

Convocation Address by Shri Gopalkrishna Gandhi

Excerpts

Delivering the Convocation Address as the Chief Guest at the 29th Annual Convocation Ceremony, NLSIU, Shri Gopalkrishna Gandhi shared some of his thoughts relevant to the study, teaching and practice of law. Lauding the efforts of the fraternity and their commitment to conducting activities during the pandemic, he said, "Much has been done by the courts of law, judges and lawyers in adapting to new technologies, without fumbling and causing reduction in output"

Recollecting the time when he was invited to an event by the Honourable Madras High Court, as a person with no formal background in legal education and practice, he chose to speak about the imperative aspect of 'Respect for the Law'.

He elucidated his position, by drawing a comparison to his affinity and appreciation for music. "I don't have any knowledge of the subject. But I have great respect and appreciation for it," he said. His emotions and affinity are similar in the case of law. "Best explained by the term 'Bandhutva' or bonding... with legal situations, which are none other than human situations; with judges, magistrates and lawyers... when I say respect, it is the respect for certain values, which they embody."

"Not to say that these judges, magistrates and lawyers are flawless. How can they be?... But their flaws only make them human. To err is human, he said. Describing his individual views on the predicament, he said, "When does one shed one's limitations? When one in a certain environment. When you enter a place of worship, you leave your footwear out. And try to feel humble, if not always successfully, before the great mystery of creation," he said. The Honourable Court in one such place, where individuals speak, bearing humility and a larger cause in mind, he added.

Generations of wisdom, tested against human experience are codified as laws. When practitioners of law damn the mantle, they become bigger than themselves, as they contribute to a cause greater than themselves, he opined.. "The responsibility now rests on the shoulders of students of law. Respect is not a result of human intelligence. It is an emotion. It is instinctive," he said.

He drew attention to the fact that in the human interaction of it all, trust plays an integral role. "The Tamil word for it - "nambikkai" or the Sanskrit word for it "vishwasam", which translates to trust... They are words that carry significant weight, and are opposite to the words that symbolize betrayal or falsehood."

“It is very difficult to define the ‘truth’, but not very difficult to define that which is not true, “ he said, adding that the truth is much vaster than fact. “Facts are very important. They are sacred. But truth is above facts, and it is that truth that you must serve, with diligence and courage.”

“Finding the pulse of ‘nyaaya’ is your task, graduating students. If you face it with respect, you will go miles,” he said.

Narration of an incident from the life of his grandfather Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi

When he arrived in South Africa in 1893, and went to a Durban court, just to be seated and watch the proceedings, the Magistrate looked hard at him. M K Gandhi was wearing a turban, and the magistrate said to him that he cannot be wearing one. To this, Gandhi replied that he could not be asked to remove my turban and left.

In response, he wrote to the editor of the publication that had commented on this incident, that he didn’t mean any disrespect to the court, and that he just felt his self-respect had been hurt. Because that was part of his identity.

But something else happened a little later. Another turban story of MK Gandhi, which is much less known. When he enrolled as an attorney in South Africa, he again went wearing his turban. After the initial formalities, once again, the presiding judge asked M K Gandhi to remove his turban. This time he removed his turban, and followed it with an explanation - Now, upon enrolling myself, I have a responsibility towards the court, its rules and procedures. And I must observe those responsibilities as an officer of the court. Earlier, I was here in my personal capacity.

Concluding the story, he said “Respect is outward, as much as it is inner.”