

--- LUNCH WITH BS ---



Professor with an appetite for reform

Delhi University's new vice-chancellor Deepak Nayyar at a lavish Spanish meal with T N Ninan

"I'm a vegetarian, you know. So why don't you think of a suitable place?" he says on the phone, affable as always. So I pick Las Meninas at the Park, partly because it is the only Spanish restaurant in town, and partly because Priya Paul has done wonders to the Park chain, with perfect positioning and a noticeable improvement in look and feel.

Arriving early, I choose a leather sofa in the hotel reception, when my eye falls on a Dupont counter: ties, cuff-links and other knick-knacks, with prices that seem to start at around Rs 6000. Given Deepak Nayyar's unabashed left leanings, I wonder about political correctness, but I can see an official Ambassador drive up outside and in a moment the new vice-chancellor of Delhi University comes bounding in.

Seated quickly in a restaurant that is mercifully empty on a Saturday afternoon, Deepak is more keen to talk than order. He has to go back to work, we've budgeted 90 minutes, and there is a lot to talk about. How, for instance, does a left-leaning economist from Jawaharlal Nehru University get picked as vice-chancellor of India's most prestigious university, in the BJP's raj? I don't know, he says, and goes on to explain the selection process, which seems to suggest that the process can be quite independent.

He is quite chuffed by the general acclaim and offers of support that have come his way since the news broke, and he knows that the Delhi vice-chancellorship is a nice little star to add to what is already a glittering career: Rhodes scholarship, doing a doctorate while at Balliol, then the IAS, back to research at Oxford, and then teaching successively at Sussex, the Calcutta IIM and JNU, with two stretches in the government — as economic adviser in the commerce ministry (early 1980s), and then chief economic adviser in the finance ministry (1989-91) at the time of the foreign exchange crisis that sparked off the reforms, of which he remains a selective critic.

Economists have been vice-chancellors before at Delhi University: CD Deshmukh, VKRV Rao, and KN Raj, among others. But at 53 he is perhaps the youngest. Also, the challenges today seem greater in one of Asia's most massive education factories: over 80 affiliated colleges, more than 80 academic disciplines, 175,000 students (not counting 75,000 distance learners) and 7500 teaching faculty, not to speak of numerous "karamcharis" who have an active union.

...I prod him to decide what he wants to eat and drink. No, not a Campari (“I gave up drinking during the day, a long time ago”), but yes, why not the house wine? “Oh, it’s Torres de Sangresà,” he says; “it’s a full-bodied red.” He’s been to southern Spain and to Mexico, so the items listed on the set-piece platter pose no traps...

There is a lot to be done, he says, but I prod him to decide what he wants to eat and drink. No, not a Campari (“I gave up drinking during the day, a long time ago”), but yes, why not the house wine? “Oh, it’s Torres de Sangresà,” he says; “it’s a full-bodied red.”

He’s been to southern Spain and to Mexico, so the items listed on the set-piece platter pose no traps: Croquetas Verduras, Tortilla, Champinon al vino Blanco, Ensalada Mixta, Patatas Aioli, Bravas Dip. I think I have the better part of the bargain, with the addition of fish and meat. Then, the bargain gets better still: Shireen Paul (Priya’s mother) has spotted us and sends across assorted cold meats, prawns and delicious cheese. Deepak is vegetarian, remember, so it’s mostly going to add to my waistline.

...He has already met the representatives of the college principals, teachers, students, karamcharis, and his immediate team. He is cheered by the goodwill that he feels, but knows it will evaporate if he takes a tough step. His general message to them is Kennedyesque: ask what you can do for your university, and whether you are doing enough...

So, what are his priorities? Objective No. 1, he says, is to improve standards and to shoot for excellence. One way, he thinks aloud, might be to infuse outside blood instead of filling all academic posts with internal candidates. Then, do something about the fee structure. “Do you know, my father studied here in the 1920s, I studied here in the 1960s, and my son is now in his second year. And over these 80 years, all of us have paid the same monthly fees.”

But he knows that change won’t be easy: he tried to raise the fee issue at JNU, but failed to carry the house. Even here, he doesn’t want to ram anything through; in fact, he can’t, because the real power lies with the 22-member Executive Council, which he will have to persuade to his way of thinking. Some of the Council members are directly elected, so a command-and-control system won’t work; it will have to be through persuasion.

Some things are in his direct control, and he wants to change them. As an old student, for instance, he is conscious of the way things used to be: the vice-chancellor had a marvellous office, but along the way a predecessor moved into an ante-room and after students attacked him, barricaded himself behind iron bars. Deepak wants to remove those bars, and move back into the original VC’s office.

“Do you know,” he says, harking back to the old days, “that the office building used to be the vice-regal lodge before Rashtrapati Bhavan got built, and the registrar’s office is where Mountbatten proposed to Edwina? And that the Gandhi-Irwin pact was signed here, because Maurice Gwyer (another distinguished predecessor) had something to do with it?” Is he going to move into the VC’s three-acre residence? He isn’t sure: “I am willing to put in a 12-hour day; but when I get home (to the exclusive Friends Colony, some 20 km away), I want to feel that I will be left alone.”

Well, he isn’t being left alone. Right now, it is desperate calls at 11 at night, to say that so-and-so exam paper of the next morning has leaked out. Deepak has quickly set up a system: anyone who has a leaked paper should fax it to specified numbers; if it has any resemblance the next morning to the actual question paper, the exam will be called off and rescheduled. But the phone calls continue to come in, so he was out at eight that morning, visiting one exam centre after another, to fly the flag and convey how seriously he takes the issue.

Then, last year’s convocation still hasn’t been held, so he has called on the vice-president (who

is the chancellor), and has fixed a date. The university's finances seem ok at the moment, but Deepak wants to start new courses (in information technology and business studies, for instance) and realises that he will have to raise some money. "I firmly believe that the state has to fund higher education, this is the case in almost any country, and the United States is the exception that proves the rule!" When I choose not to argue, he says that he will also have to top up with private funding. After all, most of the campus colleges (Kirori Mal, Hansraj, Ramjas, Shriram) were started by private benefactors, and he doesn't see why today's leading companies can't contribute. So, if you're running a company anywhere near Delhi, expect to find Deepak Nayyar at the other end of your telephone line some time soon.

...But he knows that change won't be easy: he tried to raise the fee issue at JNU, but failed to carry the house. Even here, he doesn't want to ram anything through; in fact, he can't, because the real power lies with the 22-member Executive Council, which he will have to persuade to his way of thinking...

I've finished eating my one-and-a-half lunches, and Deepak is barely halfway through his meal. So he takes a break from responding to questions, and decides that, yes, he will try the banana ice cream topped with honey, and chase it with capuccino. "Nice food," he says in passing, before diving once again into what has been a lifelong commitment: to the university life. "I believe that universities should be self-governing communities," so he even wants to try and close the main campus to external traffic. "Students find the level of through traffic unsafe, and they are willing to volunteer and man the gates, so that almost anyone who comes into the campus has something to do with the university." But the Lt.Governor and Chief Minister of Delhi will have to be convinced.

As someone who has a foot in many worlds outside his immediate university, he is acutely conscious of the lack of basic facilities in Indian universities: "Do you know that all of JNU has one fax machine?" Most Delhi University colleges don't have an Internet connection, let alone a computer that a student can use. And the university, believe it or not, is desperately short of land in order to expand, so he has his eye on some old government buildings in the neighbourhood.

He has already met the representatives of the college principals, teachers, students, karamcharis, and his immediate team. He is cheered by the goodwill that he feels, but knows it will evaporate if he takes a tough step. His general message to them is Kennedyesque: ask what you can do for your university, and whether you are doing enough. But some real issues have been brought to him, which cry out for attention. For instance, the virtual collapse of Delhi's public transport system has made it doubly difficult for students to get to their classes, but what does he do?

A glance at the watch brings a shock: it's 3.45, we've been gabbing for over two hours, and rush for the hotel portico. Deepak's white Ambassador rolls up, an armed guard (mandatory, it seems) hops out, Deepak disappears behind rear door curtains, and one is left with the sense of a man who knows he has five finite years in which to cram 10 years of hope and serious intent.