

**Keynote Speech at the 28th IVS Convocation Ceremony
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By Mr. Imran Aslam

Honorable Governors, respected faculty, Dr. Faiza Mushtaq, ladies and gentlemen and my fellow artisans who are the custodians of our collective aesthetics. A very good morning.

Amir Khusro ko paraphrase karne ki jasarat kar raha hoon. Aaj tumhare Nijam ne mohe tumre rang me rang diya hai. Mohe girwih rakh diya hai iiss izzat afzai ne. I'm truly touched and moved humbled and honoured. Me bal bal jaoon. Bal bal. I feel like a citizen of the Indus Valley.

I invoke Khusro because he was possibility personified. He was the being that became. He conjured up language, he tied knots in the air to produce music and used nonsense syllables to invent the haunting tarana which stays on with as a throbbing heartbeat to this day. Delighting. Inviting. He conceived what was unseen, he celebrated the capricious seasons and the rituals of marriage, the agony of separation and the ecstasy of spiritual consummation. He synthesized, he broke paradigms and smashed narrow hidebound, moribund templates, he dyed himself in colours of diversity and brought hands that prayed in silence together in resounding claps that accentuated devotion in the form of the qawalli. He crossed boundaries and created a syncretic culture with his unique eclectic tastes. He was the riddle. He knew the answers. He was the rhyme He understood the reason. His was the inward journey of the artist who confronts a blank canvas, a bed of untouched plaster, stone in its rugged form and the surfaces of wood, earth, metal, textiles, lying before him yearning to move from conception (taqdir) to production (ijaad) and finally when the image that imagination fired up in that eureka moment, a transposition of the vision (tasweer) magically reveals itself. Find the Khusro in yourself.

Kora kaghaz ghore mujh ko qalam
Mera bal khaye
Sher o sukhani ka Kaisa rela
Man se behta jaye.

This morning I sense the flood you will all become. It is your moment. You are on the cusp of moving with energy and creating the soil where seeds will be planted for artistic germination. Go out there with a roar. With that inner thirst of the river madly seeking the ocean as it meanders down with glacial elegance. Seeking. Stumbling. Trickling. Sinuously winding through natural barriers. It's an adventure we call life. An adventure that awaits you. And hopefully you are now equipped to face it head on.

I stand here wondering how I came to this podium to address the future. What are the moments in my own life that have created this opportunity to speak to you. Life is indeed a sentence which ends with the finality of a full stop. But in this sentence to existence cluttered with verbs and adverbs, unanswered question marks and exclamation marks, myriad emojis, there are moments brief as commas that have sustained me.

I have learnt as a writer and journalist to fiercely defend the right to space, to ward off all attempts to stereotype to dictate and deny debate, dissent and discussion, to battle against censorship in all its insidious forms, to write in ways that bypass the censorious gaze, to smuggle subversion between the lines, to try and confront orthodoxy in all its debilitating forms to refuse with an agnostic's passion the denial of rational debate and to encroach upon barren landscapes crying out for cultural occupation and celebration. Mine was the struggle for dialogue in an environment where a monologue endeavored to dominate and impose dull uniformity. Where violence became the sole voice in an atmosphere of hushed silences, I tried not to become a cynic about the absurdity of the human condition and found in humour and satire a balm to keep the spirit willing. My plays for children and adult children became those commas that sustained me. The keyboard I realized was stronger than any sword.

It has been a journey. I have enjoyed the battles past and present. And in this struggle to cast away the shackles of the mind I realized that freedom is just another word for nothing left to lose. It is as stark as that and though fraught with danger, it is exciting and very worthwhile to walk the path least trodden, getting entangled in the thorns strewn beneath our feet. We hate the slow pace of evolution given our revolutionary DNA but incremental change does bring a smile to my lips even now.

Cherish these smiles as the artist in you will confront brutal attacks on your ego, rejection slips, the critics' dismissive words, empty galleries where your forlorn masterpieces hang, a lack of understanding of your worth and the patron's unbearable demands. You carry within you a spark that will ignite the fire that you carry like so many Prometheuses. It is a stolen fire that gives us warmth, protects us from savage instincts, that blazes trails, that provides us with bonfires around which we gather to tell stories, create mythologies, dream and create. This is where imagination, the original sin, that sets us apart from other species, is born. Never let the fire be extinguished. Become Prometheus unbound. You have chosen the most abstract of journeys. It is replete with immeasurable possibilities. Await the resounding applause that is in your destiny. This is a tumultuous moment. Join the fray with your brushes glistening with dabs from a fresh palette. With your chisel sharpened by vision, with your clay awaiting the next koozagar. Embrace technology but never abandon the kinetic, the warm embrace the senses, emotions and feelings. Humankind must remain true to the sentiments that nurture it. Yahan Qais o kohqan ki azmaish hai. Yahan daar o rasan ki azmaish hai. Yahan Shaikh o Brahman ki azmaish hai. These are the struggles that await you as you walk into yet another brave new world.

I was once incarcerated in Mach prison in Balochistan many many years ago. The reasons belong in another telling. After days of sensory deprivation I woke up one day to a fear that gnaws at me even today. I felt I had forgotten how to read. It was as if someone had stripped me of all light and the elevated sense of humankind we took for granted. I tried with growing desperation to search the mind's flickering screen for alphabets, for a half remembered line for an image shaped by words. Nothing. And then I saw. Crumpled in my dark cell, a fragment of a packet. A Mcleans toothpaste packet. And I picked it up. I was able to read a percentage of chlorophyll in the paste. I was no longer blind. The cataract flowed backwards. I hid that packet. That fragment. And read it again and again. Restored to sight. To that inward eye.

Let nobody snatch your imagination and your zeal and try to imprison it. Do not let the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune overwhelm your creativity. Refuse to become the canvas on which mediocrity clings. This country needs the music, it needs the blossoming of colours, it needs forms of beauty that can banish the ugliness of our imposed landscape. It cries out for an appreciation of diversity and indigenous craft, it needs the healing touch which only you, the artisan, can bestow on a wound that is festering. It cries out for the anarchistic impulse to destroy and rebuild. Always look out for that toothpaste packet. It is there. And it must always be found.

I'll leave you with Omer Khayyam at his anarchistic best:

Ah love could thou and I with Fate conspire
To grasp the sorry scheme of things entire
Would not we shatter it to bits and then
Remold it nearer to the heart's desire.
Go and remold. Become tomorrow. May your god go with you.

Thank you.