

6

A D D R E S S
by
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Subject: THE NATION-STATE AS A MORAL ENTITY

THE NATION-STATE AS A MORAL ENTITY

Mr. President, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I feel deeply honoured at being invited to address this Commencement Convocation, memorable because it coincides with the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the foundation of this great University. I am not a stranger here, as I enjoyed the hospitality of President Hatcher when I came here under an Exchange Programme some fifteen years ago. It is a significant token of the desire of this University to recognise and cultivate world-wide academic relationships that I should have been invited from far-away India for the honour of addressing this Commencement Convocation.

This century and a half, so significant in world history, has seen this University grow enormously on the strength of its inner resources, the initiative and enterprise of its administration and its teachers, and its sensitive responsiveness to new and emerging needs over the period, which is such an outstanding feature of American life. The State of Michigan has looked upon it with solicitude and pride, and has made its expansion its special concern. But the University has been not merely a State university but an American university in the full sense of the word and its doors have also been wide open to foreign students. It has tried to build up its unique character and traditions in ever widening horizons. May this spirit always characterise and inspire its vision.

The President of the University, in his gracious letter of invitation, referred very kindly to the knowledge and experience which he presumed I possess. I have, indeed, been concerned with education for the greater part of my life. This could, I suppose, by courtesy be called experience. But I have yet to discover and define to my own satisfaction what 'possession' of knowledge means. If it is information, I may have a modest share of it, though the information one needs to have in the present context of the world is limitless and it is, perhaps, safer to be discreetly silent about what one has! If knowledge is something beyond information, something that becomes part of one's being, then it would be more proper to say that I seek it, not that I have found it.

I hope you will not take it amiss if I use this occasion as an opportunity to think aloud on a topic about which much thinking and writing has been done but much more needs to be done, and which is, directly and indirectly, often the motive and the subject of conversation when Americans and Indians come together. It is, therefore, possible that the topic may appear commonplace but I have chosen it deliberately. In our vast world of thought and activity, the exceptional has naturally a higher value. But we must revert now and then to the fundamentals, to the soil out of which our thoughts and our lives have grown.

It seems to me that, if we examine our present situation critically, we will find that the most fundamental issue that we face today and which, perhaps, dominates all others

is the relationship of the individual and the nation State and our destiny depends largely on the type of tensions which these two create and resolve.

May I remind you that, while we are in the process of building up a nation State in India, you have already built up one that towers over the world today. It is, therefore just and proper that we should carry on a constant dialogue on the nature and the deeper purposes of the nation-state and where it is going. The direction that your thoughts and actions take are of supreme importance to the world, and it is therefore necessary that you should also study with sympathy and understanding the nature and working of nation-states other than your own. There are nation-states which owe their origin to a common feeling of nationhood and to an instinctive identification of the ultimate interests of the state and the individual, an identification which persists in spite of a vigorous and articulate desire that the individual should be as free as possible under the law. There are nation-states created by the will to assert and establish the claims of the common interest, which could not otherwise be achieved. There are nation-states which are basically a grouping of two or more racial and cultural elements which aim at ensuring harmony between them and promoting the common interest. There are nation-states, constituted by the will of the people, to symbolise their attainment of a common nationhood and enshrine it in policies that will bring them strength and prosperity. Obviously, therefore, all nation-states are not alike in their origin or purpose and each must fulfil its destiny

in its own way.

We are often used to regarding the nation-state as a solution of most of our problems and there is no doubt that it had solved some of them. But there have been serious and, in the context of the times, justifiable doubts whether it has been as effective as claimed or been able to solve the crucial issue of the relationship of power to moral ends. In fact, there are States in which there is no clear recognition of the fact that, in the game of power and pursuit of material prosperity in which they are engaged, moral ends have any significant place. I need not remind you of the early Christian doctrines about the state, about its being accepted as a necessary evil, about the kingdom of heaven envisaged in contrast to the kingdoms of the earth. In ancient India there were kingdoms in which the duties of the rulers and the ambitions considered legitimate to them were duly prescribed ~~but~~ the desire for personal aggrandisement and power created obstacles in the way of developing an ethical concept of the State. There was also an under-current of the belief, promoted by thinkers and philosophers, that the physical universe, based on desire and effort, was illusory and misleading. Islam conceived of life ideally as an organic whole, not to be divided in principle or practice into the secular and the religious. The original Islamic community was at once secular and religious, a body politic whose affairs were to be settled by consensus. But soon the community became subject, like other communities, to personal rule and a political authority came into

being which, like other political authorities, was guided by its own interest. This led many of the religious-minded to reject all rulers and to deny moral status to them and their governments. All this is now past and gone. The nation-state has established itself and asserted its concepts of rights and obligations, of freedom and justice, of tolerance and co-existence - or otherwise - among its citizens.

But the fundamental question I would like to raise is: Does this mean that moral judgments will not - or should not - apply to the nation-state, that it is beyond the jurisdiction of the moral law, that there is no authority which can sit in judgment over it? I hope we would all agree that this is not so. In spite of all the apparent advantages that may be gained by the defiance of the moral law, exploitation and injustice are bound to recoil sooner or later on the State and there is no power which can prevent it in the long run. And when nemesis overtakes it, the good ones are likely to suffer with the evil ones. There is a verse in the Quran, the holy book of the Muslims, which says "And beware of the catastrophe which when it befalls, will not affect only those who have specially transgressed (but sweep all in its train)". If the commitment of political excesses and injustices by states has to be prevented, who has the right and the power to do so? There is only one answer to the question: the citizen with a sensitive and dauntless conscience who can, if necessary, defy the State in the interest of the State and assert the primacy of the moral values. But this citizen is

also an individual and a member of the community of citizens. We have, therefore, to examine where he stands before we discuss the problem of his conscience and his education.

The nation-state, as it is, has been created historically by all variety of individuals - the statesman, the martyr, the explorer, the buccaneer, the imperialist, the adventurer, the entrepreneur, the thinker, the scientist, the historian, the poet. They sometimes worked in unision, sometimes in conflict and made their own unique contributions to the emergence of the total product. Some of them, like Abraham Lincoln, compelled the state to accept and serve moral ends; some twisted moral ends to fit into the straight jacket of the state interests; some considered moral ends to be irrelevant in the pursuit of the interests of the state. They have all left their impress on the composite character of the nation-state. Your own history, like ours, has been rich in such men and both you and we have admired and continue to admire many of them particularly those who blazed new trails or added new dimensions to national life. But, curiously, in every advanced and prosperous nation-state, it has so happened that a whole system of thought and organization and patterns of behaviour have been built up which the bulk of the citizens must accept without question, whatever the implied cost. I do not deny that, in a democracy at least, the right of dissent is respected in ~~but~~ also theory and sometimes in practice. But for most individuals it is

difficult to exercise it, because all the elaborate paraphernalia of rewards and penalties, the power of big organizations, the effect of the tremendous mass media work in the opposite direction. And the ordinary individual often lacks the intellectual and moral courage to assert himself successfully against the odds arrayed on the other side.

Yet we have to remember that this individual is not a mere atom in the universe. He is symbolic of humanity itself - its future hopes and dreams and aspirations. For his sake we must be ready to make a critical reevaluation, not only now but always, of the values embodied in the system under which he lives. It is unwise and unworthy of man's intellectual and moral integrity to accept any status quo just because it happens to be the status quo and is accepted by an unthinking or gullible majority.

But some of the unsavoury builders of nation states - of which Hitler is a good example - have created serious difficulties in the way of the human conscience asserting itself. They have roused the admiration of the thoughtless but possibly devoted patriots and awakened aggressive ambitions in their minds. They have tended to blunt the moral sensitivity which distinguishes between right and wrong in the political field. Moreover, it has become even more difficult to disentangle moral and political motives and to distinguish legitimate aspirations from mere predatoriness, because the nation-state is also embedded

in a particular economic system. This complicates the situation further by bringing the vested interests into a formidable array, difficult to dislodge from their entrenched positions. They have forced or persuaded society to accept, in many things, an ordering of values with little moral basis and given a new status and prestige to acquisitiveness which is, by no means, the most attractive quality of human nature! They have given such a twist to the whole concept of relationship between man and man and between man and his own self that, instead of each man being free, within reasonable limits, to try and build his own concept of the good life, of a powerful mass movement has developed which swept everything along in the direction which they had, as it were, pre-determined, carrying the individual helplessly in its train.

When the nation-state was being formed and the new economic system being established, the thinkers of the time did not substitute - perhaps could not very well have substituted - something of their own for what appeared to be giving proof of irrepressible vitality within the scope of its limited purposes. Some of them idealised the nation-state and the new concept of progress; some studied the state and the economic system with faith in their intrinsic value and only a few raised their voice in moral or aesthetic protest against what they found ugly or evil in it. Historians, looking backward with pride, seemed to see their nation-states emerging from poverty, ignorance and disease, fighting their way through the existing obscurantism and

confusions to positions of power and prestige. They fostered many naive, and sometimes mischievous, prejudices and attitudes of chauvinism and national superiority, which the nation-state required to strengthen its foundations, and adjusted men's vision within its realised and unrealised ambitions. It did not occur to them that they were creating for themselves many new and baffling problems pertaining not only to their internal economy but even more to the development of healthy international relationships.

Where does the individual now stand in this comparatively new political and economic set up? When we evaluate this new civilization, we find that, while he has gained in some ways, he has lost heavily in others and, perhaps, the heaviest loss has been that of moral identity. We have come to believe that we cannot possibly abandon or alter the pattern of scientific and technological progress dictated to us by the system as it exists, even though it may result in making peace and international understanding impossible or resulting in the forging of the most diabolical instruments for the annihilation of the human race. Even if the danger of physical annihilation may appear avoidable or unlikely - which I do not think is the case - there are other ways of annihilation of the human personality and the gracious fruits of the man's cultural heritage, which are already operative. Our lives are prescribed by our economy, our technique, our organisation; we are, at least in advanced countries, completely in the power of the Frankenstein of our technology. There is a continuous process of levelling of individuality, an almost irresistible

pressure on each individual to be like the rest in many significant segments of his life. We must act alike, think alike, feel alike; we must admire what we are told to admire. We tend to fall helplessly under the spell of the most ingenious and powerful forms of advertisement. Each of us must tamely follow the herd in interpreting what pleasure and happiness mean and their professional merchants cleverly devise appropriate distractions to satisfy uncouth and uncultivated tastes. The average individual has no self, no inner identity, nothing in him that can be esteemed as unique. There is no mystery in man; he is not only knowable but measurable and can be manipulated by clever men or clever machines which are also, after all, of their making. Perhaps I exaggerate a little, but I have no doubt that this is true of the majority of our fellowmen and women. For this we cannot, in fairness, blame them or hold them responsible, because the environment which has been fashioned for them must necessarily yield ~~these~~ results!

Look at some of what are traditionally our noblest creations and the uses to which their contemporary expressions are being put in many cases. Art and literature have taken a hand in this process of dissolving the individual by making more and more drastically 'realistic' appraisals of man as he is. The human form, once believed to have been made by God in His own image can, in the name of art be distorted, disfigured, taken apart and fantastically pieced together as a hideous inanity. Literature uses its own media to impress upon

the individual the emptiness within him and the futility of all age-old dreams and aspirations which are denied intrinsic validity. And since this is the latest 'fashion' and the latest is by definition the best, it is readily accepted. He is warned against attempting to sink his roots deeper than his physical self and the world as he sees it in a superficial way. Progress has brought, we are told, art and literature nearer to the people, and there is no limit to the production of books. But quantity tends to swamp quality and most things have the ambition to become instantaneous like coffee! The individual has, indeed, paid a high price for the creation of this new world and this new civilisation.

What is the future to which we can look forward if this dissolution of the individual continues? An inkling of the catastrophe that lies in wait for us at the end of this road we have already received in the emergence of forces of totalitarianism. Will democracy remain safe if the individual loses the capacity to conceive of himself as something more than an anonymous unit of a mass and is not trained and prepared to shoulder the responsibility of battling with his own creations and, if I may say so, even with historic forces in behalf of a more humane and civilized social order?

It is for educators to answer this question, to decide whether they will assume leadership or trail behind any developments that take place under stress of external forces. We know that education can be imparted only under the conditions which exist, but it is also part of the educator's function to labour

to change these conditions when necessary and anticipate the future. If the forces that create and maintain the existing conditions are regarded as values to be served, it cannot be merely on the ground that they exist and are operative. No education worthy of the name can be conceived as something external, having no relationship with man's inner-most being and becoming. It should prepare us, no doubt, for the performance of the world's numerous tasks, but this performance must have its roots in the pursuit of moral and ethical values which give them meaning. In other words, education should consist in stimulating a search for values, in their courageous affirmation even under the most adverse conditions and in their expression in all activities so far as possible. And these values should be valid in themselves and valid for all. It is only when education assumes this function that man can give a moral purpose to his life, his institutions and to the state as a whole.

The responsibility of American universities, in this context, is very great indeed. Like their nation-state, they tower over the world and educators elsewhere often look to them for leadership. Their virtues are very likely to be imitated, their mistakes to be multiplied. If, under the illusion that responsiveness is a sign of awareness, they try to meet every demand of the existing social system, without an independent and objective consideration of the intellectual, social or moral value of the demand, they will place education in bondage to the

if I may say so.
prevailing system. This is a sobering thought. If, on the other hand, their concept of education is such as to bring a deep-rooted subjective culture into contact with objective culture and to create ideals that have the nature of moral commands, they will revitalise the individual and make democracy representative of the true freedom of the spirit.

Mr. President, I am aware that I have given expression to a somewhat pessimistic viewpoint. But I assure you it has been far from my mind to belittle or disparage what has been achieved by constructive political endeavour and by science and the application of science. The achievements are too magnificent and obvious to be denied. Only, there is so much at stake that we cannot be complacent, cannot be content with looking at the rosy side of the picture only. The idea of one world has widened enormously the field of political and psychological activity both for the individual and the state, and the next steps in the unfolding of this idea must, therefore, be taken with a deep sense of responsibility. We must all endeavour to form a clear picture of the future structure of society, the inner gestalt of the state, and the relation of states to one another, not for their own sake but because they embody human, cultural and moral values. These values will themselves possess significance to the extent that they emerge from the conscience and spiritual experience of the individual and yet have universal validity. This is a challenge not only to the individual but to the community of mankind, not only to education but to all other formative influences which play on it and shape its purposes.

I have considered it my duty to draw your attention to some aspects of the nation-state and, incidentally, the economic system under which it operates. I have referred also to the status of the individual, because of my concern with a problem common not only to our two countries but to the entire comity of nations. The United States exerted perceptible pressure in favour of Indian freedom and, since India attained freedom, it has strengthened Indian democracy by giving it aid in many forms. This is evidence of its deep solicitude for India's welfare. Indians, on their side, have been conscious of a kinship of ideas with the Americans because of a common allegiance to democratic principles and the value of freedom and the cooperative search for peace and justice. But it is well to recognize that misunderstandings or disagreements do crop up occasionally. On the American side, there is sometimes a resentment that their motives, however generous, should be suspected, though I must confess that, in all the countries of the world, motives are apt to be mixed. On the Indian side, there are fears of domination, natural in a people who have only recently shaken off colonial rule, and a resentment against any assumptions of superiority, whether it is real or only imaginary. Though democracy is a powerful bond between the two, the might of American industry and finance is so overwhelming that India could,

quite understandably feel intimidated even by evidence of generosity! If we wish to remove the causes of misapprehension, we must raise the discussions much above the formal level, political, economic or even educational. Impressive achievement constantly brought into contrast with only the expectations of development to come cannot create a feeling of equality. What can bring us together and keep us together is not an equally high standard of living but an equally high standard of truthfulness to ourselves, of tolerance of ways of life different from our own and the effortless sense of equality as men and women. Then we can stand before God and our conscience, united in humility and the determination to make our lives and actions the expression of an inner striving for perfection.

You have designed and built a magnificent material infrastructure of your civilization but I trust you will also be able, by word and deed, to give it a worthy gift of values. In this University - as in the others - you represent an activity of the human intellect which has contributed immensely to the enrichment of material and intellectual life. But some of our highly prized technical achievements have also given us mutual fears and suspicions and hatreds and a nightmare possibility of total annihilation. Man, shaking with fathomless fears and consumed by ineradicable hatred, is not a product to be proud of. The poet may well ask:

Is this the handiwork you give to God,
This monstrous thing, distorted and soul-quenched?
How will you ever straighten up this shape?
Touch it again with immortality,
Give back the upward look and the light,
Rebuild in it the music and the dream.

I am not sure but I do hope and pray that you may be able to do so by the constant pursuit of excellence in your own life and by helping the realization of excellence in the life of others around you. For, we are certainly individuals but, in a deep and poignant sense, we are also "members of one another" and tied to one another in innumerable bonds, tangible and otherwise.