

A message to
Award winning students of SOF Olympiad Foundation

Text of the Speech delivered by Hon'ble Justice R.C. Lahoti
at National Awards Presentation Ceremony of Science Olympiad Foundation in Delhi
on 16th June 2013 at Chinmaya Missions Auditorium at Lodhi Road

Congratulations to all winning students for achieving top ranks in SOF Olympiad exams. Standing first in the Olympiad exams among millions of participants is a feat and the winners deserve to be congratulated. My greetings and good wishes also to the parents, teachers and schools of these brilliant children who have worked hard with the children in giving their best. It is your effort and blessings that have helped the children achieve top ranks.

The world is becoming more and more competitive each day. This year's CBSE exam for class 12 had close to 10 lac students appearing for the exams –and the numbers keep on growing each year. Today a student competes with a larger number of students for a limited number of seats and colleges to get into a desired stream to achieve her / his professional goals.

It is here that the efforts of Science Olympiad Foundation are to be lauded. By making a student compete with the best students across the state and country, they enable a student to evaluate his competence, identify the areas requiring improvement of skills and performance. Darwin's principle of **Survival of the Fittest** an all time tree the played at its height at the beginning of the universe and continues to play even today. Our children need to put in greater efforts to learn and prepare themselves for the competitive exams to get into desired streams and colleges in pursuit of their academic dreams.

Before I deliver my formal address to you, I would like to ask two questions to the group of award winning students. Anyone who can answer please raise your hands.

There is a unique gift given by the Creator of this Universe - the God, to each one of you equally. None of you can claim to have received more nor can anyone of you complain of having been given anything less. The gift is such that nobody can add to it nor can take away or steal any part of it from you. Can you say what it is?
(one minute)

There are about 100 top performing students, teachers and principals who are being felicitated today. Each one of you is an amalgam of virtues. The quality and quantity of such virtues imbibed into the personalities of different individual award winners may be different, but there is one virtue which is common to you all. Can you tell me what it is?
(one minute)

Since we have identified the answer can any one of you define - what is 'excellence'?

Excellence, this is where I propose to begin my address and share a few thoughts on the topic with you today. Commonly understood excellence is the quality of being superior to others, better than others. As the word of wisdom goes - be the best and rise above the rest. But to share my very personal secret with you, this has not been a definition acceptable to me nor my methodology. The definition of excellence which I learnt from my late father, who was a role model for me and an epitome of excellence, is that the virtue of excellence lies in being today better than what you were yesterday, and a determination at the end of the day that on the coming tomorrow you shall be a person better than what you have been today. In other words, excellence does not necessarily lie in being better than others, but, to my mind, it necessarily lies in you yourself being a better person than yourself every next day.

The difference between the first and the second definition is that in the first definition your journey towards excellence may come to an end once you find that you are better than others, but the latter definition which is acceptable to me carries with it an unending motivation and inspiration. Such journey towards excellence never comes to an end, and therefore there is no limit to what your excellence can achieve. Though I am better than what I was yesterday, yet I have to be a better person tomorrow than what I have been today. You will agree that if this be the attitude there can be no limit to the heights which one can reach. Another advantage of the second over the first definition is that in the first one you may develop a false sense of pride that you have succeeded in competing with others. But in the second one you can never have that feeling as whatever you have achieved it is above your own earlier achievement, and so, in spite of what you have achieved there is still something left and waiting for you which you can achieve. You feel humbled.

I am reminded of a classical song written by Guruwar Rabindranath Tagore. It is 35th poem in my book of *Gitanjali*, with the title 'Let my Country awake'. Tagore visualizes his motherland 'to awaken into that heaven of freedom' where one to be taken by each one of the countrymen would be – 'where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection'. When you embark upon the journey of being a better person every next day then in the words of Guruwar it is your 'tireless striving' which is stretching itself every day and every next day towards achieving perfection.

What is the relationship of excellence with perfection? In the golden words of Vince Lombardi – 'Perfection is not attainable. But if we chase perfection, we can catch excellence'. The great philosopher Confucius let out the secret when he said – "the will to win, the desire to succeed, the urge to reach your full potential (I repeat, the urge to reach your full potential) – these are the keys to unlock the door to personal excellence."

Friends, if you believe then Confucius will lead you to Aristotle who has emphasized – "we are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit". That is why I said that once your journey begins towards excellence the

journey would never stop. Excellence would be your habit. And, in the lighter vein, ‘habits die hard’.

On 18th September, 2004, speaking at the joint conference of Chief Justices and Chief Ministers of the States, I had volunteered on behalf of the Indian Judiciary to declare the year 2005 to be ‘the year of excellence’ in judiciary. I had defined excellence as consisting of five I’s –

- (i) *Initiative – We shall not be satisfied with doing just what is our duty. Each one of us shall exert to do better than his contemporaries or predecessors, going beyond the goal of duty and to be better than himself;*
- (ii) *Intelligence – None of us shall feel satisfied by mediocrity, i.e. by just being average;*
- (iii) *Industry – Each one of us shall exert to put his competence and capability to its maximum utilization;*
- (iv) *Integrity;*
- (v) *Inobtrusive personality – i.e., modesty and humility.*

Even when imbibed with initiative, intelligence, industry and integrity what has been achieved is just the basic requirement which makes up the personality of a judge. Such achievements should not be a reason for developing any egoistic attitude.

The Constitution of India came into force on 26th January 1950. It did have a chapter on Fundamental Rights, but did not have any chapter, not even a mention of fundamental duties of the citizens of India. It was only by the 42nd Amendment, which came into force with effect from 03.01.1997, that a Chapter and an Article – Article 51(A) – was added in the book of the Constitution which listed ten fundamental duties. Each of them is worth being learnt by-heart and translated into action by every citizen of India, but out of the ten which has impressed me the most is the tenth duty. It says – ‘It shall be the duty of every citizen of India to strive towards excellence in all spheres of individual and collective activity so that the nation constantly rises to higher levels of endeavor and achievement.’¹

I simply love this Article of the Constitution. It speaks of striving and excellence, individually and also collectively. The purpose is constant uprising of the nation, our motherland. Such activity is ceaseless because it speaks of higher and higher levels of endeavor and achievement. *Meri manzil ek masal-sal safar hai; jo manzil pe panhuche to manzil badha di*

For us, in India, education and religion both are means to spiritual attainments called ‘divinity’. In the words of the great Scholar Sanyasi Swami Vivekanand –

¹ (Hindi version)

“Education is the manifestation of perfection already in man” and “Religion is the manifestation of divinity already in man”.²

Perfection and divinity are the beauties hidden in every person. The need is to shed all those shortcomings which are preventing them from emerging. This can best be illustrated by an anecdote. Michelangelo, the great renaissance artist who created monumental works of painting, sculpture, architecture and literature was once busy carving out a beautiful statue out of a big piece of the stone. He was asked how do you make such a good sculpture. He answered with ease and simplicity. He said that this piece of the stone has already the statue hidden within itself. All that I do is to remove the unnecessary parts of the stone with the help of hammer and chisel and the statue automatically emerges from within.

On this day when having won the awards and having been felicitated when you will seek the blessings of your elders, they will not only shower on you their blessings in abundance, they would also give you words of counsel to guide you for future. Listen to them with patience and absorb what they say. In addition, I have a few tips to be given to you:

- (i) **Have a purposeful life** or, to put it in other words, have a purpose of life. ‘Break Free – Discover your Leadership signature’,³ beautiful monograph written by Prof. Debasish Chatterjee, the then Director of Indian Institute of Management, Lucknow comes to my mind. He has begun the book by narrating a heart touching live anecdote. I hope that the name of Manjunath is still alive in your memory. Seven years before, he laid his life fighting against oil mafia. Manjunath had taken his instructions in IIM, Lucknow and Prof. Debasish was one of his Professors. One day, Manjunath was visiting his teacher at his alma mater. The teacher asked his student a pertinent question – ‘if livelihood is for life, what is life for?’ This was a one-on-one class between the two of them about life in general and professional life, in particular. Manjunath did not have an answer to that question on that day. A month later, on a dark November night, Manjunath was shot dead. Six bullets snuffed the breath out of his twenty-seven-year old body. He gave away his life defending his countrymen against the current oil mafia. Manjunath had finally answered his teacher’s question by his action: **If livelihood was for life; life was for the country.** Prof. Debashish exhorts us that truth is as old as the mountains: like Manjunath ‘all of us will become stories one day. We may not be lucky enough to make headlines when we die, yet we are the stuff that stories are made of.’ In an independent nation not necessarily we all must have a cause to die; but certainly, each one of us must have a cause to live for. Each one of you can start as a ‘one-man-missionary’ doing his best to serve the nation, the motherland.

² Kalyan Kalpataru Vol. 58 No. 5, Feb 2013, p. 659

³ Published by Penguin Books India (P) Ltd.

- (ii) **Strengthen your communication skills** – Communication is to share; a means of reaching a level at which the two are common with each other. Half of the disputes in differences which arise between the nations, husband and wife, friends, members of family are only on account of misgivings developed by lack of communication. The most important function of any form of learning is to play a critical role in encouraging creativity in the society. To benefit the society from the achievements made by your learning, it is necessary that you must be able to communicate with clarity and totality. The thoughts, concepts or ideas conceived or discovered have to be conveyed to have any meaning. A professional in whatever walk of life can neither be effective nor achieve a commanding position unless he possesses his skills of communicating with clarity and precision as its features. Effective communication generates peace, prosperity and harmonious living in the society. The best of communication skills can be borrowed from a Chinese proverb which says – “Tell me, and I will forget; show me and I may remember; involve me and I will understand.” This is communication and also a quality of leadership.
- (iii) Each one of you would achieve success in life. You are bound to rise high. In the process of achieving what you had always wished to do and while wealth and prosperity showers on you in abundance, do not forget that it is the society, your motherland, which has contributed its resources in shaping and nurturing you. Remember to repay their obligations by treating them as a debt owed by you to them. **Ear-mark a definite percentage; be it 1% or 10% of your money, time and energy for charity and upliftment of the downtrodden.** The part of earnings which you set apart for charity is **donation**. The part of your time and energy which you set apart and give to the society is **service**.
- (iv) **Read history, biographies and autobiographies.** History, because you should know what was our past. If it is good, then the reading will give you self confidence by learning what our ancestors were. If it is sad, it teaches us lessons for the present and future to learn. Remember - those who do not remember, their past are, at times, condemned to repeat it.

Biographies and Autobiographies are written on or by three classes of persons. They were categorized by Shakespeare.⁴ as (i) some are born great, (ii) some achieve greatness, and (iii) some have greatness thrust upon them. Confine your reading to the graphic/s of first two categories only and eliminate those whose subject matter is the third one.

⁴ Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, II v.

- (v) **Contribute in building a corruption free nation** – The biggest challenge which India is facing today is of corruption. Corruption is eating into the roots of the society. It appears to have assumed dimensions beyond comprehension. It is well known that corruption is the cause of innumerable social, economic and political evils. It tears the moral and ethical fibers of civilization. In spite of industrial growth and economic prosperity, corruption results in concentration of wealth in the hand of a few, making the poor poorer and deprived more alienated. The worst comes when people accept corruption as a part of life and give up the resistance to it. Still worse is that corruption poses a threat to the democracy itself.

Persons like me believe that youth and man of character as you are, full of energy and enthusiasm armed with capacity to lead – once you assume the commanding position with zero tolerance to corruption, corruption would itself drain out and India would again be a world leader. On this day while celebrating your achievements I wish you all to make a collective determination and declare it. I suggest the following three steps for you to take:-

- Step 1:** *Take a vow that you will not indulge in corruption – neither give nor take a bribe. After all, charity begins at home.*
- Step 2:** *Make a determination that you will use technology, in particular the ICT and your intelligence, for preventing corruption;*
- Step 3:** *Aim that you will devise such techniques and broader programs of institutional reforms as would enable introduction of transparency and zero tolerance for corruption in all public dealings.*

Friends, while I wish you all the best, I feel it my bounden duty to tell you what T. Rangarajan, has told in his ‘Unposted Letter’⁵. ‘Anything you choose in life comes along with its own inherent positives and negatives. What folly is it to search for a rose bush without the thorns!...Bigger the ambition, greater will be the issues... there is no easy way to the top and those who made it to the top did not make it easy. After all, there has to be a difference between a history reader and a history maker.’

T. Rangarajan narrates an anecdote – “A woman had an appointment with a silversmith to watch him at work. As she watched the silversmith, he held a piece of silver over the fire and let it heat up. He explained that one had to hold the silver in the middle of the fire where the flames were hottest for all the impurities to get burnt away. She asked the silversmith

⁵ T. Rangarajan, *Unposted Letter*, published by Frozen Thoughts, 3, Third Cross Road, R.A. Puram, Chennai (TN) – books@frozenthoughts.com

if it was true that he had to sit there in front of the fire the whole time. The man affirmed that he not only had to sit there holding the silver, but also had to keep his eyes on the silver the whole time. If the silver was left a moment too long in the flame, it would be destroyed. The woman then asked, "How do you know when the silver is fully refined?" He smiled and answered, "Oh, that's easy... when I see my image in it."

If you are feeling the heat of life, remember that God has His eye on you and will keep watching you until He sees his image in you. In every man sleeps a prophet. God became man, so that man can again become god. Life isn't a furnace that's burning you, but one that's transforming you into glittering silver."

Continue to work hard! Continue to achieve! May God bless you!

My good wishes are with you.
