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Don with a difference

--- LUNCH WITH BS ---

Apart from fixing Delhi University's finances, Deepak Nayyar tells T N Ninan how he's changed ossified courses and got students back in class

Five years ago, shortly after occupying what has traditionally been recognised as a very hot seat, that of the vice-chancellor at Delhi University, Deepak Nayyar had spelt out his hopes and plans over a nearly three-hour lunch with Business Standard. That encounter ended with the promise that he would review his own performance at the end of his term. On schedule a week ago, he telephoned to keep his commitment.

It then turned out that several colleagues in the paper wanted to join in the lunch and listen to what Nayyar had to say. So what should have been a restaurant date was changed to an office event – one in a long line of background discussions with decision-makers, held on Saturdays over a dry lunch. The difference this time was that what was said would be reported.

Nayyar was almost punctual, showing up shortly after 12.30. Ushered into the conference room, he barely waited for introductions around the table before plunging straight into the subject. The Delhi University and Oxford-trained economist who has thrice joined and left the government (the last time as chief economic adviser), has always been an academic at heart, and it showed as the meeting progressed. For the record, the food consisted of sandwich, patty and kebab, followed by a pastry, with coffee/tea always available. Also for the record, Nayyar barely nibbled at his food.

There was plenty else to chew on. For it turned out that Nayyar has been able to do a remarkable amount in a short five years. His list over lunch began with the change and modernisation of course curricula, many of them unchanged for either a quarter- or a half-century, and done with external peer review. Among the new bachelor's courses introduced were those on computer science and microbiology. Along with this came the drive to encourage a "milieu conducive to learning" - which meant the creation of inter-disciplinary centres like the one on the study of developing countries, and another on women's studies.

The agenda then extended to modernising the university infrastructure, which "had come close to collapse". Fourth, came the desire to change an atmosphere that was "not friendly to the student, not friendly to the teacher", by providing "the intellectual and social space" that a university should have. "I empowered the student, who can ask for justification of the grade he had been given; and I also empowered the faculty." Reaching for a phrase that reflects Nayyar's mildly left-leaning sympathies, he talks of having brought about a "cultural revolution".

Fifth, came improving the university's finances ("there was barely enough money to pay salaries"). And that, it turned out, was barely for starters. Because, Nayyar said, there was also the reform of the examination system, with the introduction of internal marking (including 5 per cent for attendance). This immediately brought loitering students back into classrooms, and it put the onus on teachers to teach and then to evaluate - and to do so honestly. A monitoring system revealed that the percentage of internal markings requiring "moderation" was quite small.

Other changes were perhaps not on any formal agenda, but symptomatic of the other changes taking place. Like the instances of cheating in examinations (down to 8 per cent of the figure five years ago), and a sharp departure from the old and familiar culture of agitations and protests by students, faculty and support staff. "It used to be standard practice to pitch your tent outside the vice-chancellor's office and shout slogans. But I haven't seen that happen for the last three-and-a-half years." How did he do it? By being both firm and fair. But you notice that he refers to critics of his actions as people who are "prejudiced".

The financial changes seem real enough. Five years ago, 73 per cent of the university's budget went to pay salaries, and another 17 per cent towards "committed expenditure" like utility bills. Discretionary spending accounted for barely 10 per cent. All that has now changed, because salaries this year account for only 55 per cent of the total. And Nayyar used his experience of government to tap all manner of ministries and other sources for funds - funds to computerise and create a broadband network for the university community (when he joined, even the vice-chancellor's office did not have either a computer or an internet connection), to renovate heritage buildings (including, for those who care for such things, the room where Lord Mountbatten proposed to Edwina), and to build new study centres as well as hostel rooms (up from a total of 1,000 to 1,500) and faculty housing. There are new conference halls, lecture rooms, and rooms for professors (who earlier had to share space with other staff).

“Five years ago, there was little left with 73 per cent of the university's budget spent on salaries. Today, it’s down to a manageable 55 per cent”

Those who know Deepak Nayyar recognise him as someone who is hard at work on his lectures and books, ever willing to argue a point in civil fashion but perhaps slow to come to decisions. But it is not for nothing that he joined the Indian Administrative Service in 1969 (only to leave quickly to return to academics). Because his stint as vice-chancellor has seen him using all his administrative skills to tackle a variety of challenges, including a non-cooperative education minister in Murli Manohar Joshi who would not nominate people on to interview panels that could then appoint staff. Nevertheless, Nayyar managed to appoint more than 300 new faculty, not to speak of 22 college principals, and fought off Joshi's bids to increase government control over university affairs by flatly refusing (for instance) to accept a centralised admission process for the university's management programme.

Nayyar also talks with surprising enthusiasm about reclaiming acres of university land from squatters, and building a new university plaza with an amphitheatre, food court, library, book stall, a souvenir store and a counseling centre, not to speak of bank counters, a railway reservation centre, cafeterias serviced by Nirula's and Spic-Macay (did you know they were into food, in addition to music?), and much else. He also dwells on the major renovation of run-down hostels like Gwyer Hall.

For all the revamping and modernisation of infrastructure, Nayyar clearly sees his biggest contribution as being to academic pursuits. He talks of bigger research budgets, the start of a millennium lecture series (attendance being standing room only, he recalls with pleasure), and funding from diverse sources for new work: the National Dairy Development Board is funding work in genetics; the ministry of health work related to HIV, private sector firms in life sciences, and so on.

It is an impressive listing of achievements; his opening remarks, billed for 20 minutes, have gone beyond 40. And the questions that follow (among other things, on the safety of women on campus) are fielded with the satisfaction of someone who knows that his five years will be remembered as among the more action-packed in the university's 83-year history. For himself, Nayyar is convinced that this has been both the most demanding job he has ever done, and also the most satisfying. But there will be no break. His last day at the university was on Sunday; on Monday he was back in Jawaharlal Nehru University at the other end of the city, teaching economics.