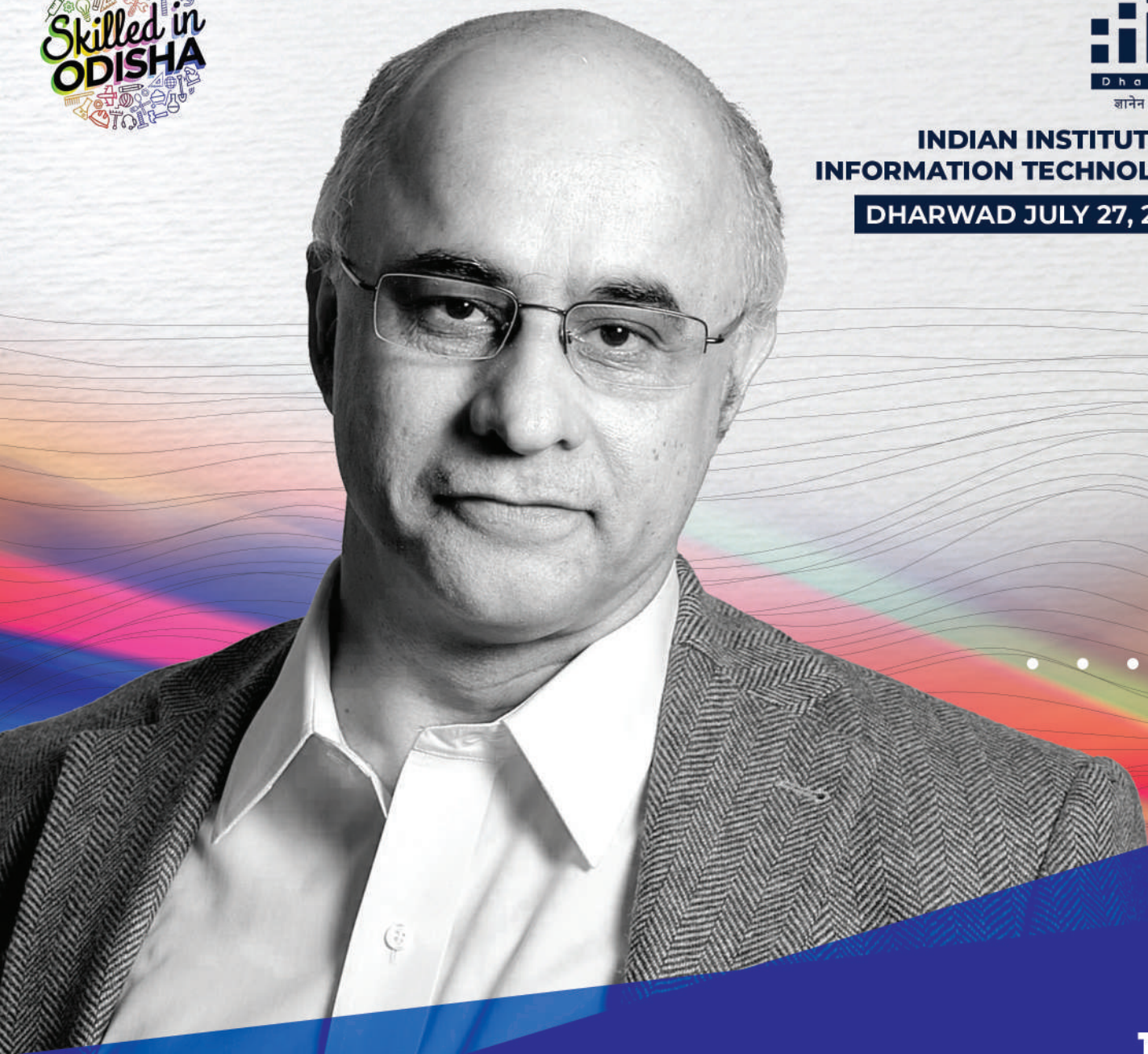




**INDIAN INSTITUTE OF
INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY**

DHARWAD JULY 27, 2019



**1st
Convocation
Address by**

SUBROTO BAGCHI

**Chairman
Odisha Skill Development
Authority**

**Cofounder
Mindtree**
Welcome to possible



Chairperson of The IIIT Dharwad, Shrimati Sudha Murty, Director Dr Kavi Mahesh, Registrar of the Institute, Professor S Basavarajappa, faculty and staff members, my dear graduating students, ladies and gentlemen.

It is a great honour for me to be here this evening to witness your graduation.

When Shrimati Sudha Murty asked me to be here today, I readily agreed for four reasons.

First, I have abiding love and respect for her, as does anyone who has come into close contact with her.

The second reason is my great respect and admiration for all the IIIT institutions as a whole that have grown from the very first one in Bengaluru and then, replicated without losing the core, the integrity, which is extremely difficult when we build institutions.

The third reason to be here is because it is the IIIT, Dharwad's first convocation. For years to come, batches would graduate, convocation speakers would deliver their speeches, but there is something enchanting to be the very first. It symbolizes the pioneering spirit; that before you, no one was here. It is a great place to be in.

My last, but not the least, reason in coming here is that the Hubli-Dharwad twin cities are very dear to me. I believe this is a sacred space that has produced greatness and given it all to the nation in art, literature, culture, science, technology and social innovation. The contribution of the Hubli-Dharwad region to the cause of the freedom movement and the subsequent effort of nation building is known to all of us. The region has a certain guiding spirit, something like a meta-consciousness that makes it unique.

This evening marks the culmination of your many years of sincere work to be an engineer in Information Technology. Information Technology is a remarkable frontier of human intellect and endeavor that has pervasive impact on life and living in its myriad dimensions. It is impossible to think of the future of humankind without the contribution of information science and technology; its import is truly fascinating and sometimes, very scary.

I entered the world of Information Technology in 1981 when it was at a very nascent stage in India. People like me who were instrumental in creating the foundation for the now iconic Indian IT industry, were clearly riding a wave at sunrise. But decades after, as I stand here to behold what lies ahead of all of you, I think there is so much more yet to happen, its newness and impact would be so vast that you would still be considered pioneers by people who would come after you. In that sense, the sunrise continues, you are waking up to it and walking into it as a very special set of people for whom the future is already laid out, there is a place in it reserved for you. From here, only you can come between yourself and the promise you hold. In that sense, you have a position of advantage and entitlement compared to millions, trust me, millions of others who cannot ever comprehend your success because they lost the race before the race began and it happened at multiple levels.

This evening, I want to speak to you about them. You have probably chosen me as the convocation speaker because of my four decades of work in the Information Technology industry, but my defining experience in life was shaped only after I stepped out of it in 2016, to go to the State of Odisha, to serve the need for employable skill development for school dropouts. It is then that I quickly realized the size of the chasm between people like us and those who constitute the majority in this country.

To give you a context, the world of skill development largely concerns school dropouts. These are children, who for either socio-economic reasons or because of poor nutrition would fall off and not go back to school. A little-known fact is that pre and post-natal nutrition problems lead to something called stunting and wasting, conditions that have direct correlation with learning problems in children. India has 1/3rd of the world's stunted children. 38.4% children born in India have a stunting problem.

For every 100 children born in India, only 95% probably get enrolled in school. Of these, only 70% would ever complete high school. This means a vast number of children in our country is out of school. By varying estimates, that is a staggering 6 million, almost the entire population of Singapore!

Most of them must get some employable skills after their fifth, eighth or at best, tenth class of study, either through a short-term government sponsored course or a two-year training at what is called an Industrial Training Institute (ITI) before they can find a job.

80% of these school dropouts would at best get access to the short-term courses that make them ready to be waiters, janitors, dump truck operators, sales assistants in a mall or sewing machine operators in a garment factory. These jobs would provide them with a minimum wage, mostly in an alien city. Only 20% of these young people would qualify to get to an ITI because, the entry level qualification there is a class-ten pass. These 20% would be trained to become electricians, plumbers, carpenters and welders, largely, the “blue-collar” work force for the manufacturing sector. Whether it is the 80% or the 20%, these are people at the bottom of the pyramid who must battle civilisational challenges at multiple levels, to get a toehold in life.

Who are these people?

Where do they come from, where do they eventually go?

Today, I want to tell you the story of 4 young women from this world, far removed from our bubble, so that you feel as inspired by them as I am. I want you to think of them whenever and for whatever reason you feel you had a rough day.

First, let me tell you about Muni Tiga.

In the very first month of my work, I travelled more than 30,000 kilometers by road in Odisha to see the 30 districts of the State to get a firsthand feel of the size and the complexity of the problem at hand. My charter at the time was to enable employable skill development for 1.1 million youth by 2019. In every district I visited, I would stop at the ITI. ITIs are the oldest skill training institution of the Government, started even before the IITs and IIMs were envisioned. Yet, with time, as IITs and IIMs have surged forward, for myriad reasons, the ITIs have receded. It is no surprise then that, in most places, they are in a state of decay. My task was to get back their self-confidence.

As part of that, at every ITI I would visit, I invariably started with one question: tell me the names of ten students you have produced that you are truly proud of. But the question had conditions attached. Of the ten, six must have been able to secure a job outside the State, competing with the best anywhere. Of the ten again, tell me the names of four girls who came in here and went on to take up a technical career. This one is important because social stereotypes exclude the girl child from technical and skill education. And finally, of the ten, I needed to know the names of two that the ITI is proud of because they went on to start a small business. Through this, I wanted every ITI to be first proud of their work through the talent they produced. For an educational institution, it must be all about students.

There was another angle to my query: in most institutions, teachers came and went, no one knew who the students were. As a result, the institutions didn't produce “role models” for others to look up to. Young people need role models; give them their idol and they can figure out the path. Thanks to the simple question, today, every institution can name the ten students in the order I wanted them to, each one has a hall of fame you must cross before you enter the classrooms.

In that larger backdrop, one day, I came to visit the ITI at Bargarh in the western part of Odisha. Upon my arrival there, when I threw the 10/6/4/2 challenge to the ITI and asked them to name 4 girls they are truly proud of, an old teacher haltingly recalled the name of Muni Tiga.



Muni Tiga

Muni Tiga was born in a tribal family of seven children. Upon finishing high school, she learnt about the ITI. She came here and studied electronics for two years and now she is a loco-pilot with the Indian Railways. I asked the Principal to get her on the phone. In minutes, she was speaking with me.

She said, in her own words, *"I am Muni Tiga. I am a locomotive pilot with the Indian Railways. Every day, I haul the Shatabdi Express from Bhubaneswar to Palasa and bring it back."* I asked to see her in person upon my return to Bhubaneswar and here is what I learn about her: as a child, her task at home was to graze the cattle. She had a few books which she would take with her to the forest and read while the cattle grazed. The villagers ridiculed her. What was a tribal girl doing with books? She didn't care. She loved to read and through her perseverance, she finished school. Now came the big challenge. She needed money to go to a college. To earn some money, she decided to become a daily wage worker in a factory that was a good 37 kilometers away. For an eight-hour shift, she earned fifty rupees a day. To get to work, she had to leave home well before the Sun was up and return after Sundown. The village people didn't like this. They taunted her. What if she brought bad name for the village? But she persisted. Amidst all this, Muni Tiga lost her father. Around this time, she met well-wishers who advised her to go to the Government ITI because they had a hostel and the education there was free. That is how she came to the ITI, finished her studies and got selected by the Indian Railways where, like her, and unknown to people like you and I, there are a handful of women who haul trains. I once heard her speak at a public event to honor her where she said, *"There is a certain inevitability to pain in life. But there must be a limit to how much we must suffer. Somewhere, we must intervene to alleviate that pain, to whatever extent possible. That capability is innate in us."*

In a State like Odisha, for generations, there has been societal disapproval for anyone who wanted to be an entrepreneur. Yet, entrepreneurs are the ones who create jobs. But there is a catch. There is a big lag factor between entrepreneurs starting their business, some succeeding, most failing, before jobs of any reckonable numbers get created. There isn't a short cut to this.



Basanti Pradhan

Hence, when a society does not encourage entrepreneurs, over time, employment dwindles, and people then must go elsewhere to get jobs. That is where, for many young women in Odisha, the Tirupur story begins.

Tirupur is a municipal town, an hour away from the better-known Coimbatore city in Tamil Nadu. Tirupur has the moniker of being the knitwear capital of India. Its annual exports exceeded seven billion US dollars in 2018. Tirupur is to the knitwear world what Bengaluru is to Information Technology. Behind its spectacular success are around six hundred thousand workers, mostly women, mostly school dropouts. Of these, half come from outside Tamil Nadu from States like Odisha, Bihar, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh. Of that migrant workforce, half come from Odisha. Most of them have been through a residential, two-month skill training paid for by the Government. As part of my work, I wanted to go to the actual worksites to see where our skill-trained youth finally go to, where do they live, how do they deal with issues like displacement and how can we better engage with their employers? That is how I arrived at Tirupur one day to meet an unusual young woman named Basanti Pradhan.

She comes from a village near a small town named Patnagarh, it is still considered back of beyond. Incidentally, I was born there. Basanti's father was a goatherd. Her parents had always wanted a son. But trying for one, they ended up with seven girls.

When Basanti, their third child, was conceived, sympathetic villagers assured her parents that this time, it would be a son. But then it was her, no son. That is how, as she grew up to learn the tale, she told herself, she would be both a son and a daughter to her parents. Being a son to a goatherd meant two things: go to graze the animals, but more importantly, cut branches in the forest and carry them on the way back home because goats eat all night long. Somewhere in time, the family managed to marry off her eldest sister. Now it was time for the second one and the family had no money to plan for it. By this time, Basanti, part time goatherd, part time school student, failed her class ten. This is when she heard about a government-sponsored training in industrial sewing machine operation. She fought with her parents to let her go there because she didn't see any future for herself in her village.

Her parents wouldn't let her do it for a variety of reasons, mostly social. But she had one infallible logic: if she didn't go, get trained, get a job and earn some money, how would they marry off her elder sister, now that there was nothing left after the eldest one's marriage? That is how, her parents eventually let go and she found her way in faraway Tirupur. But life in Tirupur can be very tough and challenging – not because of physical safety and the basic quality of living for the migrant workers – that the employers provide, thanks to the oversight by international buyers. But the food, the language, the culture and many other things that make home what it is, can make displacement very difficult. People like Basanti struggle with these, many quit work, return to fall back into poverty in less than a year. In that setting, Basanti had succeeded to stay in her job for four full years now and at the age of 22, had in fact become a production supervisor! She was a star. Fascinated, I asked her what qualities are needed to rise from the bottom most job to become a production supervisor?

In an hourlong conversation with me, she listed the qualities someone must have, to be able to succeed in their professional life and I can tell you, what she said is as much applicable to young engineers and management graduates or for that matter any professional, at the beginning of their career.

Basanti Pradhan told me, you got to know the big picture, the priorities of the organization beyond your work may entail. She elaborated on taking the initiative to learn, to go above and beyond the call of duty, seeking out more responsibility, building a competitive yet collaborative spirit, having empathy for others and so on. What she told me could be material for a convocation address for an institution like yours but what blew me away was her sheer self-confidence with which she was steering the course of not just her work, but her own life.

That self-confidence expands beyond her work into her personal life where other people want to steer her path, but she asserts herself, she tells them who is in charge. Let me give you a couple of examples. Soon after she was able to save enough money to marry off her older sister, her family wanted her to get married. In villages in India, that and not standing on her own legs, is the topmost priority for a girl's parents. A prime reason for it is the physical safety of the girl child. But Basanti refused. To quote her, she said, "I am not saying 'no' to marriage. I will marry but it will happen only when I want it." And it did happen; she eventually married a co-worker in Tirupur who turns out to be from the same region as hers. But that is not where the story ends. The moment a girl gets married, parents from both the sides are anxious that she bears a child. Again, faced with such pressure, Basanti told them, she will have a baby but only when she wants it.

The decision to marry when she wants, and to have a baby when she wants, is a non-trivial issue for most young women in the country. For most, both events usually trigger a non-reversible implication: most wouldn't return to work ever again. This is a problem for even highly qualified young women in this country. But not for Basanti who is taking on life on her own terms.

Someone once told me, most of us believe destiny is something that is ahead of us. Basanti Pradhan proves that destiny is what follows us. It is not the light in the front, it is in fact, your shadow.



Didi Sethi

The work we do at the Odisha Skill Development Authority tries to address issues at their core so that the narrative can shift from skill development to human transformation. The moment we shift the conversation, it becomes a loftier, more aspirational idea to dedicate ourselves to. Everyday along the journey, we meet people who raise the bar for society at large. Here I want to tell you about a young girl named Didi Sethi. Her story is as much about her, as it is about her mother and her principal at the Government ITI at Berhampur where she trained. The starting point of the story isn't a happy one.

Her principal, Dr Rajat Panigrahi, a devoted teacher and a disciplinarian, had shown her the door. The reason? Despite consistent reprimands to be regular to class, she wasn't yielding. Until one day Dr Panigrahi asked her to leave. This is a big deal because, at the time, girl child enrolment at ITI was a low 6% even as subsequent efforts have raised that number today to well above 22%. Thus, a girl dropping off is a big deal for us, yet you cannot have attendance irregularity at an institute where practical learning holds the key to passing the examination. Days after Didi Sethi was thrown out, her angry mother burst into Dr Panigrahi's room and literally shouted at him. To the nonplussed Dr Panigrahi, she was being abusive.

She challenged him: who did he think he was? If her daughter had to be regular with her attendance, why did she need to study at an ITI? Weren't there degree colleges in the neighborhood?

Then she paused and told something even more difficult for Dr Panigrahi to digest.

She said, "Look here, my mother forcibly married off my younger sister. Within months of that, she has returned home, having been thrown out by her husband and she is now a liability for me to deal with. You principal, you have ensured that my own daughter would have a similar destiny."

The mother was afraid. If the daughter wasn't going to be in the ITI, for her safety's sake, she now must be married off to someone who well may mistreat her, send her back one day, just as was the outcome with her sister.

Now Dr Panigrahi decided to get into some depth. It turned out that the family's sole source of income was from selling vegetables on a pushcart on the streets. Each member of the household had a task earmarked, keeping that pushcart and its routine in the centre. Every morning, someone had to load it with different vegetables, someone else took it to the streets, upon its return, the cart had to be cleaned up, reloaded and sent back for the afternoon round. It was Didi's earmarked task to clean the pushcart and make it ready for the second trip to the streets. In households like hers, there was no slack, each must pull their own weight. In this entire routine, the most difficult part was accurately predicting when the cart would be back every day for its cleaning and replenishment after the morning trip to the market, and that led to the irregularity of Didi's attendance at the ITI. Dr Panigrahi realized that the pushcart drill was a given, if that piece didn't work, the family would become dysfunctional. So, he had to keep the pushcart constant and change Didi's ITI routine instead.

He told her mother to send Didi Sethi back to class and from now on, the routine would be for her to attend the morning shift to do the theory classes and go home, attend to the pushcart, then return in the evening shift (The ITI at Berhampur runs two concurrent batches in two shifts) for her practical classes. The arrangement suited her; Didi returned to class, and two years after, upon her graduation, she was selected by Enfield India where she worked at a manufacturing plant that assembles the legendary Bullet motorcycles. Now she has shifted to Maruti Suzuki.

Today, she is behind the wheel and not in the back seat of her life.



Sumati Badaik

The story of skill development cannot be delinked to employment. The truth is that there aren't enough jobs appropriate for the skillsets of many youths in India. For most, jobs create displacement. If only there were more meaningful jobs nearer to where people grow up and live, it would make for greater sustainable outcomes for the country. The key to that is encouraging young people to start a tiny business that grows up, in a year or two, to create one or two jobs in their own locality. It is with this perspective that we started a pilot programme called "Nano-Unicorn". As you may know, a Unicorn is a tech start-up that hits a billion dollar in valuation. According to Fortune India magazine, by January 2019, India had 26 Unicorns. At the Odisha Skill Development Authority, we feel, while India needs Unicorns, the real progress of the country depends on how many Nano-Unicorns we can create.

But there is a huge challenge: Unicorns get created because of venture capital. Someone trusts a young person who has nothing more than an idea, a story, and writes a cheque down without collateral. But when it comes to an ITI student, other than going to an unresponsive banking system, there is no real avenue open, there is certainly no concept of risk-capital.

In a unique experiment, we selected potential Nano-Unicorns, people who had skill training, who had a business idea. We sent them to a mini-MBA class so that they learnt about the world of business and then we paired them with philanthropic sources for making impact capital available.

The deal was simple: each one got 1 lakh rupees without collateral and honor-based paperwork. If the money is returned within a year, it is interest-free. When the money comes back, it funds another aspiring Nano Unicorn.

That is the background against which I met Sumati Badaik.

Years back, Sumati Badaik's father abandoned her mother with three young kids and went away, never to come back again. Sumati's mother, a tribal lady from Sundargarh district was now in-charge of two daughters and a son. Left with no other option, she decided to start making a local, rice-based alcoholic brew called handia which the tribal folks drink. That is how she managed to raise her three kids, eventually marrying off the oldest girl, she got the son an auto-rickshaw and sent Sumati to the ITI at Rourkela. Sumati finished her course at the ITI in an unusual field for a girl: she had opted for refrigeration and air-conditioning. Once she was done, she went to the Rourkela Steel Plant for her internship and could have landed a job some place, but she was clear: she wanted to be an entrepreneur. Because, she was consumed with one goal – to earn enough money quickly to get her mother to stop her business of brewing. The word handia is derived from the word handi – it is a large vessel in which the brew is made and then carried to the market. Growing up, Sumati had two tasks everyday: once the brew was ready, she had to raise the handi onto her mother's head when she stepped out to sell and upon her return, had to lower it from her mother's head. Now Sumati was clear. She had to get her mother to stop the business of brewing handia. She didn't like the ignominy of loading and offloading the handi. That is how she applied to become a Nano Unicorn. Today, she has her own refrigeration and air-conditioning repair business in the steel city of Rourkela. On-time repayment of a business loan for a small entrepreneur is a rarity, default rates are quite the expected and yet, amidst the many challenges of raising her tiny business, today Sumati is leading the way among her cohorts, in meticulously returning what she has taken so that the money finds another recipient like her.

My dear graduating students, some of you may wonder as to why I am speaking to you about a world so far away from where you are and that too, why these four young women? Let me now share the reasons with you.

I want you to realize how blessed, how privileged, how entitled and how potentially far removed we all are from the larger reality. And amidst that construct, I want you to appreciate human courage, of the power to find your own motivation to overcome odds, to receive the uncomplaining ability of ordinary people who achieve extraordinary outcomes. The accepted way of the world is to find role models from a stratum higher than our own. Seldom we find inspiration and solace from those who are children of lesser advantage. Yet, they abound. What we need is the pause, the reflection and the grace to find them and learn from them.

Then there is another aspect to today's conversation. As technology leaders of the future, you need to think of how your work can emancipate the millions of individuals who constitute the majority. We think of killer apps, quick money and instant fame. We need to think of people for whose sake we must make technology a life force, a great leveler, but it wouldn't happen automatically. To make large, transformative impact on the lives of the people who run the real risk of being left behind, we must first build empathy.

And finally, why only women in today's convocation speech? Is it that the world I work in has no men worth emulating? Quite the contrary.

Yet I have chosen to hold up these four women because, in our social system, it is the girl child who must climb the steeper face of the mountain each time.

Yet, our future, the future of the nation, and that of the Indian civilization, depends on how we treat our women. There is a serious urgency to that task. If women are inspired to work, if women can safely get to work and come back home, our children and the elderly would be automatically safe. If women can have the same access that everything a man has in this country, India would become a developed nation in its true sense.

You graduate this evening from the land of Kittur Chennamma and Sudha Murty. In pursuing your profession, be a champion of womanhood wherever you go.

In closing, I call upon the collective power of Muni Tiga, Basanti Pradhan, Didi Sethi and Sumati Badaik to bless your journey, to sprinkle the stardust on you so that you live a life -- not just of achievement but inclusion; not just of success but one with the ability to inspire others.

Thank you very much and Go, Kiss the World



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