

## **A brief note on the history of the National Institute of Advanced Studies**

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The roots of the idea behind the National Institute of Advanced Studies can be traced to a proposal by the late Mr J R D Tata that there was a need for a high level educational institution as a memorial to Jawaharlal Nehru. In 1966 Mr Tata constituted a working group consisting of Professor Jean Capelle, formerly Rector of several French universities and Director-General, Ministry of Education, Paris, Dr S Dhawan, Director, Indian Institute of Science, Dr A G Evstafiev, Chief of the UNESCO Mission in India, Dr Malcolm M Willey, formerly Vice-President for Academic Affairs at the University of Minnesota and Professor R Choksi, Managing Trustee, Sir Dorab Tata Trust

The concept behind the proposal was the thought expressed by Jawaharlal Nehru in the following words: "Between these two [humanism and the scientific spirit] there has been an apparent conflict but the great upheaval of thought today, with its questioning of all values, is removing the old boundaries between these two approaches, as well as between the external world of science and the internal world of introspection. There is a growing synthesis between humanism and the scientific spirit, resulting in a kind of scientific humanism." A project prepared by Prof Capelle's Working Group suggested that the main object of the proposed Nehru Academy (as it was called) "should be the pursuit of excellence combined with a drive towards purposive action"; the training in the Academy was to be characterized by "depth, breadth and resiliency". The Group emphasized that the Academy should promote "the grasp of a methodology of action, developing at one [and the same] time a scientific capacity for analysis and synthesis and a moral sense of duty and responsibility". In particular mathematics was to be given major attention, along with the most important fields of the physical sciences and such subjects as psychology, economics and sociology. The Academy was to be staffed by a small number of full-time professors but a large number of part-time faculty as well as visiting professors and exchange scholars. The value of cooperation with other organizations was greatly emphasized.

For a variety of reasons this proposal did not materialize, but in 1984 Mr Tata went back to the idea. This time he asked Prof R D Choksi to head another Committee to reexamine the idea in the light of advances since the date of the Capelle Committee. This Committee included another distinguished French academic, Prof. Philippe Olmer (Honorary Professor at Paris and Director-General at the Ministry), as well as Dr Dhawan, Mr L K Jha, Prof M G K Menon and Dr H N Sethna. The establishment of NIAS was the direct result of the recommendations of this Committee.

In his thinking about educational institutions in India Mr Tata was greatly influenced by French examples. (It might be recalled that he was born in France and spent his youngest years there.) In a lecture given as President of the Court of the Indian Institute of Science on 19 March 1964, Mr Tata emphasized the need to start a different kind of educational institution “for the most talented” young Indians, along the lines of the *Grands Ecoles* of France. He realized of course that mere imitation would never be satisfactory, but clearly was a great admirer of the French system, and spoke about how “the students of the French *Grands Ecoles*, who were trained in exceptionally severe moral and intellectual disciplines, have displayed in their career integrity and leadership of a high order”. He was convinced that “India’s progress can only be assured by the quality of a leadership that can extend and improve mass education, employ her natural resources to greatest advantage, use her inventive skills of mind and hand with daring and imagination, and establish on equal terms vital contacts with leaders of thought and action in other lands.”

Although in his 1964 address Mr Tata had in mind the idea that the Indian Institute of Science could be one of the special Indian *Grands Ecoles*, he seemed to feel a few years later that the objective could only be attained through a different institution. Thus came the Capelle Working Group. When the possibility of a new Institute reemerged in 1984, the questions that had been raised by Prof Olmer about the original concept led to a refinement of the earlier ideas and the establishment of NIAS in 1988.

NIAS was eventually built on the campus of the Indian Institute of Science. In keeping with Mr Tata’s original vision, the Institute has emphasized right from its foundation a multi-disciplinary approach, bringing together the natural and social sciences, technology, the humanities, administration, management and industry. The Institute has done this through the character of its own faculty and its large out-reach programme through its Associates (now numbering more than two hundred) from all walks of life.

NIAS finally started operating in June 1988 with Dr Raja Ramanna, former Chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission, as its first Director. The first course was given in 1989 at Pune. The main building of the Institute at the IISc campus was inaugurated by Mr J R D Tata on 12 March 1992. The auditorium of the Institute was opened on 23 March 1997 by the then Prime Minister, Mr H D Deve Gowda. Mr Tata had passed away on 29 November 1993.