

Who Will Work the Seed Farms of Knowledge?

Shyam Sunder

A farmer saves some of his best grain as seed to plant the next crop. While eating an extra mouthful is satisfying today, it is not worth the risk of having nothing on the table next year. What is true of agriculture is also true of society and education, except education requires us to think of much longer generational cycles, not just annual crop cycles.

To teach its children in schools and universities, to create knowledge, and innovate, a society must attract a fair share of its best young minds to education and scholarship. Is the number and quality of people attracted to teaching and research sufficient to support India's dreams be a brain bank or technological superpower?

Can India have the kind of future it dreams of if she fails to attract the highest level of talent into universities to teach, and think of new ideas in science, technology, social science, arts and the humanities?

To find your own answer, look around the room or street you are standing in. Count the number of things you see which were invented in India. Watch, car, television, computer, bicycle, phone, electricity, synthetic fabric, ballpoint pen, pencil, or mobile phone? Learning to make others' inventions is not the same thing as being the first in the world to think and to make them. The distance we have to travel to stand among the countries which lead the world in brain power becomes immediately obvious.

Next ask: what were the characteristics of the people who made the inventions that have transformed our lives. If these were the people with high brain power, surely India has plenty of those. Again, look around you in the Great Lakes class. Now ask: how many of them are, or will be, devoted to invention and scholarship? It might be easier to answer the question: how many of our brightest friends are NOT pursuing MBA or software engineering. In India, the answer can sometimes be disappointing.

India cannot aspire to the future as an advanced society without original thinkers to inspire the new generations of students, new ideas, original scientific research, development of technology, and producing fine arts and literatures that great minds create and appreciate.

How do we make sure that India's institutions of higher learning attract a fair share of the best minds of each generation into teaching and research careers? As a member of the extraordinarily talented group of India's young generation, each student of the Great Lakes Institute, and the readers of this magazine, are candidates for such careers. India is a free country. How many of us choose to toil in the seed farms of knowledge, instead of

consuming the fruits of the knowledge created by others, is for each person to decide.
What is your answer?

Please send your reactions and any answers to the editor to be shared with others in the next issue of the magazine.

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