

**Speech of Dr. Shashi Tharoor
Honoris Causa Recipient
7th Convocation Ceremony
St. Xavier's University, Kolkata**

Our Chief Guest, Rev. Fr. Arturo Sosa, S.J., Superior General of the Society of Jesus, the Rev. Dr. James Arjen -Tete, S.J., Chancellor of St. Xavier's University, Kolkata, the highly respected Rev. Dr. John Felix Raj, S.J., Vice-Chancellor of St. Xavier's University, Kolkata, Rev. Dr. Xavier Jayraj SJ, Registrar, and, of course, Mr. Vatsal Chirimar, the Honorary Secretary of St. Xavier's University Kolkata Alumni Association, distinguished deans and members of the faculty, proud families, and, above all, the graduating class of this 7th Convocation Ceremony.

I am deeply honoured to be with you today on this momentous occasion of St. Xavier's University. Thank you.

I was at your very first Convocation Speaker some years ago, and to stand before you here, is triply gratifying. First, because it is only my second day out of a wheelchair after a recent accident, and to do so as a ceremony that signifies both culmination and commencement, the closing of one chapter and the quiet unfolding of another, is privilege enough. But to do so while receiving the degree of Doctor of Literature (D.Litt.), Honoris Causa, is all the more an honour I accept with profound gratitude and abiding humility. An honorary doctorate is a gesture of generosity from the University, one that humbles the recipients even as it honours him.

I accept it not as a culmination, but as an encouragement to continue engaging with ideas, with public life, and with the enduring power of, I hope, thoughtful expression. Though I have earned one doctorate the hard way, and been accorded a couple more Honoris Causa, this is my first honorary doctorate in India, and it is an honour that resonates all the more with me, since I am a Xaverian.

I am deeply mindful of the confidence that such a distinction reflects. That sense of responsibility feels especially resonant when the honour comes from an institution shaped by the Jesuit intellectual tradition, a tradition that insists education must reach beyond information to formation, beyond competence to conscience.

St. Xavier's University, Kolkata has from the start upheld the conviction that the true purpose of learning is not only professional advancement, but the cultivation of ethical judgment and social awareness. Love, freedom, liberty, justice, equality, and fraternity are all co-equal here, and are the foundation of the core values that we all share.

Under the stewardship of its Chancellor, Reverend James Tete, and its Vice-Chancellor, Reverend Felix Raj, the University continues to uphold a vision of education that is both intellectually rigorous and morally grounded.

We are, of course, honoured by the presence here of the wider leadership of the Society of Jesus, under the guidance of the Reverend Father General Arturo Sosa Abascal, S.J., whose global stewardship reflects a commitment to scholarship and the service of humanity.

Together with the deans, the faculty, and administrators who animate this institution each day, they sustain an academic community in which knowledge is pursued not as an end in itself, but as a preparation for meaningful service to society. It is this understanding that education shapes character as much as career, that lends today's ceremony its deeper significance. It is especially meaningful that the honor conferred upon me today is a doctorate of literature. Every discipline represented in this hall contributes in its own indispensable way to society. Science expands our understanding. Law orders our institutions. Commerce powers our prosperity. Literature does something different, but equally vital. It deepens our understanding of the human condition. I know literature does not compete with these other fields of knowledge. It complements them. It reminds us that behind every policy statistic there lies a human life, a lived experience.

Behind every technological breakthrough, a human aspiration; and behind every institutional debate is a discussion about values. It teaches us to see complexity where others may see simplification and empathy where others may settle for abstraction. In societies as diverse and argumentative as our own, such habits of mind are indispensable. They strengthen the qualities upon which any democracy depends. The ability to listen, to question, to dissent, and above all, to understand complexity.

We live in an age that rewards immediacy. Opinions are formed at the speed of a tweet. Outrage often travels faster than reflection. Yet serious study, whether in literature or any other discipline, insists upon patience. It asks us to linger with evidence, to wrestle with nuance, and to recognize that truth is often layered rather than linear. In that sense, education itself is quietly subversive of the certainties that dominate our public discourse. It reminds us that human experience cannot be reduced to slogans. For those of us engaged in public life, language is not a decorative accessory. It is the very medium through which ideas are contested and communities are imagined. Words can illuminate, but they can also inflame. They can build bridges across difference or erect walls of misunderstanding. The discipline of careful thought, with its attention to precision and context, offers a necessary corrective to the coarsening of contemporary debate.

If this university has chosen to honour me with a degree in literature, I take it not simply as a recognition of the writing I have undertaken, but as an affirmation of a truth our times repeatedly remind us of that words matter. They matter because they frame our conversations. They matter because they influence our institutions. And they matter because

they shape the moral climate of our society. It is to the guardians of that climate, the young minds graduating today, that responsibility for the future will increasingly belong. You graduate at a moment of extraordinary possibility for our country.

India today is one of the youngest nations in the world. 51% of us are under 25. You are already in the majority. It's your country. In the decades to come, the energy, talent, and imagination of today's young people will determine whether we translate demographic potential into national achievement. A young population can be a dividend, but only if it is educated, empowered, and ethically anchored. Otherwise, it risks becoming a source of frustration rather than fulfillment. That is why a convocation such as this is not merely a private milestone. It is part of a larger national story. Each degree conferred today represents not only your personal accomplishment, but an investment in our republic's future. You leave this campus not simply as graduates of St. Xavier's University, Kolkata but as participants in India's ongoing experiment in democracy, diversity, and development on a scale the world has rarely seen. Yet the measure of that participation would not be confined to professional success alone. The India you inherit is vibrant, ambitious, and dynamic. It is also complex. Contested, divided sometimes, and occasionally turbulent. It demands from its citizens not only competence but judgment, not only ambition but balance, not only conviction but civility.

In such an environment, the habits cultivated through your education here become invaluable. The capacity to think critically, to weigh evidence, to engage respectfully with opposing viewpoints. These are not academic luxuries. They are democratic necessities. A society as plural as ours cannot be sustained by uniformity of opinion. It is strengthened by the disciplined management of differences.

You have been educated in an institution that prizes reflection with rigor. When you step into your boardrooms, your courtrooms, your laboratories, classrooms, studios, or into public service, you will carry with you more than a credential. You will carry a method of inquiry, a standard of excellence, and, I hope, a sense of responsibility to something larger than yourselves. That is what my Jesuit education gave me, and I hope you will leave with all of that. Because the true test of education lies not in the titles it confers, but in the temper it instills. It has revealed in how you respond to disagreement, how you exercise authority, how you navigate ethical dilemmas, and how you treat those whose circumstances differ from your own. India's future will not be written by slogans. It will be shaped by citizens prepared to combine skill with sensitivity, confidence with humility, and success with service. If your education has equipped you to do that, as I know St. Xavier's would have tried, then the promise of our democratic moment, our demographic moment, will not be squandered.

As you leave this convocation hall, you stand at a threshold. Behind you lie years of structured learning. Before you stretches the far less predictable terrain of lived experience. There will be moments of triumph. There will be moments of uncertainty. In both, remember

that your education is not a shield against difficulty, but a compass through it. It does not necessarily equip you with all the answers, but with the capacity to seek the answers honestly, to revise them courageously, and to defend them thoughtfully. And you must never stop learning. I'm probably older than many of the parents of the graduating class, but I can truthfully say that not a day has passed in my life where I haven't learned something new, a fact, an insight, an idea, a word.

Keep your mind open, and you will receive learning every day to add to the foundations that have been laid at this university. Carry with you not only the pride of achievement, but the discipline of reflection and the generosity of spirit that true learning demands.

If you remain curious in success, principled in adversity, and humane in power, you will justify the faith placed in you today. The future of our country will not be secured by rhetoric but by responsibility and responsibility in action. May you exercise your knowledge with integrity, your ambition with balance and your success with generosity. My warmest congratulations to each one of you in the graduating class.

Thank you, Nihil Ultra and Jai Hind!!