

A winning proposal

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India and the US have agreed to strengthen their existing partnership in areas, such as science and engineering, social sciences and humanities



US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton

Led by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and India Minister of Human Resources and Development Kapil Sibal, a group of high-level government officials, educators and college administrators from the United States and India brainstormed here On October 13 about taking their educational relations to the next level.

The first ever “US-India higher education summit,” held at one of Washington’s best-known academic institutions, Georgetown University, did not grab as much headlines as some other bilateral events have in recent times. But that does not diminish the historic nature of the dialogue, and the immense potential the collaboration in the field has for both countries.

The lack of buzz around the summit was hardly surprising. While high-profile presidential and prime ministerial visits and accords, such as the US-India civil nuclear deal, get the credit for advancing ties, one of the best-kept secrets in the bilateral relations is the centrality of the role educational exchanges — especially those from India to here — played in bringing the two nations closer.

At the moment, a 100,000 Indian students are enrolled at US universities. Over the years, American schools have graduated more than a million Indians, many of whom made the US their home, making huge contributions to this country’s economy and acting as unofficial ambassadors of India here.

It is also hard to find a US educational institution which doesn’t have a sizable number of Indians among its faculty, teaching and mentoring America’s young generation.

That is why it is not too far-fetched to say that the Indian alumni of US educational institutions are responsible for initiating large-scale people-to-people relations between the two nations. Before they started arriving on these shores in significant numbers in the 1960s and ’70s, Americans had scant interaction with Indians.

From the US perspective, its schools have trained generations of Indian political and business leaders. Several stalwarts of the current Indian cabinet are graduates of American universities.

Sibal, who also holds communication and information technology portfolio, graduated from Harvard Law School, while Home Ministry P. Chidambaram, is a graduate of Harvard Business School. External Affairs Minister S.M. Krishna counts two American schools as his alma maters, Southern Methodist University and George Washington University. Minister of Rural Development Jairam Ramesh and Minister of Railways Dinesh Trivedi are also American-educated.

But as several participants of the education summit pointed out, the US-India educational collaboration is about the future. It has the potential to transform India, the US and the world, by educating and empowering the Indian youth in unimaginable numbers.

As Sibal said, more than a hundred million young Indians are expected to join the labour force in this decade and, this extraordinary demographic dividend can be leveraged only if this workforce is provided with quality education and taught the relevant skills to remain competitive in the global economy.

To achieve that goal, India is planning to double its gross college enrolment rate to 30 per cent in the next 10 years. That would mean sending an additional 30 million kids to college, which would require, according to the minister, 1,000 more universities and 50,000 more colleges, not to mention more than a million faculty members.

This is where the US comes into the picture. Until now America's biggest role in transforming the Indian education — other than the help it provided in founding elite Indian schools such as Indian Institute of Technology Kanpur and Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad — was attracting Indian students here.

But what India now needs is help with setting up more quality institutions such as these two. And the US, the undisputed leader in the field of higher education, has the wherewithal to help India on this.

America's 4,200 odd centres of higher learning are the reason the country continues to be the pre-eminent political, economic and military power in the world. It is not just the Harvards, the Stanfords and the MITs that produce world-class research and cutting-edge innovations, hundreds of state schools across the country are equally responsible for pioneering work in many fields.

On October 13, the two sides agreed to strengthen their existing partnership in several areas, such as science and engineering, social sciences and humanities, forge partnership in "vocational education" and "skills enhancement," and explore new models for education, among other things. Individual Indian and US institutions have also agreed to set up specific projects and initiatives.

Already, several US schools have a limited presence in India through collaborations with Indian institutions. Once the "foreign universities bill," which is before the Parliament is passed, international educational institutions can set up campuses in the country.

One hopes the legislation will be a reality before the next summit is held in New Delhi.

Frank Islam is the co-author of the book *Renewing the American Dream: A Citizens Guide*.