**Transcription of the speech by Mr. Shashi Tharur during the 131st Annual Prize Giving of The Daly College on 7th December 2013**

President, Board of Governors, Principal, parents, teachers, students, friends, I hope that covers everybody, delighted to be here on the Hundred and thirty first anniversary of the Daly College. Though Principal Sumer Singh tells me you are even older than that, and your fore- runner school was established in 1870. I’m sorry, first of all, to have been a bit late arriving; I missed the cultural programme perhaps, due to no fault of my own. Apparently you are fogged in Indore every morning in December, or so the air traffic controller insists. So we sat in Delhi for an hour before we could take off and circled above you for 45 minutes before we could land! My apologies in not having seen the young talents that have been recognized by the principal, I’m sure I’ve missed some very- very interesting performances. I was very impressed with what little I was able to see of your campus in the limited time I had, it certainly seems to be attractive, well laid out, there are new constructions coming up all the time and, and of course listening to the principal’s extensive and impressive report; to see all the achievements of the young Dalians in sports, in academics, in various kinds of extracurricular activities… all of this is indeed very impressive. I’m struck by the internationalism that the school has been imbued with, already, with the student exchange programmes. I think 19 of your students going elsewhere and others coming here. In fact, when the principal mentioned the word globalization, it suddenly made me realize how widespread this is and how common place is this idea of globalization that has infected all of us. Our most ordinary headlines these days reek of globalization. I mean just think for example this is after all a school founded once for royalty - About those sad headlines a few years ago lamenting the tenth anniversary of the tragic death of Princes Diana. What has that got to do with globalization you might ask? For think of it this way – an English princess with a Welsh title, leaves a French hotel with an Egyptian companion, who is supplanted a Pakistani. She gets into a German car with a Dutch Engine, is driven by a Belgian chauffeur full of Scottish whisky, they are then chased by Italian paparazzi on Japanese motorcycles into a Swiss built tunnel where they crash; a rescue is briefly attempted by an American Doctor using Brazilian medicines and this whole story is told to you in Indore by an Indian Member of Parliament from Thiruvananthapuram – that’s globalization.

So, we are living in this world in which we all are much more knit together and I think it is extremely important that Daly College has connected its children to the outside world just as you have of course connected your school through your alumni to remarkable achievements in National life. I’m here really at the insistence and invitation and help of Shri Digvijaya Singh, your Patron, Governor and old boy, who remains a very strong and passionate advocate of the school and its interest in the National level and is of course a former chief minister - a very distinguished one of the state and a general secretary of the party to which I belong and I just am very pleased that someone like that is from here and that he too by inviting me to address the G20 group that assembled in Delhi underscored the importance of these international connections that Daly College seems to value. You are only one of two Indian members of the G20 group and you are of course hosting the prestigious round square conference and all of this seems to me to suggest that you are heading in the right direction.

The old motto of the school Gyanmev Shakti – knowledge alone is power – is particularly striking because power is perhaps the most under used of assets. People acquire power as an end in itself without quite realizing what can be done with it. And if in this school you are taught through knowledge to acquire the power to excel then you know how much you can do with that power – the power above all it seems to me to rise to the occasion, to set new bench marks, to dream and to realize those dreams; to question and to seek answers; to learn and sometimes to unlearn the wrong things and above all the power to change lives, the power to bring about change in the lives of those around you in the society around us.

That’s why I was so impressed and pleased to see the references in the Principal’s report to the social work being done by your students… The eight girls toilets …and I was please that the parents applauded when that was done because having seen for myself the appalling condition of the toilets in many government schools in our country and sometimes the absence of toilets in girls’ schools. It seems a silly thing to focus on in the educational side and yet it is fundamental; because it is one of the most important factors that have led to the higher dropout rate of girls from government schools. When there aren’t toilets sometimes they don’t come past a certain age when they need to change, they can’t help it. If there isn’t a toilet they’ll go home and if home isn’t nearby they won’t come back. And this sort of phenomenon can easily be arrested by the simple construction of a toilet. And I’m glad you are coming up with eight toilets in schools for girls and I hope you and your successor Dalians will continue to keep that good work going.

Keeping girls in school is a very important objective for our nation. In fact when I was at the UN I used to find it very difficult to answer the question that well meaning audiences would ask me- “what’s the one thing we can do to change the world for the better?” and I would get very bureaucratic and talk about how one thing isn’t enough ; there are so many fronts we have to fight on at the same time – abolishing poverty, dealing with illiteracy, battling disease and so on and suddenly I realized I don’t need to do that. There is one simple answer that actually is proven to make a difference in the world and that is a two word mantra ‘EDUCATE GIRLS’. If we can educate girls we can transform the world. Gandhiji, as you know, had the famous insight that if you educate a boy you are doing a good thing but you are educating an individual. If you educate a girl you are actually educating a family, you are transforming a community and empowering society. And this is something which numerous studies have demonstrated. I won’t bore you with in the limited time we have but it seems to me vital that what Dalians are doing to help keep girls in school and get them out of the school system, equipped and ready to take on the opportunities that our country has to offer – this is extremely important.

I listened attentively to the Principal’s report and his comments about the RTE act. It was a done deal when I came into the ministry – I take no ownership for it but at the same time it is a very important act. Its intentions are entirely honourable. Ours is a country where when the British left us they left us with 16% literacy. In fact we are talking about girls only 8.9% percent of Indian women could read and write in 1947. We had a huge challenge of just bringing people up into the basic literacy as well as the necessary education to take advantage of the opportunities of the modern world. For this we needed to do a variety of things and the Right to Education Act embedding in the constitution the right for every Indian child to have an education is a fundamental part of our attempts to overcome this. I know that there have for people like your Principal and others who associate themselves with him….. They have some real concerns and I believe these concerns must be addressed. And I would certainly say that in the limited time available to us in the life time of this parliament that this government would very much be receptive to listening to how best we can tackle the kinds of challenges that Principal Sumer Singh mentioned in his speech today.

I know that he will be open to the charge as so many others are in Public Schools particularly schools with a princely origin - the charge of elitism. I never went to any of these institutions myself but I did go to college at St. Stephens which has the same charge frequently flung at it. And, the truth is, that I’ve often answered that there is absolutely no harm in elitism if it’s an elitism of merit. I’m told that your school has been opened to students of all backgrounds since the 1940s so it is no longer elitism of birth or of exclusion and that to my mind is the ultimate answer.

Yes education in a place like Daly College is a privilege. But it’s a privilege clearly that has to be earned. You have to be good enough to do well here, to graduate with one of those medals and cups and certificates that I had the pleasure of handing out a little earlier. So I urge all the youngsters here particularly the ones who are contemplating the ending of their school career in the imminent future, to strive for that elitism of excellence which is extremely important in our country. You know that too many of our parents here are aware of the fact that a lot of the emphasis on school education in our country certainly in my generation and before and perhaps for many of those in the hall today has been an emphasis on examinations, on cramming, on shoving facts down the throats of the kids, filling their heads with facts and figures from text books and class room lectures which they’re then meant to regurgitate on the examination paper. That is certainly not the right way to go about it. It wasn’t fifty years ago and it’s certainly not the right thing to do thing in the 21st century because that gives you all well filled mind but today in the internet era you don’t need a well filled mind you’ve got Google. You can find any fact you want with two clicks of the mouse. What you need is a well formed mind not a well filled one and a well formed mind is one that is able to respond to unfamiliar ideas that is able to answer or attempt to understand an answer, questions and challenges that weren’t posed in last year’s examination. Because a big examination called life tends to ask you questions for which you can’t necessarily prepare. But a well formed mind is the one that deals with unfamiliar things - is anchored in a certain knowledge of context, a certain sense of values, a sense one’s place in society and in the world and that mind ultimately will serve you much better in the real world than the mind that perhaps might win an examination result but might not serve you so well when you have to face life’s real challenges.

I don’t want any of the prize winners today to think I’m disparaging their accomplishments. Coming first in class is not a bad thing – I was inconveniently good at taking exams so I still value the collection of books and trophies we get for doing such things but it’s not enough. In fact, ultimately the hallmark of an educated mind is what is left behind in your head when you’ve forgotten everything that you studied for your examinations.

The other thing that I was pleased to do this morning on my way over here was to inaugurate the Sanghi Hobby Center. I was pleased to see the school giving importance to dance, to music, to art, to creativity. This is something we don’t do enough of in our day schools around the country. We don’t do generally in our educational system. And the reason we don’t do it as I said is our emphasis on examinations, which has the other effect of stifling the kinds of initiative that you increasingly need in the 21st Century world. Ours is a world that is increasingly a place for innovation not for regurgitation. Yes, if you Google the words ‘frugal innovation’ today your first twenty hits would all be Indian companies that have created cheaper more affordable mass produced products. We’ve got the Jugad business going, we’ve got the world’s cheapest insulin injections, we’ve got the world’s cheapest water filter, the world’s cheapest electrocardiogram, the world’s cheapest small car in the Tata Nano. All that’s wonderful, but these are inventions made somewhere else that we’ve modified and slimmed down. We need to come up with ideas of our own. We were the land that once invented the zero without which people couldn’t have counted properly. You see the Roman numerals how long it took to write a simple number. It was some Indian genius or school of mathematicians lost in antiquity who came up with the very idea of ‘shunyata’ …of nothingness converted to the numerical zero which transformed global mathematics. These kinds of complete original discoveries- We’ve had Sir C.V. Raman and the Raman Effect, we’ve had Satyendra Bose and Boson. We’ve had a few…. We’ve had a few a century ago but where are the young people of today doing those things? This need to think creatively, to innovate, to think out of the box is something we need to instill in children right at the school level. In fact out of the box thinking is something… people ask what do you mean by the box… the little box is the conventional thinking, the thinking that says do this because this is the way it is done. Do this because it’s always done this way. That is the thinking inside the box. Thinking out of the box is re -imagining things in the ways people haven’t thought of them necessarily before. I’m wearing an example of that myself right now. I wear glasses like our distinguished Principal, but I don’t actually need them 90% of the time because I don’t need them to read, I don’t need them to meet people, I don’t need them to see all of you in the front half of the room but I need them for distance, I need them when I’ve to drive or watch a movie or whatever. So because I don’t wear them most of the time, I put them away in a pocket, I bang into a wall, I break them, I leave them somewhere, forget about them, I put them on my lap when I’m sitting down I get up they fall down somebody steps on them. In the first three months of this year I lost or destroyed six pairs of glasses. So I was mentioning this to a friend and he said think out of the box and I said what do you mean? He said what’s a problem with your glasses? I said look glasses for a hundred and fifty years are made in one way, they join to the center and they hang over your ears. And since that’s uncomfortable when I don’t need to use them, I take them and I’ve got to put them somewhere. He said no actually re-imagine glasses in ways that don’t require this. I said look I’ve tried frameless glasses but they too our joined to the center and hang over your ears what’s the difference? He said try this and he came back to me with this. I, if I want to see the dim shadows there at the terrace or the back of the room I hang this around my neck and I click it together with a pair of magnets in the middle, I say hi and I unclick it again and here I am. I haven’t lost or broken a pair glasses in the last ten months. So it’s a simple idea but it’s how can we re imagine things that have been thought of only in one way for a very long time. This is the kind of thinking we need to do much more of in life and I encourage the young Dalians here to think for themselves, to not just ask the teacher why something is but ask them why not. And try and imagine things differently. May be the next big unexpected invention will come from an Indian of Daly College and it won’t be a zero.

I know on these occasions one is supposed to leave you some parting advice. I don’t know since you’ve all won so many prizes doing difficult things the first piece of advice I actually would give you is welcome difficult tasks and do them. Easy ones always come your way. Challenge yourself to do things that you don’t actually find easy. It’s actually much more satisfying to excel in something that you never thought you had a natural aptitude for. That means taking risks and you should particularly young people. I know your parents may not approve of me suggesting this but this is the right time in life to take risks. I think Gajendra who just won this distinguished alumnus medal is an example of somebody who left a very straight long term career in the army to go off and take risks in entrepreneurship and he’s come with results. And when you’re young and he says he’s not as young as he looks, but when you’re young you can particularly do that because that’s the time when you are not weighed down by other responsibilities – family and social. And you can actually take on for yourself the opportunity to back your guts, back your instincts and know that even if you fail you can stand up again. Don’t be afraid to fail. There isn’t one prominent successful person in the world who hasn’t known some setback somewhere. If he or she says that they’ve never known failure either they are lying or failure is just waiting for them around the corner.

In fact today the Principal rightly began with a moment of silence for that great son of South Africa, & citizen of the world Nelson Mandela whom we lost yesterday. I had the great privilege of meeting President Mandela three times and on two occasions alongside my then boss Kofi Anan, didn’t have much of a direct conversation with him but once we had a lunch together and I spoke to him for a couple of hours – was fascinating, instructive, he said lot of things - a remarkable outstanding human being. In fact one of the Indian connections that Mandela had, was the extent to which he was inspired not just by Mahatma Gandhi but by Jawaharlal Nehru. Gandhiji he admired earlier in his life but he found Gandhiji’s prescriptions difficult for him to implement, particularly after the violence of the South African State. The apartheid regime led him to go on and have to oppose it through violence himself. And he said, “You know I don’t want to be thought of as a saint, I’m a sinner.” He said, “Even if you define a saint as a sinner who goes on trying”, which is a lovely Mandela line. He said “I’m not a saint, don’t compare me to Gandhi”. But he said he was inspired by Jawaharlal Nehru and his most famous speech before his arrest in the early 60’s was a speech that he titled “No Easy Walk to Freedom” which was actually a quote from a speech of Jawaharlal Nehru’s that he had read. And he then kept that phrase in his mind and when he finally published his autobiography after his release – 27 years of prison later, he called it “Long Walk to Freedom”. So he’s had that inspiration from India in his life and we should mourn him. But the reason I thought of him and mentioned him is because I was talking about failure. It was Mandela who said “don’t be afraid to fall, what matters is how you rise again.” And I think that is something you should all bear in mind as you go out into the world. Mandela at the prime of his life was jailed. He spent 27 years, the best years of his adult life, behind bars. Missed the funeral of his parents, missed the funeral of one of his children, his marriages deteriorated and eventually ended because of his long jail sentence. Through all of that he never gave in to despair or cynicism. He remained a giant who had tremendous faith in himself , in the values of his principles and who went on as you know to be an apostle of reconciliation, forgiveness and peace, after having endured such terrible privation for so long. One can be inspired by that message. “Do not turn cynical, do not turn negative”.

We’re entering into an election cycle in our country we’re going to have a lot of negatives flung around us. We’re going to have parties saying how everything is bad and how everything is wrong and point to all the negatives. Look for the positives too, we have made progress in this country and we must make progress a more… and it doesn’t matter who you elect in the end to make that progress for you, that’s your sovereign right as the people of a democracy but keep the hope, keep the faith that we can work towards a better India.

Two final bits of advice to the youngsters here, I know that you think of school as a place where they forced you to learn, and when you don’t have school you don’t have to learn forget that. Learning is something you have to do daily, if you’ll excuse the pun not just in Daly but daily. And it’s actually, I don’t think that I’ve spent a day of my life where I haven’t learnt something , whether it’s a new fact, a new word, a new insight into human behavior. Every day if you keep your eyes and ears open and your mind open you will learn and that is the secret to actually continuing to accomplish things in life is always continuing to learn. That open mind is extremely important ‘coz a mind is like a parachute, it functions best when it’s open – you know, don’t try and jump of a plane with a closed parachute, and don’t try to walk into the 21st Century with a closed mind.

Follow your own instincts, as I said earlier, and take risks. But develop the talents you have. Every single one of you in this hall has a talent. God hasn’t made anyone without some special ability. It may not be coming first in the exams or being the best all round sportsman or the best debater. It might be just a talent to make your friends laugh; it might be a talent to be someone who can actually show compassion to the less fortunate. There are various kinds of talents but every one of us has something… develop it, don’t let yourself down ultimately know one can be a better you than you yourself that is what you need to live to.

So I want to thank all of you for being here. I certainly am a great believer in the Indian dream. I came back after three and a half decades of my life spent abroad. And I came back to try and serve my country through whatever use of my talents and capabilities I can bring to bear on it. But I say to youngsters here you too should have your own Indian dream. Dream it, but remember that the dream is not going to be fulfilled if you sleep on it. This is a dream you must work for everyday with your eyes open and that mind of yours open too.

Congratulations to all the achievers, congratulations to Daly College.

CEASE THE DAY DALIANS! Jai Hind!