

National Institute of Advanced Studies: The Evolution of an Idea¹

J. R. D. TATA

Madame and Gentlemen,

Our distinguished Director, Dr. Ramanna, has welcomed you; but I would like to add my own personal welcome, a very warm personal welcome, because as the first participants in this new and, to me, exciting venture, your presence is very important to me.

It is to me a source of great pleasure, not untinged with amusement, that someone who has not even had a university education should be inaugurating an Institute of Advanced Studies.

I would like to tell you the historical background of this institution because I think you will find it an unusual and interesting one. For that I will have to go back a little in time, in fact, about a quarter of a century back.

When Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru died, the usual Memorial Committee was formed and I was put in charge of collecting money for a memorial fund. Through twisting the arms of colleagues, businessmen and industrialists, I was successful in collecting about two and a half crore rupees, which today would be equivalent to at least rupees twenty crores. Thereafter, as a member of the Memorial Committee and Fund, I was somewhat concerned at finding that no important project was proposed to perpetuate the memory of that very great man.

Now it happened that I had a French mother; so I was half French and educated in France. And there I happened to learn

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Mr. J.R.D. Tata was the founder-chairperson of the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bangalore.

that the French system of higher education was a rather special one, founded strangely enough by none else than Napoleon I, who created a very high grade school or college, which he called Ecole Polytechnique, to produce engineers and technical officers for his armies. In the subsequent years, what became known as the Grandes Ecoles – or ‘the Great Schools’ – followed. The most recent one, created only after the last war, was the ‘Ecole Normale d’Administration’ (E.N.A.). Almost all top government officials, including ministers from the Prime Minister down, have gone through these so called great schools.

The most remarkable fact I happened to learn, to my surprise at the time, was that whereas their alumni represented only about 1% of the annual output of all graduates from French Universities, they actually held about 75% of all the top jobs in France – whether in government, in commerce or industry, in banking, or in the armed forces. They were, and remain even today, the educational elite of France. I remember that on one occasion when I was there, every single member of the French Cabinet, from de Gaulle down, came from one of these great schools. Some people think that it created an understandably elitist system which produced remarkable results, and it showed at least an intention to provide for outstanding boys and girls an opportunity to reach the highest possible standards of their potential, and to compete with others similarly gifted. As I had learnt at that time that there were in the universities no comparable opportunities in India for brilliant young Indians, it struck me that perhaps the Nehru Fund could create one or more similar institutions somewhat patterned on the French system.

So to study that idea I went back to France, and I found and invited for advice a very distinguished academician, Prof. Jean Capelle, with whom I created a Committee consisting of a number of people, including one Russian – because in those days one got better support for ideas if there was a Russian involved – and one American, and a couple of Indians, including Dr. Satish Dhawan, who later became head of the Department of Space. Uneducated as I was, I naturally stayed out of it. I got them to prepare a detailed

scheme which I got printed and took to Delhi, and presented to the whole assembled Nehru committee, which consisted of all the leaders of the Congress in those days – including Mrs. Gandhi, of course – and the Secretary happened to be Dr. Karan Singh, the Maharaja of Kashmir.

I got my colleague Prof. R. D. Choksi, to present it, and I waited with some pride and expectation for some members to react to it. To my dismay the one who reacted was Dr. Karan Singh, who I learnt later had a fine academic record but only in the humanities – history, sociology, religion, languages and the like. He was a good friend of mine and happened to be the Minister for Aviation at the time. Karan Singh said to me: “Jeh, what is this nonsense about mathematics”? Unfortunately, in the Report on that scheme was a clause which made it a requirement for admission that the student had to have a strong grounding in mathematics. Maybe Dr. Karan Singh did not know that the French people, or the French academia, believed that a mathematically trained mind was a mind that was best capable of dealing with difficult problems requiring strong concentration, logic and deep thought. Applicants were therefore expected to be reasonably good mathematicians to be admitted into any of these Grandes Ecoles. So when Dr. Karan Singh said, “Do you mean to say that if this school of yours had been there when I was a college student I would not have been admitted”? All I could say was: “Well Karan, if you were as poor at mathematics as I was, then neither you nor I would have been admitted”. Dr. Karan Singh did not take it too well. He threw the brochure on the table and said “Nonsense !”, as a result of which the proposal was summarily rejected. So that ended that particular venture, to my regret.

Fortunately at about that time the first IITs and IIMs were coming up, which did give to brilliant, young Indians greater opportunities than they had had in the past in Indian Universities or Institutes. Except for the one like the Mathematics School of the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research, there were very few highly scientific establishments which gave a chance to the most brilliant of our Indian students.

From then on it became the practice after the death of Sir Dorab Tata that his Trust, of which I happen to be the Chairman and my colleague Jamshed Bhabha is the Managing Trustee, should every few years, create some institution or other of national importance in the educational or other fields.

So a series of them were started over the years until a very few years ago, including the Tata Cancer Hospital and Centre, the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research and the last one, a pet of Mr. Bhabha, its real creator, namely the National Centre for the Performing Arts in Bombay, the purpose of which was mainly to perpetuate India's dying old heritage of drama, dance and music and also encourage new ones. So about five years ago, when we felt that the time had now come to think of another new institution of national importance, I wondered whether the one we thought of twenty-five years ago could be considered again, perhaps in an amended form. Having talked to my co-trustees and finding them fairly positive, I decided that I should first consult the most outstanding personalities that I could gather into a new committee.

So I went back to France and to Jean Capelle, who said he was too old now but would get someone equally competent; this turned out to be Prof. Philippe Olmer, himself a product of one of the Grandes Ecoles, in fact of the one that is known to produce professors for the other 'great schools'.

So Prof. Olmer came and I was fortunate to be able to recruit the following eminent men to join him in a Committee to advise us: Prof. M.G.K. Menon; Mr. L.K. Jha, the famous economist and administrator; and Dr. Satish Dhawan, Head of the Indian Space Research Organisation, and Prof. R.D. Choksi, both of whom were members of the First Committee. These erudite gentlemen produced a brief but outstanding report which recommended that there was a case for reviving the earlier scheme, but somewhat different in character.

The Committee came to the conclusion that there was indeed a need for an Institute for Advanced Studies that would bring

together exceptionally gifted and able persons from the different streams of national life – the civil service, business and industry, the academic world and from the professions. Unlike the 1966 project, the revised Institute's scheme would not be for students but for participants in a programme of continuing learning through lectures and discussions.

The Committee criticised over-specialisation in all walks of life and the tendency to regard education mainly from the one aspect of acquiring more degrees and more diplomas. They pointed out that no amount of academic education can any longer prepare a person for a career which will last another forty years at least.

We accepted the Committee's recommendations and decided that the principal objective would be for participants to be drawn from government and non-government sectors and the professions, thus bringing together promising young administrators and executives in order to help them get a better understanding of each other's tasks and problems, and to assist them in developing the best means of dealing with the many inter-related problems arising from the complex changes taking place in our fast evolving world.

Another objective goes back to the original philosophy of Jamsetji Tata who, when creating the Indian Institute of Science, visualised it not only as a great centre of scientific research and learning but one which would also provide its students with opportunities to nourish their minds with the study of philosophy, history, archaeology, statistics and philology.

In keeping with his original vision, in the aims of this Institute has been included the belief that there is both the need and desire amongst young, educated people, who in their excessively specialised academic studies are so often denied the opportunity to be exposed to what is loosely called the humanities – the arts, music, poetry, history and philosophy – which though unconnected directly with their active working life are important elements in the make-up of a liberally educated person such as Jamsetji Tata conceived.

Whereas the decision was taken to proceed with the project, the three principal issues to be considered were: where to locate the Institute; how to finance it; and who should lead it. Nothing could be more important for an establishment like this, if it had to evoke confidence, respect, and even admiration if possible, than the choice of its leader; and it should be someone of considerable stature. It was agreed that, considering the record of Dr. Ramanna, we could not have done much better. We are very proud of his being in charge of this Institute from the very beginning.

We were anxious that the Institute should be located at Bangalore, in fact in the premises of the Indian Institute of Science if they could spare four or five acres from their very large campus area. We are fortunate that they responded generously and are very grateful to their distinguished Director, Prof. C.N.R. Rao. If we are inaugurating the Institute today in Pune, and not in Bangalore, it is only because we do not have a building of our own yet, and it will take a couple of years to put one up in Bangalore. We are therefore taking advantage of the facilities generously offered by the Tata Management Training Centre for holding our inaugural session.

Dr. Ramanna in his introductory speech has already thanked many kind people and the Government of India as a whole, but I think I should personally express my gratitude to the Prime Minister himself, without whose support the approval of the government would not have been obtained.

I myself would like particularly to thank the Government of Karnataka, who not only welcomed us, but also promised us a tax-free loan of one and a half crores of rupees for ten years.

Dr. Ramanna has mentioned Jamshed Bhabha. Jamshed Bhabha is one of those beings who, when he sets his mind on something or adopts a proposal, will never give up. He has all the qualities of the species of the crab or the crocodile. And he has from the start been a great help to me and to the scheme as a whole.

I am grateful also to Dr. Menezes, Director-in-Charge of the Tata Management Training Centre, who very readily put the whole

of his establishment and its facilities at our disposal. He would have agreed even if it had been for a longer period – perhaps three months. But even so, we are extremely grateful and I hope you will find yourselves reasonably comfortable, the surroundings pleasant, and the sort of atmosphere that will encourage the kind of thinking and the kind of valuable cross fertilisation of minds that we want to see.

So Madame and Gentlemen, this ship has been launched at last, after nearly four years of consideration and discussions. It will sail in largely uncharted seas but I hope that you, my dear young people, as the first passengers on its maiden voyage, will find the trip a pleasant, useful and enriching experience.

I shall, therefore, end my overlong remarks merely saying “Bon Voyage”.