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Interview   Rajendra S Pawar

" We need radical reforms in the education sector to ensure both quantity and quality. "

Rajendra Pawar, chairman of the Delhi-based NIIT, created a revolution in industry-linked education in the IT sector and grew the company into a leading global talent development corporation with over 8,700 centres in 40 countries and revenues of Rs 1,689 crores in 2009. Pawar and his fellow founders of NIIT have now taken the next big step: setting up the NIIT University, NU, a not-for-profit institution sponsored by NIIT at Neemrana in Rajasthan on a sprawling 100-acre fully residential campus. With its first academic session beginning from September 2009, NU offers PhD programmes in computer science and engineering, educational technology and bioinformatics and biotechnology, MTech programmes in computer science and engineering and educational technology and BTech programmes in computer science and engineering. In a wide ranging interview, Pawar, who is also the Pro-chancellor of NU, speaks to India Today Aspire about the crisis in higher education in India and why he set up NU. Excerpts:

Q. What is the crisis that higher education faces in India?

The problem in education is both of quality and quantity. In higher education our gross enrolment ratio is only 11 per cent versus 40 per cent plus in developed countries. So, we have a huge gap as this statistic shows. If you look at the Eleventh Plan document, the government has increased its spend five times compared to the Tenth Plan. Yet we are getting only one-eighth of what we really need for higher education. Compare this with the fact that every year will Indian students studying abroad, India is remitting 4.5 billion dollars - four times what our Eleventh Plan spend would be.

Q. What about the quality of education?

In quality there are four specific dimensions that I want to highlight. One is that the studies show that not even one out of four graduates is employable. There is a mismatch in what the industry needs and what the universities are creating. Second, where are the teachers and particularly when you are asking for an increase in student enrolment? We have a tremendous shortage of teachers. Third, India of today is very different from India of 1989. We were not creating any intellectual property because ours was a closed economy. Now we are at the nano and IT stage where India has to generate new ideas and concepts. Without research we cannot develop. We are short of PhDs and we need more than 100 times the number we are producing. Finally, and this is not only an Indian problem, the way education has evolved worldwide is that we break things into compartments and specialisations. This is what is termed as tunnel vision of our graduates that doesn't help integration - whereas in today's knowledge society everything is about integration. So we have to completely change the basis on which teaching is done.

Q. How can we meet the demand and at the same time improve the quality of higher education?

There are two things. We have to go through massive reforms and education is the last bastion of reform. But we need to balance it with a need for inclusivity. We have to do reform keeping inclusivity in mind, otherwise we will have a very different kind of a social pressure. The poorest of poor can't be left out or you will have a

divide in the society which would be insurmountable. So the first thing needed is liberalisation which means ease of entry, exit and operations for new players wanting to set up educational institutions. Regulation should only ensure a level playing field. That is it! Everything else should be left for the consumer to make a choice. Second is privatisation. Here my view is that we have a few hundred government universities out of which only a handful count. We choose these few and convert them into world class universities. And the remaining that are badly run, underfinanced and impart poor quality education should be privatised so that their problems could be adequately addressed.

Q. The other issue is relating education to the jobs available and to the needs of the industry. What needs to be done for that?

Industry-linked is the term I like to use. Now employers have virtually no say in how education is imparted and that is simply because the only entity

the link. We have been running the GNIIT programme for the last twenty years. On any given day there are 25,000 young students who are doing the GNIIT and who are working in about 3,000 companies for one year on a stipend as trainees and learning how industry works before they finish the programme. The second dimension is technology-based. It does not mean that you can replace the teacher because you can never replace the teacher. It is looking at the role technology can play to leverage a teacher much like the way technology assists a doctor or a lawyer, engineer or a chef. The only profession in which the professional is working the way they did 300 years ago with a chalk and board is teaching.

Q. What are the other dimensions that you wanted NU to be a beacon?

The third dimension is a research-based approach. So on our campus we have set aside 25 acres out of 100 for incubators. So that the faculty and the

the more they realise what they want to do and that is how it should be. It is more natural. They migrate to their areas of strengths and learn physics alongside music, alongside arts, alongside languages and so on and get a little more ready for the knowledge society.

Q. What needs to be done on the job related or vocational sector? NIIT set an example in IT – what about other sectors?

You may be aware that the prime minister chairs the Skill's Mission council - which incidently I am a member. It has to deal with the problem that precedes higher education, which is that not everyone has to go to college. So some people may prefer at the end of class 10 or 12 to work for sometime. Today, the thing is that if you get off that train you can never get in again. It is a fundamental flaw. We have to permit people who have worked for some years after class 10 or 12 to get back to higher education. Our system currently does not permit it. Nor does it recognise the value of

" People who work for a few years after high school must be allowed to get back to college. Now if you get off the train you can't get in again. "

which regulates and fully controls education is the government and they have left no space for anyone else. We have to create new examples which show how industry and academia can work. That's the experiment we are trying at NIIT University (NU).

Q. What are the main reasons behind setting up NU?

We want to set an example basically on four dimensions for which we have to be a beacon. One of them is to be industry-linked. Now as a company NIIT has served for 28 years and we are putting all that knowledge in this not-for-profit university. Interestingly for us, industry base is

students can work within the same campus and create a world of work which is integrated to the world of studies. It will create a vibrant environment for research. This research can be converted into economic value and that can support the research of the university, it can support faculty. The fourth is to correct this tunnel vision. We use the word seamless. In education today we have forgotten how to do integration. Integrative learning is what we are proposing. We don't have departments, we only have overlapping areas. So therefore the students come in, choose their electives, and move their path as they uncover what they want to do and the more they learn the more they grow,

the skill acquired in the process which it should. So there is a radical reform required in the policy of skill development, so that a much larger number of people will get off the train after class 12 to work for sometime before they come back, particularly if they have to earn enough to pay back for the higher education. Today, unfortunately, the path tends to be brahminical in culture. If you get off that path, you are a shudra for life. We do not respect a skill, which is the real problem. This I guess harks back to the past of the caste system. So on the skills policy we need some changes and finally I think we are now moving forward.