

Making SIS Visible and Socially Relevant

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BACKGROUND

It seems there is a sense of palpable disquiet among many of the colleagues in the School as regards future course and 'vision' for this prestigious School. As we are aware, the School has unique distinction in being much older than even JNU. In fact the 'golden jubilee' of the School came and went more than two years ago without any notice. It even seems the *Kunzru Lectures* have not been organized for some five years or so! It was a pointed query from the UGC Team on 9 August 2008 that shook some of us to do introspection as to how the prestigious School could contribute to knowledge and how are we 'socially relevant'? On that day, fortunately, the Dean put the issue squarely in terms of our 'submergence' within the larger JNU canvas and how the 'credit' for specific work of individual faculty member accrues to JNU rather than the School *per se*.

THE PROBLEM

The question posed by UGC Team is quite pertinent. It could still form the basis for some internal churning to position the School at this crucial juncture. I vividly remember prodding one JNU V-C as regards institutional ownership and nurturing of research. His formal reply was: 'outstanding work always gets respected'! This amounts to classic abdication of role and vision of head of JNU to buttress and 'own up' research so as to vindicate establishment of JNU as a research university that is 'different' than others in India. It is a fact that along with work/contribution of a faculty member, the respective Centre/School/JNU goes up in societal esteem. However, this process largely remains amorphous especially due to lack of 'institutionalized' mechanism for the purpose not only at the University level but also at the School level. Even being a part of JNU, the School can still aspire to reach the pioneering position held by it during its previous incarnation as ISIS. It appears that the School has considerable potential that remains scattered as well as untapped. As such in the absence of concerted efforts to nurture it, the overall picture leads to misplaced perceptions as regards 'visibility' and, in turn, social relevance, standing and contribution of the School within and outside JNU that can vindicate the cost to the public exchequer. Cumulatively, its fall out is a sense of dejection and despair among many of the faculty members. Such a 'sense' can not but adversely erodes the standing of the School in course of time. The fact that the 'golden jubilee' passed without any effort at projection of the School and showcasing the vision for the coming years itself is a testimony of this sad state of affairs. The question that remains is: Can we afford to be mute and helpless spectators and continue sulking? If not, we must try to make sincere efforts to ensure that School springs back to its past glory. Its strong presence needs to be felt and seen in area studies as well as in functional centers. In fact we could even collectively aspire at some stage to crystallize 'SIS position' on seminal issues of policy and concern at domestic as well as international level.

POSSIBLE WAY OUT

In view of this, it seems high time that we need to look at state of affairs closely to put into place concerted response. To begin with, we could commence a churning process and hold informal meetings, at least once in a month on a fixed day and time, to exchange notes, views and work concerning various developments. The exercise could be in the form of a self-help open-ended SIS group of faculty members who have strong teaching and research interests. It will be devoid of any formal trappings that could stultify free exchange of views and ideas. For the sake of convenience, the group could have a convener for a quarterly period. Its motto could be promotion of 'SIS brand' and, in turn, JNU.

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