

# **SASNET workshop 2006 on The role of South Asia in the internationalisation of higher education in Sweden**

*Presentation by Sunandan Roy Chowdhury*

## **The Moffusil and the Metropolitan – Higher Education's Meandering Paths**

The aim of this conference is to reflect upon the state of linkages in the area of higher education between Sweden and South Asia and suggest possibilities of growth.

One way of looking at internationalization of higher education in Sweden is to think how far Swedish institutions can attract and retain foreign students including students from the developing world. And, the role of South Asia in this process is worth looking into.

But internationalization of higher education can't be only about greater proportion of student intake from developing countries. I am not so sure that if more 'black' or 'brown' students sit next to 'white' students in classrooms, we would achieve internationalization of higher education. However, this may be useful because sharing of different life experiences is always enriching. In this paper, I will discuss two themes. One how students from South Asia could be attracted in greater numbers to Swedish universities or more generally, to western universities where the universe is not Anglophone. And, secondly, I will return to the theme of internationalization of higher education in an age of increasing global connectivity.

As I was reading the conference proposal, I couldn't help smiling in an appreciative way, the use of the word 'moffusil'. This word, most probably of Persian lineage, tells a lot about our world, not only in the sub-continent but around the world. But as we discuss internationalization of higher education with Europe and the sub-continent in purview, one needs to go back a couple of centuries. Pre-British India had structures of higher education and it was not mono-universe of higher education. With the coming of western knowledge powered by the industrial revolution machine and a new Indian elite enamoured by English ways, the other knowledge worlds started weakening and the university system, poor copies of Oxbridge, flourished. Independence in 1947 did not usher the dreams of 'national education' that was articulated in the fifty odd years preceding it. Before independence, Indians went in small numbers to England, usually, sons of rich, for whom entering the bar in London was the be all and end all of life. After independence, slightly larger numbers started going, sometimes as students, sometimes as young professionals. A large bunch of first engineering graduates went to Germany to work in the post-war industrialization in 1960s and a few came to Sweden too. An almost equal number of doctors went to

work for the National Health Service in U.K. almost at the same time. However, the movement of students which was largely to England in the first two decades of the independence started changing since end 1960s. United States with its much larger number of universities and the GRE / TOEFL system became the favoured destination. The replacement of U.K. by U.S. also signified a certain massification of higher education in India. While the children of the elite went to U.K. earlier, America opened its doors to a wider middle class itself a product of Nehruvian industrialization. This massification has continued with increasing numbers going to Canada, Australia, New Zealand and also to some non-English countries of the west.

While the first spate of massification of higher education retained quality and at times, even created new heights of excellence, in India as well as the movement westwards, in recent years, getting a 'foren' degree is sometimes, becoming equivalent to acquiring a new pair of jeans. Third rate Australian universities, quite often private, are setting up shop in India or luring students to go and study in these institutions. Indian banks are now all geared up to finance the 'MBA's of a new India of call centres and software companies. Such massification, to my mind, is crassification.

However, the demand of higher education in India being an ever-increasing curve, there is a strategy that can be conceptualized which does not demean higher education. Sweden and some other European countries can play a great role in internationalization of higher education in their own structures. And, this is what I visualize. England attracted the colonial and post-colonial elite, America attracted the rising and growing big-city middle class, let Sweden and Europe attract the girls and boys of moffusil India and moffusil sub-continent. In the sub-continental context an international degree gives a bit of educational exposure but, more importantly, confidence, sometimes, a bit much of it, and networks, both pan-Indian and western. The bright minds of Meerut or Hossur have been left out of this loop. If Sweden targets them, it will be a beginning of a new deepening of higher education in India. It will also help Sweden and Europe gain access to newer markets outside the 10-12 big Indian cities. It will also lessen the grip of Indian middle class elite on the growth possibilities of an important civilization of our planet. Targeting this segment of South Asia will, of course, need a bit of field research and also spelling out of a strategy. If Sweden as well as other European countries are willing to take up this exercise, I foresee a deepening of higher education linkages between the two regions.

But internationalization should not only mean students coming from South Asia to Sweden and Europe. There is a second and, in my view, more important component of internationalization of higher education in Sweden and Europe. The present day university is a western creation, its disciplines have been structured in Europe. Internationalization demands that we take a new look at these disciplines. The role of South Asia and the developing world is to impact the futures of these disciplines.

Let me give examples from some disciplines. Take economics. From Adam Smith till now economics has grown as a subject rising from industrial revolution England through the Great Depression to the socialist variant and

to present neo-liberalism. However, when we are in a developing world country like India or China, one issue we face is corruption at almost all levels. There is hardly any serious academic discussion of corruption among western or Indian economists. I remember an interview that I took of Muhammad Yunus, this year's Nobel Laureate for Peace. It was 1998, and the interview was happening in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh. I asked him whether he thought that western experts working in the field of development in South Asia have a peculiar prism through which they look at things and, by implication, I wanted to hint that the prism distorted their vision. He replied that experts, western or South Asia were captives of the same prism because the knowledge universe of Indians too was the same as of modern west. May I add, because all sources of knowledge in the formal institutions of our world are either emanating in west or are being managed by the western academe.

In this context, internationalization, to me, will mean creating a knowledge universe that is developed with the many meandering paths between the metropolitan and the moffusil as its hinterland. We live in a world which is somewhat reinventing itself. So be it public health or micro-credit or rural development or urban planning, the world at large has to go beyond renaissance and industrial revolution Europe. It has to also think beyond the nation and the nation-state. Philosophies of higher education and its concomitant strategies are somewhat pivotal in the process of this re-invention. Sweden as well as other European countries could think of partnering with India and other similar non-western worlds to create a higher education world that is not a mono-universe. South Asia's role in the internationalization of higher education in Sweden can be as much its contribution of specific realities which are absent in the ordered worlds of the west, as its talents and idea-universes. It can be a step towards re-inventing a just world of knowledge which Sweden as well as Europe and South Asia in its non-western setting can take in tandem.

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