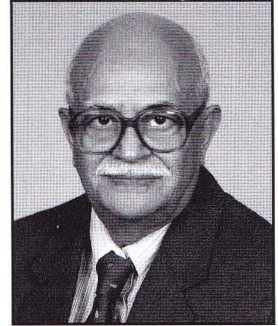


PROFESSOR ZILLUR RAHMAN SIDDIQUI

FORMER ADVISER, CARETAKER GOVERNMENT AND
FORMER VICE CHANCELLOR, JAHANGIRNAGAR UNIVERSITY



I am pleased to have the opportunity of congratulating the East West University authorities, and especially the graduates who are going to be conferred the degrees they have so deservedly earned after years of devoted study at this University.

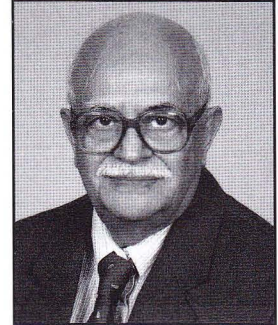
East West University has already made its mark in our academic world. I am sure the young graduates will carry farther afield its reputation as a centre of excellence. My very best wishes for yet another successful convocation.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Zillur Rahman Siddiqui". The signature is written in dark ink and has a decorative flourish at the end.

Professor Zillur Rahman Siddiqui

PROFESSOR ZILLUR RAHMAN SIDDIQUI

FORMER ADVISER, CARETAKER GOVERNMENT AND
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Hon'ble. Chancellor, Professor Dr. Iajuddin Ahmed, Hon'ble Education Minister, Dr. M. Osman Farruk, Dr. Mohammed Farashuddin, President, Board of Directors, Members of the Board of Directors, East West University, Pro Vice-Chancellor Members of the Academic Council, teachers, and students who are about to receive their degrees, ladies and gentlemen,

I feel honoured to be invited by the University to deliver the convocation speech on this The Fourth Annual Convocation taking place this morning. I have been a convocation speaker on several occasions before this one but this is the first time I am doing so at a private university. I do not know whether this has any thing to do with my known reservations about private universities as a concept in the context of Bangladesh. I will not say that those reservations are no longer there. But I will freely and gladly admit that, for some time past now, I have come to form a more positive, a more shall I say discriminating, attitude to them. I will explain, later on, how this happened.

I will not go over the oft-told story of how and why the idea took hold in many minds of finding a solution to the mess in the area of higher education that was threatening to be permanent, beyond any solution in the foreseeable future. Universities established on private initiative, and characterised by efficient management, also free from the turmoil engulfing our public universities, were seen as a likely panacea, capable of providing a system of higher education modern in concept and trouble-free in delivery. The enabling act, permitting the establishment of private universities, was passed in 1992. The political climate was favourable, the sponsors were many and impatient, the authorities by which I mean the U.G.C and the Ministry, were supportive of the ventures, and what followed was a procession of private universities. Some but not all were in able hands. Many took it as an investment, providing an outlet for idle money. Luckily for the sponsors, the moment was ripe, too, for there were many qualifying for admission to a degree course but failing to find a place in a public university of their choice. Private universities gave them a chance and not only them. There were those eligible for admission to a public university but unwilling to do so. There were also those who could afford the expenses of a foreign university but considered one of the better private universities at home a good alternative. That the moment was ripe has been proved beyond any doubt by the trend in admission to private universities. East West university claims, according to last year's report, an enrollment figure of 3556 (Gross). This is nothing short of a marvel and it shows the confidence the university has come to acquire in such a short time.

Today universities in a poor country like ours have a double challenge to face. First, it has to meet the demands of society for higher education. Secondly, it has to provide a kind of education that will equip the recipients to play their expected role in a world driven by forces of science, technology and commerce. There is an increasing demand for job-oriented education. Finally, there is that inescapable precondition for higher education, an adequate command over English, as a gateway not only to the existing stock of knowledge but to the constant flow of new knowledge that is being created the world over.

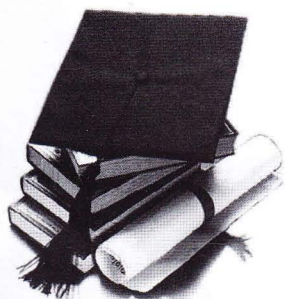
To what extent, if at all, have our universities met the challenges? The common perception, shared by most of us, is that their achievements, taken cumulatively, do not count for much. The slow decay of our system comprising all the tiers of education and seen most clearly and disturbingly at the tertiary level, presents a gloomy prospect for our future. We are witnessing a widening gap between the face value and the real value of the degrees being offered by our universities. The public universities, nominally autonomous but actually under the constant surveillance of the government, have been, in varying degrees, brought to a state of paralysis. A kind of inertness has struck not only its separate limbs but also its very brain. The bare facts are before us: sterility at the level of creativity, and, at the functional level, an admission policy vitiated by a chase after numbers, courses and curricula that are mostly outdated, and obsolete, examinations lacking in rigour and regularity, a criminal permissiveness in the selection and reward system of the faculty, colossal waste at the national level on account of the "session-jam" for which defaulting teachers are as much responsible as any other factor. Accountability at the level of administration and instruction are at the lowest level. The rot we are witnessing today is nothing new. It has a long history though its worst symptoms surfaced only after our Liberation.

Please understand that this is my personal view and I have come to hold this view through my experience of forty odd years as a university teacher. I have personally experienced the slow death of a system I have lived with. It is also my personal and firm belief that our manifold failure at the national level is largely due to the failure of our system of higher education. We can hope to save the nation only by saving our education.

Private universities now constitute a part of our system. There are over fifty of them now and there is a bewildering variance amongst them in quality and commitment. The better ones, and East West is certainly one of them, are known for their forward-looking innovative thrust, for the buoyancy and freshness of their faculty, by the close monitoring of students' performance, by the sense of confidence they try to instill in their minds, by the easy availability of internet facilities, to mention some of the plus points. As against these, there are quite a few minus points too, chief amongst them being the absence of a campus. It is a requirement for recognition set by the U.G.C. and one which majority of the private universities find difficult to fulfil. But the more resourceful ones are already on the way of meeting this very valid requirement. East West University, too, holds out the promise of building a campus in the not too distant future, as I learn from its last year's report.

City-based universities may not have, they need not have, extensive campuses which our older public universities are proud to have. But they must have facilities for sports and outdoor activities. There must be some scope for students and faculty to meet outside the class-rooms and outside the class hours. A university is a meeting ground of minds, and a place where cross-fertilisation of minds becomes possible through unscheduled and informal contacts between student and student as between student and teacher. It is difficult to create such environs in an overcrowded city but, as they say, where there is a will there is a way.

East West University proclaims that it is committed to promoting eastern culture and values and meaningfully blends eastern and western thought and innovation through a strict application of a code of conduct that is consistent with that grand aim. Here I am but quoting the very words of Dr. Mohammed Farashuddin, President, Board of Directors of this university, words that he uttered last year on this very occasion. I would say that it is a worthy aim and will hasten to add that it sets a stiff task. When we talk about western thought and innovation we do not mean merely science in its technological expression, in other words scientific knowledge in practical application. We also mean the totality of western civilisation, its contribution to that area of knowledge commonly called the humanities. Our earliest universities, appearing in the scene by the middle of the nineteenth century, adopted much of the western humanities in their curricula. One had to read the history of Greece and Rome in one's pre-university years and the history of England thereafter alongside the history of India. Even students of the pure and applied sciences had to have a grounding in history and literature.



With the restructuring of our secondary education, all this has changed. Some universities, to remedy the loss, have taken recourse to compulsory basic courses like history of civilisation, and this they have done at the instance of some U.S. universities.

One sees the direct and I would say the limiting impact of globalisation and market forces on the academic programme of our private universities. If we are to remain true to the idea of a university, they will have to look beyond their present confines. I am glad to notice that East West University is already showing its awareness of this. I would hope that East West University along with our front line private universities will, in due course, blossom forth into centres of diverse disciplines, thus answering to the diverse demands of a society.

One such demand is for a new generation of graduates who will be leaders of tomorrow. I will now turn to you, fresh graduates of East West University, and say a few words of my hope and fear. The country, after over thirty years of formal and political freedom, is yet to achieve the goals set out in our constitution. Our status is still that of a least developed country. We are still far from enjoying our destiny of a self-reliant nation, and our society is torn by factional strifes that clog the path of our progress. The older leadership has failed to unite and lead the nation. Now it will be your turn to fill the void. This you can do by proving your worth in different vocations that you choose for yourselves. Leadership is a wide concept, not limited to politics. A sound university education is supposed to fashion a man or a woman equipped with general as well as particular competence. Unfortunately, both competence and a spirit of dedication are in short supply. What you have learnt from your university is going to be your capital and your source of strength and the good work you do will go to the credit of your university. Since she, your alma mater, has chosen excellence as her motto, you will try and keep true to this motto in your life.

But excellence alone is not enough for a man or a woman to realise his/her full potential. Along with excellence one will need character and commitment, character to face the many challenges, the many temptations of life, and commitment to the people in their struggle for a better life. Never make the mistake of being content with your personal well-being, financial and otherwise. Whether you like it or not, you belong to your people. Cultivate this sense of belonging and then you will see that you have things to do not strictly your own. You will feel richer and stronger with a new, an invigorating sense of identity. This follows naturally from the fact that you are a citizen of a free country. Your background, the education you have received here, and your vocation all conspire to make you a citizen with added responsibilities, a citizen to serve other citizens. As you leave the precincts of the university and start a new chapter of your life, may this ideal of service bring you untold rewards. May God help you.