



**AMET**  
**UNIVERSITY**  
(Deemed to be University Under Section 3 of UGC Act 1956)

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**CONVOCATION ADDRESS**

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by

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Dr. J. Ramachandran, Chancellor, Dr. Rajesh Ramachandran, Pro-Chancellor, Col. Dr. G. Thiruvassagam and Members of the Board of Management and soon-to-be graduates of AMET University. Good afternoon to you all. It is my pleasure to be invited here today to gratefully receive an Honorary Doctorate from this esteemed Institution.

Commencement speeches are often made to inspire graduates to pursue a rosy future. Even so, I do believe that being in awe of someone or something may limit your horizon. As such inspiring you to set any specific target is not my goal here this afternoon. What I do hope to accomplish in these few short minutes we have together is to share with you, my story as I see it. And hope that it helps you achieve even more success than what I have been blessed with.

### **The Beginning**

My foray into Shipping was quite by accident, as if destiny had planned it for me. When I was young, the vastness of the sea and its immense employment opportunities eluded most Indians living in the hinterland and I was no different. Indeed! As a young lad from Rajasthan, the only ships I ever saw were desert camels. As such, on graduating from BITS Pilani as a mechanical engineer, when I got to first hear of employment opportunities at sea through the Shipping Corporation of India (SCI), I just applied without much thought or clear plan.

As fate would have it, my application got approved and my new life at sea sprang open. As an impressionable 21-year-old, I was easily stimulated by the enormity of the sea, the scale and variety of its' state-of-the-art ships carrying 90% of world



trade – from coal, iron ore, oil, sulphur and grains to finished goods – and the courageous men who rode them. The idea of building a business around this exciting world thrilled me and buoyed me to learn well and to learn fast.

It was this yearn to build, to create something from what I had come to love perhaps, that led me, at 27 years of age into becoming one of the youngest Chief Engineers at SCI. Shore opportunity soon followed – first as a Technical Engineer in SCI's Mumbai office and later in Hong Kong with a professional ship management company UNIVAN, where I would spend my next 15 years – the last 8 years of which I served as its Director and General Manager. “Could I do more?” my tryst with entrepreneurship began with this simple question.

Fleet Management Ltd, Hong Kong was established in 1995 with one ship under management. Some 28 years later the company is recognised as the largest organically grown manager worldwide that technically manages a diversified fleet of more than 620 ships collectively valued at more than US\$20bn; employing 24,000 seafarers, including 14,000 from India; and employing 1200 shore based professional across 23 offices in 13 countries.

### **Desire and Destiny**

Today, when I look back, I see my decision to strike out and run a business of my own had been prompted by a set of ideal conditions and a deep desire to have a positive impact on the lives of others, while shaping a secure future for myself and my family. It happened like this...

When I began working in Hong Kong in the late 70s, the concept of third-party ship management was still in its infancy. During the 15 years I was employed in Hong Kong, developments both at a personal and business level satisfyingly began to run in parallel. As my ability to handle the day-to-day challenges grew and my knowledge of the industry deepened, so the concept of third-party ship management and its acceptance in the market grew rapidly.

During my time as Director and General Manager at the professional ship management outfit, I worked for our managed fleet grew from 20 to 80 ships. At this stage of my career, I had reached a point where I was supremely confident of my ability to run such a business. But the structure of the company meant there were no more heights for me to scale. I should have to move on or stagnate.

After 15 years as a Senior Executive, I had paid my dues and formulated my dream: to set up a world-class ship management business built upon the core values of Integrity, Excellence, Entrepreneurship and Teamwork. I would work toward creating a premier company recognized for its quality and high standards. The company would be headquartered in Hong Kong with support and branch offices in leading shipping centers worldwide.

### **Early Challenges**

Shipping is a highly regulated business that requires strict compliance with various national and international conventions and rules and regulations. These conditions mean that the barriers to entry in this business sector are unusually high. It was extremely challenging to enter the market where a number of well-known leading players were already well established.

After establishing the company in 1995, the first year was very difficult. My colleagues and I had to build the business from the ground up; systems had to be set up, and procedures put in place, while at the same time the services had to be marketed internationally. By the end of the first year we had achieved modest success in the form of about eight ships being taken into our management. Still full of the driving ambition we had set out with and fuelled by the encouragement of gaining our first customers, the team and I, now fully motivated, pushed on to our first major breakthrough.

In 1996 a large Dutch company and a well-established Norwegian company gave us support by committing their ships in to our management. This not only gave a

tremendous boost to our business, but also brought serious recognition for us in the industry.

By 1997 when the Japanese market first opened its doors to us, we knew that as an international ship management company to reckon with, we had arrived.

### **Building FLEET**

As future stars you may wish to know what it took to build FLEET. Simply put it took a TEAM. And while luck did play its part there is really no substitute for hard work. Indeed! For many years it was a matter of sheer hard work and soaking up everything I learned along the way. When I arrived in Hong Kong and joined Univan the work was tough, and the hours were long but in return I quickly gained knowledge of all aspects of the business. With hindsight, I shall always be grateful to Captain Vanderperre for throwing me in at the deep end and helping me appreciate not only what to do, but also what not to do. Enduring the tough conditions that I and my colleagues endured at that time infused me with a desire to ensure that crew welfare would be as important as client satisfaction once I had my own ship management company to run.

In order to build and motivate our 1200 shore-based employees together with our more than 24,000 seafarers it is important to introduce a company culture of excellence and mutual respect that is thoroughly inclusive. In that, I am heartened by how my initial team, which was recruited in the first five years of the company's existence, still works alongside me today.

My formative years as a child also helped. You see my father was a public prosecutor in the town and I one of 8 children he raised under his strict discipline and a strong work ethic. I watched both of my parents and my siblings work hard. To seize on opportunity, you needed to have the combination of a strong work ethic and creativity. These would become the greatest gifts that my father would pass onto me. By the time Fleet Management was founded I had learned that if I was to succeed, I



needed the right business partners, a strong team to work with and clients who had the same thinking about how a ship management company should be run. And I must say that I have been blessed with all three.

When creating a new company on the scale of FLEET achieving a satisfactory life/work balance is almost impossible. I was very fortunate in the early days, when I had to burn the midnight oil or the demands of the business required me to travel the world, my wife was very supportive all along. She stood by me during even the most challenging of times. And she continues to be a constant source of inspiration. By gathering around me an excellent executive team and learning the art of delegation I have more recently been able to reward my family's patience by sharing much more time in their treasured company.

### **Success mantras for future dreamers**

Today as you seek to make your own castles, I can share that there are so many careers within shipping. From constructing a ship, surveying a ship, commissioning, fixing ships, or even running and insuring a ship. The challenges and therefrom the opportunities that arise are endless!

Yes! There is no shortcut to success. Having a vision is essential: it should be a vision that is subject to adjustment in the face of a changing environment. Goals, on the other hand, remain constant, as does the work needed to achieve them.

Finally, stay excited and aim for quality. Excitement will ensure that your day will never be tedious and with quality comes growth. I wish you the very best of luck in your future endeavors.

Thank you once again for thinking well of my life's achievements.