

Speech Accepting the 2019 Exemplar Award for Outstanding Academic Achievement by the South Asian Studies Association

India through the Lens of a Political Scientist...Looking Back, Looking Forward

I feel honoured at being selected for the 2019 Exemplar Award for Academic Achievement and thank the South Asian Studies Association for selecting me. There are many eminent scholars working on South Asia and I feel very privileged at being given this award.

Today I would like to share with you some of my academic life experiences, the support I have received from Institutions I have worked for, which have helped in reaching the point I have today in my life. I believe the 'life of the mind' which we all share and the contributions we all make to the discipline of Social Science and to society, is not a solitary journey but the end product of an entire generation of scholars working together. In countries such as India particularly, which is still seeking its self identity and place in the world, this journey often runs parallel to changes taking place in society and as observers and commentators our lives are bound up closely with the people we write about. Hence, looking back my academic journey has been an attempt to analyze and understand India through the lens of a Political Scientist.

My journey as an academic began in Gargi College for Women, a constituent undergraduate college under Delhi University in 1972 where I got my first job as a lecturer. In the early 1970s Delhi University was expanding and many new colleges were being set up. However, the courses we taught to undergraduate students mandated by the Delhi University exemplified the state of the discipline of Political Science at the time and were not satisfying as they had little to do with the rapid changes taking place in Indian society at the time. We taught mainly 4 constitutions – US, UK, Russia, China and India; a historical development of the British Constitution and the Westminster style of democracy together with Public Administration and Political Theory and Thought more suited to western polities. Indian politics was cast mainly in the formal legal style with little emphasis on political processes. (No reflection on Gargi College, today it is a premier college of Delhi University and its course content transformed).

However in the 1970s change was taking place among academics in the understanding and teaching of the Social Sciences. Attending a Seminar at the newly formed JNU in mid 1972, made me feel that this was a more exciting environment and I decided to undertake an M/Phil degree there in the afternoons, which was tough but very rewarding as it put me in a new academic milieu. I continued and found completing my PhD a very challenging and motivating venture. JNU formed in 1969 under an Act of Parliament, is an all-India and Post-Graduate University expected to obtain students from all states and regions, which meant that we met fellow students from all over the country, which was enriching. The idea was not to form another

University like Delhi University but a research University, a unique synthesis of humanities, science and technology. The late 1960s/early 1970s was a time of ferment and witnessed a number of social movements such as the Women's movement, the backward caste movement, peasant movements and finally the movement against the Emergency from the mid 1970s. These impacted on JNU which has had a distinct left orientation, but which is no longer as important with many different viewpoints visible and jostling for place on campus today. More important, JNU has from the beginning a distinct anti-colonial bent in its world view, and the aim has remained to create an "Indian" University devoted to understanding the developing world, different from, but with the high standards associated with Oxford and Cambridge.

Some features of JNU as it came to be established, have attracted students from all over the country and many like me never left, being absorbed as faculty members. The School of Social Sciences formed in 1969-70 was a multi-disciplinary unit with not departments but multi-disciplinary Centres, closely linked. Faculty taught across Centres and Students could take optional papers from any Centre. More important, standing in the shadow of the School of International Studies, the SSS from the beginning focused mainly on India – its history, politics, economy, society and development – to which addition of new Centres such as Gender, Science Policy or Informal Economy and Labour has been a continuing process. The faculty consisted of some of the best minds in the country who were picked up to start the Centres such as Romila Thapar and Bipin Chandra in the Centre for Historical Studies, or Rasheedudin Khan and C.P. Bhabhri in the Centre for Political Studies and given a free hand in framing courses. The syllabi also was different with a focus on colonialism and its impact on India, the making of India's constitution, partition, challenges before the newly independent country, caste, land reforms, political processes etc. For example in my own Centre - Political Studies – the focus was on the nature of the Indian State, how historical formation on the Indian sub-continent was different from that of Europe; the post-colonial democracy that was emerging, and the challenges of state led growth and planning. The Centre for Historical Development while focusing on Nationalism and the National Movement, has produced research on regional histories and regional identities as they developed in the colonial period and contributed to the nation in the making.

Some features of the University have shaped my perspectives on teaching and research. In JNU as perhaps in many Universities in the US – there is symbiotic relationship between teaching and research. Optional papers are offered to students based on the ongoing research of the faculty an interest often shared by their PhD students, which makes it an interesting venture. As a result students want to come to JNU because they want to do research on a particular subject with a particular faculty member and they become partners in research, and often join you as a faculty colleague, which takes the journey forward. Two of the books I have written are with former students and the experience has been very rewarding. Second, even before reservations in admissions became mandatory the University had its own system of selecting students from disadvantaged categories and backward districts. A residential University, it led to many faculty

members including me, schooled in privileged private schools and colleges, mingling with and teaching first generation learners among our students. It made us more socially conscious of the need to help them, some of whom have done very well in life. Many SC/ST students who come in through such quotas are very aware that they need to catch up in terms of reading and writing abilities with their more privileged, better schooled peers, and they work hard, put in extra effort. Such a person getting a good job lifts up his his/her entire family. Over the years I have realized, unlike our political leaders, that young people don't want doles and welfare, as Amartya Sen once pointed out they want opportunities – good quality affordable education, skilling and jobs. Many such students have entered the State Civil Services and been proud to serve the country. They never forget JNU and their teachers and I have had the pleasant experience of meeting some of them as senior district officials during my fieldwork and being well looked after by them.

It was in this academic setting that during my time as a faculty member beginning in 1980 that against seminal changes taking place in society and the larger academic world, some ideas shaped my thinking and my academic career. These also influenced many colleagues and the direction that our Centre for Political Studies took and which has left a lasting impact on its faculty and students. While teaching on India, I floated an optional paper titled “Politics in Third World Societies” in the 1980s. Critical of theories of Modernization and Development, the prism through which Developing Societies were being analyzed, the course argued that the trajectory of the post-colonial developing world was different. Theories of Dependency and Underdevelopment of A.G. Frank were avidly read and the notion of unilinear development, that the developing world would become a mirror image of Europe was criticized. The idea that if you were standing in countries on the periphery or the margins of the world, your view of the world was different was an exciting idea. Equally important, the paper covered the study of Asian, African and Latin American countries. What I and many of my colleagues and students discovered was that the problems faced by non-Western societies were much closer and more similar to our own, than western societies in which we had been so assiduously schooled. Theories of the state in Africa and Latin American, the work of Frantz Fanon, why some countries such as Brazil, Nigeria, Pakistan and Bangladesh, experience military rule but India has not were ideas, which were endlessly discussed. Out of such debates arose the need and desire for understanding and theorizing on India, drawing on her own historical and contemporary specificities.

It is in this context that the most exciting discovery for me and which has remained a lifetime's preoccupation was caste, due to the rise of Dalit assertion in the 1980s under the charismatic leader Kanshi Ram who formed the BSP in 1984. Caste was studied earlier but as a sociological category but now with the construction of Dalit identity and challenge to upper caste domination from below, it became a reality. Why was the BSP formed thirty years after independence? I have argued that it was the result of long term democratization and has led to deepening of democracy. Following the trajectory of this movement has been very interesting. Out of this

stream arose the most abiding theme of our Centre for which we are all known and continues: Social Justice and Equality. Much research has been undertaken by us on issues such as Social Justice, Humiliation, Group rights, minorities, and identity politics among others. I was attracted also to the writings of Dr Ambedkar on Reorganization of States, on which many don't know he had very useful ideas. My interest in Dalit studies took me to the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library in Delhi on a Senior Fellowship in 2006 where my research showed how by the 2000s a small, but influential, educated Dalit middle class, viewed the Dalit Question differently, demanding *alternative* paths not mobilization but extension of reservation or affirmative action for the private sector and Supplier Diversity for small business/industry, which the Congress government of Madhya Pradesh did briefly experiment with.

Another area that attracted me arising out of changes in the Indian polity was globalization and economic reform in the 1990s, leading to re-evaluation and debate on earlier notions of Socialism and state led growth. Why did State-led development fail? When does infant industry grow up and learn to compete in the world economy? Did we take too long to open up and lost out? It has remained a constant endeavour to understand neo-liberalism and neo-liberal policy in India, its economic impact, what has happened to welfare, as well the cultural impact of globalization, as a closed economy and society opens up to the world. This led to a paper which I taught with a colleague on Globalization, Public Policy and Development which became very popular leading to student theses ranging from Telecom Policy, FDI in Multi Brand Retail, PPPs in various areas, changing Nature of the State in India etc.

But overarching to all this, quite early I had developed an interest in the Indian States/provinces as I have for long strongly felt that the rise of the states is one of most important changes in India's democracy. This is where changes are taking place leading to the loosening of the federal structure, and regionalization of the party system and these seminal changes are driving national patterns. In the 1990s these changes were particularly visible in states in the Hindi heartland which had not undergone much social and economic change in the colonial period and have lagged behind. The 1980s and 90s witnessed sudden, rapid and in fact de-stabilizing change: movements by Backward Castes and Dalits, Mandal and reservation and the Masjid-Mandir agitation and communalism. But, by the late 1990s it became recognized that if economic reform was to succeed it must be carried out in the states. While the Centre had initiated the process, the states required fiscal stabilization, economic liberalization and better governance. I have always felt that India provides a laboratory for comparison across states and here the issue of governance is seminal.

In recent years two areas which have pre-occupied me have been communalism and the working of institutions in India. The former was sparked due to the re-emergence of communal riots in the 2000s in north India particularly the Muzaffarnagar riots in UP in 2013 after a long period. It led me to examine the nature of communalism in a post-Congress post-globalization period and my book on Everyday Communalism.

Regarding institutions, a feeling grew in the Centre in recent years that we had worked on political processes, but institutions which form the bedrock of our democracy had been neglected. This feeling has actually grown because of concern over the last two decades over the decline of institutions – Parliament, the Election Commission, the higher Judiciary, the Reserve Bank of India, the higher bureaucracy, investigative agencies such as the CBI which have gradually become pawns in the hands of governments to control and abuse power. How do we rebuild institutions and protect them has attracted scholarly attention, though much more research is required.

Post retirement with some colleagues from the Indian School of Business at Mohali, I have helped set up a Research Institute PRAMAN. It constitutes a different model to Universities, as research institutes do not undertake teaching, only funded research projects and training. The idea is to look at specific public policies such as education, health, food security, their framing and implementation. Most of the research in Universities remains theoretical, though change has come in. So this is a new learning experience for me.

Finally what are the challenges facing Universities and students today in India some of which I encountered as the Rector (Pro-Vice Chancellor) in my final years with my University? Two aspects were constantly on my mind and much debated in the University. First, funding for Higher education has remained low and affected both infrastructure in a residential University like JNU and also research. Spending on education has remained low; in 2012-13, it was 3.1% of the GDP. It fell in 2014-15 to 2.8% and registered a further drop to 2.4% in 2015-16, was 2.7 percent of GDP for the financial year 2018. There has been higher outlay for higher education but most of it is for IITs and IIMs not central Universities, also more funding has gone to Pure Science and not Social Science which unfortunately is dismissed as not important. In fact, India only spends 0.85% of its GDP on research.

Second, how does one bring Universities out of their ivory towers and closer to societal needs and changes without losing their autonomy and without losing out on pure research? In the Social Sciences today there is emphasis on the need for skilling young people to obtain jobs or to start businesses of their own, rather than research. Science schools are seen as doing pure research, but many have pointed out the need for translational research and partnership with industry. So the position that Universities occupy as centres of knowledge and learning need rethinking. Both these issues: the lack of funds and jobs has agitated students and we have witnessed huge agitations in Delhi recently by students from all over the country.

Universities are also concerned with crises visible today in Indian society and I have been sharing my views on them in newspaper articles and public interactions. India was described as the fastest growing economy in the world in the early 2000s by many observers and political commentators. However, regional and per capita inequality remains high. The states in north India are worse off than those in southern and western India, the worst off being disadvantaged groups such as Dalits, MBCs, minorities, small farmers, women and the rural and urban poor.

Equally serious is the growing polarization between the Hindu majority and Muslim minority community leading to deep seated polarization and constant communal tension. Similarly caste divides remain often resulting in atrocities. Cultural diversity and tolerance viewed as the hallmarks of India society have declined. Parallel to all these developments is rising authoritarianism and a palpable sense of fear of criticizing the government within the media and the intelligentsia. All these tendencies are a danger to our democracy and to the secular fabric of our society. While many of these tendencies have been there earlier, in recent years there is little doubt that they have increased and pose a danger to our democracy. These and many more problems remain and need to be researched, taken to the public and opposed. Universities such as JNU have been at the forefront. I am happy that I have had the privilege of being part of this journey and will continue to be in the future.
