

heritage of our great culture. Times have changed and knowledge has accumulated at a prodigious rate. Transmitting knowledge now costs money. If we have to have good universities, we need money. Mahajan wants government participation in the NSU by providing 100 or 200 crores of rupees and still hopes to be beyond government control! Possibly, with that kind of money, we could restructure at least 10 universities into better institutions if we have the political will. If the NRIS want to invest in an educational enterprise, under the prevailing economic climate in India there is nothing that prevents them. But let them keep away from governmental support. After all some of the finest universities and research centres in the world are private. The best schools run in this country are private schools. There are several NRI businessmen in the US who would probably invest in such ventures. There could even be benevolent NRIS who would make donations like the alumni of Kharagpur IIT who donated \$2 million to his Alma Mater. Let them attract the best talents from wherever they want and show what the results are. The people would be grateful if they demonstrate their love and concern for this country.

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## NSU – Another El dorado?

The reasons advanced in Mahajan's report, supported by Srivastava, for the establishment of NSU are mainly based on their thesis that high quality research is nonexistent in most of the universities, National Research Institutions and IITs

### Solution offered

The suggested approach to overcome the ills of Indian academic institutions is nothing short of a 'revolutionary manifesto', that is, to

establish a NSU – a 'Brave New World' where:

- a) There will be no more scientific leadership by appointment and no scientific administrators posing and acting as scientists.
- b) Administrators will take up administrative matters and the scientists of scientific matters.
- c) Many NRIs would participate in the venture to repay some of their debt to the land of their birth.
- d) There will be a system of rewards, incentives, media exposure and other perks to improve performance.

There is a vehement disclaimer that the proposal for NSU 'is not an arrogant nonresident solution' for the ills of Indian science. This means, back at home people should take it as a pure, altruistic, transparent offering of their migrated brethren.

### Backup required

- 1) Grant of land near a major industrial centre, easily accessible by air (presumably New Delhi).
- 2) A grant of about Rs 200 crores from the Govt of India.
- 3) NSU must be accorded a 'certain special status'. It must have a separate independent charter, without quotas and without binding and suffocating rules, internal and external.
- 4) A 20% reservation for the NRI scientists in the faculty.

### Comments

Apart from making some remarks like 'naive proposal, completely divorced from ground realities in India', 'curious mixture of exceptional generalities with undertones of specific inanities', etc., the scientists, whose opinions have also been published, have not categorically stated whether the proposal is as revolutionary as it is claimed to be and if it is worthwhile investing our limited resources in establishing new institutions with the fervent hope that these would remove the existing malaise. None of them seriously considered the possibility of achieving the aim by infusing more life by way of infrastructure, better management, sustained

operational autonomy in, at least, some of the existing centres. I have no hesitation in stating that the proposal of NSU is neither novel nor revolutionary and it suffers from many inconsistencies, self-contradictions and sentimentalities. The expected results are based on fond hopes, wishes and promises, unsubstantiated by coherent reasoning.

The blunder of separating the research institutes from the university ambience, cited as the root cause for the problems of higher education, may be true and should have been and could be rectified. However, a similar pattern is in existence at the research institutes in other countries (e.g. Max Planck Institute). The real reason lies in downgrading our universities as unfit for high-level research, in order to justify the establishment of new institutes (Rob Paul to pay Peter Syndrome)

Many other criticisms levelled at our academic institutions, such as the hierarchical nature of the organizations and rigid adherence to 'procedures' convenient to those in authority, are quite valid. These issues have been the subject of numerous discussions and are on the agenda of various committees. Remedial measures, such as internal autonomy, etc., have been expected to be existing. The real failure is in not implementing and monitoring these simple, self-evident, democratic rules at the grass-root level. Feudalism in India is a social trait. In spite of all refinements introduced in the Indian psyche, due to space time changes, it often reverts like the straightened dog's tail.

It appears to be a common human tendency to boss over. In Western countries too the 'Herr Professors' do lord over their 'Mitarbeiters', but generally for genuine causes and there are checks and counterchecks (to minimize the excesses) built into the system over decades and centuries. Such control mechanisms are practically nonexistent in many (if not all) of our institutions.

The tenor of statements by Mahajan, sounds more 'like fire and brimstone' pulpit sermons of 'born again' scientists. But, it is strange to hear from Srivastava (cosponsor of the proposal) that 'it will be wrong to say that our scientists have failed the country', and yet he asserts that 'Indian Universities, in general, have remained a continuation of their colonial past'. While this

may be true of the older universities it cannot be said of the postcolonial and more recent institutions. If 'the JNU provided a change from other universities and has positively succeeded in many areas', it is difficult to understand why Srivastava, who was the V.C. of this University for some time and a planning commission member afterwards, and other educational policy makers did not make serious attempts to bring about necessary organizational changes in, at least, some selected universities, instead of initiating belated measures to start a chain of new institutions! Instead of reforming the State Universities, through UGC or some other organization, our planners opened a set of Central Universities. Now we are talking of starting NSUs sweeping aside the 200 and odd existing universities and condemning them to a wholesale death.

The solutions offered by Mahajan are backed only by hopes and promises – 'There will be no scientific leadership by appointment'. 'Administrators must take care of administrative matters and the scientists of scientific matters'. There are research institutes like BARC, TIFR and some CSIR Labs, where the conditions come quite close to this situation. Even then, if things are not as good as they should be, the administrator is an undeserving target for attack. Their idea of electric management with intellectually-oriented politicians and intellectually-oriented doyens of industry sounds like the ideals of 'Plato's Republic'. It is difficult to come across a single politician who does not aver profound ideas for nation-building.

Mahajan and Srivastava are promising the moon. It is for those in charge of the country's policies and the finances to make a cost-benefit analysis before squandering the average taxpayer's (who is not necessarily a scientist) money. It is not that the country is not appreciative of the talented scientists and scholars who

made a mark in their respective fields in this country or elsewhere. Eminent scientists such as Chandrashekar, Haris-Chandra, Pancharatnam have been offered places of their choice, if they preferred to return. However, for various reasons they could not accept.

Universities in this country are functioning to cater to many interest groups. Education is a state subject and it is the norm of the times that political, religious and cultural groups of various hues play an active role in promoting their proteges for Vice-Chancellorship and other governing bodies. Reservation is a national policy, similar to 'equal opportunity act' in the US and there is very little that the institutions can do to oppose the political pressure groups in a democratic system. If the Ministries of Human Resources Development, Education and Science & Technology are now falling head-over-heels to implement the Mahajan report they could as well have averted the calamity by being more circumspect about pushing the reservation and other retrograde policies and should have strongly opposed several populist measures undermining the academic standards. Where is the guarantee that NSU will not be swept off the ground, after it is inaugurated, by the 'democratic' wave of reservations and other moves?

Many of the prevailing ills of our education are well known for a long time. It is ironic that often those in the seats of power, who have maintained the status quo and enjoyed the benefits of their privileges, turn out to be vehement critics of the same system after their retirement. A mission of the presently suggested type to restart 'high level science education' at the suggested cost, even with the facade by NRI bigwigs instils no confidence of success in our minds. The simplistic assumption that any set of NRIs can do better than a set of resident Indians has to be viewed with utmost care and even suspicion. It will perhaps cost much less money and

takes much less time to show results if a small number of universities among the existing ones are selected, given suitable financial and governmental backing (without undue interference and bureaucracy) to let them function with some of the advantages proposed for the NSU. Let us welcome with open arms the NRI teachers and scientists who have the credentials to make positive contributions to take an active part in such a new experiment. Even if a linkage has to be established between teaching, research and development, measures can be initiated gradually. If a country cannot build itself and has no intention of rebuilding itself, a handful of foreigners or nonresidents, who left the shores of this country for various reasons, cannot do it either. This is axiomatic. Let there be further discussions on such an endeavour originating from within but supported by all eligible well-wishers

Finally as a foot note, it is worth mentioning that the real talent of our country is from the semirural areas. Due to financial, regional and other restraints they can pursue higher studies only in their regional institutions. Our Ramans, Rajagopalacharis, Tilaks and Gokhales, Rays and Sahas have been and are going to be from such financial and social strata. Those who can afford other set of schools and colleges – Rishi Valley, Panchagani, St. Christi, St. Stephen would not have any difficulty in receiving education from the best institutions, here and abroad. But let it not escape our attention and our conscience, that there has been no scientist of any stature, from the latter class in spite of privileges and splendour.

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