

PM's campus connect in China will help relations

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Opening one's doors to traders or tourists is easy. It takes great inner strength for a nation to open its doors to thoughts and knowledge from outside. Over the course of her history, China has done so; and today once again she revives this tradition." This was the core of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's message while inaugurating the Centre for Gandhian and Indian Studies at Fudan University on 16 May. In a short speech, he affirmed ancient civilisational links in education and culture, and repositioned these in today's context of Sino-Indian partnership.

PM Modi emphasised "global warming" and "global terrorism" as two contemporary challenges that could be addressed effectively from a Gandhian perspective. Recalling the Mahatma's engagement with Chinese activists and scholars, he mentioned Zeng Shengti, who had stayed at Sabarmati Ashram, and was affectionately called "Shanti Jain". Fudan University's newly inaugurated centre has scholars drawn from the disciplines of philosophy and language, and will be led by noted Indologist and Pali scholar, Dr Liu Zhen. In a keynote address that conveyed depth and vision, PM Modi re-

marked on his great fortune at being invited to not one, but two universities during his much-anticipated China visit. He represented India effectively; and at the same time honoured his hosts by saluting China's investment in education and its youth.

On campus, we glimpsed a lesser-known aspect of the PM's personality; one that his government would do well to leverage. He connected joyfully and effortlessly with students; he was humble and fully engaged in the presence of scholars. Li Han, a student member of the delegation from Shanghai International Studies University (SISU), said he was touched by the PM's "wisdom and kindness". When Fudan's Indian students set up a spirited "Modi" chant, he was surprised, and spontaneously walked over to greet them. He spent time talking to Chinese students from the Hindi Department of SISU. Even with VVIP photo-ops, there are unscripted moments that reveal the person behind the persona. This appeared to be one such moment. Mohammad, a postgraduate medical student at Fudan says, "The PM was kind and polite in the way he spoke to us; I never expected he would come over to shake our hands. His speech was excellent." Priyanka, a Fudan medical student, was happy he spoke



Prime Minister Narendra Modi interacts with Chinese students during his visit to the Fudan University on 16 May. REUTERS

in Hindi about the enduring values of Mahatma Gandhi. Her best moment was "the opportunity to meet and interact with the PM". Ravish, an MBA student, felt proud to be a part of Fudan University as well as a citizen of India, where the great Gandhi hails from.

PM Modi's interaction with students at Beijing's Tsinghua University (15 May), and Shanghai's Fudan university (16 May) were stunning successes. If this goodwill could be channelled into institutional engagement between India and China, then the optics would be well worth it. At present, educational link-

ages between the two countries are under-utilised. This is true for "numbers" as well as "substance". The numbers of Indian students in China and Chinese students in India are minuscule in proportion to student numbers from both countries represented in Western institutions. There is vast scope to promote engagement at every level — high school to post-doctoral research. The current visa regime is an obvious barrier, and both governments appear to be addressing it.

As for "substance", Nirmola, PhD candidate at Fudan, observes accurately that we

need more Indologists in China and Sinologists in India. She sees the Gandhian Centre as a "symbol of China's determination to study and understand India in a comprehensive manner"; however, much more remains to be done. In my own discipline of International Relations, I find gaps in the syllabus, and skewed representations of either country in the classrooms of the other. Sister-university arrangements would motivate institutions in both countries to share resources, develop joint curricula and encourage academic exchanges. In assessing mu-

tual impact in the education sector, there is one notable success story. NIIT China, which provides IT training (and job placement) for tens of thousands of Chinese students each year, is one of the best-recognised Indian brands in the mainland. The challenge would be to extend the NIIT model to non-IT sectors, where India has less of a cache.

The educational, artistic and cultural collaborations that, for centuries, flourished along the Buddhist routes between India and China, attest to the value of "open-door" policies. Quite often in the past, these collaborations enjoyed state patronage. By leveraging the appeal of leaders who reach out directly to the youth, we once again have the opportunity to cultivate strong institutional links for education. These links should extend across sectors; must include public-private partnership; and must not be concentrated in elite institutions. In conclusion, some Confucian wisdom:

"If you think in terms of a year, plant a seed;

"If in terms of ten years, plant trees;

"If in terms of 100 years, teach the people."

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