

# THE VOYAGER'S MAP

*At the 31<sup>st</sup> Convocation  
of Sambalpur University*

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**Speech delivered by**

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*Odisha Skill Development Authority*



Your Excellency, Governor of Odisha  
and Chancellor of Sambalpur University,  
**Shri Ganeshi Lal Ji,**  
Vice Chancellor **Shri Sanjiv Mittal,**  
Registrar **Shri Nruparaj Sahoo,**  
Deans, Teachers, members of the press,  
assembled guests and most importantly,  
my dear graduating students.

Today is a special and significant day for you. You are looking ahead to the rest of your life. As I thought of the most personal and meaningful way to address you, I look back at my own voyage so far. As I reflect on my professional life, the forty years in the IT industry and the last six years serving the Government, I can see clear patterns. They reveal why many things have worked out in my favour. I believe many of these may work for you as well. Let me share some of them with you as you push your boat from the shore today, setting sail for your own voyage.

Friends, the starting point for a voyager is to feel inspired. No great conquest has ever been made, no great adversity has ever been overcome, without feeling inspired. What is inspiration? The word is of Latin origin: *inspirare*. It means breathing life into something. It means taking a deep breath of air into your lungs. I think this is a very powerful metaphor. As you set course every day of your life, you must breathe life into yourself. Many of us think inspiration is external. No, inspiration is very personal. As deeply personal as taking a deep breath. Through that act, we build the ability to create things that did not exist before us. We also receive the tenacity to take on the world.

Many of us think that inspiration is perhaps a miracle, a revelation that is extraordinary. No, my friends. You are the miracle, and you are the revelation.

And the world that you inhabit is the miracle and the revelation also. As a child, I was deeply curious about the world, and wonderstruck by everything. I was born in Patnagarh, not far from here, in 1957, to a small-time government servant. Our family moved incessantly because my father had a transferable job. I grew up in places like Nabarangapur, Rayagada, and Koraput.

In none of these places did we have electricity or running water at home. I did not go to school till the age of eight because there were no schools nearby. My parents taught me at home by a lantern light.

Since I did not go to school, I was often left to my devices, and I spent time with nature. I climbed trees, often precariously, and often falling from them. I ran over the narrow, irregular paths separating lush paddy fields, I learnt to catch fish from my tribal friends, I learnt the names of all the trees, the insects, the animals, and the birds.

I saw sunrises and sunsets, starlit skies, and dark ones. All these fed my sense of wonder. In later life, I realised how precious this sense of wonder is. Many of us lose it as we journey through adulthood. But without a sense of wonder, there is no joy. Without a sense of wonder, we do not build perspective, without wonder, there is no discovery.

My sense of wonder made me fascinated with people and places, with times past and times future, with things I could see and hear and those that lay beyond my senses. I think that this sense of fascination and wonder led to the realization that the world is not just the space upon which my feet are set. There is a bigger time and a larger space to which we belong. We must walk towards them with wonder in our eyes.

But, friends, not everything about my childhood was beautiful. When I was a child, my father had serious mental health issues that periodically unsettled our lives. Simultaneously, my mother was slowly losing her vision. As I was entering my teens, she became irreversibly blind. It is not easy to grow up as a child in a home where things are unpredictable, particularly in a household with meagre resources. Stigma thrives on such circumstances and children with difficult childhoods often become anxious and defensive.

But my parents were great people. Despite my father's periodic struggles with a mental disorder, he taught me ambition. But he also taught me the importance of intertwining ambition with integrity. Every day, he made me read aloud the English newspaper to him so that I knew the world was not limited to Koraput or Keonjhar.

Our ambition is determined by our sense of time and space. But just as he inculcated ambition in me, he also gave me my early lessons in personal and professional integrity.

In my subsequent life as a student of leadership, and as a leader myself, I began to see the dangers of unbridled ambition when someone loses the sense of personal integrity. Along the way, my father taught me that you do not practice integrity when you become someone big. You practice integrity when you are no one and you have very little.

My mother taught me the importance of love, not just to love your own self or love those whom you consider your own; but love broadly and deeply. On her deathbed, when I had kissed her forehead for the last time, she said, "Why are you kissing me? Go kiss the world." If my father taught me to build great success, my mother taught me to give it all away.

The adversities I faced raised me to a level I did not know I was capable of. Adversity gives us resilience, creativity, empathy, and the capacity to innovate. It gives us a sharper intuition. I am grateful to destiny for putting certain such events in my path that have left me richer. No tree has become taller without withstanding the high winds. No river has become more forceful without the fall into a gorge that gives it an energy-force to make it run farther and become more useful to everyone.

When you encounter the inevitable adversities on your voyage, look to your own depths for resiliency, and let yourself learn and grow through that adversity. Let adversity inform you, but not define you.



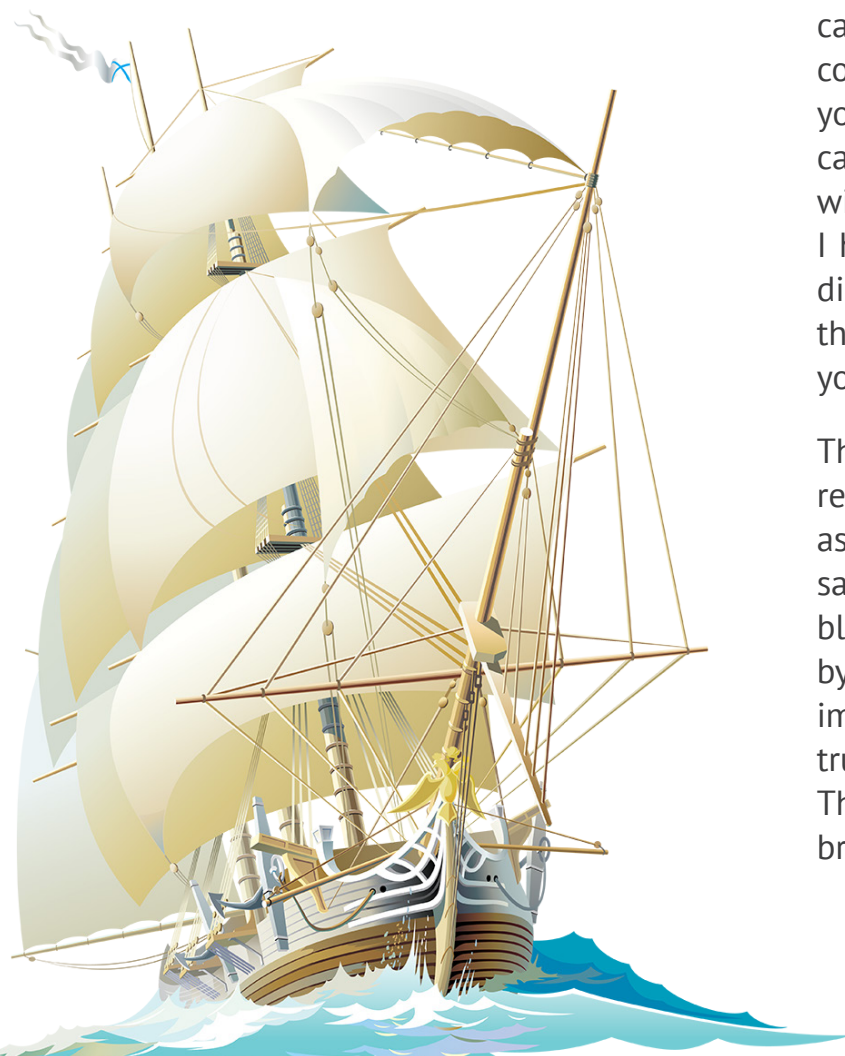
Inspiration, the sense that something beautiful will happen for you, will launch your voyage. Adversity is inevitable. Also inevitable in every voyage is displacement. You have been here in this University for many years. Today, you are graduating and for most of you, it will mean you need to leave.

We are here to celebrate your success as much as to wave you off on the voyage of your life. Every voyage is also an act of displacement. This has a deep implication. We must have comfort in displacement. Since I married Susmita, she and I have moved houses twenty times in the last 40 years! All that displacement obviously happened because of my professional life, and they came at a certain personal price that our family paid—usually cheerfully, but not always.

Sometimes the displacement, and the uncertainty that displacement brings, caused us pain. Still, we are glad as a family that we had and built comfort with displacement, and even today, that comfort with displacement is something that defines us. I am not saying, you must accept displacement. I am saying, make friends with the idea, make it work for you. You will experience displacement in many areas of your life. One of those is your career. While it was common at one point for people to spend decades working in the same place, today it is much more common for people to move from job to job, company to company, organization to organization.

And talking about jobs, many of us constantly look for that proverbial coveted job, the one with the highest social visibility, the one that will instantly deliver external validation. Early in my career I realised that even as you might be considered lucky when you land such jobs, you will be surprised at how quickly they can make you ordinary, how rapidly you will become part of the herd. All my life, I have sought out what I call, the “tough, dirty, but strategic job”. These are the ones that throw you into the deep end and test your lungs to their limits.

These are the ones whose incumbents are remembered. Being remembered, even as everything is temporal, is the most satisfying thing for any professional. We blossom and we shine when we are driven by a sense of legacy. But no matter how important you think your career is, the truth is that jobs are inanimate things. They cannot satisfy anyone. It is we who breathe life into a job.



It is we who make jobs aspirational by doing ordinary things extraordinarily well. I have done every single job the best I could, I did not allow the job at hand to be my identity. The job wasn't my brand. I was the brand. This can happen only when you give more to the job than you take out of it. The starting point for that is not to allow the job description to determine the contour of your engagement. The job description is what you rewrite every time you are in charge. Every time a new incumbent takes charge, the world waits to see whether you will reduce yourself to the printed word of the job description or whether you will print your own words.

In saying all this, I do not want to leave behind the impression that I had all the calibre to execute upon what I wanted to make out of a job. Quite the contrary. Each time I took that tough, dirty but strategic job, I was courting the unknown. I was out of depth, stark in my inadequacy. That is what built the humility in me to seek help, to collaborate, to create a shared community vision so that my vision could joyfully become everyone else's.

As I evolved, I prioritized seeking knowledge from others rather than seeking their help. You will be surprised how most people have something to give, how most will give joyfully, and how, in the act of giving and receiving, new bonds get forged.

Here, I want to let you in on a personal realisation about knowledge and learning: we must always seek to learn from unusual sources. Most people seek to learn from the usual sources. There is no harm in doing that, but it will hold up no unknown knowledge; it may offer you information but no revelation.

When everyone is looking at the forests to solve a problem, look at the skies. When everyone is digging the ground deep, go explore the ocean. By the time I was nineteen, I started my work life as a lower division clerk with the Government of Odisha. Soon after, I moved away from Odisha for a prolonged period of forty years.

As I went, I carefully took the little boy within me, with wonder in his eyes, fascinated with the world, with values deeply held and a recurring thought that, every day, something beautiful is about to happen. Many truly beautiful things happened in the ensuing four decades of my professional life.

I was lucky to join the Information Technology industry when it was just born. My work took me to many cities where we made home. From Delhi to Kolkata to Bengaluru and to the Silicon Valley and the East Coast of the United States of America. In my professional career, I consciously moved from function to function. My work took me to parts of the world that were hitherto alien places.

Along the way, the author in me took birth. First as an occasional writer in business magazines and newspapers, then to become a regular columnist and one day, the book offer came which led to many subsequent books that went on to receive great readership. In between all these things, I had my first taste of entrepreneurship when I co-founded a company called Project.21. I was all of twenty-eight at that time. Project.21 ran its course for just three years and closed. It was a failed enterprise. I came back to the world of employment.

But ten years later, the urge for entrepreneurship returned and this time, I was lucky. Hugely so. I co-founded Mindtree, the company that built the engine for the AADHAR platform.

Through many ups and downs along its way, Mindtree today has emerged as one of India's most valued companies that employs 35,000 people around the world. At Mindtree, I rose to become the Executive Chairman and in 2016, I stepped down to make way for the next generation of leaders. This is when the call came from the Honourable Chief Minister of Odisha, Shri Naveen Patnaik, to come and serve the State I was born in, to fulfil his vision to create employable skills for youth, mostly school dropouts.

As I speak to you today, it has been six years, serving the same government where I had started my life as a lower division clerk in 1976. This time round, as Chairman of the Odisha Skill Development Authority, the State has given me the rank and status of a cabinet minister. Back to my roots, from lower division clerk to chairman, my voyage has come full circle. So here we are. Voyages begin with inspiration. Voyages necessarily involve displacement. But being inspired is not the end, and displacement is not necessarily thrust upon us. Inspiration must lead to a state of decisiveness, and decisiveness leads us to action. Our breath is not for passive contemplation. We are agents of action. The question is, who guides our actions?

Friends, if there is a singular thread that holds the many things in my life's journey, it is this: my life's decisions were always made by me. No one else has ever made any decisions for me.

Nobody decided for me what I would study, or how far along in academia I would go. No one has ever decided any of my subsequent career moves. Along the way, I have chosen my friends, and I have also made choices to leave some of those relationships. I am proud to say that I have chosen my own life partner. I sought counsel from people in taking decisions, but it is I who has always decided the course of my journey. When you make your own decisions in life, that very act can be liberating. It empowers you. It gives you renewed energy. It holds you accountable because now you can blame no one else when things do not work out in your favour. You are accountable to yourself. Being accountable to yourself leads to empowerment.

It is not always easy but the more you make your own decisions, the better you get at it. The earlier you start the process, the greater becomes your advantage in life. Life, you will soon find, is an endless process of making decisions, small and big. It is in the consequence of the decisions we make that we unfold our own destiny. Each one of us needs to look at decision making as perhaps the most important of all life skills. This is not a skill you want to outsource to someone else. Voyages begin with inspiration. Voyages involve displacement, change.

And we make choices along the way: big choices, small choices. We are responsible for those choices, and they impact the voyage in material ways. But you do not travel alone. Many times, in the course of your voyage, you will find that your fellow travelers look to you to help make decisions and sometimes, to take decisions as their leader.

So let us talk about leadership. I do not believe that leadership is an inherited trait and that the greatest leaders are “born leaders”. Even as there may be a certain genetic disposition that makes people display certain leadership qualities, I believe that leadership is a skill that everyone can develop. Some are more intrinsically aware of its requirements, attributes, downsides, and potential for impact. Others practice leadership and, over time, they hone their skills. “Great leaders” are the result of consistent practice. In this act of practicing leadership, the starting point for an aspiring leader is to see the leadership trait in others. To make them feel valuable in the process. The act of making someone feel valuable starts with respect for them.

The quickest path to respect is listening. Listen deeply to people, particularly those who look up to you. And listen with your head and heart simultaneously. You will be amazed at how powerful the act of listening is. And people who listen deeply to others are people who also develop the ability to listen to themselves. To hear the voice and the void equally well. An important caveat here. With leadership comes power. Power is a necessary fuel for leadership. But where there is power, there is the danger of corruption.

To protect ourselves against the corrupting influences of power, we must be self-observant. And to observe the self, again, we must listen deeply. Over the span of the last six and a half decades, I have had four identities that intertwine and nest together, and which together define who I am.

To begin with, I was a professional, largely in the Indian IT industry. I have also been an entrepreneur for half of my life. My third identity has been as a published author. And finally, for the last six years, I have been a public servant.

In all these stages, by most reckonings, mine has been a life well rewarded, for which I have profound gratitude. In hindsight, things have worked out well for me. The rewards, for the most part, have been bigger than my efforts. Some of it was serendipity, while some acquired through conscious effort and chiselled with sustained practice. Today, I share my journey with you because you are at the start of your journey, and even as every journey is unique, indeed there are many similarities. It is not the case that everything that has worked for me will work for you. Yet it can help you to know the path taken by someone else so that you can choose where to follow it and where to create your own tracks.

Today is a great day in your lives. I bless all of you abundantly. May you stand at this podium one day and give yourself away. I bless you to have great mentors to guide you in your journey. I also bless you to outgrow some of them so that you become big and tall in your own right. May you always be open to emergence. May you always stay inspired and inspire others. In the end, I give you my most cherished lines from the Kathopanishad:


**“You are your deep driving desire. As is your desire, so is your will. As is your will, so is your act. As is your act, so is your destiny.”**


## Go, Kiss the World!



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