

Q&A

A 'PLATFORM' TO SHARE

IT HAS BEEN A YEAR SINCE THE LAUNCH OF THE INDIA PLATFORM AT GHENT UNIVERSITY, BELGIUM. BALAGANGADHARA RAO, DIRECTOR, RESEARCH CENTRE VERGELIJKENDE CULTUURWETENSCHAP, FACULTY OF ARTS AND PHILOSOPHY, GHENT UNIVERSITY, TALKS TO MALINI SEN

Why was India identified as a priority region for academic collaboration?

In the last decade, Europe's relations with India have grown dramatically. There are increasing numbers of joint ventures with and take-overs by Indian companies. The European Union now deals with India as a global leader with shared values. More importantly, India has produced a generation of outstanding scientists in domains like ICT, engineering, medicine, etc.

In view of this radically changed position of India in the world, Ghent University rector Paul Van Cauwenberge identified India as a priority region for academic collaboration.

What are the focus areas and key objectives of the India Platform?

The changed relations between India and Europe are not yet reflected in mutual understanding. As India is neither a developing country, nor a fully developed nation, Europe is still trying to determine its attitude towards India. One of the central aims of the platform is to develop an 'India Policy' and to stimulate fundamental research into the cultural differences between Europe and India.

Other aims are to facilitate partnerships between Ghent University and Indian institutions of higher education; as well as with non-academic partners from business, administration, politics and media. The realisation of these objectives is framed in a long-term relationship between the two nations.

It has been a year since the launch, what have been the achievements so far?

The India Platform is promoting India as a research partner par excellence. A database of existing collaborations is being developed and professors are encouraged to collaborate with Indian scientists and doctoral or post-doctoral students. Ten agreements with Indian institutes of higher education have been signed. The India Platform has also played a seminal role in the establishment of Academy for Social Sciences and Humanities (ASHA) in India, and the organisation of an international conference cluster, 'Rethinking Religion in India.' In the following year, the platform will raise funds to turn some of these existing collaborations into more sustainable agreements and facilitate research exchange.

As the director of the platform, what is your future vision?

It is my vision to build up a movement to rejuvenate the social sciences and humanities in India. Research output is poor and largely irrelevant for 21st century India. At the same time, rapid changes in society have brought about new social and cultural problems, which require innovative research. Yet, few talented students are attracted to building a career in these domains. The India Platform wants to counter this. Today, already, a massive experiment is taking place in Karnataka with the establishment of ASHA. The state government is supporting the academy. The academy's goals are to create social science modules for engineering colleges in Karnataka; to set up innovative

social scientific research projects and develop new curricula; and to develop a vision on higher education for 21st -century India. All this will be a joint effort of Indian and international scholars.



Balagangadhara Rao