Madam Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor, Graduates, Academic Colleagues, Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is a pleasure to be here. I am particularly pleased that Professor Pillai from IGNOU and Professor Velukar from the Yashwantrao Chavan Maharashtra Open University (YCMOU) are here too. Your presence symbolises the enormous potential for productive collaboration between the fast-growing open universities of India.

I congratulate the graduates and I thank you for making me an honorary doctor of Vardhaman Mahaveer Kota Open University. I am proud to become a member of your academic community.

University convocations are enjoyable events. I estimate that I have taken part in 150 such ceremonies. At the UK Open University I shook hands and talked to some 50,000 graduates as they were presented for their degrees.

For me today's convocation is an anniversary and a double milestone. 2007 marks the 35th anniversary of my involvement with open universities. It was in 1972 that I went to the British Open University as an intern, had a conversion experience and re-oriented my career to advance the concept of open universities.

The first milestone is that today's is my 25th honorary doctorate. I think of it as a silver jubilee and thank you and the 24 other universities, in 16 countries, that have conferred such titles on me.

The second milestone is that this is the tenth academic honour that I have received from open universities. I believe profoundly in the mission of open universities and am delighted to have honorary links with so many of them. Thank you for adding VMOU to their number today.

Why do universities award honorary degrees? It is to express their approval of achievements at three levels.

First, they recognise the contributions of particular individuals. I am both honoured and humbled that so many universities have chosen to recognise my own work in this way.
Second, they recognise the work of the recipient's institution. Through such awards I am privileged to have been the surrogate for a number of important organisations.

My very first honorary doctorate, from Deakin University, Australia in 1985, was a tribute to the International Council for Distance Education, of which I was then President, for creating a professional association for distance educators worldwide.

A subsequent honour recognised the contribution of Laurentian University, where I was President in the 1980s, to bilingual higher education in Canada. For a university to operate bilingually is a special challenge, with which VMOU is very familiar.

In the 1990s the honorary degrees and fellowships that I received paid homage to the immense role of the British Open University, of which I was Vice-Chancellor, in giving impetus and inspiration to higher distance learning around the world.

In this decade an honorary doctorate from the University of Wales celebrated the contribution of UNESCO, where I was Assistant Director-General, to the campaign to bring education to all. This honour had a special personal meaning because my father, my uncle and my brother had all graduated from the University of Wales.

Today, in honouring me you also honour the Commonwealth of Learning. COL was set up at the instigation of Commonwealth Heads of Government, in particular your own Rajiv Gandhi, to help governments and institutions use technology effectively to advance education and learning. We are proud of our achievements in India and look forward to working closely with VMOU in the period of growth and expansion that Vice-Chancellor Naresh Dadhich is leading.

Finally, as well as recognising individuals and institutions, honorary degrees also celebrate concepts. Today we celebrate the concept of the open university. We celebrate the idea that a university should be open to people, places, methods and ideas. Open to all people who can benefit; present through distance learning in all places where people want to learn; open to the use of all technologies and methods that can make learning more convenient and effective; and open to the ideas that can change the world.

These and other expressions of openness are the foundation of the social transformations for which open universities are created. The Vardhaman Mahaveer Open University is part of that noble tradition. I thank you for honouring me, for honouring the Commonwealth of Learning and for celebrating the concept of the open university.

Once again I congratulate the graduates and I wish you well as you put to use what you have learned at VMOU.