

4th Convocation Address by  
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at the LNM Institute of Information Technology

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JAIPUR, NOV 13, 2010

Let me begin by warmly congratulating all of you for your accomplishments. But then, nothing less was expected from you, from the very first day you went to school many years back! That morning, your tiny fingers were held by your parents as they stood in front of the kindergarten classroom and then they let go. You went inside the classroom; their eyes moistened, they prayed for you and, even as you did not know that one day you would be here, they knew it.

For all of you here today, it is rightly a time to rejoice in your accomplishment. As you rejoice, do take a moment to think of your parents and pray for them.

They gave you life. Your parents believed in you. So, you are here.

But it was the teacher who actually shaped your intellect over the last two decades of growing up, of learning, of testing the premises and pushing their limits. Today, please also take a moment to appreciate a teacher whose name you no longer remember but whose face is still in the mirror of the mind somewhere beneath a dusty layer. I have mine; I am sure you have yours.

As you enter your new world, you stand on what I want to call a platform; it was built by these two sets of people. One created your body and mind; the other gave you the essential knowledge and the ways you may seek more. Your platform today consists almost entirely of these two things. In its current form, the platform is largely incomplete. For you to make an impact, you will have to build on that platform. For instance, over the next few decades, you will have to build years of work experience on what you have today. Then a day will come when your platform will be defined not just by your own knowledge and experience but by that of your personal and professional network. A certain day will also come when you would realise that a critical component of your platform is not just the network but also your personal net-worth. You will have to save some to create the proverbial nest-egg or the ability to start your own venture. Your net-worth can sometimes determine your risk-taking capacity.

You will also need to build your net-worth because you may want to help others.

For, didn't Mother Teresa say, "You must have before you can give"?

Beyond your body, mind, academic accomplishments, your work experience, network and net-worth, one day you would also figure out that in life the structural strength of your platform critically depends on your personal relationship with your spouse and your children. Their love will be the eventual pillar on which the rest of the platform will rest.

## YOUR PLATFORM

- Your Body
- The Academic Qualifications
- Your Work Experience
- Your Professional & Personal Network
- Your Net-Worth
- Your Family

So, your platform is truly a critical part of your existence. But there is something beyond it as well.

It is your purpose.

As we start our life and, sometimes, well into it, many of us get so preoccupied with building the platform, that we forget that it is not what makes us complete. A platform, as the meaning of the word suggests, is just a springboard. It is a surface on which you stand to go someplace. Your platform, like a railway platform, is a place from where you need to go someplace. That someplace will be determined by your purpose.

Your platform is not your purpose.

Today's conversation is on your life ahead, on the Platform and the Purpose. Let me guide you deeper into the subject.



I told you that a platform is a springboard; it is a space from where you need to go someplace else. Your purpose, on the other hand, determines how far that journey will be, for whom it is undertaken and how meaningful it is. There is another way you could look at purpose: **It is our purpose that determines the impact we make over time.**

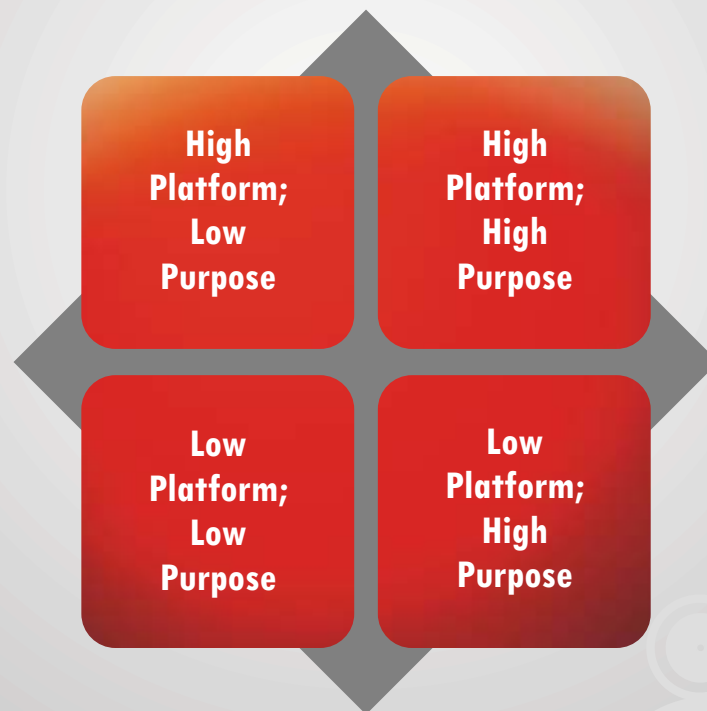
Today, you are ready to enter your work life. Over the next four decades or so, you will work, earn, add value, and change your own world and that of others. In the course of it all, you will make a certain impact. No two graduating students will make an identical impact. Both the amount of impact you make and the extent of time over which you make it will vary from individual to individual.

In the end, you will find that life is like a two-by-two matrix in which your existence will be defined by the x coordinate that represents your platform and the y coordinate that represents your purpose. Between these two, there are four quadrants. All of you will find yourself predominantly placed in one of these four in your lives.

There will be some of you whose existence will be called “low platform and low purpose.” There will also be some who would fit into “high platform and a low purpose.” There are some who will live a life best described as “low platform and high purpose.” Only a very few amongst you will go on to lead a life that will be described as “high platform and high purpose.”

All the four options are available in equal measure as you start your life but, as life progresses, you will tend to settle into one or the other. Unlike the first twenty years of life when your parents and teachers could stevedore you into making the right choices, from now on, you will make the choices and you will also have to live the consequences of the choices you make.

Today, I want to describe to you the characteristics of people in the four quadrants, their driving force and the impact they make in the world.



### **Low Platform & Low Purpose**

This one is easy to relate to. Remember the good-natured boy who studied in your eighth standard class, the one who sat alongside you or in the bench behind? He perhaps decided to join a nearby college even as you were fiercely competitive and made your engineering choices; he picked up an ordinary graduate qualification along the way and has plans to settle down in the family business. Or he is just looking for a job in some local organization where he will stay on for the rest of his life. He will raise a small family, build a reasonable dwelling and remain in relative anonymity. In the years ahead, he will take care of his immediate needs; he will not venture beyond the familiar and make no claims to changing the world.

Quite similarly, some of you here may also settle into a comparable life even as you work in a software services company. You could be content with the on-the-job training, the allocated work, the predictable good salary, the postings and assignments that will come along the way. You will stay close to the median and after a few decades of work, of raising a family, simply fade into oblivion. It would be a low platform and low purpose life.

People who stay here are the vast majority that make the world a predictable, often dependable place to live in. They do not have overly positive or negative influence on life. It is an okay quadrant to be in as long as you are comfortable with its consequences and make no false comparison with others. Chances are, you will live a life of contentment and while you will not leave a mark behind, you will also not make things difficult for people around you.

The redeeming aspect of being low platform and low purpose is that people in this quadrant do not consume resources disproportionate to what impact they make; they take from life what is minimally needed; they are not overly materialistic and do not amass wealth and fortune at other people's cost. They have a lower carbon footprint in every sense. These are people who are driven by the sheer need to exist.

Existence is the driver of their being.

## High Platform and Low Purpose

Then there are some people who live in the high platform and low purpose quadrant.

This is usually a highly qualified, highly competent set of people who, however, lead a self-serving life; they are predominantly concerned with what others have that they do not have. They use their education, experience and their contacts to see how best to get ahead in life. Both material acquisition and organizational power are very critical to them as is social recognition. To them, platform is everything. They are very unlikely to risk it because it largely defines their existence. These are people who are more likely to pursue the predictable.

Take the many people you know in the generation before you to get a sense.

As I said, they are bright and intelligent; they have a life-script quite ready even as they are entering work life. That life-script consists of, first landing a good job, then a masters degree or an MBA at a brand-name school after a couple of years, then an assignment in the US or Europe where the standard of living is sanitized. These folks plan to get a green card or its equivalent at the earliest and change it to citizenship of the host country. They marry equally covetable, equally qualified spouses and build a high net-worth life from the very start. They are the first to buy a good car and a better house.

After a few years of living overseas, some will actually return to India on an expatriate salary, take the membership of the best clubs, and send their children to international schools so that they become global citizens before they are 16. They will live in gated communities where a retinue of drivers, cooks, and ayahs will ensure that they remain functional.

These people are often in positions of visible organizational leadership and they are seldom aware that they are leading a life of high platform and low purpose. They genuinely believe that they are hugely beneficial to life and living. They do not think there could be anything more significant than personal ambition. Aggressive pursuit of their personal goals determines their choice of work; their employer usually is a 'multi-national company' as that term gets instant social recognition in India.

These are people best suited to handle a large company assignment as against starting something on their own; they are whom we could call 'path dependent' as against those who are 'path creators.'

People in this quadrant believe that their biggest contribution to the nation and the society is their own life. For the most part, they think they are indispensable to their employers. But then, they are also the easiest to replace because for everyone that goes out of the scene, there is a long waiting list to get into their shoes, thanks to the burgeoning middle-class of India that produces highly qualified and highly ambitious individuals.

The driver of their existence is consumption.



## Low Platform and High Purpose

In the lower extreme quadrant there will be a handful who will decide somewhat early on in life that the rat race of the high platform, low purpose life is not what they are cut out for.

If you are slotted here, you could be a potential start-up entrepreneur. You might also be an idealistic individual who wants to work for a social cause to make a difference to the society. You do not believe that institutions like the government and the established private sector have the capacity or the sensitivity to make a difference. You decide, not out of compulsion but out of choice, that you must make a direct personal impact, however small, to a cause dear to you.

There are some real and inherent challenges in being in this quadrant beyond the fact that it entails personal hardship and a minimalist lifestyle. Though the entrepreneurial idea may be enticing or the cause may be very noble, working outside an established organizational framework often makes it difficult to succeed.

People in this quadrant need to get their spirit up every morning against all external odds and sustain their souls with no reward or recognition mechanism that is so readily available to those in the high platform, low purpose quadrant. It is often a lonely trek without an early validation that your work is making any tangible difference. That said, those who opt to be in this quadrant do what they do because of who they are. They do not seek instant gratification; they are patient with the act of enterprise building or the change making process they have undertaken. However, being low platform, their work usually impacts only a few and does not by itself become scalable.

There are things in the world that require scale.

Some people in this quadrant, one day, actually may make it to the one above: the quadrant of high platform and high purpose.

The driving force behind people who are low platform and high purpose is path making. Sometimes it is altruistic; sometimes it is born out of a desire to simply own one's destiny.

## High Platform and High Purpose

Many of you graduating today are already on a high platform by virtue of your privileged upbringing. For those who did not come from an elevated socio-economic background, the credential of LNMIIT would provide you with what you missed. Thus every graduating student here actually stands on a high platform compared to millions of other people. The platform of LNMIIT itself guarantees that you will get preferred jobs, opportunity for research or higher education. Your current achievement will, at least temporarily, spiral you into an almost upward lift in life.

That said, whether or not you will be able to retain and build on the high platform will actually depend on many factors and certainly is not a matter of lifelong entitlement. Many people make wrong career choices; sometimes people get lazy. Life is a snakes and ladders game. And then there are also the unpredictable circumstances that may rob you of your platform or slide you down to a lower one.

But assuming that life deals you a reasonable hand, the larger question is whether or not you will build high purpose on the high platform that has been provided to you. When you embrace a high purpose and stage it from a high platform, it makes the highest difference to the world.

This is the quadrant of Mahatma Gandhi and Mother Teresa. This is also the quadrant of people like Steve Jobs, Bill Gates, Warren Buffet and, closer to home, Dr. Manmohan Singh, Ratan Tata, Dr. Govindappa Venkataswamy and Narayana Murthy.

I would like tell you a few things about being in this league. Sometimes, people here may actually start in the immediate lower quadrant of low platform and high purpose.

Bill Gates started life designing a BASIC language interpreter for an obscure machine called the Altair. Steve Jobs was a geeky youngster who wanted to build a personal computer with great calligraphy. Dr. Manmohan Singh was an economist whose younger days were spent as a regulator with the Reserve Bank of India. Dr. Govindappa Venkataswamy was just another ophthalmologist. Narayana Murthy started Infosys with a loan of Rs. 10,000 from his wife Sudha.

Somewhere along their respective journeys, these individuals received their calling, as we all do at some stage or the other. The difference is, when the call actually comes, most of us have suspended hearing. Among other things, obsessive love for your platform invariably creates deafness. So, when the call actually comes, make sure, you pick up the instrument. The trick is to recognize the call and to embrace the cause that it conveys.

Destiny does not leave you a voicemail message.

Once you embrace the cause, you must cease loving your platform even as you recognize its power, because from now on you have to externalize its benefits and look at yourself as its lifelong custodian and not the owner.

Ratan Tata sees the Tata Empire as a platform to make a difference to the world; it is not something that he owns for his personal glory and greatness. People like him develop what we call the power of vision. Then on, they must do three things right: they must create a vision community to carry people along and make them feel it is a shared vision. Then they must give their entire life to that one cause it entails and understand that in the top right hand quadrant, there is the least scope for instant gratification. Finally, they must remain steadfast even in the wake of great personal sacrifices and they must not yield to distractions. They do not let adulation come in the way of their work; nor do they fight battles that take them away from the main purpose. Remember, even in the height of the Nano controversy, Ratan Tata did not engage in blame game. He quietly retraced and relocated his plant from Nandigram to Sanand so that the first Nano could be delivered on the promised date.

For people in the high platform high, purpose quadrant, the size of vision is larger than life; this is where the ability to build scale kicks in. Lofty as it may sound, this quadrant often tests the aspirant with highly dangerous situations usually involving a momentary temptation and that has no margin of error. One mistake and you drop into the left or the bottom quadrants. History has a special graveyard for high achievers who lose their balance when they yield to the allure; from that point on, their fall from the pedestal is often rapid and irreversible.

The driving force of people in the high platform, high purpose quadrant is the desire to leave a legacy and create memorability. The urge to leave a legacy and build memorability is not personal, it is driven by an institutional dream.

My dear friends, today and everyday of your being, you would need to ask yourself, where are you among the four quadrants of life? While others may sometimes look at you and wonder, it is only you who would know the true answer.

Before I conclude, I want you to know that there is nothing right or wrong about being in any of the four quadrants.

The more important thing is not to be placed in one without knowing it. There is a thin line that separates ignorance from self-deception.

As you move out of the hallowed portals of this great institution, continue to strengthen your platform. But know that the platform is only meant to catch a train; it is not a place to live on.

Education and experience give us the power to make informed choices and we need to choose where we want to be and at the same time, understand the consequences of the choices we make.

While life is about making choices and not succumbing to inevitability, it constantly tests our resolve and sometimes rotates us from one quadrant to another to see what conviction we carry in the fulfilment of our purpose.



The late Dr. Govindappa Venkataswamy was a trained gynaecologist but a rare form of arthritis deformed his fingers. Undaunted, he retrained himself to become an ophthalmologist and he even modified surgical instruments so that he could operate upon his patients. After lifelong work, when the government gave him retirement, instead of settling down to enjoy his last days, he started Aravind Eye Hospital that has today become a world-renowned institution providing hope, vision and a new life to millions of people. Dr. Venkataswamy's platform was destroyed but his purpose rebuilt it, first at a low scale, a low platform as we could say, of just a ten-bed hospital. Today, the same Aravind Eye Hospital has saved 2.4 million people from needless blindness. 70% of people operated upon by this great institution do not have to pay for the procedure.

Like that great soul, sometimes you will fall from where you are; it may be just that life is testing you for your worthiness for something even greater than what you had ever imagined to be possible.

In life's difficult moments, do not lose heart. When fire or flood ravages your garden, like the humble gardener, gently go back to your work.

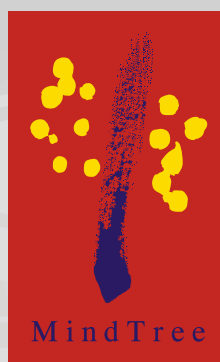
Ladies and gentlemen, thank you once again for the honour of delivering the 4th Convocation Address of the LN Mittal IIT, Jaipur. I pray to the Almighty to help bring out the very best in you, to make you feel that this one life on the planet has been truly your life, the way **you** wanted it.

Go, Kiss the World.





Subroto Bagchi co-founded MindTree Limited where he works as Gardener and Vice Chairman. His books, The High Performance Entrepreneur, Go Kiss the World and The Professional are business best sellers.



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