Creating
the India brand
in education

Firstly, the success that India has achieved in demonstrating its abilities in IT application and IT enabled services, so much so that it is seen as the most preferred destination for IT enabled business processes outsourcing. This is so in spite of its lagging in hardware, almost no significant quantum of owned software, absence of a software patents regime and a general lack of high-end developmental initiatives.

Prof. M. M. Pant

We have recently seen in the media the huge recognition that the IIT brand has now had in the US and in the rest of the world as well. This is a result of several path breaking measures that were taken in the early sixties, whose benefits we are now harvesting.

There have been expressions of hope and sometimes concern from almost the entire world that India has the potential of becoming the world's leading supplier of education. This is based on two major observations.

Firstly, the success that India has achieved in demonstrating its abilities in IT application and IT enabled services, so much so that it is seen as the most preferred destination for IT enabled business processes outsourcing. This is so in spite of its lagging in hardware, almost no significant quantum of owned software, absence of a software patents regime and a general lack of high-end developmental initiatives.

The other is the command and fluency over English for which we again have a significantly large numerical population, despite the fact that several states are discouraging English for school education. Since large parts of the higher growth economies need both English education as well as IT enabled applications, India is well suited to achieve success as the leading supplier of these. In a sense, it is a reminiscent of the Japanese in the Industrial Age, who in spite of not having the ores and raw materials became very successful in making steel and other products.

However, as a colleague of mine argued that only when the statistical mean and the mode of the Indian achievers reaches greater heights that the India brand will become valuable.

In my opinion, one component of the answer is that the stellar achievements are because of individual excellence and the mediocrity is because of the state's non-chalant approach. It is of course true that these individuals have often benefited from the State created infra-structure, but for most people, it is a low quality system with inconsistent quality of delivery.

If we recall the past track record of the Industrial and services sector, there was a sea-change in the quality of Indian products when the reforms process opened them to global opportunities and competition. All in

all, it has been beneficial to the consumer.

We need a similar reform in education and some fundamental thinking on moving ahead fast with the sole object of the citizen's welfare. While the Government should be pro-active in thinking and developmental of standards, it should not be limited by its ability in its execution. Because in its execution, it unleashes the full potential of the weapons of mass destruction, that now only the Government is legally allowed to own.

We have seen the importance of the outsourcing model in achieving organizational efficiency in world-wide operations. What I suggest here is less Government involvement in operational

execution and the creation of what some people have called an 'in-sourcing' model with NGO participation, which may be not only not for profit organizations, but for others as well.

We need to have a re-look at the current proposition supported by Supreme Court pronouncements that profit organizations should not participate in the education processes. This is obviously having the result that the citizen cannot directly invest in education. If IT companies can make profits, pharmaceuticals can make profits, if citizens can invest in hospitals, liquor companies and hotels and entertainment business; there is no logical reason as to why they should not be allowed to invest their surplus wealth in the educational

infrastructure. They can actually invest up to US$25000under the new regime internationally, but not so within India. Does it remind you of discrimination in India against Indians...Indians and dogs not allowed. If making residential buildings and shopping complexes can be encouraged, why not encourage investment in the creation of educational infra-structure. There must be a framework to regulate the quality and, of course, eventually it is competition that will drive standards.

Apart from driving away possible investments in education, the State is doing so many other things to dilute or even destroy the India Education Brand. While there are numerous examples of this, but two recent ones deserve a special mention, namely the decision to sack a large number of NIT

Directors in one go and removing the Chairman of UGC on the ground that the appointments had a legal problem. In both cases, the concerned persons did not do anything with respect to processing their own appointments and the entire processing was done by the Ministry officials. They were duty-bound to seek the best legal advice. The administrators are expected to be senior members of the IAS and

are not expected to be irresponsible. The persons appointed must have had good reputations, having held high academic positions and these are all destroyed with complete disregard to the effect on the branding of the Institutes. The NIT's are premier Institutes of technology, only a step behind the IIT's. The UGC is the apex body for education, trying to oversee a system of higher education, which is among the largest in the world.

While the Prime Minister, who has himself been the Chairman of UGC is compelled to retain ministers who have been charged in criminal cases. He does not seem to care enough for maintaining the dignity of the major Institution and its Chairman.

The approach should not be to seek legal advice and use the machinery of the State to remove a particular person through an obvious ventriquolism through a Public Interest Litigation but to find ways and means to see that the Institution functions effectively. It is quite interesting that another former Chairman of the UGC, who filed a PIL because some Universities were trying to function without seeking grants from UGC, is also not vocal in the media when the office of the Chairman of UGC is itself being defiled. How will a future incumbent of the post of Chairman, UGC indemnify himself against the incompetency in the processing by ministry officials and which self-respecting academic will accept such an appointment where the appointing authority itself does not take responsibility for its actions. And what happened to the good old principle of 'estoppel'.I know the courts ruling that there is no 'estoppel' against statute, but what about 'estoppel' against executive action. In any case, even if the rule regarding three terms limitation in the UGC has been violated, what is the damage? Whose rights have been violated? At the most of an imaginary other individual who was denied this opportunity where the rule was held against him. Did this

happen for the applicant in the PIL. I do not know, but seems extremely unlikely that he would have filed a petition within the usual 90 days of the appointment.

This is why, reforms are urgently needed in education. We need to create a pool of independent professionals in education, so that they can provide the necessary inputs, advice and directions for educational policy, which is otherwise being totally guided by loyal officials and pliant academics.

This reminds one of the titles of a recent book by Arun Shourie, namely, 'Will the Iron Fence Save a Tree Hollowed by Termites?'

Our people have become very reticent and passive, but if we do not get up and fight for our education, you will have shlokas being sent over your cell-phones by a company from Finland; private for profit universities from Shanghai attracting your students who normally go to IIT; the IIT's and NIT's being run like schools by the Municipality, design being taught by Institutes from Korea, hospitality from Switzerland, tourism by Mauritius, management by USA and so on.

To progress further, we need to break new ground as we did five decades earlier to achieve our future goals. But will Shastri Bhawan