

Visioning a Developmental University Experiments and Challenges in Sikkim

Valedictory Address by

Mahendra Lama,
Founder Vice Chancellor,
Sikkim Central University

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Visioning a Developmental University

Experiments and Challenges in Sikkim - Valedictory Address

Mahendra Lama, Founder Vice Chancellor, Sikkim Central University.

The Sikkim University launched in 2007 as perhaps the last in the line of the new Central Universities, which were to be set up in under-served areas. The mission of the University is academic and research excellence while maintaining an inclusive institutional character and being a strong instrument of regional development and cross border integration. The University is expected to contribute substantively to the nation building process by mobilizing the rich intellectual heritage of the region, galvanizing the academic fervour and creative instincts of youth, developing agencies of regional development and cross border integration and interaction. To this end, the University expects to attract students and faculty members from both within India, abroad particularly from the neighbouring countries including Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, Myanmar, Thailand and Nepal.

It inherited about 11 colleges from the earlier North Bengal University, which were in a bad shape and went about streamlining their curriculum, modernizing the academic resources like library, teaching staff and mentoring them as well as motivating the students and their parents with special sessions and events to celebrate the achievements of students. The colleges have moved from traditional annual system to a more scientific semester system and credit based grading from July 2008 session.

With respect to curriculum, besides the usual course contents, the Curriculum Designing Committee seeks to ensure that the theory is accompanied by adequate citation of local and regional knowledge and that 40% is given for practical and field based study or training modules with presentations and interactive classroom discussions on relevant major issues. The emphasis is also on inter-disciplinary research techniques and learning methods.

The University has developed an excellent library, which is fully automated and cross referenced, and also have advanced digital archives and digital access facilities. Faculty and Students are motivated to use the library, with awards for maximum use. The University has an academic journal "Teesta" and a University Press. The Internal Quality assurance Cell (IQAC) has been established in the University with facilities for plagiarism check.

Sikkim University has developed three distinct inter-disciplinary academic programmes: Conventional Programmes, Non-conventional Programmes and Policy Studies Programme. Besides the plethora of schools and centres on different subjects, the University has developed several non conventional schools. An important one is the School of Indigenous and Folk studies as Sikkim has a rich tradition of knowledge which needs to be documented and developed. As a fragile ecological region affected by power projects, and impacted by climate change, the School of Sustainable Development and Livelihood Management has its developmental task cut out in the areas of livelihood, indigenous people, disaster management etc. Being surrounded by neighbouring countries, the School of Peace, Conflict and Human Security Studies, seeks to address larger national interests while directly relating them to regional and local issues. For example the University took up a study of potential trade with the Tibetan region following which these trade routes were actually opened.

Some of the innovative non academic semi-academic programmes include an oral history project. The subjects taken up are disaster management, traditional medicinal practices, mountain agriculture, water, traditional food, Nathula Trade route etc. There is also a community radio project. The university also has a heritage museum and archive. There is also a winter sojourn programme which

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has a compulsory field visits for all faculty members and students for 10-15 days in winter vacation and a community radio project.

In the policy studies programme, the Sikkim University has been in collaboration with United Nations University (Tokyo), Food and Agricultural Organization and other such bodies. They have also initiated cross-border dialogues with neighbouring countries. It has also taken up studies related to current issues like climate change, worked with the Glaciology Commission of the state government, and has signed MOUs with several universities abroad.

As part of its contribution to the development of the region, the University has participated in the development of the North East Region Vision 2020 document, and written the Sikkim Development Report 2008, as well as contributed to the 11th plan appraisal of the Sikkim and Mizoram Planning Commission.

The Campus has been developed keeping in mind the environmental sensibilities and the cultural heritage of the region. The infrastructure is also earthquake proof. The main idea is to develop institutions that will speak a development politics by its action. Sikkim University is trying to build a transparent, accountable and result oriented management system with best management and accounting practices e governance, fortnightly reviews, staff motivation surveys, multi-tasking and individual accountability and zero corruption tolerance.

While developing the University it has had to face many challenges. The first one is that of remoteness of location and absence of communication. While finding creative ways out of these, one often confronted resistance from the bureaucracy as well as the political leadership. They expected the University to be a quiet timid place, but we wanted the university to be the fountainhead of a critical mass of change, which would impact the under-development dynamics in that country. As a so called backward region the North East would be given money, but institution building was neglected, which then enabled local vested interest to rule the roost. The challenge is to build a National University, which is national in character and interest, but with local content and local ethos. This along with the attempt to build a transparent institution faced resistance from many vested interests. The North East is bounded to the extent of 99% by other countries, and therefore an important development mission is to create linkages, which would help the nation building process. This is particularly important in the age of climate change especially as we are situated in an ecologically fragile geography. There is a rich knowledge base that needs to be protected like the traditional intellectual property of medical knowledge. In this context, the Challenge is to change a "security-centric border policy, into one which is full of opportunities. This is the development orientation of the Sikkim University.

Shambu: Are the challenges because you have a development vision which is different, or because you have a young faculty or because the demand is high or that there is resistance to change.

Lama: The main challenge is to address the issues institutionally, rather than somehow getting the work done bypassing the institutional issues. This is important because true change will take place only when the institutional aspects are addressed. Whether it was sticking to principles as far as bank accounts are concerned, or resisting bureaucratic interference in appointments or the insistence of rationalizing institutional blocks like changing the rules for the inner line permits, the University has been able to set the standards by raising these issues institutionally so that the system is forced to respond and change.

Foxia: What you say resonate as even in J & K, the Govt is channeling money, but not doing institution building.

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Lama: We needed to attract good faculty. We had a good experience, as we offered freedom and independence to the best academicians to set up their centres and departments. We got three Indian graduates from Oxford and two from Germany and many from JNU to set up there. We need to celebrate the idea of higher education, and create a critical mass for it. The political leadership is not interested in this as their children are studying elsewhere. So they have no vested interest in developing education. For example we have 29 hydel projects in Teesta, but not a single hydrologist. This is where inclusivity of development comes about; otherwise we will only be giving degrees.