

GURU COOL

IIM Kozhikode director Debashis Chatterjee on the changing face of education

In the changing landscape of education, the new face of leadership is softer and less formal. This shift is exemplified by three remarkable women I met during one of my visits to the US with the education minister of India. These three women were then leading major US universities: Drew Faust, the first female president of Harvard University; Susan Hockfield, the first woman and life scientist to lead MIT; and Renu Khator, the first Indian American woman to become the chancellor and president of the University of Houston.

These leaders exemplify the strength of informality and the embrace of the gentle yet influential force of education. Drew Faust, a passionate advocate of humanistic inquiry, emphasised the importance of introspection and self-awareness, guiding us on a transformative journey from uncertainty to wisdom. In the face of global economic challenges, she cherished our shared human heritage. Similarly, Susan Hockfield of MIT embodied a new vision for higher education, advocating for the seamless integration of knowledge across various disciplines. This approach gave birth to innovative fields such as biomechanics, nuclear medicine and conscious capitalism. The fluidity and exchange of knowledge, often referred to as "flowledge" that had historically limited academic growth.

The rise of the creative, whole brain, valuing soft cortical skills and big-picture perception, challenged the dominance of analytical left-brain structures. In this transformation,



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women like Renu Khator shone as leaders, bringing diverse perspectives in recruiting faculty. Renu Khator told me that she was her husband's boss's boss. Here, the recruitment strategy for professors for her university included inviting a whole department full of a bright professor's team to join her university together. Renu's journey from a small town in Uttar Pradesh to the highest echelons of American education highlighted the triumph of the soft power of India within the once-insular corner office of American academia.

The true classroom lies in the minds of the students, where thoughts, perceptions and emotions converge, and create the essence of the learning experience. Great educators empower students to think for themselves by providing the space to learn through their own experiences.

Professor Yash Pal was one

of India's most iconic teachers. With a doctorate in physics from MIT, he was an institution builder and a great teacher. He could simplify complex subjects with

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utmost ease. He demonstrated a simple truth — a good teacher explains but a great teacher enlivens science subjects. If a student asked an average physics teacher what gravity was; he would get an explanation

that would be abstract and mathematical. Here is how Professor Yash Pal would explain the concept of gravity to his students animatedly.

He would draw a circle representing the circumference of the earth. Then he would draw pictures of tiny human figures standing around the circle. He would point to a human form on the top of the circle and ask, "The little human is standing upright right at the top. That is not so surprising. But look at the fellow standing upright at the bottom of the earth. Do you now know what gravity is all about?"

Professor Yash Pal would thus immerse the whole class in the mystery of gravitational force. Great teachers like him highlight the difference between the explicable and the inexplicable, combining logic and magic, igniting moments of revelation that take the student to the core of knowledge.

Several years later, during my second five-year term as the director of IIM Kozhikode, I had the privilege of commissioning a classroom that I called "gurukul for gurus". This was a sunlit classroom panelled by glass walls on four sides and arched with a very high-brick ceiling. We put grass under the feet, vertical gardens on the sides and live trees inside the classroom. The teachers and students would sit down on low wooden seats in a circular arrangement. This natural ambience of the classroom soon became a favourite at IIM Kozhikode. Students hurried to remove their shoes to flock to this forty-seater class. Our gurukul awakened the contemplative capacity of our students in the lap of nature.

Education, a passionate pursuit and a pilgrimage to our consciousness holds the key to unlocking the wellsprings of creativity. By shedding the masks of ego and embracing authenticity, we tap into the core of our creative source. Creative ideas, born from the randomness and unpredictability of the universe, can lead to innovations that shape the future. Embracing creativity means embracing the art of de-materialisation, turning something into nothingness to bring forth new possibilities. As we embrace the changing face of education, we must dismantle the barriers between disciplines and nurture the creative flow of knowledge.

Excerpted with permission from Debashis Chatterjee's *Leadership Chronicles: My Experiments with Globalizing Indian Thought*; Published by Penguin Random House