

Infosys Prize 2010
6 January 2011
Prime Minister's Remarks

I am truly delighted to participate in this very special event. Let me begin by wishing all of you the very best in the New Year.

I congratulate each of the awardees for their achievements and individual contribution to the growth of knowledge. It is a particularly uplifting moment for me to be in your company. You are an extraordinarily talented lot. Your accomplishments speak for themselves. I wish you well in your work in the years to come. May God bless you with even higher attainments. And may you continue to be a source of inspiration to others.

I also compliment Infosys, the company, and the Infosys Science Foundation for instituting these awards, and for inviting such a distinguished jury to select the winners.

I have always believed that Winston Churchill's words that the "empires of the future would be empires of the mind", were remarkably foresighted. Indeed, it is now commonplace to suggest that we today live in a knowledge-based era.

The strength of a nation is no longer determined by the might of its armies. It comes from the quality of its collective knowledge, the productivity of its working people, the creativity of its entrepreneurs and the dedication of its professionals.

A country's prosperity too is a function of the knowledge its people possess. Indeed, it has always been so. However, what has changed in the last few decades is the access to knowledge. We live in an era of greater equity and equality as far as acquisition of knowledge is concerned.

Feudal restrictions and pre-democratic institutions are no longer able to impose social barriers to access to knowledge. If there is one barrier, and this too is an ancient one, it is the barrier of economic capacity. Indeed, with the growing share of privately funded for-profit educational institutions, this may be emerging as a worrisome barrier to freer access to knowledge for all.

That is precisely why I personally value scholarships and prizes that liberate creative minds from the constraints of economic and social handicaps.

My own life stands testimony to the importance of scholarships. If I did not have access to scholarships I would never have been able to complete my education, let alone have the opportunity to be educated at some of the world's best institutions.

Private institutions like the Infosys Science Foundation have a large role to play in generating funds required to reward excellence.

I see that you have identified five disciplines, namely, Mathematical Sciences, Physical Sciences, Engineering and Computer Science, Life Sciences and the Social Sciences. These are important disciplines and India must make its mark in each of these areas.

While several Indians have received global recognition for their work, and even Nobel Prizes, we have not had an Indian working in India receive a Nobel Prize in the sciences since C V Raman. I am, therefore, particularly delighted that the Infosys Prize is given to Indians doing world class research but resident and working in India.-

In an increasingly globalised world and with the ease of modern communications, it is possible for researchers to work in multiple environments even as they stay stationed at one place. But the great merit in being located in one place for a reasonable length of time is that new generations of researchers can benefit from the intellectual leadership provided by talented people. And India surely needs such leadership.

I recall that when I chose to quit my job at UNCTAD and return to India to teach at the Delhi School of Economics, the then head of UNCTAD, the distinguished Argentinian economist Raul Prebisch, told me that I was being foolish leaving a United Nations job to return to teaching in India. But he added in the same vein “sometimes in life it is wise to be foolish”!

Many young persons today may think it is not exactly wise to leave the comfort of well funded institutions abroad to return home to work in India. The infrastructure our universities and research institutions provide may not be world class, though, now some institutions in the private sector, like Infosys, do provide world class facilities.

But, having accepted all the inadequacies of India’s research infrastructure, if there are young men and women who are willing to work here and produce world class research despite all the constraints they may face, we must salute their wisdom, their grit and determination and their love for their country.

Awards like these, I believe, do precisely that.

We recognize that encouraging and rewarding productive academic pursuits is a special responsibility of the government too. We also acknowledge that in a society like ours we must make available a greater number of merit-cum-means scholarships and scholarships for the socially and economically disadvantaged sections.

That is why our government has taken several measures to increase funding for scholarships and awards for deserving students. We have placed special emphasis on assistance to students belonging to the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes, Minorities and to the girl child.

Such scholarships create a wider knowledge base. It is on the foundation of that wide knowledge base, that we must then erect the pyramid of excellence.

The Infosys Prize is an award for excellence. To widen the resource pool from which we can select qualified awardees, we need a wider social base of talent.

We do believe that it is the responsibility of government to create that wider talent base. The wider knowledge base. That is why we were very keen that we recognize the Right to Education as a Fundamental Right.

If there is one initiative that our Government has taken in these six and a half years in office that I consider really special, it is this Right to Education that has now been enshrined in our Constitution.

I sincerely hope that today’s awardees will inspire newer generations of researchers to pursue excellence in research. There is no other way in which excellence can be encouraged except by inspiration provided by the intellectual leaders in various walks of life. It is the product of your work, and your own life that inspires younger people. I congratulate today’s awardees once again. I applaud your extraordinary achievements once again. May your path be blessed.
