



'CSR funds give new hope to research'

The National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS) was founded in a verdant campus in Bengaluru near the iconic IIT Sc, by J.R.D. Tata and Raja Ramanna 25 years ago. Baldev Raj, director, NIAS, speaks to Shivanand Kanavi on the impact of the institution and its future vision

NIAS has completed 25 years. How would you visualise its role and future?

When J.R.D. Tata conceived this institute with Raja Ramanna the focus was on producing holistic thought leaders in all domains. He wanted to create a place where you could attract the best of the people in humanities, culture and heritage, science and technology, policies, strategic studies, education, etc. I think we have done eminently well in that respect. Every year we have about 15 or 20 such programmes for leaders from government and enterprises. When they go out, they say they were transformed.

We are an impactful institute but with a small budget. After I came onboard six months ago, I have interacted with everybody – our associates, adjunct faculty, chair professors or regular faculty, Ph D students and so on. To be effective, to make an impact, in addition to people, you need some money. The Tata Trust supported us, in fact we exist because of the Tata Trusts. The way forward would be that, we create a sort of corpus, endowment money, which will yield us about ₹10-15 crore a year, which is not much as an annual budget for such an institution.

To create this endowment fund are you tapping corporates, government, NRIs, and HNIs (local and NRI)?

Fortunately, with CSR having been built into Company Law recently,

I am sure our kind of institutions with deep societal impact will attract some CSR funds. So, one can approach some enlightened corporates and I have already started talking to a few. Another is to take up with the Departments of Science & Technology, Atomic Energy, Space and Defence, asking for endowment. They have already given us some money and I have requested them to enhance it based on our performance. We are also guided by an eminent management council headed by S. Ramadorai. Their large network of contacts would certainly help us.

What are the research areas the NIAS faculty is involved in?

We have people here who are in culture and heritage. We have child psychologists who are concentrating on informal education; strategic studies groups that work on different areas like space, defence, atomic energy; energy and environment groups. We also have people who are looking at why India has no time zones and so on. I also want to expand our work in agriculture, especially precision agriculture and sustainable agriculture. In India now we are giving a lot of emphasis to manufacturing but not enough to the future of agriculture.

My idea is to bring some young assistant professors, post-docs, Ph D students and conduct field work and experiments in all these areas. So, our needs are small. However, NIAS needs to be more visible.

If you want to give inputs to NITI Aayog then what would be your focus areas?

I have brought on the agenda two new areas. One is the study of inequalities. It is not easy to analyse the inequalities. If you want to have inclusive development, inclusive growth, then, first of all, you need to know which are the excluded communities or what is the extent of exclusion.

The second area is our cultural heritage. I don't think we really have anybody who can stand up in government to say what the holistic picture regarding heritage is. Can we come to the level of where Europe is with respect to cultural characterisation in say 10 years of at least 100 items in our cultural heritage? I find NIAS to have the right people.

We also have an interesting group on behavioural ecology studying the conflict of man, animals and forests and they have done wonderfully well, they are always in the field. I think they have great peer recognition but now we are trying to see how we can make an impact on the policy.

A highly neglected area is the Harappan sites and the tourism and public education through them.

Yes, we are working on Dholavira, in Kutch, one of the largest Harappan sites in India, along with IIT Gandhinagar using satellite and digital technology.

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