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### **On U.S. Visit, India's Education Minister Presses for More Involvement by American Universities**

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Washington

In an unusually aggressive effort to build alliances with American universities, India's education minister traveled to the United States last week for extensive discussions on how the United States could more deeply engage with India.

Kapil Sibal, who, just a few months into office, has positioned himself as both a blunt critic of India's education system and an ardent advocate of educational reform and global engagement, told American officials that he sees the United States as playing a critical role in those efforts.

In a speech at Georgetown University here on Thursday, Mr. Sibal described what he termed the "daunting" challenges facing India. It will become the most populous country in the world by 2015, he said, and now has some 220 million students enrolled in primary and secondary education.

But just 10 million students now go on to college. To be economically competitive, he argued, India must become a "producer of knowledge."

Within 10 years, Mr. Sibal said, he hopes 30 percent of students will go on to college, but he noted that the Indian higher-education system does not have the capacity to admit all those students.

The government of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, which replaced a more conservative education minister with Mr. Sibal this year, has ambitious plans to rapidly expand and reform India's higher-education system.

Mr. Sibal said those plans include building 14 new "innovation" universities. He also said India should expand vocational education and needed "thousands" of community colleges.

"I do believe I have this opportunity at a time when India is ready for change. But the challenges are daunting," Mr. Sibal told the Georgetown audience. "But it's the challenge that excites me."

Mr. Sibal—whose formal title is minister for human-resource development—spent a week in the United States, beginning in New York to meet with the president of the New York Academy of Sciences and Indian-American academics.

From there he traveled to Boston for meetings with the presidents of Harvard and Boston Universities, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and members of their faculties.

He also traveled to Yale University and to Washington, where he met with the presidents of Georgetown and Duke Universities, and held discussions with U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, and other federal officials, including Judith A. McHale, the State Department's under secretary for public diplomacy and public affairs.

Several of those who met with Mr. Sibal said that they came away impressed by his directness and his intelligence, and that, while he acknowledged that much hard work lies ahead, he was clearly committed to opening the doors, and reducing barriers, to many types of collaboration.

#### **'A Paradigm Shift'**

In an interview with *The Chronicle* on Friday, Mr. Sibal, who was visibly tired, estimated he had given 15 speeches in the past six days. That morning he had participated in a round-table discussion with more college officials, including representatives of two community colleges, and others.

He said India needs alliances with many types of institutions, from research universities to distance-education providers, if it hopes to bring more students into higher education and to tackle many of the critical issues facing both India and the world. India, he added, is no longer interested in being the beneficiary of foreign largess, but in being an equal partner in the creation of new educational opportunities.

"This visit is not about replication," he said. "It's about a paradigm shift in our long-term collaboration."

He said he was concerned that there may be some misunderstanding among education providers here over what the Indian government will allow them to do.

Institutions will be able to make a profit if they choose to offer programs in the country, he said, but that profit must be reinvested into the enterprise, not siphoned off by shareholders. Foreign institutions will also be subject to different oversight than will domestic ones.

In speeches and concept papers he provided along the way, Mr. Sibal described as one of the cornerstones of India's development the creation of what he called innovation universities. These institutions will be given complete autonomy over academics and will not be subject to some of the regulatory oversight that now exists for Indian institutions. Mr. Sibal has been critical of the myriad regulatory agencies that now oversee Indian higher education and has promised to reform that system.

#### **A Different Model for India**

In his interview with *The Chronicle*, Mr. Sibal said it was not up to him to define the nature of those new institutions. Some could be fully foreign-owned. Others could be collaborations between foreign and domestic partners. But whatever they do should be expressly designed to fit India's needs.

"I have no expectation for, say, a university like MIT to build an MIT in India. That doesn't make sense. Because the nature of the problems confronting people in India are entirely different from the nature of the problems confronting people in the United States of America."

He characterized the response he received from American universities to this concept as "extremely positive."

"For the first time I get the sense that at this end people have started understanding this is an area in which there are huge challenges and huge opportunities," he said. "Huge opportunities for foreign education providers and for investors in industry because many of these solutions can only be brought about through industry-university partnerships."

He dismissed potential concerns over the financing of such institutions. He said the Indian government does not lack for money. And foreign providers interested in working in India "have to bring in the money."

Still, he added, "We're not looking for grants from American universities. We want to be equal partners."

Mr. Sibal's tour was designed in part to lay the groundwork for a visit later this month by Mr. Singh, the prime minister.

"Since India is a strategic partner, we want to see how we can work together in higher education to address global issues we face, like clean energy and global warming," said Alina L. Romanowski, deputy assistant secretary for academic programs at the State Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, who participated in one of the meetings Mr. Sibal held in Washington.

Ms. Romanowski said the meeting was an important part of the India-U.S. "strategic dialogue" announced by Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton and the Indian minister of external affairs in July, of which education was one element.

Last week's meeting was a great opportunity for both sides to discuss what they're looking for in partnerships and to describe their priorities, said Ms. Romanowski. "It's very much a continuing dialogue," she said.

Mr. Sibal said he hoped to have formed a new India-U.S. education council by the time Mr. Singh arrives to help further educational collaborations between the two countries.

#### **Aspirations vs. Specifics**

University officials who met with Mr. Sibal said that discussions focused mainly on determining common interests.

Richard H. Brodhead, president of Duke, not only met privately with Mr. Sibal, but attended an embassy dinner for the minister, and was part of a group that met with Mr. Sibal and Secretary Duncan. He called Mr. Sibal "very smart, very serious."

Mr. Brodhead noted that Duke is already deeply engaged in India. Its business school has an [Indian presence](#), and its public-policy and global-health programs are active in the country.

On a theoretical level, Duke is also interested in the problem posed by Mr. Sibal, of how to create new and innovative models of higher education that are cross-disciplinary and focus on concrete solutions to real-world problems, Mr. Brodhead said.

What role Duke will play is not yet clear. Mr. Brodhead characterized the conversation as "longer on aspirations than on specifics," but he said Duke officials would discuss how the university might work with counterparts in India.

George Joseph, an assistant secretary for international affairs at Yale, said Mr. Sibal's visit to the campus included practical sessions for the Indian delegation on building up Indian universities.

### **Awaiting Specifics**

One session focused on developing world-class science and engineering research, while another was on recruiting and developing top faculty members.

As with Duke, Mr. Joseph said, it was not clear what role Yale might play in expanding higher education. But it was clear that Mr. Sibal envisioned a variety of roles for foreign universities, Mr. Joseph said, from acting as mentors to new Indian institutions to setting up their own campuses in the country.

"It was very, very exploratory at this point," he said, adding that Yale's president, Richard C. Levin, was there "more to listen than to offer up anything yet."

But he said that Mr. Levin, who had pre-existing plans to visit India in early November, expected to hold further discussions with Mr. Sibal during his trip.

University officials also would need to take time to consider what sort of role Yale might be able to play, although Mr. Joseph said Mr. Sibal was "fairly aggressive" in his efforts.

For Yale, such partnerships would be consistent with its ambitions to build further connections in India. Last year, the university announced an ambitious [multimillion-dollar effort](#) to expand its course offerings and faculty expertise in India as well as increase student recruitment, research partnerships, and faculty and student exchanges.

Following his talk at Georgetown, Mr. Sibal met with professors, students, and interested community members. The audience was largely supportive, breaking into spontaneous applause at several points, but not hesitant to pose sharp questions. Dolly Oberoi, an Indian-born founder of an e-learning company in suburban Washington, said her family had started a foundation whose goal is to educate poor but promising Indian students. But she said her efforts had gotten caught up in red tape and bureaucracy.

"It's a question of, how do you get from Point A to Point B," Ms. Oberoi said. "Regulations change. It's always a moving target."

Mr. Sibal acknowledged the regulatory hurdles in India and said he hoped to reform the system, as well as set up an accreditation system free from government interference.

J.P. Singh, an associate professor of communication, culture, and technology at Georgetown, recalled his own struggles learning "without chairs, without proper teachers" at a government school.

When he returns to the village where his mother still lives, he said, he worries that he doesn't see "a sense of hope."

Mr. Sibal, who said he was also educated in such schools, senses a brighter outlook in India. Enacting the changes he proposes will not happen overnight, but, he said, he was optimistic that Indian higher education could move forward.

"I think India is going through a metamorphosis," he said, "and hope is what is carrying us forward."