

**Inaugural Address of Kalpatha 2011 by
Former Ambassador T.P.Sreenivasan
Vice-Chairman, KSHEC at Technopark on Nov 19, 2011**

Thank you for inviting me to inaugurate Kalpatha 2011, a two day national conference on the topic of "Business Innovation The New Age Survival Mantra". You have invited me at a time when I am in the process of reinventing myself. To put it in computer terminology, I am struggling to put new software into the hardware that is accustomed to a different set of circumstances and demands. After being an evangelist of foreign policy and strategic thinking, I have now moved to the academic world, with a mandate to help the Kerala Government formulate its policy on higher education. My only consolation is that there have been several diplomats before me, who made the switch and done as well in academics as in diplomacy. In a way, my own appointment as the Executive Head of the KSHEC is an innovation on the part of the Government of Kerala.

I have agreed to speak here today not because I have much to say about innovation, which is now a vast subject for discussion in the business world. I am fascinated by your commitment to uphold the recent trends and issues in management and bridge the gap between the corporate world and academia. In fact, the first new topic that my Council adopted for implementation was the Institution-Industry interface, a programme of close interaction between educational institutions and the industry.

The nature of interaction between educational institutions and industry has changed significantly over the years in India. In the colonial era, there was little interaction between the two, as the University system essentially supplied human capital to staff the civil service and judiciary. It was not purported to cater to the industrial workforce. Post independence, graduates of Indian university system found employment in a much wider range of careers, including in industry. Other forms of university industry linkages such as industry sponsored research projects, joint publications, business incubators in universities, have started to flourish recently in certain institutions such as IITs and IISC. These institutions have witnessed higher intensity university industry linkages. For instance, all the business incubators started in academia in India can be traced to IITs and IISC. When IIT Kanpur was ranked as number one among engineering colleges, the reason was that it had received a high amount of alumni money in the form of university-industry linkages. This benefits the industry because they get young brains to work in their research and development programs and the University students get great exposure to the industry. For this very reason, these institutions are considered institutions of excellence and enjoy greater autonomy. My ambition is to create such institutions in Kerala.

It goes without saying that there is a strong connection between autonomy enjoyed by institutions like the IITs and the intensity with which it participates in the nation's innovative system. The government funding for research, which is channeled through public research institutes has not been fully utilized for the purpose intended. For this reason, the Government now proposes to create Innovation Universities with greater autonomy in matters of academics, faculty, personnel, finance, administration and in the development of a vision for the future. These universities will make our universities more active participants in the country's innovative system.

India's economic success story is based on growth in business services, including information technology services that are mainly non-patentable and do not require formal R&D spending. This may appear comfortable in the short term, but to compete at the global level, research at the university level has to be essential part of our strategy. Absence of research will make our graduates mere labour in the world markets. New streams of technology can be invented only when education endeavors to meet demand.

A UNESCO Policy Forum concluded in 2000 that one of the most important challenges for institutional policy-makers is defining a legal framework and incentive systems which stimulate innovation at the institutional, departmental and individual levels. A balance has to be achieved between the culture and traditions of a university with existing outside opportunities for collaboration. Bringing these opportunities to the campuses is the objective of the Institutions-Industry Interface that the Executive Council is planning to accomplish.

Increasingly, industries are becoming the beneficiaries of the products of our universities and, therefore, they have a responsibility to invest in education, particularly research. We do not have major manufacturing industries in Kerala, but our graduates do work in other parts of India and abroad. Partnership with major industrial houses will benefit both the universities and the industries. Needless to say, the knowledge industry, which is growing in Kerala has even a greater stake in education and research.

Coming back to innovation in its present sense of invention and renovation, interestingly, the most innovative companies such as Google, Facebook, Twitter etc do not claim to be innovative, while those who are still trying to be innovative speak of the importance of innovation. Those who have acquired game changing technologies go beyond innovation, they create revolutions. Steve Jobs and Mark Zuckerberg are not innovators, but visionaries, to borrow a word from an earlier era. Innovation may well be for lesser mortals, but innovation is essential for business and it is the survival mantra of today.

Innovation is traditionally measured by the number of patents a company files, but more recently there is a tendency to measure it in terms of influence and global reach. The result is a list of 100 most innovative companies in the world and the surprise is that not a single Chinese company is on the list. Yet, China has become the most prolific patent filer in the world, pursuing a national plan to become an economy based on innovation rather than imitation. The Chinese plan calls for its corporations and individual investors to file two million patents by 2015, which would dwarf the current filing in the US. The absence of Chinese firms on the list of innovators has been attributed to focusing on the domestic market first. But it will not be long before the Chinese secure global reach and become one of the most innovative countries. Like in other areas of business, China is ahead of us in patents and it is poised to compete with the US.

In education, however, vision is more important than innovation. but in the short term, innovative ideas are as important in education as in business. The search for answers is the essence of education, just as business today cannot prosper without constant search for new applications of old inventions, if not new inventions and discoveries. In the laboratories, failures are not uncommon and success comes only after repeated failures, while in education, failures can do lasting damage. But in education as well as in business, tireless efforts are essential for new concepts, new applications, in other words, innovation.

I would like to conclude with what Leonardo da Vinci had to say about the vital importance of inquisitiveness in life. "I roamed the countryside searching for answers to things I did not understand. Why shells existed in the top of mountains along with imprints of coral and plant and seaweed usually found in the sea. Why the thunder lasts a longer time than that which causes it and why immediately on its creation the lightning becomes visible to the eye, while thunder takes time to travel. How the the various circles of water form around the spot which has been struck by a stone and why a bird sustains itself in the air. These questions and other strange phenomena engaged my thought throughout my life." Some of the phenomena that bewildered Leonardo have been explained by science, but others remain. Both business and education must be constantly in search for answers to these questions, leading to innovation and vision.
Thank you.

T.P. Sreenivasan, (IFS 1967)

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