

Extracts from the Convocation Address Given by Dr P K Kelkar on 1981 May 17:

...When I came to Kanpur first to join as the Director of the Institute, almost everybody I met in Kanpur asked me if...I had wanted to commit professional suicide ...I did not at all worry about this because I was no longer myself but an instrument of a historical process.

...When Professor Dahl came to India to share in our efforts to make IIT Kanpur an ideal institution of its kind, I soon recognized that he too was drawn in by the Spirit of History as its instrument.

...Then, again take the way we succeeded in recruiting a remarkable faculty - a few experienced persons along with a large number of young highly qualified individuals, enthusiastic and full of adventure. Most of them had given up satisfying and remunerative jobs abroad and decided to involve themselves in the great adventure of building up IIT Kanpur. They too were instruments of ...history.

...[IITK's first] architect was sensitive to academic needs arising out of new ideas, new perspective, new vision and the spontaneous exercise of freedom of thought, speech and sometimes action on the part of the faculty and the student body. He was successful in using local material to create, through his imaginative designs, 'Beauty, Comfort and Delight'. He combined landscape, movement and function in his way. It soon became obvious to us that he too was 'infected' by the Spirit of IIT Kanpur.

...The first batch of students who joined IIT Kanpur were the real torchbearers of its Spirit which they passed on to the generations of students who followed them. All the old timers on the faculty, I imagine, must be remarking occasionally, particularly when they are wistfully recalling the past, that the first batch was, perhaps, the best batch.

...No institution in this country set up by or aided by the government can avoid working under the shadow of bureaucracy ...I wonder why one gets a feeling, when one meets a government official, that his main concern is to impress on you that he is there to represent the government's point of view and to guard the interests of the government as he sees them. What makes him forget at the time that the Institute in question is set up by the government itself to fulfill certain objectives, I have never been able to make out. Perhaps, at the time of discussion he assumes unwittingly the role of the interpreter who can give the 'authorized version' of how best the Institute can achieve the objectives set for it by the government. One has to concede that this is a terrible dilemma which any institution could face... IIT Kanpur was very fortunate. We found in Mr. G K Chandiramani a very sympathetic official who almost bent backwards to set aside for a while the bureaucratic approach ...I suspect he too had a whiff of the Spirit of IIT Kanpur and had lost his bureaucratic sobriety so far as IIT Kanpur was concerned.

...On occasion, ideas seemingly dangerous were also supported [by the Boards of Governors and their Chairmen]. Sometimes it looked as if the Chairman and the Members of the Board of Governors were as willing as the Director to throw out of the window all caution as dictated by Conventional Wisdom. This was so when the idea seemed so exciting and pregnant with all kinds of possibilities as to bring to the surface originality and spirit of creative activity among the students and the members of the faculty.

...Right from the beginning our objective was to build as Indian Institute primarily devoted to the pursuit of academic excellence...In this context, evolving an appropriate curriculum became an exciting adventure. In this process all the faculty including the visiting professors participated as equals. There was complete freedom of expression, as also the right to dissent. Nevertheless, after a series of meetings, some of them rather stormy, we did arrive at a broad consensus. This made it possible for us to establish some very important guidelines:

1. ...Apart from [only twenty-five contact hours], there would be time available to the student for home assignment, self study, extra reading and so on.
2. All the departments - Engineering, Science, Mathematics, Humanities - would have identical status, academic as well as institutional.
3. Conditions should be created for the spirit of academic freedom to be sensed and experienced by every member of the faculty and every student. In fact, a lecturer could assume full responsibility for any assignment...As a result he should feel that he was a potential professor. Similarly, no student should feel any hesitation in approaching any person of authority, including the Director...
4. Postgraduate courses should be initiated along with undergraduate courses...

...[When the IBM 1620 arrived in Delhi and was to be brought to Kanpur] for the first time in my life I became aware of the potential power of the seemingly innocuous device of the government, known as post facto sanction [and used it repeatedly ever after].

...Another memorable event I recall was the organization of a fairly high level seminar on Materials Science in 1966...[which] turned out to be lively, fruitful and compulsive enough to make everyone take a fresh look at one's approach to Materials Science teaching, research and organization.

...The real pace-setting innovation in which IIT Kanpur was drawn in was the establishment of the glider facility as well as a flight-testing laboratory. It was because of [this] that many in IIT Kanpur could have the experience of being up in the air contemplating the universe around in complete silence and for a moment feel the unity of the tiny negligible specks we are with the Universe at large. This experience was as chastening as it was memorable.

...Finally I would like to say a few words about our experience in establishing the Campus School. A faculty wife who loved children and who liked teaching in the best sense was principally involved in this experiment though there were others too. Along with the alphabet, numerals, spoken word, written word, pictures and so on, significant use was made of the techniques of learning by doing...After five years in school, the youngsters became enterprising enough to arrange a science exhibition on their own. In this school there were children drawn from the entire campus community. We felt proud one year when the son of one of the jeep-drivers stood first in the class.

...Every occupation involving the use of hands, skills and experience, has something professional about it. This means that there is always a need for on-the-job training [of technicians].

...The overall picture that emerges when one takes a detached view of what IIT Kanpur looks like today, one gets a feeling that the 'genetic code' which History wrote...has not been erased. It still has, deep inside, vitality and the spirit of adventure and the urge to go on accumulating intellectual capital to serve not only academic goals but social purpose as well. I do not think I am foolish if I happen to look forward with optimism to the crucial role IIT Kanpur can play in the national scheme of things in the years to come.