

# GOLDEN JUBILEE REFLECTIONS

By Prof. M. S. Ananth



The word IIT today represents a brand name that India is proud of. The IIT system represents the realization of a vision that Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru articulated of providing scientists and technologists of the highest calibre to help building a self-reliant nation. The Golden Jubilee of IIT Madras is therefore an occasion for celebration. It is also an occasion for gratefully acknowledging the remarkable support received from the Ministry of Human Resource Development as well from the numerous stakeholders in India over the last fifty years and in its formative years from West Germany.

The Golden Jubilee is also the time for us to look forward to the next fifty years - it would be wise to introspect and to identify lessons learnt and not learnt from the global best practices in higher education. India today is an India full of youth and promise and it is incumbent on her higher educational institutions to guide the country to a position of leadership in the world while preserving her age-old cultural and spiritual identity.

There are lessons (C.M. Vest, Pursuing the Endless Frontier, MIT Press, 2005) that IITs have learnt and internalized rather well:

- Young faculty, given academic freedom, enrich the system with a flow of new ideas;
- Combining teaching and research brings passion and constant rejuvenation;
- Open competition for faculty and students drives excellence;
- The faculty's commitment to service leads to strong interactions with business, industry, and government;
- Funding flows from government funding agencies to the researchers based on their merit in a competitive marketplace of ideas.

There are other important lessons that we have yet to internalize and the Golden Jubilee is a good occasion to resolve to do so with the enlightened support of all stakeholders:

- Science is the search to discover unity in the wild variety of the universe. So are the Arts. As a technological institution that aspires to be among the best in the world we will expand the educational experience of our students into the realms of the arts and medicine.
- Innovation and competitiveness are the main drivers of economic growth in today's globalized world. The major sources of both are the University-Centered Research Parks which are very generously supported by the governments in the developed countries. We will work with the government to evolve a national policy to support such Research Parks.
- Government funding all over the world comes with a caveat of equity in its distribution. Private funding from industry or from philanthropic individuals is important for pushing the frontiers of excellence in specially chosen areas of research. We will strive to make this happen on a much larger scale than in the past.
- Good graduate schools in the West are enriched by a mix of students and faculty from other countries. While science is universal, scientists carry cultural prejudices and a mix of diverse cultural backgrounds helps overcome many of them. We are aware that many faculty in the USA who received Nobel Prizes in recent decades are non-natives. We resolve to make it easy for foreign students to study and for foreign scientists to hold permanent faculty positions in our institutions.
- The value system of the IITs is not the same as that of the market place. We have articulated our values and will forever guard against bureaucracy upsetting the balance between trust and accountability by introducing undesirable 'incentives'.
- Until the turn of the century, the IITs which were made autonomous by an Act of Parliament were, like all government supported institutions, funded

conservatively and by and large left to govern themselves a benign neglect that augured well for educational institutions. The IITs shot into fame in the last decade, as a result of the entrepreneurial success of their alumni in the USA. Public and political attention have since then been heaped on the IITs in India. Such attention is indeed a double-edged sword and we will guard against erosion of our values by such unwarranted attention!

IITs have reached the stage of adolescence as it were after a childhood of fifty years. They have the intellectual wherewithal, the youthful zest and the wisdom to fashion a brilliant yet sustainable future for themselves. The first Indian Governor General of free India, Bharat Ratna Rajagopalachari said, "If the scientists of India make up their minds, they can raise India's prestige to a degree which will more than make up for any failures or defects in other fields". On the occasion of our Golden Jubilee it is but appropriate that we in IITM will resolve to live up to the words of the "wisest son of India" in the years to come.