Yash : A Man with Multiple-Vision

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I have great pleasure in recalling my many pleasant encounters with Yash Pal, over the last four decades. As several incidents crowd my mind at the same time, causing a traffic jam, I will be restrictive and limit my narrative to the last fifteen years or so. For during this period, I had the opportunity of working closely with Yash and seeing how deep his visions are. I use the word in plural, for he is one of those rare types who can nurture several visions and yet devote adequate attention towards realizing each of them.

The IUCAA

In 1987, the idea was beginning to nucleate that there should be a resource centre of excellence in the university-sector to cater to the subjects of astronomy and astrophysics. The idea had been nebulous at first, being triggered by the proposed creation of a giant metre- wave radio telescope (GMRT) near Pune under the auspices of the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research. Although the telescope itself was to come up about 90 kilometres from Pune near Narayangaon on the Pune-Nasik Road, its academic headquarters were to be in the campus of the University of Pune.

Taking advantage of this development, Naresh Dadhich at Pune University pushed forward a proposal to have a centre for astrophysics in the university of Pune, which will act as a local nucleus for university astronomers and astrophysicists and enable them to interact with the GMRT facility. Naresh had been successful in having a group of general relativists regularly visiting the maths department of the university, amongst which may be mentioned Abhay Ashtekar, the internationally known relativist and initiator of the loop approach to quantization of gravity. The university took up this

idea and got the support of Govind Swarup, the originator of the GMRT proposal and then in charge of the project.

To get support from the UGC to this proposal, Naresh approached Yash Pal who was then the Chairman of the University Grants Commission. When Yash looked at the overall picture, he came out with a more ambitious idea. Instead of a local Pune University Centre, why not have a national centre with several built-in facilities for faculty and students from various universities? He had in mind what today is well recognised as an *Inter-University Centre*.

I think it was in September of 1987, that Yash called Naresh and me to discuss the concept further and the modality of how to go about it. *See Big...Think Big...Act Big*, that was his message. He felt that the universities had missed out in the development of overall research programmes in the country which were largely confined to the autonomous research institutions of the various departments of the Government of India. There was need to redress the balance by creating resource centres of excellence in the university sector. One such centre was already coming up, the Nuclear Science Centre in the campus of the Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi. It would have a national facility in the form of a pelletron for nuclear studies to be used by faculty and students from universities.

Why not create another centre for astronomy and astrophysics, that could have guaranteed access to the GMRT?

This was the beginning. And from the beginning Yash gave an enthusiastic backing to the project. It went through several brainstorming discussions, leading ultimately to a project report on what the centre should be like. Naresh and I sent it to the UGC for approval.

That was when Yash made that all-important phone call. I was at home around lunchtime when he came on the phone. He came straight to the point. "Will you take on the directorship of the new centre and the responsibility of setting it up?" I had of course been enthusiastic about planning such a centre, but in an abstract way, without thinking of who actually will translate vision to reality. My role I had envisioned more as a distant advisor from TIFR, than as the person in the driver's seat. Sensing my hesitation, Yash used his trump card: "I will approve the setting of this centre only if you will take on this job and that too by cutting your links with TIFR." Having been several years at TIFR, he was only too familiar with the reluctance of its academics to leave the place for good and take up some responsibility elsewhere in the country, especially in the university sector. Indeed during my tenure at TIFR I had seen many academics venturing out on lien, and returning after an year or two, finding the conditions in the real world too harsh. Yash did not want that to happen to me

After pondering over the question for no more than fifteen seconds, I replied "Yes, I will take on the responsibility". I did not consult, as I should have, my family. For it was a major transition to make. But Yash had posed a challenge and I had to respond to it. Moreover, I resolved to make the centre so attractive to work that others from TIFR would follow without thought of turning back.

Of course, when asking for total loyalty to the new centre, Yash had laid on his own assurance that he would back the project 100 percent. He did not say so in so many words, but all his actions spoke louder than any words. When I look back on those years of setting up IUCAA, I find so many right things happened at the right time...the first and foremost being the above fact

Man of Ideas

In the UGC one of the senior officials once confided in me: "Here our job is to implement

what we are given. When we have a man of ideas like the present Chairman, our job is that much more challenging." Shortage of ideas had never been one of Yash's weaknesses! After a fruitful research career as a cosmic ray physicist belonging to the first generation trained by Bhabha and Peters, Yash had moved on to other challenges. I recall his moving to Ahmadabad shortly after I had joined TIFR, to take up the implementation of the SITE programme...the so-called satellite instructional television experiment. How to use satellite TV to communicate educational and informative programmes to remote areas in India, areas which were not easily accessible to road transport or by rail? What kind of programmes would do justice to the target village audience? How can one receive and evaluate feedbacks? In the 1970s this was uncharted territory and Yash had to use his own imaginative mind to successfully meet these challenges.

Even after finishing this experiment, the Indian Space Programme did not want to let go of this imaginative mind and so Yash continued in Ahmedabad with new projects, to do with remote sensing. Once I met him during one of his brief passages through TIFR and he expressed his yearning to get back to the academia, to resume research. But that was not to be. His managerial skills and imaginative mind would not be let go by the Government of India so easily. And so I saw him 'trapped' into one administrative job after another. In each position he has left his own stamp...his starting the National Council for Science and Technology Communication at the DST, and then the various inter-university centres at the UGC.

The NCSTC has been playing seminal role for science popularisation in the country. Yash encouraged such efforts not simply as office-based programmes but ones like the Jnan-Vijnan Jathas that went right amongst the masses.

I recall, during one of his early visits to IUCAA, his mentioning the need for harnessing information technology towards facilitating access of universities to libraries. From that early vision sprouted what we today know as the INFLIBNET. Likewise his desire to get universities closer to the research facilities of the Atomic Energy Department initiated the IUCDAEF at Indore. Perhaps an offshoot of his Ahmadabad days of distant education was the CEC, with its programmes in audio-visual modes of presenting different topics in the university curriculum.

Man of Culture

But the same information technology, I know, makes him worried about the future. Will the rapid spread of knowledge lead to a thermalisation of ideas and a world which is very homogeneous? Such a world, devoid of its present cultural variety, would be a very boring place to live in. How to preserve ethnic individuality, the regional specialities, the neighbourly differences, that are now fast disappearing? A man who appreciates and values the differences of culture will have cause to worry. But while he worries about this problem, I am sure Yash's fertile brain will come out with some idea to counter the trend. Let me wish this man for all seasons a very happy and productive life ahead.

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