Interactive Session with Dr. Meenakshi Gopinath, Founder and Director of WISCOMP & Principal Emerita, Lady Shri Ram College, New Delhi, on the occasion of the 27th Lalit Doshi Memorial Lecture held on 27th August 2021

Moderator : Mr. Bharat Doshi

Invitee Panellists:

Dr. Rakesh Mohan **:** President and Distinguished Fellow, Centre for Social and Economic Progress, who is a renowned Indian economist. Formerly, he has been the Deputy Governor of the Reserve Bank of India for many years. He delivered the 5th Lalit Doshi Memorial Lecture in 1999

Ambassador Vijay Nambiar **:** Former Chief of Staff to the Secretary General of the United Nations. He is a Trustee of the Lalit Doshi Memorial Foundation. Ambassador Nambiar delivered the 13th Lalit Doshi Memorial Lecture in 2007

Mr. Bharat Doshi :

We have a panel here which will have its own questions and I also have on the screen before me several questions from the audience. We are conscious of the time available and Rakesh and Vijay, if you agree, we will first start with one question each from you and then I will pick up one or two questions from the audience and we will cover the question-and-answer session. So, Rakesh I suggest you start first.

Dr. Rakesh Mohan :

Thank you very much Bharat. And, let me first congratulate you Meenu, if I may, I cannot really address you as Dr. Meenakshi Gopinath. It's too difficult to do that. But really, my warmest congratulations, heartfelt congratulations for a very thoughtful, wise, scholarly, and eloquent lecture. You have really given us a great deal to think about and it will take me some time to absorb it when I read

your text. But I do have much to discuss with you on the role of our education, which we will have to do offline over a long, long, dinner. I will concentrate right now on just one broad issue. I was struck by the absence of emphasis on the function of higher education or university to engender scholarly and academic excellence and research, both among faculty and students. You have clearly, of course, with great justification, concentrated on the social function of the university in myriad of aspects, all well taken, whether it is to do with the aspects of inclusion, whether to do with gender diversity, whether it is promotion of democracy, dissent, etc., all of which of course I agree with. But what strikes me in a sense is that the countries with the highest gross enrolment ratio in higher education which you mentioned are China and United States, have also perhaps now the greatest universities in the world.

In the case of United States, earlier UK and Europe, Yale, Harvard, I mentioned Yale because that's where I got my BA, so I have to first mention Yale; Yale, Harvard, MIT, Stanford, etc., but now increasingly, Peking University, Tsinghua University, Fudan and others in China. Now my question is that one of the characteristics of great universities is that they are also elitist. They do, of course strive to equalise access, which was not the case in earlier times, but they do emphasise excellence in the faculty, importance of research, etc etc. One of the things you mentioned, of course, is the average small size of colleges in India. Of course, there are some universities that are huge, but there are small colleges.

That it is different from both China and the US, because you do need some reasonable size to get quality faculty, students, etc. So, there is a need for both excellence, emphasis on scholarship, open research, free research, academic independence, etc. and, of course, inclusion. It seems to me that the two leading countries in the world that is China and US seem to be doing that, but you completely sort of missed out on talking about scholarly excellence in India. I would say, of course, that one big change that has taken place last 20 years, which you mentioned, is a huge increase in quantity. But it does not seem there is any increase in quality. I can just give, as one measure, difference between China and India, that since I was at Yale university last five years or so, that the number of Ph.D. students from China at Yale, and I presume on average in US, there were five times the Ph.D. students from India, whereas there were equal number as MBA students and, one of the other issues which

perhaps there is not the time to go into, is the excessive privatization of our education in India, much more than United States, by the way. Your views, particularly college scholarship and academic excellence.

Dr. Meenakshi Gopinath :

Thank you, Rakesh. As usual an extremely, provocative and a very important question. And of course, you've raised this issue of quality. It is a vexed question and when we look at quality it remains a very elusive concept, especially in our context. Can we look at quality in isolation of inclusion? But we can leave that for our longer conversation over dinner. The new education policy has been very cognizant of this gap in what you call research. And they have recommended, given what's called the massification of higher education, that universities be divided into three tiers. The top tier, which they called the World Class Research University, which will concentrate precisely on sifting students who have the propensity and aptitude for research. Here we will also have to put our policies of admission under the scanner and be a little more open to a needs-blind policy. This exists, as you know, in Yale and Harvard, where the socio-economic background of the applicant does not come in the way of student aspiration.

Now the three tiers are as follows. Type 1 would-be world-class research and higher quality universities, type 2, high quality teaching across disciplines and with some research, and type 3, high quality teaching at the undergraduate program. There are several debates around this, whether you can actually hierarchise the space in this way. It is a very open debate right now. There are diverse perspectives. Can teaching happen without concomitant research? You have pointed to that. There is also the other phenomenon of the dumbing down of research, and you are probably aware of the prevalence of what is called"predator research", in India where you can pretty much get a PhD, (if you are willing to pay the price) on the basis of a 'ready-made thesis' that you can actually buy! However, let me not go there. Yes, I perhaps, should have addressed this issue more frontally, but I thought that I would focus on those that particularly resonated with me. How do we build a fecund 'research culture' in India – remains a critical issue to address.

The NEP, for example, has set up a whole array of bodies and programs (with impressive and innovative acronyms), to enhance the quality of research in

India. Several bodies that include the Higher Education Grants Council, the Mission Nalanda, Takshila, the National Higher Education Regulatory Authority, National Repository for Education Data, National Testing Agencies actually tasked to accelerate this process. There are also several schemes to encourage research.

As you know, you can have all the schemes in the world, but if at the level of the school, the interventions in terms of the quality of education are woefully inadequate as the ASER (Annual Status of Education Report) has said. The Foundations to build a knowledge economy, or to build research of value in higher education institutions, are extremely shaky. You know, by the time young people come into the higher education space, there are already severe shortcomings in terms of learning ability. It is far from a level playing field. You know what the ASER reports said about learning outcomes at school, I don't have to elaborate. So, putting the entire onus of responsibility on colleges and universities to conjure the rabbit out of the hat is somewhat, unfair. However, your point is well taken. Universities simply cannot have the competitive edge without quality research. I also feel that this obsession with becoming world class universities, is a little premature. We really need to build solid foundations of the knowledge base. We need to encourage original and critical thinking, end rote learning. We have to inculcate the scientific temper, that our Founding Fathers talked about. And then look at excellence not as antithetical to inclusion, but as integral to it. I don't know if I have answered your question but thank you for that comment. I will make sure that I read up more on this for our meeting offline.

Mr Bharat Doshi :

Vijay, your question now.

Ambassador Vijay Nambiar :

OK, thank you. Thank you Dr. Gopinath for your very, very deeply reflective yet scintillating and sometimes even searing analysis of the Expansive Academy and as has been said, it's covered more the University or the Academy as social institution. Let me take you a little more into what may be a current zone of engagement for you and that is your role in WISCOMP. WISCOMP (Women in Security, conflict Management and Peace) is more

than 20 years old, it started even before the Security Council Resolution 1325. It in many ways, anticipated much of the international debate on women and security and conflict management.

But I think after 20 years too, I suppose you still think it is a work in progress. It should be it, considering what you have said in your entire lecture today. How is WISCOMP today negotiating what you call the daily plebiscite? How is it going in terms of, it's working? Do you agree that it is not just the subcontinent, but also much needs to be done on building peace inside the country, and I wonder what you think? So, I want you to reflect on the continuing role of WISCOMP in furthering this quiet revolution you talked about in engendering the Academy. Thank you.

Dr. Meenakshi Gopinath :

Thank you, Vijay, and thank you also for pointing out that we came into being a year before the 1325 resolution and that was because I think in the South Asian region, although not adequately reflected in the global discourse, there were already movements led by women to establish trans versal solidarities around issues of conflict and security. In other words, they were already doing the WPS agenda even though it was not labelled as such, and today the discourse has tended to invisibilise the contribution of South Asian women as you well know. Thank you for mentioning the workshops that we did! You were a very important part of that evolution. I remember the scintillating discussions that you led, especially on the Indo-Pak composite dialogue among others. Maria Montessori had once said that all that governments can do is keep countries out of war. Building lasting peace is the work of education. So, in that context the Academy has a major role, especially today for our fractured planet.

Women's voices were truly marginalized in the formal official discussions on peace and security, because, by and large they entered peace building through the corridors of human security. As Mahbub ul Haq had said, 'human security is a child that did not die, a dissident who was not silenced, a disease that did not spread'; a conflict that did not explode into violence. It is not about weapons but about human dignity. So, it also involved inevitably, turning the conventional vocabulary on security on its head, wresting it out of its Realist moorings of security as a zero-sum game. You would also remember that, thanks to you I was a part of some Track Two dialogues between India and our

neighbours. I was struck by the fact that even though they were 'Track Two Processes',they were "thinking war and speaking peace" just like conventional security establishments. That basically they mirrored official positions on 'nationalist' even jingoistic agendas, defending some of the worst travesties against democratic values in our region. Now, therefore, there was a need to speak, as Carol Gilligan said, in a different voice and to look at the everyday mutinies and daily resistances that break these shibboleths; reflect, the subaltern concerns that not just women, but citizens at large face in what is known as "peacetime"war, a kind of continuum of conflict that exists in the land of Gandhi and the Buddha, where we unfortunately witness a very high level of ambivalence to violence. This is something that has become so normalized today.

So yes, building solidarities among young people transcending fault lines of class, caste, region and religion and gender is crucial. I do want to say that we at WISCOMP make it a policy to have at least a 33% reservation of men in all our initiatives and that is why we speak of' engendering' the security discourse and not ghettoising it. And we don't believe that men make war and women make peace or that women are "from Venus and men are from Mars". We don't want to reductivise that whole discourse but, yes, to look at the different layers of violence that exist within societies, across social groupings and to also to nurture young people to become deeply invested in believing in the cultures of coexistence is our aspiration. It is a fragile link; it is a difficult proposition today across the world, not just in the South Asian region. We are seeing shrill representations of new kinds of xenophobia, new kinds of demonization of social groups.

So as you said, the battle for freedom is never completely won and the field is never quiet. It will always remain a work in progress. But important it is to recognize that this new language, this new vocabulary, has to emerge from the younger generation because their reality is very different; the globe they inhabit is very different, borders and boundaries mean different things to them. Of course, there are new borders and boundaries of the mind, the mono-cultures of the mind that are asserting themselves, the monotheism of consciousness that threatens our global village. But can the old methods of recognizing context-specificity,the interconnectedness of roles and functions, again inform our systems of meaning? Can the non-linear ideas of time and

space, which is so unique to what you call South Asia, once again enter our consciousness?

So yes, it is a work-in-progress and thank you very much indeed. The encouragement of people like you who sat in the formal policy space and supported us at a time when it was not fashionable to speak about gender, peace, and security, really meant a great deal and gave it the fillip. Today rather than being invited to the last panel at any seminar on peace and security, I think we have inched up to the pre-lunch sessions. So that's saying a lot. Thank you!

If I may come back to Prof. Rakesh Mohan's question on research, I just did want to flag again that there are several initiatives that are being taken at the level of the new dispensation under NEP and you know, there are several aphorisms which will surprise you. One is called IMPRINT - which is called Impacting Research, Innovation and Technology, the other is IMPRESS - Impactful Policy Research in Social Sciences. Then there is STAR - Scheme to promote Transformational Advance in Research. Then there is SPARC - Scheme for Academic Research and Collaboration; there is GIAN - Global Initiative for Academic Networks. There is also STRIDE, Scheme for Trans-disciplinary Research for India as a Developing Economy and then, last but not least, there is CARE - Consortium for Academic Resilience and Ethics. So, there you are. There is a whole menu of initiatives, but so long as quality poses huge problems at the level of the school learners will always come hampered without the tools and predispositions for research. The Academy clearly has a huge gap to fill!

Mr. Bharat Doshi:

Thank you very much, both the panel members. Meenakshiji, it was a brilliant session. I will convey my personal thanks separately. I must apologise to the audience, due to time constraint, we cannot accommodate any more questions.

I will now have to handover the baton back to Ruby Pavri and would like to thank her before she passes it on further for vote of thanks. Ruby is the Head of the Department of Psychology at the St. Xavier's College, Mumbai, and she has been associated with the Lalit Doshi Memorial Foundation for more than 20 years.

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