



**International Management Institute
Kolkata**

Convocation Speech
by

Shri Sanjay Mitra, I.A.S

Defence Secretary,
Government of India

**Annual Convocation Ceremony
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Good morning, Mr. P. K. Khaitan, Chairman, the Board of Directors, Professors Arindam Banik, Paramita Mukherjee and distinguished faculty, thank you for inviting me here today. To the proud parents and family members, and the graduating Class of 2019, hearty congratulations!

It is a great privilege for me to stand here, and speak with you on what is likely, a memorable day in your lives so far. It is hard for me to believe that many decades have passed since the day I graduated. I remember a myriad of emotions from that day - pride at having got thus far, anxiety about what the future might bring, and eagerness for the next phase of life.

My time in college was more than I could have ever wished for: I learned from sage advisors, made lifelong friends, and later chose a career where I worked as a part of the vast administrative system, made an earnest effort to make things better.

Two years ago, you chose to get management education at IMI, Kolkata. That choice has endowed on you many privileges – you have been exposed to the most advanced ideas and processes for modern business managers; technical skills that the best managements in the world are looking to build; you have been taught the tools of professional managers, and have been honing your skills to handle real life situations.

My intention is not to sermonise by telling you that you are about to begin your lives. It would be unfair to use that cliché with you. The

very fact that you were admitted to IMI, Kolkata means that you have been amongst the *crème de la crème*. You probably studied diligently throughout school, worked even harder in college, engaged in a diverse set of extracurricular pursuits, worked strenuously to achieve high scores in the entrance tests, and finally adopted a backbreaking pace just to make it through the last two years and qualify to wear those robes. The world is yours for asking. So let me assure that you are not fledgling, inexperienced birds about to fly out of the nest. Your learning at this institute has armed you with a formidable array of tools to combat problems. But at the end of the day, you must remember that it is merely that – a toolkit. Once you step out of the safe cocoon of campus and into the real world, your achievements as a professional will depend only in small part on how well you put this toolkit to use. In large measure, your success as a professional is likely to hinge on the choices you make in your life.

The choices you make there will define who you become. *As Dumbledore told Harry, “It is our choices Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities”*. As I reflect on my own life, I believe there are choices that have particularly shaped who I am today, choices that you might yourself face soon. Today, I want to talk to you about those choices. In life, you will encounter forks in the road ever so often: And when you do, you will find yourself answering the inevitable question – do you want to stay with the path well known, or do you want to venture forth into uncharted waters, unmapped territories? The choice of which road you take will shape who you become. For me, more often than not, I chose the road less travelled. And it has indeed made all the difference.

The more complex and novel situations I have faced have helped me to grow and remain relevant. Growth begins where your comfort zone ends and should be the only constant in life. Every time I have found myself at one of life’s crossroads, I have tried to take the path which offers me a steeper learning curve. One must

always strive to understand new ways to learn, and slowly move to a level where learning itself becomes a habit.

A true test of this learning is how far it is able to imbibe the diversity of opinions and ideologies. What makes IMI Kolkata a centre of excellence besides its high grade quality teaching is the space and respect for diverse strains which are encouraged to take shape here; an understanding that each student brings unique experiences, strengths, and ideas based on one's background and experiences. These differences can be along dimensions of religious or political beliefs, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, socio-economic status, age, ability, race, or other different ideologies. Diversity is the celebration of these differences to enrich not only learning but also growth and in a broader context represents the plurality of our country. This trait needs to be nourished as it defines the uniqueness of India.

Standing amidst you here, I feel a surge of excitement and wonder. Excitement at the thought that as you step out on the anvil of life, possibilities of immense magnitude await you. Wonder at the idea that how much the world has changed and changed for the better in terms of technology, communications and resource utilization and the critical role you would be playing as agents of change.

As brightest young talent, you will be stepping out into an India which is consolidating its position in the world as a rising economic power, surrounded by fiercely competitive economies led by China. You will be the new harbingers of change and development that our country is aiming for. With your expertise, domain knowledge and technical competence, you are in a much better position to lead by front. It will be your job to create capabilities for growth and new solutions. We can build shared prosperity for our 1.25 billion citizens by transforming the way the economy creates value. Corporate India has a critical role to play not only to help create value by addressing key societal needs, but

in supporting a vibrant entrepreneurial sector. Besides, it needs to partner with the Government in order to implement new developmental approaches. Your role in this story is of boundless possibilities.

As a career civil servant with 38 years of service, I have worked in various capacities in the state and Union governments. The work encompassed the length of spectrum from doing the extremely basic tasks in administration, to accomplishing policy goals, to handling the defence of the country, my only good ingredient for a stable stint has hinged on making the right decisions and standing up for them.

As alumni of this prestigious school, the array of possibilities for carving out a successful career is waiting for you. By all means, make money, get rich, be successful but somewhere in some corner of your mind, do keep a thought of how it will contribute to making the life of poor and deprived better. The Father of the Nation had a Talisman *“Whenever you are in doubt, apply the following test. Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest man [woman] whom you may have seen, and ask yourself, if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him [her]. Will he [she] gain anything by it? Will it restore him [her] to a control over his [her] own life and destiny?”* This helps in taking the right decision. As bright young talent of this country, you should also remember that you have an important role to play in chartering our country on the path of further progress. A career in public policy offers you an opportunity to touch the lives of these countless millions. Our country with its immense reserve of human and physical resources is lacking not in the quantity and quality of these resources but in the way we have utilised these resources. You with your intellect and training can bring on board a much-needed competence and balance to the field of public administration, thus becoming a part of nation-building. I urge you to consider this as an option in your endeavours.

As the saviour of Chrysler, the great Lee Iacocca laid down nine qualities needed for effective leadership. My own choices have effectively hinged upon 5 major pillars taken from Iacocca's 9 Cs – I am sure, as management students you would be familiar with this dictum. The first one of the Cs, which I think is extremely powerful for me, is the “c” of character. How do you define “character”? In the professional and personal journeys that you embark upon, you will find many temptations and opportunities to take a short-cut. The question at that moment is to ask yourself whether it is right or wrong. And if you get an answer within you that it is wrong, have the character to stand up and say: I will not do it! Many points of time in my career I have had a situation where I had to take a call taking a decision as Yes or No. And whenever I have taken a decision, on the basis of what my conscience told me, that's held me in good stead.

Stand up and value your character because that will really tell you what to do and what not to do. Standing up to the values given to you by your parents and upbringing is the key. At the workplace, you will always encounter choices that if you do it differently, you would grow faster. Not choosing this idea of a short-cut growth would certainly lead to a sustainable career and yes, character is the ladder that will get you there.

The second, and of equal importance is conviction. If you are convinced about something, go ahead and do it. There could be business situations where you may have to tread the thin line between conviction and a hollow ego trip. If you see business leaders around you, people who have achieved the pinnacle of success, you will find that their decisions have been based on conviction. The price to pay for a decision based on foolhardiness could be very high. An action borne out of conviction will always stand you in good stead. *In the movie Bridge of Spies, a character says, “Stoikiy muzhik” – Which sort of means like ‘standing man’ a man who would stand up for his convictions and beliefs and*

without any reaction or aggression would silently stand up again and again in the face of adversities until he is left to survive and conquer.

Third on my list is creativity. Creativity makes the activity of work enjoyable. Work becomes a thing of joy and so much less an ordeal if you enjoy doing it. Everywhere around you may find people grudgingly going to work. There are umpteen number of ‘Monday blues’ jokes. But what an amazing thing it would be if work is driven out of a sense of enjoyment which you can call differently as creativity. Thinking out of line, merging ideas, not being scared to try out new ideas all these defines creativity. This also becomes a natural progression to growth. More relevant in today’s times and fourth on my list is “communication”. Having great ideas and almost error-free processes and not being able to convey it to the implementing team is a sure-shot recipe for failure. The ability to convey and communicate is most important when you are leading men and working in teams. As someone who has worked at the threshold of policy making, I found the ability to communicate and communicate right as the most important ingredient for success of an initiative. One needs to invest and improve on this capability and make it an integral function of our work processes. Last in my list is “courage”. Actually, it is an amalgamation of all four things I’ve talked to you about – character, conviction, creativity with communication used as tool, which define courage. You must have the courage to stand up and say I want to do it this way and not worry about those who may deter or discourage you. *If you can fill the unforgiving minute, with sixty seconds’ worth of distance run,* and not be afraid of failure, you have learnt the art of survival and success.

And last but not the least, let dimensions other than work underline your personality. I am reminded here of a conversation between Charlie Brown and Snoopy from Peanuts comic strip where *Snoopy asks Charlie, – “What do you do for a living”. He replies,*

“Tread, I laugh, I travel, I love, I enjoy and I eat.” “No, no – I mean how do you earn your bread?” “Oh! I work,” he replies, “but that’s not living.”

Time is a great wealth that you lose as you grow older. Yet, one does gain experience and a certain confidence in one’s work as the time goes by. In the sea of uncertainty, this quiet confidence in what you do makes the ride much easier and worthwhile.

As Steve Jobs said, “Don’t let the noise of other’s opinion drown out your own inner voice. And most important, have the courage to follow your own heart and intuition. They somehow already know what you want to become. Everything else is secondary.”

To conclude, you are embarking on a most exciting journey. The world out there is fiercely competitive, but you should have no fear. You have been tempered by one of the most rigorous programs in the world and are now ready to show your mettle. Congratulations to all the graduating students, good luck, and may you fulfil your dreams. Thank you all.

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