

Vice-Chancellor's visit to India, 17-25 March 2012

My last trip to India took place two years ago, almost to the week, and it felt like it was high time that I returned, especially following the success of the University's [India Day](#) last summer. My personal links with India are many: academics with whom I have collaborated over the years; post-docs with whom I have worked in the US, who are now running laboratories or institutions themselves; supporters and donors who have helped the University in a variety of ways, particularly for last year's India Day here in Oxford. So there was a lot to look forward to on this trip, and my colleagues within the University administration certainly packed in a lot for me to do, with a combination of development meetings, lectures, alumni receptions, and institutional visits.

The highlight for Monday 19th, which rounded off a hectic day, was the Oxford India Business Forum. This is an event that the Saïd Business School has been holding since 2006. Some two hundred people, many of them emerging business leaders, and a considerable number of Oxford alumni, heard presentations and discussed the theme of governance and regulation. It was both remarkable and impressive to see leading figures from the worlds of business, policymaking, and the social sector discussing "the rules of the game" that play such a critical role in shaping India's economy.

Oxford already has a number of excellent research collaborations with Indian partners, and on Tuesday morning we paid a visit to the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research to discuss our collaboration in Physics. TIFR has to be one of the most beautiful research institutes in the world, set in gardens at the southern tip of Mumbai, overlooking the Indian Ocean. Professor Subir Sarkar co-leads the collaboration from the Oxford side. This project is a real partnership of equals, involving scholars who have known and respected each other's work for years, and who have joined forces to tackle problems of mutual interest. One of the most exciting developments is the building of a neutrino observatory, several km beneath a mountain in Tamil Nadu. The plan is to shoot neutrinos through the earth from Oxford all the way to India. The distance of 7000 km is a magic baseline to observe neutrinos, and the work will generate significant new insights about these particles.

Later that day we held a graduate recruitment event at St Xavier's College, the outstanding (primarily) undergraduate college that Barack Obama visited on his trip to India. Here I gave a talk entitled "[Reaching out: world-class education in an era of globalisation](#)", in which I considered the key roles of the modern university, and the way that such universities "go global", in research, in education, and in impact. Our graduate admissions colleagues who accompanied me on part of the trip spoke with more than a hundred students about coming to Oxford to undertake postgraduate study. There are over 350 students from India at Oxford today, and many of them are on graduate scholarships. This includes the Rhodes Scholarships, which have brought almost two hundred Indian students to Oxford over 60 years; the Felix Scholarships, which have brought thirty Indian students to Oxford within the last 4 years; and the Clarendon Scholarships, our flagship scholarship programme, which is open to all.



On Wednesday we flew to Delhi for OUP India's 100th Anniversary celebration. From a modest start in Mumbai, OUP has carved out an important role in India for 100 years by publishing locally tailored books in a broad range of areas: including textbooks, ELT, and scholarly works. The event was graced by the Prime Minister, Dr Manmohan Singh - himself an Oxford graduate - who spoke movingly about supporting a culture of reading in India. The government economist Dr Montek Singh Ahluwalia (right) was also in attendance, along with so many of the authors whose creativity and excellence has made OUP a success for a century.

That same afternoon we met with Dr Ashwani Kumar, Minister of Planning, Science and Technology, to discuss future avenues of potential collaboration in scientific research and teaching between Oxford and Indian partners. We and the Department for Science and Technology will be exploring two areas in particular: a collaborative investigation of the genetic basis of cancer in India; and opportunities to build capacity in technology transfer and commercialisation, which is a key priority of the Indian government.

Oxford is already collaborating in the area of cancer research, and the following day we visited India's most outstanding medical school, the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), which is part of INDOX, a network of twelve leading cancer centres right across India. Previously seen as primarily a rich country problem, cancer is rapidly becoming a major killer in India. INDOX is studying the lifestyle factors that influence the risk of cancer on a scale never before achieved in India, involving tens of thousands of participants. For example, does vegetarianism or the use of particular spices used in Indian cooking have a beneficial effect? How far does chewing tobacco, or the increasing adoption of Western lifestyles in urban areas, have a detrimental impact? We saw hundreds of patients waiting for treatment, many having travelled from distant parts of the countryside; we saw patients receiving chemotherapy; and we spoke with the clinicians who are providing their treatment while conducting groundbreaking research into the nature and causes of the disease.

We later met with the Minister for Human Resource Development, Kapil Sibal, who is the architect of India's rapidly transforming HE sector. Later we went to IIT Delhi, one of India's outstanding science and technology institutions, where I talked about the importance and excellence of science at Oxford and about the critical [role of universities in bridging the gap between science and society](#). The evening came to a close with a delightful reception for alumni at the British Council, which plays such an important role in supporting cultural and academic links between the UK and countries around the world. The evening showcased some of the best of Oxford, as it included a short talk by an alumna of our MSc in Contemporary India, Sunali Rohra, about the impact of her time at Oxford; a mini-lecture by Robyn Norton, Director of the George Centre at Oxford, about the important work the Centre is doing in India to make health care innovations affordable; and lots of good cheer among Oxford alumni - of whom there are fully 1300 in India. Any university is only as good as its alumni, and Oxford's alumni in India are flourishing. Past and present they include two Prime Ministers - Dr Manmohan Singh and Mrs Indira Gandhi; plus leaders in business, in Bollywood (Soha Ali Khan), and in sport (Tiger Pataudi). A great cricketer for Oxford and India, Tiger died recently, much too soon, and was memorialised in a recent lecture by none other than Imran Khan, the Pakistani cricket legend (who is also an Oxford graduate). Khan said that Tiger had the benefit of a quality education, and that a quality education "structures the mind". To me that perfectly captures what an Oxford education is all about.

On Friday we travelled to IIT Kharagpur, where I gave a lecture as part of the institution's Diamond

Jubilee celebrations. Before an audience of around 250 students, I talked about [what makes a world-class university in the 21st Century](#). I was also able to announce a major new policy change in undergraduate admissions: for the first time, conditional offers of admission to Oxford for undergraduate study may be made based on a candidate's performance in the Class XII examinations set by the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) and the Indian School Certificate (ISC). Up until now, Indian applicants for undergraduate courses have needed to have A-levels, SATs or the International Baccalaureate.

We also had a chance to talk with IIT Kharagpur's Director, Professor Damodar Acharya, about the remarkable history of his institution, which began in a former detention camp for Indian freedom fighters in the first half of the 20th century. We also talked about the university's exciting present, which includes great students and academics, and an exciting new centre on Bio-energy. A real treat for me was the opportunity to give an impromptu talk about my organic chemistry research. Somehow students were persuaded to show up late on a Friday evening to hear about protein-protein bonds!

On the final day of the trip, in Kolkata, we met with academic colleagues, students, the media, and with Oxford alumni at the University of Calcutta and Presidency University. It was a great way to round off the week.

Having recently returned from these seven whirlwind days in India, and settled down to review all that my colleagues and I did while over there, I have two observations. First, even though each day was packed with meetings and events from morning to night, I am struck by how much more we could do. There were many important research partners we could have visited, and several other outstanding universities whose international initiatives and ideas for collaboration we could have discussed. The breadth of Oxford's links in India is staggering. Second, the future will surely hold even more. This is an exciting time to be a student or a professor in India. Resources are flowing into the higher education sector as never before and excellence is developing everywhere you look. The rise of India's universities is a great thing for Oxford. It pushes us to be better ourselves. And it creates new potential partners. Collaboration and mobility will be the keys to excellence in the 21st Century. India's rise creates new opportunities for Oxford to collaborate. I look forward to what the future will bring.