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100 FOUNDERS

Samvad in Sanskrit means dialogue

THE NEWSLETTER FROM ASHOKA UNIVERSITY

The Making of a World-Class University

Dismayed with the state of higher education in India, Sanjeev Bikhchandani joined hands with friends to establish a university which would open the students' minds and not be just about getting a good job. He writes on the origins of what is today Ashoka University.

It was in mid-2007 that a few of us began talking about a grand idea – a new kind of university in India. That was the seed of what would eventually become Ashoka University.

For the next two years, the idea was fleshed out, through countless discussions, over many gallons of coffee (thank you, Ashish, for the hospitality). The issues that we grappled with in those early years were going to be foundational to the character of Ashoka University.

One of the most critical of these was our decision to focus the university solely on Liberal Arts and natural sciences. We would stay away from professional courses such as engineering, medicine, management, law and others that are popular with middle class India because they maximise the chances of getting a job. We wanted to address an unsolved problem: there were hundreds of reputed institutions in India offering professional programmes, but no world-class Liberal Arts institutions.

We believed that it was possible to follow your passion in the Liberal Arts and also have a great future, as long as the institution was world-class. So we set out to establish such a university, with an admittedly vague notion of what 'world-class' meant.

Then we told ourselves: it starts with stellar faculty. What would attract such faculty, we enquired of friends at global universities. The answer was emphatic: world-class faculty like to work with others like themselves. In other words, the bar for hiring faculty had to be high across all departments. No compromises.

They like to teach exceptionally bright students, so the bar for admissions has to be high, even if this meant that the early batches were smaller than planned. This also meant that we would get the best students we could, and therefore we would be need-blind in admissions and have a generous financial aid programme. No student would have to give up an Ashoka admission because he or she could not afford the fees. The consequent financial deficit had to be accepted as the cost of excellence and inclusion.

World-class faculty like to have complete independence in their teaching and research. This implied several things.

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There would be no interference by Founders on academic aspects, and faculty would be free to set curricula, travel, attend conferences and focus on their research. There would be collective ownership of the university, and no matter how much money you donated, one founder would get only one seat on the Board of Trustees. This has ensured that no one voice gets too powerful, and therefore, ensures autonomy to the Vice Chancellor and faculty.

Students were to have an immersive multi-disciplinary experience, and this meant a fully residential programme, and substantial requirements of academic width before they declare their major.

And finally, world-class meant a move away from the rote learning, which is the hallmark of the Indian education system, to an emphasis on critical enquiry and argument – don't stop at the 'what' and 'when', move on to the 'how', 'why', 'what-if' and 'why not'.

But when we weighed all the aspects of what it meant to be world-class, we understood that it was going to require financial resources of a substantially higher order of magnitude than we had initially imagined. But good people

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rally around a great cause, and Ashoka has been blessed with a hundred Founders contributing generously. It has the distinction of being the largest collective philanthropy project in India.

But even more than funding it is the time given and commitment demonstrated by faculty and staff that has made Ashoka what it is. As Founders we are also grateful to students and their parents for reposing their faith in us. It is the early batches and the formative years that decide the future course of a university.

Our ultimate aim is not to establish one university, but to catalyse a transformation in Indian higher education. We know that if Ashoka succeeds, others would emulate our model, and we would be glad to share our learnings.

One Ashoka isn't enough for a country of over a billion minds.

Spirit of the Ashokans

Vineet Gupta is Founder and Trustee, Ashoka University, and its founding Pro-Vice Chancellor. An incomparable leader, he stepped down from his administrative duties in August, leaving an indelible mark. Vineet writes on the spirit of the Ashoka People who make the University what it is.

The promise of building an institution that will be the best university in the country and perhaps one of the best in the world and will outlive us, is thrilling. I get goose bumps as I write this and this is not the first time or the last time that I will experience this sensation.

The Ashoka story started as a conversation amongst friends in 2006. While the aim was always to build a high quality institution, the larger vision for Ashoka is about transforming Indian higher education. The success of Indian higher education cannot be about setting up one Ashoka University. We need a few hundred. I am aware of at least two other initiatives being built on the Ashoka model that have gained considerable traction. More will follow. The vision and generosity of the one hundred Founders of Ashoka stands as an outstanding example of a determined collective resolve of business leaders to impact higher education and society. In the Ashoka model, there are many firsts for Indian higher education. A unique model of governance and funding, relentless focus on excellence, a 21st century education, a contemporary and beautiful campus, high quality of faculty and students and a missionary team – each of these set benchmarks for others to emulate. Ashoka stands as the beacon of excellence.

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It is the purity and audacity of our vision that drives all people associated with Ashoka.

The "Ashoka People" – our Founders, Faculty, staff, students and friends are a special lot. They are unreal and have unreal expectations of this institution, of what it can become and of what they are willing to contribute. And this "unreasonableness" makes Ashoka into what it is. The "unreasonableness" is nothing short of a grand vision of the greatest institution of higher learning that India would have ever built. Each of these individuals owns Ashoka and this spirit of collective ownership is what is different about Ashoka compared to any other organisation I have ever been a part of.

I have had the great fortune to be associated with Ashoka since the beginning as one of the Founders. It is strange to say this after 11 years of those initial conversations, but we had this nagging feeling that we will perhaps get "here". Right from getting an initial Founder group in place, negotiating with the government for land, making the first deposit and launching the Young India Fellowship in a rented campus to building the campus, surmounting regulatory hurdles, recruiting the first set of Faculty and our first class, fundraising, starting the campus on a construction site and then delivering on the promise of a great learning experience – each building block of this amazing institution is a case study in itself. But we can say this only in hindsight. In the act of doing so, we were guided only by our instincts and by the zeal and motivation of the people who came together to build this institution. There were no precedents, nobody in the team had ever built a university before, yet each person was doing this as if this this was a matter of life and death. Everyone at Ashoka "was and is" on a mission.

Last year, I was being driven to campus by Narayan, who joined Ashoka in 2014, a little after the campus opened. During the ride, Narayan mentioned that he has made videos of the university. He did this in his spare time and he wanted our admissions and outreach team to use these videos to showcase Ashoka to potential students. He felt that we could do more to spread our message. His dream is to see his two beautiful kids study at Ashoka. Ashoka belongs to him as it does to every person who feels so strongly for what it stands for. The people who work at Ashoka feel that they are co-creating a legacy.

I also had the opportunity to be the first Pro-Vice Chancellor of the University. We were a team of approximately 40 people when the campus started in July 2014. On our first day on campus, we were scrambling to organise the first meal for our students. This team of 40 is now about 225 odd and the challenges are different but the spirit and zeal of the "Ashoka People" is ever stronger. They are truly special and I feel blessed to be a part of their lives.

From 6 to 100

In September 2014, Rudrangshu Mukherjee, the founding Vice Chancellor of Ashoka University, wrote the following lines for the first edition of Samvad which aptly describe the beginnings of Ashoka: "The phrase "tryst with destiny'' that Jawaharlal Nehru coined for his speech on August 15, 1947 has become a part of India's national lexicon.

Seven years ago, a handful of entrepreneurs were gripped by the idea of establishing a university that would provide excellent education to the future citizens of India. They decided that it would concentrate on the Liberal Arts, an area of learning which had fallen into neglect. In 2008, the International Foundation for Research and Education was formed as a Section 25 company under the Companies Act, 1956, to create Ashoka University.

Nine years later, Ashoka has grown into a full-fledged movement, with over a hundred Founders – individuals and corporates who believe in its vision and mission. Each has given to the University in his/her unique way, transforming lives of countless individuals. The photo essay below aims to chronicle the journey of Ashoka through its Founders.

2011: VT Bharadwaj with the founding batch of the Young India Fellowship at the SACAC Campus

2012: Amit Chandra, Tiger Tyagarajan and Ashish Dhawan inspecting the under-construction university

2013: Vineet Gupta, Pranav Gupta, Ashish Gupta and Pramath Sinha with Haryana Government officials at the formal inspection of the campus

2014: With (then) Vice Chancellor Rudrangshu Mukherjee at the campus inauguration

2015: Deep Kalra addresses Young India Fellows

2016: Tiger Tyagarajan, Harshbeena Sahney Zaveri and Sasha Sanyal at the inauguration of the Genpact Centre for Women's Leadership

2015: Celebrating Ashoka's first Founders Day

2016: Ashoka celebrates its second Founders Day

2017: Rajeev Sahney and Amit Chandra twinning on the third Founders Day

2017: Rahul Bajaj interacts with staff on a tour of the campus

2017: Ashish Dhawan and Vineet Gupta at the graduation of Ashoka's first undergraduate batch

2017: Manish Kejriwal and Pramod Bhasin listening to Nobel Laureate Venki Ramakrishnan

2017: Founders with Venki Ramakrishnan and Sunil Khilnani, chief guests at the first undergraduate convocation

Ankit Gupta

Young India Fellow, 2014-15
Mentored by Sanjay Kukreja

Raised in Kolkata, Ankit was granted a full tuition scholarship at Ashoka.

Realising he made a bad engineer and a good public policy student, Ankit applied to the Young India Fellowship (YIF) to pursue Liberal Arts with the aim to move into consulting.
At YIF, he was mentored by Sanjay Kukreja, Managing Director of ChrysCapital. Ankit first met Sanjay at Founder's Day in 2016, and they would subsequently meet every few months in Delhi.

Sanjay spent a lot of time understanding Ankit and his goals. He advised Ankit to always invest. Whether people or equity, managing one's investments requires balance and a good understanding.

Though they are no longer in touch, Ankit values the time spent with his mentor. He was amongst the top 5 students in his batch at YIF and won an award for the best ELM (internship project). Ankit is working with Schlumberger as a Business Analyst in their Dubai office.

> **"Sanjay was a wonderful mentor to me. His advice: to invest in equity and relationships, both long-term, has helped me immensely in my work. Today I am mentoring two Young India Fellows.**

Aqsa Pervez

Undergraduate, 2015-18
Sameer Mehta Scholar

Aqsa's father passed away when she was young. It left her mother, a primary school teacher, to fend for the family.

Raised in Gorakhpur, UP, Aqsa wanted to make a career for herself in finance. Even with 94% marks in her boards, her chances of getting into a good college were abysmal, and foreign universities were unaffordable. Ashoka not only offered her full financial aid, but its interdisciplinary approach meant that she could study multiple subjects.

Aqsa has opted for economics and finance as her majors. She recently had the opportunity to travel abroad, her first time ever, to Wellesley College in the US. She was part of the Contemporary Women's Leadership Programme, studying issues facing women in the workplace. The trip exposed her to a larger canvas and got her interested in behavioral economics.

Breaking away from her professionally oriented family background, Aqsa hopes to pursue a career in academia. She has been on the Dean's list in all her semesters at Ashoka.

> **"Ashoka has been a life-changing experience. I have grown in the best learning atmosphere and it has helped me become the leader I have always wanted to become. It has allowed me to unlock my full potential."**

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