



3rd
Convocation
2010

Report of the
Vice-Chancellor

4 March 2010

His Excellency Shri Murlidhar Chandrakant Bhandare, Governor of Orissa and the Chancellor of Ravenshaw University, Dr. Bhakta B. Rath, our esteemed Chief Guest, our distinguished recipients of degrees honoris causa, Members of the Executive Committee, Senate and Academic Council of the Ravenshaw University, the Deans of Schools and Faculties, Graduates of the Class of 2009, fellow Ravenshavians and invitees.

It is a delight to have you all joining us to celebrate the success of those graduating today. Time flies, and sooner than we thought, the day of the Third Annual Convocation has arrived. The first two were held in the sweltering heat of May, and this time, when the soft weather is still around. From the virulence of May to the mellowness of March has been quite a journey, and we have not yet arrived. There is a line of Mathew Arnold, which is an antidote to the weary, 'it is better to travel than to arrive'. The line does not comfort me any more. Ravenshaw is eager to arrive.

In our eagerness, in this beautiful morning, I welcome the graduates, I welcome the esteemed guests, I welcome our five special guests of distinction, whom the University will honour today by conferring the honoris causa, Mr. Pavani Parameswara Rao, distinguished lawyer, Mr. P. V. Krishnamoorthy, one who brought in a sort of cultural renaissance in Cuttack Radio in 1950s, Mr. Prafulla Mohanti, and Mr. Jatin Das, the well known Odiya painters who have brought us international fame, and Mr. Chitta Ranjan Das, whose writings have made life, for us, the school of learning. I warmly welcome our Chief Guest Dr. Bhakta B. Rath, a product of Ravenshaw and the distinguished head of the highly sophisticated and classified Naval Research Laboratory of the USA, who has come all the way from Washington DC to deliver the Commencement Speech. Last but not the least, I respectfully welcome our Chancellor, His Excellency, Mr. Murlidhar Chandrakant Bhandare, the Governor of Orissa who has smilingly mentored us in all our travails.

If University means science and reason, inclusiveness, and unprejudiced enquiry into knowledge, then Ravenshaw had been a University at least a century before it actually became one. Today, actually, we have young Ravenshavians, donning their own gowns and scrolls, waiting to be formally graduated.

In this staging of the ‘Hamlet’, the Prince of Denmark is obviously the graduate. In our times, impacted by the 1967 subversive Hollywood classic ‘The Graduate’, with Dustin Hoffman and Anne Bancroft, the archetype was a tired, bored and socially awkward young man. Its natural variable was the freedom to romance with life, and without much responsibility. The times have changed. The demand of upward mobility now puts the graduates of today under stricter regimen.

This morning, more than 2,000 Ravenshavians, will receive their degree, and will be administered the pledge of honesty, dignity and pursuit of knowledge. What shall they be tomorrow? A chilling observation is that the man who graduates today, and stops learning tomorrow, is uneducated the day after. Pretty frightening, is it not? I shall quote a rather flamboyant line for you, ‘the fireworks begin today, each degree is a lighted match, and each one of you a fuse’. And yet, there would be many, who would abandon themselves to that catchy line of Hitchcock’s in ‘The Man Who Knew Too Much’, ‘Que Sera Sera’, Whatever will be, will be, The future is not for us to see’.

No matter how dense the opacity of future, whether you will be handsome and rich, whether you have rainbows day after day, the fact is, Ravenshaw graduates over a century have been leaders of men and women, and agents of change. And more importantly, over a century, they have contributed to the concept of civility. No urban institution can exist without it. What does it mean?

It means certain politeness, courteousness and cordiality. It suggests consideration of and for others.

The Ravenshaw University has been striving to renew itself since its own commencement in November 2006. As we can see, we are engaged on many fronts. Our toughest burden is the old baggage which has settled like debris and dust not only on its body but also on its soul. We are trying to separate the dross from the gold. Once these impurities are removed, I am confident it will again become beautiful, both in body and soul, as the temple of Puri now has become, after old, staid layers were peeled off.

We are now creating space by extending the physical infrastructure in many ways, by building a brand new academic block, creating well equipped lecture theatres, renovating West and East Hostels, and the front arcade, and breaking ugly, mean, divisive structures, so that Ravenshaw can once again breath free.

We are creating space for a new Art Centre, renovating both the Kanika and Centenary libraries, planning more student residencies, rebuilding the Amphitheatre with enhanced seats and much larger stage, and with a coffee house space free with it. We have urged the state government to empower us with funds and support to develop the second campus, Ravenshaw 2, which shall be the future home of 15,000 students.

The physical space is important. Someone described the modern university as a series of highly individualistic faculty members, held together by a common grievance over parking. Bricks and mortar are as important as values and visions at the foundation stage.

The new faculty has started arriving. Their coming has been neither easy nor complete. The response was huge with nearly 8000 applications for

153 positions, with candidates even from overseas. So the short-listing and selection both have been arduous. Our demand for another 106 new positions is pending with the government, without which the teacher-student ratio in this new born university will become congenitally skewed.

Faculty is the core resource, very hard to find like oil. Settling the new faculty is equally tough. We do not have a green field situation. The new faculty had to enter an almost private space. The way the old faculty has measured up to the situation is admirable. They have taken the lead in making the newcomers comfortable, and many of them are working much harder, and with much grace, in making the changeover smooth. It is a unique experience of mutuality and adjustment.

With new faculty at hand, the question is, what shall be the nature of new pedagogy in Ravenshaw. It is only common sense that the disciplinary borders of yesteryears will give way to fusion. A course on ‘Gender and Society’, now for instance may have to include, Sociology, Politics, History, Neuroscience, Evolutionary Psychology, Human Genetics and Medicines, History of Science, and Law.

My friend Dr. Vidyanand Nanjundiah of the Indian Institute of Science recently visited Ravenshaw for a Selection Board. Going back, he has written me a long letter in longhand, a part of which I quote

‘Biology is blessed by an exceptionally fine literature (I don’t mean technical stuff, obviously), but most students remain unaware of it. The range and scope is vast. I would urge the Ravenshaw Library to stock up on the writings of Lewis Thomas, Stephen Jay Gould, PB Medawar, JP Bonner, Richard Dawkins, ... one could go on.

The field of Biology is slowly beginning to acquire a conceptual underpinning, somewhat in a manner Physics at the end of the 19th century. Indeed much of that underpinning is based on Physics and Chemistry. This makes much of the compartmentalization seen in teaching programmes not just irrelevant, but positively detrimental. It would be excellent if the Ravenshaw University could take the lead and usher in ‘Core Biology’ lab and lecture courses that are common to students from Zoology, Botany and Biotechnology, not to mention other disciplines. There are good books that can smooth the effort, for instance the one by Keeton.’

Ravenshaw shall respect such opinion, implement them, and value such mentoring. This is a glimpse of the new pedagogy that Ravenshaw would be keen to install.

The gleaming of newness also appears in the composition of new courses. Apart from the flagship MBA, we have the M.Phil course in Women Studies running this year and we prepare for masters courses in Geology, Rural Development, Public Health, Aviation Management and graduate study in Hotel Management and Hospitality, all from July 2010. The gleaming of newness is also in the digital book and music library which is now borne on Ravenshaw’s new IT infrastructure. In the Centenary library, the students can now access 50,000 digital books in PDF format and 60,000 digitally catalogued songs, at the click of a mouse. They can take printouts and can have a copy of the books on their memory sticks and through digital media.

The newness is more visible perhaps in the token presence, of some international students as ICCR scholars. The ICCR Centre in the campus has not only brought in many uplifting cultural evenings but also smoothed the access of international students. Consequently, we have in the campus, boys

and girls from Kabul to Ulan Bator, Colombo to Brussels, Fiji to Vietnam. May their tribe increase next year.

Our resources are scanty but aspirations unbridled. At any time we have a whole lot of projects in the pipeline, an Indoor Sports Complex for instance, those Swimming Pools of our dreams, the day for night lights for the play field, by the way our cricket field is matchless, it now doubles for the Barabati Stadium for first-class matches, recently Sourav Ganguly played there for the East Zone Ranjit Trophy. And then there is the masterpiece of all proposed constructions, the Ravenshaw Convention Centre, which we fancy to call the ‘Seven Pillars of Wisdom’ after the magnum opus of TE Lawrence, and the Ravenshaw Radio, University’s own FM Channel, which may emerge out of the pipeline and go on the air quite soon.

Tata Steel once coined the advertisement, ‘We also make steel’. It was a testimony to their manifold activities besides steel making. We hope to fill up the Ravenshaw calendar with so many co-curricular activities, absorbing students and faculty alike, that we could also say someday in Ravenshaw that ‘We also teach’.

In the midst of two semesters and an archaic examination system which I urge the new faculty to change, faster the better, the Ravenshaw students have listened to the Sufi music of Qutbi Brothers, the Hindustani Classical renderings of 102 years old Ustad Abdul Rashid Khan, the Colombia based Chocquibtown Band, equally electrifying music of the Indian Ocean, and the recent Mohan Veena recital by Pandit Vishwa Mohan Bhatt. They have listened to Dr. Kiran Seth, founder of SPIC MACAY, Professor Ram Puniani of IIT Mumbai, Dr. Vidyanand Nanjundiah of Indian Institute of Science, Mr. Sam Pitroda delivering the Ravenshaw University Development Trust Lecture and

they are going to listen to Mr. Manoj Das who will deliver this year the Ravenshaw Memorial Lecture on March 20.

In the end, I once again turn to the new Ravenshaw graduates and say, that the truth is, I was afraid the day I walked into Ravenshaw, and I was afraid the day I walked out. Somebody consoled me and said, quoting Emerson, what lies behinds us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us. So put your future in good hands – your own. You have done well in Ravenshaw. Congratulations. Now life is your College. Good Luck.

Devas Chhetry