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# The relevance and challenges

*Academicians stressed the need for a change in the present structure of affiliation to achieve quality in higher education at a two-day seminar held as part of the golden jubilee celebrations of Stella Maris College.*

Stella Maris College turns 50 this year. "Higher Education in India — Relevance and Challenges" was the theme of a two-day national seminar held on January 31 and February 1 as part of the Golden Jubilee celebrations. The seminar was unusual in that it brought together the seven departments of Economics, History, Commerce, Literature, Sociology, Fine Arts and Social Work, in an inter disciplinary response to the challenges of higher education. An audience of students and staff both from the host institution and from other colleges in the city listened to distinguished academics from all over the country. The experts spoke with clarity and conviction, allowing students who have little access to disciplines not their own, an entry into another world.

Dr. G. D. Sharma, Secretary, University Grants Commission, who delivered the keynote address went to the heart of the matter in emphasising how much a change in

the present outmoded affiliating structure was needed to achieve quality in higher education. He spoke on the importance of devolving initiative to teachers and students. Everywhere else in the world "it is teachers who determine what is to be taught," said Dr. Sharma who took the liberal view that academicians should consider the use and not the possible misuse of greater freedom.

Dr. A. M. Nallagoundan, Prof. and former Head of Department of Econometrics (University of Madras), the speaker during the first session on January 31, deliberated "The relevance and estimation of returns to higher education in India." He startled the audience with the revelation that though in common perception, higher education brings higher monetary rewards, economists have been unable to substantiate this hypothesis. Degrees help the potential employer to sift unsuitable candidates and they merely signal the potential for employment in the better educated. Unemployment, he felt, could be reduced, but never ended. Dr. Sr. Helen Vincent, former Principal of Stella Maris College, chaired this session and the next.

Dr. T. K. John, Professor, Vidya Jyothi, New Delhi, challenged the audience, in the session that followed, with questions rather than answers in his account of "Challenges of the historian in higher education in the 21st Century." Pointing to evidence from contemporary history, he held that education has not succeeded in breaking the shackles of tradition and leading to a more just society.

In the post-lunch session Prof. S. Swaminathan of *The Hindu*, advocated a complete overhaul of the B.Com syllabus, orienting it towards industry rather than

conventional accountancy. He advocated sweeping changes in conventional evaluation methods.

Responding to a question on finance, he expressed the view that those who benefited from a course should bear the costs. Quality education, for which a society had to pay more, was certainly preferable to cheap and shoddy courses.

The speaker for session one on the second day was Dr. T. K. Oommen, Professor, Centre for the Study of Social Work Systems, JNU, Delhi. The topic of the session was "Challenges of Sociology in the context of Globalisation." Dr. A. K. Raju, Head, Department of ICE, Madras chaired the session.

In his short conceptual history of Sociology, Dr. Oommen dwelt upon the development of the concept of globalisation out of previously held positions that were trichotomous and dichotomous. Dr. Oommen, through examples, demonstrated the suspicion with which these terms and categories ought to be treated, as they were not ideologically innocent, but products of colonialism, society brought about by technology and advanced communications. The teaching of Sociology therefore, he said, should not ignore plurality and hybridity, nor should it succumb to 'the End of History thesis' with its simplistic, progressist ideology. The teaching of Sociology, said Dr. Oommen, must address reality that is multifaceted.

Dr. Meenakshi Mukherjee, Head of the Department of English, JNU, speaking on 'English studies in the era of globalisation' traced the changes in the position English studies have occupied in the academy, since the Macaulay Minute on Education in 1831.

From an Arnoldian position of literature as 'high culture' today with globalisation literature has become a product of the very forces of the market place it once feared, with the literary hardsell. Syllabi today are shaped by market places that create the author, even as considerations of gender, class and ethnicity continue to interrogate the canon. She called for the re-examining of syllabi that could include translation and culture studies.

Dr. Shobita Punja, in a plea for art education in higher education declared that "we need art critics, conservationists and creative artists. We also need to rescue art history from western historians," she said, "and to formulate Indian Aesthetics." Art education, Dr. Punja declared, was vital for creativity. To encourage our expressive faculties to celebrate diversity and to respect things in our day-to-day life, to visualise concepts as Einstein did, art education becomes an absolute necessity. In her response to questions about evaluation of art, Dr. Punja declared that 'competitive' approaches to art should be transcended through the students/ artist being her own most demanding critic. Art and our heritage should not succumb to defacement and neglect due to faulty notions of development. Dr. Joe Arimpoor, Director of BIRDY, Hyderabad, explored the way in which schools and colleges today deny creativity, and propagate anti-social values among the young. Higher Education, he said, is deficient in its support of democracy, secularism and social justice. Integration of mastery and mystery were important for higher education.

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