



**Convocation Address by Mr. Suresh Narayanan Chairman & Managing Director,
Nestlé India Ltd. 13th April 2019.**

Dr Ranjan Banerjee, faculty and staff of SPJIMR, graduating students, and most importantly, parents, well-wishers and members of the family. A hearty welcome and I am delighted and honoured, to be called here to talk, on the first day of the most important lives ahead of all of you.

Almost at the same time, 37 years ago, there was a young man, who belonged to a very traditional, middle-class Tamil Brahmin family, and was at the crossroads on deciding on a career.

Those of you who know about Tamil families will understand that we are circumscribed by a few things that are important. Number one, before we enjoy life, we talk about duty, and duty is the most important element in our lives. Second is where you have studied, and what you have studied, rather than your bank balance. Third, if you have to make it to a good job, a job as a bureaucrat is always considered as a great opening. In the proud traditions of the Indian Civil Service, followed the Indian Administrative Service, and for most young people of my background, that was what we aspired for.

So I never did an MBA like all of you. I went on to do a Masters in Economics and specialised in Monetary Economics, in the hope that I will have the coveted three-letter suffix to my name. So that's what I was dreaming about, what I was focused on, and thought will make a great life for me ahead. To be a good bureaucrat and to be someone who ran the affairs of the country, in the proud tradition of generations of South Indians who had become bureaucrats. And then came along a company, called Hindustan Lever in those days, to the Delhi School of Economics. They had never come before. I was told by my father, who was insistent that I get into the IAS that those were the times when parents decided where you went and what you did.

My father said that it is a good interview for me to give. An uncle of mine who was also in the IAS said, "Hindustan Lever is known for giving a good job. So, go and apply for that." With great reluctance, trepidation and almost with disdain, I applied to Hindustan Lever. But, my young friends, when there is something you are not really interested in, sometimes you land up doing your best. And it so happened that I landed up with a job at Hindustan Lever as a management trainee. And that was the predicament of an aspiring bureaucrat

who strayed into the corporate world. So, in every sense I am an accidental corporate immigrant.

And it is but poignant that Dr. Banerjee invites me to come and talk to you on what a career is made to be. The first lesson in life, my young friends is that 'Man proposes and God disposes'. Take it as it comes, and what is important is what you make of what you get, rather than dreaming of what you might not get. I stand here today and speak to you not as a corporate captain. I don't speak as someone who has been in the industry for a very long time. But I speak more as a parent, because I too am the father of a daughter who is about your age. These are the words that I might share with her as she carves out her career in this world, based on the experience that I have gleaned in all these years of being someone who did not qualify himself to be in management and has done reasonably well during the course of my career across organisations.

I call it the 'Ten Principles'. The 'Ten Principles' have stood me in good stead, and might stand you in good stead. Some of it might not be applicable to you, but nevertheless, it is my duty as a parent and not as a Chief Guest to tell you about these things.

The first 'Principle of life' is that you need to have clarity on who you are, what you believe in and what you want. For those of you, who might have heard me before, I am very fond of the dohes of Kabir. And Sant Kabir said in a different context once, "Kasturi kundal base." Kasturi, the musk, is in the navel of the musk deer, "Kasturi kundal base, mrug dhoom de man mai. Jo jo Ram hai, duniya dekhat naahi." The problem is that you keep looking for purpose in the world, when the purpose is within you, the Guru is within you.

I am reminded of a story that I heard some days ago, about a fire in a jungle. Every animal in the jungle ran out, including the king of the jungle, the lion. As the lion was running out, he saw a humming-bird, and the humming-bird was running towards the fire. The lion asked the humming-bird, "You foolish being, there is a fire there, why are you going towards the fire, when you should be going away from the jungle?" The humming-bird replied, "I have eight drops of water in my beak, I think I can do something to put off the fire and to save the jungle." It is these small purposes, small steps, small initiatives that are going to be important in your lives. Clarity of purpose, clarity of values, are extremely important. It is sometimes said that in the corporate world, only the mean guys win. I can tell you in all my experience, nice guys also win. And I think it is important that you keep the clarity of who you are and what you want to do.

You are all here on the threshold. Some of you have worked; the people who have got their MBAs are those who have already got work experience. But many of you are those who are going to search for your careers. Don't go for a career because your neighbor has done it. Don't go because that's the most fashionable thing to do. Go because you have a purpose, you have a calling, and you have a contribution to make to that role. Only that will satisfy

your life. You have but one life to live and if you regret, at my age it is too late. “Ab pachhtaye ho toh kya, jab chidiya chug gayi khet.” There is no point regretting later, that this is what I would have liked to be. Be that, and be that dream, what you are today.

The second ‘Principle of life’ is competence. You climb only when you excel in what you do now. I think it is important to understand that in the corporate world or entrepreneurial world, you have to demonstrate your competence before you grow.

I know that you are in the social media age; you are in the instant age. I am from a different age. I am from an age when things were slower, things were gentler and things were more purposeful. You are from an age where instant gratification is a part of your journey, where the ‘Likes’ on Facebook are more important than the ‘dislikes’ face-to-face. But competence, and building on competence is what will get you to wherever you need to go. Again, Sant Kabir said this beautifully. He said, “Jaati na poochho sadhu ki, pooch lijiye gyan. Mol karo talvar ka, pade rahen do myan.” Forget the scabbard, when it is the sword you have to talk about. In your own lives, make competence the centre of your being.

Learn, skill yourself, be better at the job today than you were yesterday. Incrementalism is not a bad thing. Nobody becomes a genius overnight. Compete, but compete with yourself, because that’s the only way you can seek valorisation of your capabilities and of your efforts in your own life.

The third ‘Principle of life’ is credibility, as sure as the sunrise, as clear as a pond. No nasty surprises. Today you are all getting out of one of the finest institutions in the country. Some of you have been given medals, some have been given certificates, some have been given honours, but the fact of the matter is that this is only one part of the story. Great degrees, great CGPAs are starting points, but great endings depend on credibility.

Credibility is built action by action, day by day, week by week, month and year by year. When you enter a room, somebody says this person is credible. When there is a crisis, nobody asks you for your degrees, nobody asks you whether you were a 4.5 or 5 on 5. All that they are looking for is, is this person credible? So, build your credibility. Choose what your personality type is, but be consistent for God’s sake. If you are not consistent, you become like an unsound, unmitigated disaster of a brand. A brand is like a human being. You have a positioning. You all know it in marketing, one on one. But the fact of the matter is, if that is not consistent over a period of time you can lead to a lot of trouble.

The fourth ‘Principle of life’ is probably something I have experienced, and is found the least in leadership or in any form of organisation, but probably is the most important when organisations are led and progress through their lives. And that is the fourth c, of courage. Courage is the quiet voice in your head that says there is a better way of doing something. Courage is not telling your boss that you are a fool, whoever promoted you and in fact I

think I know better than you. That is not called courage. That is called a career limiting move. And that is not something that I would actively encourage to practice, if you want to make a corporate career. Courage is the capability to say politely and yet firmly that there is a different path that we can follow, there is a different boat that we can ride, there is a different tree that we can climb, in order to ensure that we resolve the issue that is at hand.

Courage is what people seek in their colleagues when they go through difficult times. The one person that I seek the most, today as the leader of an organisation, is a courageous man or woman who is capable of telling me, "Mr. Narayanan, these few things could be done better." In my life I have come across three kinds of people that you'll come across. The first kind are those who come into meetings, they drink the tea, eat the biscuits and walk away. They are the most harmless people, "kuch na karo, kuch na suno, kuch kam hua nahi hai". But they are the most harmless fellows. The second are what you need to have in your teams, the naysayers, "hove na, chal ve na, dita hove."

These are the people who will keep telling you that it is not possible. If you are an incurable optimist, it's good to have some of these people around, because they will then straighten the path as far as the result is concerned. The third are the most dangerous, and they are the ones sadly in the majority. These are called the 'jingoistic'. These are the ones who rise up to the leader and say, "Sir, the sun is rising in the east because of you, and it will set in the west because of you. Aap ke bina koi nahi, aap ke bina duniya nahi." And if you are a leader who looks to your ego, you will say, "I am the greatest man on earth." And when there is a fire these will be the first people to run away from you. So choose what you want to, but choose the path of courage, my young friends, because that is something that will not forsake both you and your conscience, because ultimately, you have to run with your conscience.

The fifth 'Principle of life' is concentration. I know you are all multitaskers. I am told the millennial generation can eat, drink, Whatsapp, watch a video, write an email and study at the same time. Unfortunately, life is not very kind to the so-called multi-taskers, because if you try to do 25 things at the same time, you are not capable of doing any one of them excellently. So I give you, contrary to what you might think, is the experience of 35 years of being in the trenches – concentration. Focus on one thing single-mindedly and see it through. If you concentrate, you learn, you focus, you pick up the right things, you pick up the right nuances and you are able to make yourself an excellent human being apart from being an excellent professional.

The sixth 'Principle of life' is creativity. All of us think that the only jobs that are creative are the jobs at the top. We believe that being a CEO is the most creative, or being a Director is the most creative, or any designation you choose at the apex is the most creative. But all of us, including me, have started from the bottom. I started my life as a salesman, selling Dalda Vanaspati in Jodhpur. You would think what is so creative about that job? I still found

ways of making that job creative, cleaning the tins better, talking to the retailer better, shelving things better, conducting better activities, better trade promotions, and that was the way in which I made my job creative. Creativity is like a muscle – if you don't use it, you lose it.

Unless you make the most mundane jobs creative and contribute your personal excellence to it, you will never go on to greater responsibilities. All of us in our careers will have interesting jobs, boring jobs, taxing jobs and very easy jobs. That's the way life moves, that's the way the cycle moves. But if you keep yourself creative, you can have something that can be extremely good for you, and that can make you in fact a valuable partner to everyone who is working around you.

The seventh 'Principle of life' is a big one, it's called constraints. We always believe that 80% of all obstacles to success come from constraints. But constraints, as Dr. Banerjee rightly said, is how you position yourself vis-à-vis a problem or an issue.

It is important here for me to highlight the fact that with all my experience I have found a distinct difference between men and women when it comes to constraints. And I don't say this with any negative sense. Men are 100% confident, 50% prepared, but women are 100% prepared but 50% confident. Let yourself go, you have the best in you. Don't allow constraints to make you into something else, because years on, you will have no time to regret. You cannot turn around and say, "Look, I'm sorry but I looked at this as a constraint. That constraint would have come and gone and the opportunity would have also gone.

Kabir said this beautifully, he said, "Jin dom dam tin paiyan, gehre paani peth, main budi dooban dari, rahi kinare baithi." If you are going to sit by the sea-shore waiting for the pearls to fall on your lap, my young friends, it's not going to happen. You have to seize the moment, you have to make mistakes, you have to own up to failures. All careers are not about successes, I've had many failures. I've had many falls, but the important thing in life is not that you fall; the important thing in life is that you dust yourself and stand again. That is the only lesson that is worth taking as far as failure is concerned.

The eight 'Principle of life' is compassion. It has always been believed that to be a leader you have to be tough, you have to be Type A. The guys who look at you straight in the eye and keep talking about your KPIs and don't ask you about your family, about the child who is sick or about the mother who has got a problem, but only talk about the business.

In my own humble submission, compassion is like a coconut – tough on issues but with a heart. And I think it is important that compassion also goes with humility. Compassion is what Kabir once said, "Vruksh kabuni phal bakae, nadi se niche neer, parmarath ke karane sadhun dhara sharir." The role of leadership is to follow and not to lead. When a shepherd guides his flock, he stands behind the flock, he doesn't stand in front of the flock. Why is

that? Because he has provided the right guidance to the flock to go in the direction in which it should.

And I think compassion is one of the key hallmarks of leadership and human beings. In fact, the Dalai Lama has once said that it is probably the most understood but the least practised emotion of mankind, that we don't demonstrate compassion for each other. But compassion and ego is what I put together. And ego again, was said beautifully by Sant Kabir, "Jab main tha tab Hari nahi, ab Hari hai, main nahi. Sab gaya mit gaya, jab Deepak dekhe mari." All the "andhera" in your life goes away when you look at your true self. Remember, the position, the success that you have in life is but transitory.

There is a nice story told to me once, of a retired Chairman of a bank going to a branch of a bank. The teller looked at him and said, "Sir, you look familiar, were you not the Chairman of the bank?" He said, "Yes, I was the Chairman of the bank." She looked at him and she asked, "How is life different, Sir, from when you were the Chairman, and now?" He said, "Young lady, I played a game of chess. I was the King, I could easily dismiss the rook. But when the game is over, the King and the rook are in the same box." That is the reality of what you are seeking. Everything that you seek must therefore have an element of compassion, have an element of humility, have less of that ego, because the more ego you have, the more calamities you face, the more pain you cause yourself.

The ninth 'Principle of life' is continuous learning. SP Jain has given you fantastic degrees and your parents have supported you on this journey. They have made their sacrifices. The teachers and professors here, have given you the very best of education. But this is not the end of the journey for you. Continuous learning is what human beings are meant to be. Your texts of today are going to be outdated in the next five years, or maybe in the next two or three years, or in the next ten years. But the fact of the matter is continuous learning is an important characteristic of all human beings. There are no bounds to gaining knowledge. Once again it is your ego that permits you from not getting it. As you become more senior, as your visiting card becomes bigger, your designations become bigger, your ego also becomes bigger. So when you ask a question, you think that people think that you are stupid. They don't. As long as you don't think of yourself as being stupid, ask that question and seek knowledge continuously as you go along.

The tenth 'Principle of life' is a controversial c, because you have been programming yourself for continuous success, continuous acceleration, both in academics and in your relationships and in your bank balance and in everything. I am giving you a contrarian philosophy which might appeal to some of you. The last c is contentment. Contentment and seeking happiness is what your journey is going to be all about. What is it that makes you happy and therefore not envy the success of others? We always tend to do it. Unfortunately, our rat race encourages that to the hilt. It tells people that if somebody is

getting an A+ and if somebody is getting an A, then you should be striving for that A+ somehow by hook or by crook.

It means that if somebody has five houses and somebody has just one accommodation it means that the person with five houses is far more successful as compared to the person with one house. The fact of the matter is, my friends, the journey that is being followed by each one is different. You don't know the pain points, you don't know the trials and tribulations that the other person is going through. And therefore, don't allow this envy to come into you. Again, Kabir said this beautifully, "Bura jo dekhan main chala, bura na milya koi, jo dil khoja apna, mujsa bura na koi." The problem is if you seek happiness by correcting yourselves you will become a better human being, a humbler human being, an accessible human being, a more loving human being. And life is about enjoying the moments of life.

Life is not about accumulating a lot of things and not being able to enjoy them in your lifetime. Life is not about creating anxieties and envies. When we are envious, we think that someone has got a promotion and I have not got a promotion, welcome to that club. You will get early heart attacks, you will get ulcers, and you will probably die much too soon. Is that a life that you want to lead, or would you like a life of contentment?

In the end, we talked about your teachers, and I believe they are the ones who have given you the knowledge to propel your future. Long after you have left this institution, if there is one lasting memory of the institution, it will always be your teachers. For me it is always the teachers that I have had who are my most lasting memories, and not anything else that I might have done or achieved.

And I think that as an ode to all the teachers here, I would like to again quote from Sant Kabir. He said, "Guru Gobind dono khade, ka ko lagu pay?" Bhagwan aur Guru dono khade hai, kin ke paer padu. "Balihari guru aapne, Govind diyo bataye." The one who has shown you the path to your excellence, your livelihood and to you being a great human being is the teacher and therefore fall at the feet and respect that teacher. So, my young friends, you are at the cusp of a very successful career ahead. You will make that difference to mankind the way you want to seek it. If you do so with purpose, values, compassion, with a caring mindset towards everyone who is around you, you will not only be successful but also very happy.

So once again, as an elder I can only extend to you my very best wishes and blessings for a fabulous career ahead and to enjoy all that you do. It is a fantastic journey, enjoy it while it lasts. Thank you very much for your time.