity, and he is himself a child nursed on the milk of many mothers. These and related qualities protect him against the mindless obsession with a closed, singular and adversarial identity that, as I said earlier, is responsible for much of today's violence.

I like to hope that your education in this fine university has cultivated these vital qualities of intellect and character in you, and that you will do all you can to make India and the world a peaceful, humane, tolerant and just place. I wish each of you well in your future endeavours.

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