

Leadership Talk with Dr. Vinay Sahasrabuddhe

Date: April 16th, 2020

Time: 11:00 AM

Speakers:

- **Dr Abhay Jere, the CIO of MHRD Innovation Cell, Govt. of India**
- **Dr Vinay Sahasrabuddhe, the President of ICCR**

Brief description of the discussion:

Dr. Abhay Jere, the Chief Innovation Officer of Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) Innovation Cell, Government of India, began the discussion by introducing to the viewers the various “hats” Dr. Vinay Sahasrabuddhe dons: President of ICCR, Vice President of Rambhau Mhalgi Prabodhini and Head of Public Policy Research Centre. He described him as being “an intellectual, thought-leader and administrator”, who also playing a significant role in framing the New Educational Policy of MHRD, being a member of the Parliamentary Committee on Education.

The first question from Dr Abhay asked for an elaboration on the online platform “I-CAN” (an initiative by Rambhau Mhalgi Prabodhini) and the role it is playing in helping the distressed during the COVID-19 crisis. Answering this, Dr Vinay first touched upon the innovation behind the idea of I-CAN and how it struck “long back”. He informed the viewers about the role it is playing in helping the migrant labourers staying in large cities like Delhi, by providing them food, shelter and counselling, for which various people, including psychiatrists have come forward. The platform connects the “help-seekers” with the “help-givers”, while the volunteers play the role of preventing digital divide from obstructing the noble cause. He talked about the encouraging response the initiative has got, notably from the Union Minister from Odisha (Mr Pratap Sarangi) and the NITI Aayog. Even foreigners have donated and Dr Vinay is optimistic that the initiative will continue to function, even after the crisis.

Dr Abhay then enquired about Dr Vinay’s opinion on India’s influence on soft power’s global scenario. Dr Vinay explained how the term originated in ‘90s, with Dr Joseph Nye being the coiner of the term. He explained how in international relations, post second world war, every country realised that influencing the global society requires intellectual and emotional transactions, and not military power solely. That’s the definition of soft power.

He gave an example of soft power’s demonstration: the “Americanisation” of urban centres around the globe, Tel Aviv (“Hebrew America”) and Beijing (“Mandarin America”) for instance. He also threw light on why Delhi isn’t Hindi America: because of the “Indianness” remaining intact. He described why India’s modern history is, in a way, entirely based on soft power (the discovery of India was for spices, which was an expression of our soft power).

He also described how *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* is an intrinsic component of our philosophy and international relations, since ancient times. He hailed our “ethics, mythology, *Purans*, *Shastras*, art forms, classical music and dances and even Bollywood movies” are ingredients of our soft power. He

stressed on the fact that the people of India, though, are the single most important ingredient and, on this count, we have “much to gather”.

Dr Abhay asked next, how soft power’s relevance is going to increase, with a changed world order, due to India handling COVID-19 crisis much better compared to Western Countries? Dr Vinay reiterated the role of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* in our humanitarian approach to such global crisis. He talked about diplomatic importance of extending help to other countries during such tough times and how, this is the “Track Zero” and the “Gangotri” (point of origination) of international relations.

He praised India’s incumbent Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi, for “walking his talk” in this crisis, by lifting the ban on export of certain drugs, which have proved to be helpful for countries like US, Israel and Brazil. He further said, that the spirit of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* makes India other countries feel they are not alone, in such difficult times and that, is of “utmost” importance.

Dr Abhay asked next, how ICCR works on increasing India’s soft power? Dr Vinay began with mentioning India’s uniqueness, which has made “every corner of the globe” curious about us. He gladly proclaimed that this curiosity has been replaced with goodwill over the years, which is the reason Indians do not face violence in other countries. He talked about his experience in a turmoiled Afghanistan two decades back, where people would initially mistake them for Pakistanis and interrogate them but, upon knowing their real nationality, “smiled and shook hands”.

He said that we enjoy this goodwill all around the world, from “Vietnam to Russia” and from “China to Latin America”. He elaborated upon ICCR’s task next, which is to ensure that this goodwill translates to understanding of the Indian Philosophy, which keeps the “enigmatic” country together, despite its diversity, challenges like poverty and a burgeoning population. Academic efforts are exerted and, once people understand the aforementioned India’s Philosophy, our soft power will increase manifold, according to him.

Dr Abhay raised a popular question next: what can India do to ensure our philosophy is understood in the West, where our image is governed by theories like Aryan Invasion theory and films like *Slumdog Millionaire*?

Dr Vinay began his answer by talking about the “misperception” first, which is substantiated by evils like our social system and caste system, which exist today as well. He said that we must show the West that these are evils which we are trying to overcome and, the Indian Constitution and our age-old view on world demonstrate that only. Promotion of social justice has been our philosophy, which needs to be promoted. He stressed upon our original thinking of rejecting social discrimination. Even on gender, he noted, that we have had female protagonists like *Gargi* and *Maitri*. These, he said, need showcasing.

He explained the reason of this misperception next: the Eurocentric influence on academia. He expounded why sending “thousands” of software technicians won’t suffice though and all that we can do is to be done through academia and open material classes. Eventually, he opined, sectors like tourism will play a huge role in achieving this, since, “to know India, experiencing it” is of prime importance.

He illustrated two examples next, which showed what the people in the west think about India and its people. The first was about a German student, whom he had met in Berlin two decades back. He

had come to India but was displeased due to the “rule-breakers, filth and disorder.” Quite surprisingly, he had extended his stay to thirty days, from ten. When asked for the reason of doing so, he talked about the “glitter” in eyes of Indians, which no European possessed. The glitter signified the aspirations of the Indians while people back home, weren’t so.

The second example was about an Indian friend of theirs, who taught in an American school. Few years back, he had a fifteen-year-old student who would routinely doze off. In spite of warnings and interrogations, he wouldn’t change his habit. Finally, one day, he exclaimed, “Teaching is your job, listening to it or not is my liberty!” He was left speechless, keeping in mind the environment of individuality but, he didn’t stop communicating with him.

Eventually, the boy let out his family crisis, where his new father didn’t permit him to stay at home. Since he had to live at a hostel, he had to pay, the means for which were generated by working as a dishwasher at a McDonald’s outlet till 3:00 AM in the morning. This left him short on sleep and hence, he would pass out in the class. The boy ended with one line, “You asked me all this only because you are an Indian. No American teacher would have pursued this much, since they regard that as breach of an individual’s right to privacy.”

The two instances were also an indicator of an Indian’s “strong” Emotional Quotient, which makes us reach out to people in distress.

Dr Abhay had his last question: For achieving all that we talked about, it is important that foreign students come to India and study, which doesn’t happen as much as we would like. What could be the possible reason behind that?

Dr Vinay began his answer by mentioning statistics: India is the twenty-sixth largest study destination and the third largest source for students going abroad for higher education and quite clearly, this large gap needs to be removed. This can be done if all types of higher institutions- private and public (including IITs and management institutes) – work to improve the quality of education they provide. He yearned for a “concerted effort” from all departments, so that India becomes a hub for higher education.

He also asked for a change in mindset: for example, Ayurveda is termed inferior indirectly, when Allopathy is referred to as “Modern Medicine”. This, he said, should be changed, since a lot of research is conducted in the field of Ayurveda as well. He called for a strategic and time-bound approach for bolstering the understanding of India and its philosophy. He accepted that time taken will undoubtedly be large.

He informed about one such programme which ICCR has implemented: “Understanding India”. Through this, forms are distributed among foreign students, and, a provision to “Visit India” is also available, which will give the applicants a chance to live in Indian families since, according to him, living in a family is the best way to know that society.

He urged some people to change their mindset regarding of such programmes: taking foreigners to a Bharatnatyam performance, for instance, isn’t enough. We must endeavour to make them understand that a dance form is a relation between an individual and the Almighty. Art-forms are connotations of philosophy, which must be understood, to the visitors.

The session thus concluded on an optimistic note, with Dr Abhay hoping that via Dr Vinay's views and endeavours on soft power, India will thus move forward in the global community.



Promotional Poster of the Leadership Talk, released by Dr Abhay Jere



The discussion in progress, between Dr Abhay Jere and Dr Vinay Sahasrabudde