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KGPian EXTRAORDINAIRE

Reflections of a former Director

The Mother of all IITs, that is how the Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur (IIT-KGP)- the oldest, the largest and the most diverse of all IITs- is known. The ageing mother got rejuvenated by a unique and philanthropic gesture of one of its Agricultural Engineering alumnus, Vinod Gupta who offered a donation of 2million dollars for setting up a Management School in IIT, Kharagpur. As an unconventional Director of the Institute, I took up the offer as a challenging opportunity and established, against all conventions and unwritten rules of the Government of India, what is now famously called Vinod Gupta School of Management (VGSOM). This unique venture ultimately became a template for all IITs to follow suit in establishing Management as well as other privately funded professional Institutes. Thus, once again, the Mother of the IITs assumed a new and pioneering role model.



Shri Vinod Gupta

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One of Our Faculty

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When he proceeded to USA for higher education, the experience of education in rural India, followed by an experiential and holistic training in the very first IIT at Kharagpur, were undoubtedly etched deep in the memory of Vinod Gupta. Nurtured in USA as a visionary entrepreneur, Vinod resurrected a small bankrupt IT company based in a garage. With his extraordinary management skills, he has propelled the nascent company to a very successful 600 million dollar company, called InfoUSA. At the back of his mind, the learning experience in India and the knowledge debt continued to stir his conscience. And, thus, he wrote to me (being the Director of IIT at that time) that whatever he is today is due to IIT Kharagpur and that he is keen to repay the debt by doing something for the IIT-KGP. He asked if IIT-KGP would consider his proposal of a donation to set up a business/management school. While we were making good progress in normalizing the academic environment of the Institute, Vinod's offer appeared as a lightning rod to bring a new dimension to the image of an old Institute. I informed Vinod immediately that his proposal was acceptable "in principle".

I was, of course, vaguely aware of an unwritten rule of the Government of India that the IITs were not supposed to get involved in a formal management education programme. Further, there was no question of a public-private partnership in any venture in such Institutes of National Importance. I reasoned that with changing scenario ushered in by globalised knowledge era and flat management, the aspirations of Engineering graduates to manage and lead industrial and professional organisations would be better served by a management school which lays emphasis on technology management. Therefore, I went ahead full speed to justify the creation of a Management School with a difference to our Senate and the Board of Governors. More importantly, I justified the need for a public-private partnership in setting up such a School which will be financially self-sustaining and thus will be no burden on the MHRD or the Institute. I was quite apprehensive that MHRD will never approve such a proposal under the existing unwritten rules. Therefore, I took the benefit of the fuzzy "autonomy" vested with the Board of Governors of the IIT for approval.

Vinod Gupta monitored the progress passionately and was very excited with the formal approval of our Board. He suggested a formal agreement to be signed between IIT and the Alumni Foundation (which he set up in USA as a Trust for funding the proposal and which had the IIT Director as one of its members). My predecessor and Emeritus Professor G. S. Sanyal (who knew Vinod well) and I were invited to formalise the agreement. Vinod agreed to place 2 million dollars in the Trust which will pay \$200,000 annually as interest to IIT for 10 years and

thereafter the full amount of 2million dollars was to be transferred to IIT. A legal agreement was drawn up and signed by me on behalf of IIT-KGP. We returned happily with a Cheque of \$100,000 as the first instalment of interest towards the project. As the news of this unusual venture spread, there was a query seeking clarifications from Chairman, All India Council of Technical Education (AICTE) as to how IITKGP can start a Management School since management education comes under its purview. My response was that IITs being Institutes of National Importance created by an Act of Parliament could take such initiative solely. Thereafter, the MHRD conveyed serious concern about violations of Foreign Exchange Act of the country by bringing money in dollars without the permission of the Reserve Bank of India. My response was that I had taken the permission of my Board of Governors for the transaction and that if I was guilty of any wrong doing for a worthy cause, the MHRD was welcome to send me back to my parent Institute, i.e. IIT, Delhi. This, of course, never happened.

In the meanwhile, preparations for architectural design and construction of the building for the Management School were in full swing. And, then I received several letters from the Deans of some prominent Management Schools in USA briefing me on the history of privately funded Business Schools in USA which are named after the donors. The Deans advised me to name the proposed School after the donor, Vinod Gupta. As per some unwritten rules; public-funded Institutes in India are not supposed to allow naming of any facility after a donor. But, to set an example of private-public partnership, I was willing to accept the advice of the Deans though it took a lot of effort to convince the Senate and the Board of Governors of the Institute. The Board finally made a landmark decision and agreed to name the School as Vinod Gupta School of Management (VGSOM).

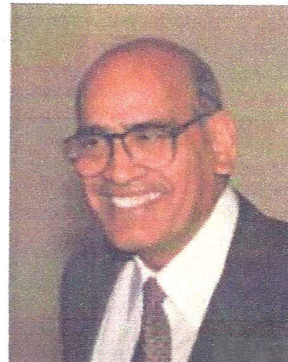
In order to bring any controversy to an end and to put a permanent seal of the highest authority on this novel venture, Vinod suggested that we invite Hon'ble Dr Shankar Dayal Sharma, the then President of India, to lay the foundation stone of the VGSOM building. That the Gupta family knew the President's family helped to facilitate the acceptance of our request by the President to be the Chief Guest of our Annual Convocation as also to lay the foundation stone of the VGSOM building. As demanded by protocol, we also invited Hon'ble Mr. Arjun Singh, the then Minister of HRD. He could not come because of his preoccupation but his office showed magnanimity by asking me if the Ministry could help the venture in any way. Such a rare and generous offer by the Ministry called for immediate response and follow-up. I asked the Ministry to fund the building. I sent a formal proposal for Rs. 80 Lakh for the building which the Ministry approved right away on the basis of our estimates. With adequate funds from both MHRD and from Vinod Gupta, a uniquely designed and exquisite building with a granite front (the first of its kind on any campus in India) came up in no time.

Vinod Gupta visited IIT-KGP periodically and took a lot of interest in the development of the VGSOM. Whether it is the selection of the Dean of the School, faculty, or students, Vinod offered constructive suggestions. For VGSOM, Vinod has funded visiting faculty from some of the good US Schools, and arranged exchange of students between VGSOM and Schools in USA. The School has already an established name and reputation as measured by the quality of students and the offers of job opportunities to its graduates. The School is self-sustaining financially and continues to expand its infrastructure and activities, facilitated and nurtured by the ever generous grants and interest continuing from the donor.

Is Vinod Gupta a torch-bearer? Of course, he is. It is his pioneering example that led to : (a) the formation of Alumni Foundations (and later a Pan IIT Alumni Foundation) in all the IITs; (b) the sensitisation of the IIT alumni to donate generously to their alma mater; (c) the setting up of Alumni-IIT partnership in funding R&D projects; (d) the setting up of Schools in the areas of Management, and other thrust area disciplines in all IITs; and (e) a keen interest and involvement of IIT alumni in their respective alma mater. These are extraordinary developments and achievements in technical education in India, resulting from one unique venture and adventure of Vinod Gupta. Needless to say, I was fortunate enough to be in a position to use my maverick style of management to facilitate and execute various processes of far reaching significance in higher education in India. Through this venture, the Mother of IITs once again assumed the role of a shining leader of new frontiers among all IITs.

In all my life I have believed that we can raise ourselves from the petty selfish interest and escapism by doing good for the commons. In a country where more than 70% people do not get a decent living and education, we the privileged should not rest a while before doing some permanent good for the people. Contentment is not a stop of a complete life. And if one remains engaged with conviction, no problem is insurmountable. Mr. Vinod Gupta is a living example.

May the tribe of such visionaries, philanthropists, entrepreneurs, and torch-bearers as Vinod Gupta multiply and flourish to serve the motherland and mankind.



Prof. K. L. Chopra