

EDUCATION, LEADERSHIP AND VISION OF A FREE INDIA

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*"Free Enterprise was born with man and
shall survive as long as man survives."*

— **A. D. Shroff**
1899-1965
Founder-President
Forum of Free Enterprise

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by

Nani A. Palkhivala

I

Dadabhai Naoroji's Vision of a Free India*

Dadabhai Naoroji's vision of a free India was the vision of an enlightened and well-educated society. Dadabhai was an ardent advocate of free education and of the principle that every child should have the opportunity of receiving all the education it is capable of assimilating. His own words were, "I realize that I had been educated at the expense of the poor, to whom I myself belonged The thought developed itself in my mind, that as my education and all the benefits arising therefrom came from the people, I must return to them the best I had in me. I must devote myself to the service of the people."

Dadabhai was a great pioneer in the promotion of female education. He used to tell his grandchildren

*This is the text of the acceptance speech by Mr. Palkhivala, when Dadabhai Naoroji Award for 1997 was conferred on him on 12th August 1997.

some stories of his early days — how as a college student he would go from house to house with a friend, persuading parents and guardians to allow him and his friend to sit on their verandahs and to teach the three R's to their girls; how some of them took advantage of the offer but some irate fathers threatened to throw them down the steps for making such a preposterous proposal! His biographer, Sir R.P. Masani, said that to capture a pupil was sometimes as difficult a task as to conquer a city: against them were arrayed the forces of stern orthodoxy and with it the misgivings of the ignorant regarding the consequences of such a movement on the social life of the people.

Dadabhai realized that the two finest characteristics of the British were that they had a sense of justice and, further, they had a sense of fairness. An instance of the average Englishman's sense of justice and fairness is supplied by Dadabhai's own election by Englishmen to the House of Commons. Unfortunately, Indians lack both these characteristics. We, Indians, need Article 17 of our Constitution to tell us that untouchability shall be abolished and its practice in any form shall be forbidden.

I have no doubt that if Dadabhai had lived long enough to take part in the framing of the Constitution of India, he would have embodied similar fundamental rights as have been given by our Constitution. In other words, I believe that if

Dadabhai had to frame a constitution for free India, he would have envisaged the same type of secular constitution, and any minorities, whether based on religion or language, would have the right to establish and administer educational institutions of their choice. Dadabhai believed that India's salvation lay in equality of all religions and equal reverence for all religions.

Dadabhai, in his wildest nightmare, would have never thought that India would reach such a low level of degradation and corruption as it has reached today fifty years after attaining independence, — the lowest level of degradation in its entire history of 5,000 years.

Dadabhai, the greatest Indian of his time, was a Zoroastrian by birth and by conviction, and he lived the religion of Prophet Zarathushtra — good thoughts, good words, good deeds. A regenerated secular India would have been the greatest monument to his memory.

Education & Moral Leadership*

I would like to pay my humble tribute to the teachers and the professors of this University and at the other universities of our country who trim the silver lamp of knowledge and keep its sacred flame bright from generation to generation. They expend their lives on significant but unadvertized work. Quite a few of them plough the lonely furrow of scholarship. Their dedication bears witness to the selflessness of the human spirit.

I am proud to say that during my days as a student, our teachers and professors used education as the technique of transmitting civilization. The education we received helped us to enlighten our understanding and enrich our character. If I may speak in a lighter vein, the greatest lesson taught to us was that a formal education at a university cannot do you much harm provided you start learning thereafter!

I am using the word "education" in its profound sense. Animals can be trained; only human beings can be educated. Education requires personal

*This text is from the Response by Mr. Palkhivala to University of Mumbai's Special Convocation for conferment of Honorary Degree of Doctor of Laws (LL.D.) on him by the Chancellor, Dr. P. C. Alexander, Governor of Maharashtra, on 19th January 1998.

participation and transformation. It cannot be given to anyone; it must be inwardly appropriated.

In ancient India, kings and emperors thought it a privilege to sit at the feet of men of learning. Intellectuals and men of knowledge were given the highest honour in society. King Janaka, himself a philosopher, journeyed on foot into the jungle to discourse with Yajnavalkya on high matters of state. In the eighth century, Sankaracharya travelled on foot from Kerala to Kashmir and from Dwarka in the west to Puri in the east. He could not have changed men's minds and established centres of learning in the far-flung corners of India but for the great esteem and reverence which intellectuals enjoyed.

Thomas Jefferson, one of the founders of the United States of America, remarked, "If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, it expects what never was and never will be." When a republic comes to birth, it is the leaders who produce the institutions. Later, it is the institutions which produce the leaders. The question — where are the leaders of tomorrow? — can only be answered by the other question — where are the nation-building institutions which can produce the leaders of tomorrow.

Do we have educational institutions which aim at generating excellence? — institutions which are equipped to produce "movers of people, mobilizers

of opinion” — integrated personalities whose minds, hearts and character have been developed in the noble traditions of our invaluable heritage?

Education today is in total disarray in our country. The ministry of education is considered a minor cabinet post which reflects a serious misunderstanding of the pivotal role of “human” capital in taking a nation to great heights. We have failed in imparting value-based education to our youth which I was fortunate in receiving both as a student and in the home. The result is that India which “should have led the world in life-nurturing ideas, is being led by the crass materialism of others.”

We are quite right in making constant endeavours to raise the standard of living of our people. But the standard of life is even more significant than the standard of living. If we lose our sensitivity towards the quality of life, it can only mean that while our knowledge increases, our ignorance does not diminish.

What we need today more than anything else is moral leadership at all levels. It is particularly essential in the field of education — moral leadership founded on courage, intellectual integrity and a sense of values.

We, the citizens of Maharashtra, are very fortunate that we are living in a State which has produced

some of the greatest Indians of the last hundred years — Dr. Dadabhai Naoroji, Sir Pherozeshah Mehta, Mahadev Govind Ranade, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Gopal Krishna Gokhale — all of whom had the distinction of passing through the portals of this great University. They lived their lives in the service of the country and its people. I am sure none of the above eminent Indians, in their wildest nightmares, would have ever thought that India would reach such a low level of degradation and corruption as it has reached today fifty years after attaining independence — the lowest level in its entire history of five thousand years.

A regenerated secular India would have been the greatest monument to their memory.

I can only say that just as we do not deserve our sublime Constitution, just as we do not deserve to have great leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, we did not deserve the galaxy of Indians mentioned earlier, who gave of their lives and of their selves in the service of the country.

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— Eugene Black

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