



Convocation Address - IIM Ahmedabad

**Dr S Somanath, Dr Vikram Sarabhai Distinguished Professor and
former Chairman, Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO)**

60th Annual Convocation | March 29, 2025

Mr. Pankaj Patel, Chairman, Board of Governors of IIMA, and members of the Board. Prof. Bharat Bhasker, Director of IIM A, Deans, Chairs of the Programmes, members of faculty and staff, distinguished guests, recipients of the degree and academic awards, young and bright students, proud parents, ladies and gentlemen;

My greetings to all on the occasion of the annual convocation.

I am sure that this is a glorious and memorable occasion for all of you. I am very happy to be invited to join you in this year's convocation, and very proud being a one of the member of 40,000 alumni of this institute.

IIMA created by the visionary, Dr. Vikram Sarabhai, whose dreams created the space programme and ISRO, which I served for the last 40 years. Now I hold a chair in his name at ISRO, which is really an honour. IIMA since its inception has been known for its academic leadership, advanced research, and intellectual development in the country, a centre of progressive thinking, critical analysis, which instils a sense of social responsibility among its students. IIMA has been producing noted business leaders, innovators, and has made remarkable contributions across diverse fields, such as education, public policy, social harmony, culture, civilization, and art. The

university's interdisciplinary character pursued with passion has fostered innovative research, created numerous opportunities for intellectual and social growth. The institute has attracted the best of faculty with academic credentials from prominent institutions across the world as well as having exceptional research credentials. I am very happy to note that the institute is ranked first amongst the business schools in the country since 2020.

I would like to express my heartfelt congratulations to each and every student graduating with degrees and specially those receiving awards and medals. I also wish to appreciate the work of administration, faculty members, staff, parents, and everyone else who contributed to the development of this Institute and these exceptional young minds.

Award of degrees is a recognition not only of your work but also of the support of families and friends and of the teachers you have had along the way. Your success in future life – both personal and professional – is determined by many attributes:

You must have ***Passion:*** To be completely dedicated to what you do. ***Commitment:*** To lead from the front, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, in all adverse conditions. ***Excellence:*** To set the highest standards of professional integrity and performance. ***Determination:*** You may fail sometimes, but never lose the spirit. ***Focus:*** Always see the big picture, and don't get distracted by the small ones. ***Learnability.*** You need to be a student all through your life. Above all, have ***Humility, Honesty*** and ***Integrity.***

After being invited as a chief guest, it becomes my responsibility to share some wisdom and life lessons not just as a part of the customary convocation address, but for you to remember and ponder over if you find it useful. The best lessons you can find are always from your life and not from the quotes from others' experiences. It is equally difficult to share one's life's experiences in its entirety, as the intensity and

emotions of those experiences are beyond words. Let me look at my life and share a few generic lessons that could benefit you.

- Be a voracious reader, read as much as you can and from as many domains as possible, as it will shape your world view and give a fulfilling life.
- Learn to work in a team, as alone you can go very fast, but in company of others, you can go very far. Brilliance alone won't take you far, if you are a loner.
- The rate of knowledge creation, technology advancements are too fast for human mind to tackle. Still make continuous learning your habit.
- If you want to be a leader, be a good follower first, find your right mentor and stick to him/her.
- Take risks in life, as it is the only way to break barriers, prepare well for opportunities, as it will knock on the door only once, remain unattached to all that you accomplished, that will give you peace.

Being from a village, what shaped me was the importance given to education by my parents. The books that I read shaped my outlook and developed needed passion. I had the fortune to read not only science books, but classic literature, travelogues and magazines. I read, so much forgetting about everything else, that helped a village boy to be aware of things far beyond the evident. For students, what shape you ultimately is what goes inside you, food and information, its processing - how best you digest it. It is necessary to read widely and create awareness on many topics that may be immediately relevant and may appear irrelevant. I have seen people asking questions, why I should read a novel? It is an imagination of an author and has no immediate benefit from reading it. Each novel is a reflection of the thought process of the author but also has so much of life's experience buried in it. You come across characters with myriad behaviours and attitudes and understand the psychology of human nature.

The experience of developing space technology has been that of successes and failures. The challenges in launch vehicle design are in achieving perfection, efficiency and repeatability in all the missions through the established processes of testing and validation. This can be equated to challenges in real life as well, where failures and challenges make one perfect over time.

The team work has been the hallmark of ISRO. We evaluate and bring up people to leadership who understand this, and who practices team building. The ability to appreciate other people's domains and their contributions is always very difficult for ordinary people. For everyone, our own work is important and precious. No one like to give compliments and acknowledge other's contributions. Please start doing it, you will see the magic happening. Those who receive your appreciations will value your work more than you ever imagined. By appearing important, you can go a bit far, but it is not a that a characteristic that will endure, and produce results in large organisations and institutions and public life.

I am particularly fortunate to work at ISRO focussed on the use of space technology to find solutions to the problems of people and society. Not far from now, Bharat should become a technology powered nation, where home grown innovations will create new opportunities in industries, product development, business and economic progress. The initiatives of our government to have the industry-academia-government support system for research and innovation will definitely bring results.

In the coming years, much growth is forecast in the field of science and technology that will make significant changes in your profession as well. Technology disruptions will change everything we see today. The professions of teachers, lawyers, doctors, even drivers and clerks are being replaced by intelligent machines. The language revolution and instant translation will make communication much smoother, revolutionise entertainment industry, study of literature and culture much more democratic. The AI and quantum revolution is taking on many domains including previously unheard areas such as product design, business, national security etc. The

purpose of the technology is to ease the life of the human beings and provide him with more spare time for enjoying life. Though much has been achieved in improved connectivity, mobility, food and nutrition, managing pandemic, general healthcare and extension of life span, the dangers of technology is equally looming large on our head such as creation of wars machines, environmental degradation, extinction of species and new age diseases. Among all these conundrums of technological upheaval, you need to be alert and educated to remain relevant.

Development of right kind of leadership in a society is a difficult process. You will see many great leaders who will be remembered for their great contributions, and equally bad leaders who will be forgotten very fast. If you want to be a great leader and make an impact in whatever sphere you venture into, then become a good follower first, based on sound principles, which you must set for yourself. Also identify a mentor who will show you the right path. I have been blessed with the such mentors who helped me to shape my purpose and character. Some of my mentors were my father, some teachers, some of my bosses in ISRO.

Venturing on complex tasks and taking critical decisions while executing projects needs courage and risk taking capability. In any situation, while a decision is to be taken, all relevant facts and their impacts will not be revealed to you, and that is the beauty and challenge in decision making. A fool can make decisions faster, as he is not fully aware of its impact. But an informed person trembles seeing the possible impact of many critical decisions. Risk taking nature is a blessing, but it need calm mind, well informed advisors and ability to grasp situations beyond your areas of expertise and comfort and above all blessings of the universal power. Always take decisions, make yourselves available for it and own your actions, as the growth is through that and not through procrastination.

You need to train your mind for those opportunities in life you will be called up on to take critical decisions. Also prepare well for those opportunities, as it will knock on the door only once. If you study the story of great leaders, you will see that they

prepared themselves thoroughly for the purpose and were waiting for some magic to happen. That magic comes to those people who waits, dreaming, preparing and arming themselves well.

How to remain unattached to all that you accomplished is a huge challenge. In the organisation ISRO where I worked, I have been changing roles and teams occasionally. Everywhere, I was capable of making some impact and achieve some credible visible outcome. While you leave, a bit of hangover is likely, making you uncomfortable and continue to think about it and possibly advising or being critical of the new team. Remaining unattached is a trait that will take away the pain of leaving and moving to a new team. The unattachment will help in better delegation, team work and mutual recognition and respect.

To truly unlock the potential of our nation, we must continue to innovate, collaborate. Innovation does not happen in isolation. It requires a culture of curiosity, a strength to face failure, and an insatiable hunger to seek answers. At ISRO, we faced numerous challenges—whether it was the early struggles of launching our first satellite, Aryabhata, or the perseverance required for Chandrayaan-3 to make India the first nation to land near the Moon's south pole. But each failure not only strengthened our resolve to try again, to find better solutions, and to reach greater heights. To the graduates here today, I urge you to cultivate this spirit of innovation, apply your knowledge to solve real-world problems whether in science, humanities, or social sciences, innovation has a place everywhere.

On this occasion, I would also like to highlight the rich and glorious knowledge tradition of India, which has been now been seen in better light. From the Vedas to modern-day scientific advances, India has always contributed greatly to the world's understanding of the universe. Science and other forms of human knowledge progressed considerably in this part of the world as the world's first source of

knowledge, providing scientific insights into astronomy, geography, mathematics, metallurgy and philosophy far ahead of their time.

The ancient scriptures such as 'Mahasalila', the primordial soup and 'Sooryasidhantha' not only describe the Sun's and planets motion, but also offer calculations on many of the astronomical things. The knowledge was so advanced at that time and was the real modern science. Indian philosophy not only emphasized material progress but also gave great importance to spiritual progress, which was seen as essential for holistic human development. This balance is what makes India unique, as it has contributed to both scientific and spiritual advancements in the past.

India is now at the cusp of a technological and scientific revolution. The future holds immense possibilities—space exploration, artificial intelligence, sustainable development, and beyond. The responsibility to shape that future lies in your hands.

You have just completed one phase of your journey. The world today needs individuals having ability to connect empathetically with others, to show compassion to our peers is critical to our lives and helps us thrive as a progressive society. You have the knowledge, the passion, and the ability to make a difference. The universe is vast, but so is human potential. Reach for the stars, not just in your careers but in your contributions to humanity.

I congratulate all of you once again and wish every one of you an exciting, challenging and a rewarding journey ahead. Strive to bring benefits of your learning for the betterment of the society and nation. Make your parents and teachers proud of you.

Good luck. Thank you all. Jai Hind.