I come to the question of the university, because of my biographical and professional association with the National Law School of India University, where I was also many years ago an undergraduate student of law, through legal education and other related professions that benefit from legal education. At the NLS, from the time of the founding by Prof. N R Madhava Menon in 1987, via the National Law School of India Act, 1986 passed by the Karnataka Legislative Assembly, law and its teaching have never been perceived as an isolated technical domain of training. From the tradition of teaching law alongside the social sciences, the consistent attempt was to shape the consciousness of a lawyer who would emerge as an active changemaker and a contemplative thinker, occupying the domains of thought and practice simultaneously. The abstract and the concrete were never fully segregated in the pedagogic strategies at the NLS. With the requisite humility that comes with standing on such gigantic shoulders, let me say a few things about university-level learning and its challenges in India today.

The metropolitan university in India, for better or worse, has become steadfastly an altar for all kinds of prayers of economic advantage. This is perhaps only fair as more and more citizens, especially on the margins, come to enter the professional workforce and want requisite skills to compete effectively in a precarious wage market. That makes the university, a handmaiden of market forces, what some

would call a 'neoliberal' university. This being granted, and some of us who are trying to run programmes at universities in this room, know this reality only too well, I want to try and draw attention away from the practical concerns of the university in our time. The university, the oldest ones – Nalanda and Taxila in South Asia, Oxford in 12th century Catholic England (as an ecclesiastical education establishment) rose. People went to these institutions in the distant past(s) to get away from the machinations of the world, to immerse in a surrender to the cause of learning. Men, mostly elite men, and/or men of the cloth were found immersed in years of debate and discussion of difficult textual materials, many of them stemming from questions of theology and predictably, questions of statecraft. The internet tells me that trade or vocational schools were also important – where artisans and businessmen learnt their practical arts. In Europe, these establishments lent special support during the 18th and 19th century as manufacturing industry and the economic changes initiated by them, became important pivots of change in society. The distinction between the trade, professional, or vocational schools that taught arts of industry, commerce, and business and those educational establishments that imparted arts of thought, scientific reasoning, mathematics, philosophical and theological abstraction, and higher order innovation - seems like a far more recent phenomena that coagulated along the history of industrialisation in Europe, and later in the colonies. The national or regional origin of learning establishments that were in the nature of modern universities are also a later development.

My question for you today, is: Why should we accept this distinction and bifurcation?

What should we do at universities to generate learning environments where mature citizens as well as deft professionals can simultaneously be trained? As we push and pull the decolonization of education tug-of-war, away from and towards nativism, my provocation to you is that there is an opportunity here for Indian educationists to radically re-imagine higher education in India today. Take it away from nativism, as also foreign imitation, as also elitism, as also populism. Is this series of educational adventures possible? Well, I am optimistic.

In a country where schools (both catering to the children of the elite and non-elite) are struggling to keep a student meaningfully engaged with the project of learning, where (as JPAL has documented) basic cognitive skills of arithmetic and language are often found wanting in children in primary or middle school, can we ask for ambitious experiments in higher education that require 'cognitive endurance' in higher education? My provocation to you is, yes, let's try not to conservatively calibrate our cognitive expectations of our students. We can try some experiments in higher education to address this widespread deficit that settles in at early stages.

We grow up in Indian cities with the mortal fear of competitive exams, our public libraries are flushed with mock test compendia and our children end up spending their precious formative years at tuition centres preparing for a chance at life – aka the coaching centre that sells them the dream of a high-prestige professional degree campus in engineering, medicine, law, or management. These are very legitimate dreams in a country where there is high precarity in employment and underemployment. Parents and teachers are very legitimately worried about securing the economic futures of their children and students. From their vantage point, a young person's metaphysical, emotional, and aesthetic growth may seem like a secondary concern especially as higher education becomes more and more expensive. I offer a conciliation of these two views: of the importance work-facing, relevant university education, alongside the seemingly contradictory emphasis on aesthetic, emotional, and metaphysical education of young minds.

Moral and/or metaphysical and political education offered at universities must also train future leaders and citizens to confront their own self-image with a radical candour. They must be able to live with an acknowledgement of our collective complicities in global histories of injustice and violence. Young citizens must be trained in the art of citizenship beyond festivals of voting and occasional protest. Young citizens must also be schooled into developing empathy for problems and

structural and situational violences which are not of their own familiar variety. To do that, they must appreciate contexts that their own neighbourhood, town, village, caste, community, religion, but also, and crucially, the larger, wider contexts of nation, region, and globe.

I find some solace in turning to Tagore on education, whose propensity in establishing the Visva Bharati University, was purely to concentrate on the arts (both visual and performing) and related disciplines that centrally took up questions of aesthetics. This was not an entirely naïve act, but one that was radically politically alive to the task of creating of generation of doer-thinkers for a new and emerging nation-state that needed language, art, dams, factories, murals, farming, but most of all, strong faith in their infinite capabilities. I am remembering now that Indira Gandhi who later was prime minister and a difficult, authoritarian one and the left-leaning actor Balraj Sahni were classmates in Visva Bharati, Shantiniketan. Taking cue from Tagore as an educationist and political thinker (not only a mystic and poet as he is often read in the West), I must turn us to the insecurities that drive our pedagogic decisions at universities.

Other than the livelihood anxiety, Indian education today is also caught in rigid bucket-lists. It is assumed often from middle or even primary school that if a child is not good at cracking timed tests in say arithmetic, that they will not grow up to be

able to learn that specific skill or discipline. And in contrast, if they are good at arithmetic in grade four as a nine-year old, they must commit themselves to pathways leading from that skill for their whole life. We pass judgment on potential success or failure in schools and other learning environments too quickly. We bind young people to life decisions too soon. The aftermath of that is confronted when the young adult comes to university. Some disciplines are assumed to be easy, low-effort (often this is the perception of the humanities and *softer* social science disciplines like anthropology) while economics or physics or statistics is considered occupying higher positions in the hierarchy of requirement of labour and intelligence. The student then allocates their energy and intellectual labour along this spectrum in order to determine the most realistic chances of succeeding at university. The student is by now, at age eighteen or nineteen, mortally afraid of failure or setbacks of any kind. It is like they want to keep playing a video game at level five where they know will win, and remain throughout inhospitable to the idea of trying out level thirty-five of the same game, or a different game which has a setup they are not familiar with. It is a dire attitude of risk aversion. It is a fear of the unknown, a fear of difficulty, and a palpable of fear of limitations and boundaries drawn around the self at a young age that they now cannot unsee. It fails our task of keeping up high levels of cognitive endurance in the learning environment.

As one of our NLS students was asked at a major foreign scholarship interview, what are the things you failed at? The student thought for a while, and said, well I have been trying to learn swimming for a while, and am still not good at it, so I suppose, swimming. The interviewer offered an important corrective to the student, but you haven't failed, it's just that you're still learning. This anecdote carries tremendous wisdom, as I see it. To fail by repeated predictable success is a misfortune we often offer our students at schools and universities couched as successful opportunism. A student is not given time and patience as resources. They are not given the emotional support to take longer than others to learn something. They are often fitted with huge egos that take a hit at the smallest of setback. Are these apposite values and strengths for successful businessmen, professional corporate executives, doctors, government servants, and future political leaders? I think we can do better than this. We can do better by maintaining levels of cognitive endurance and inviting students to step out of comfort zones and try math if they are not good at it, and try learning a language if they think it is not their strong point. To do it, we will have to destroy the honour code of maintaining grade sheets which become weapons of destruction. I hope we can create in universities a learning environment where a student is more interested in the stuff of learning than in the ultimate victory/defeat outcome.

Alongside combining big picture thinking, artistic and metaphysical education and professional and vocational training, I think, as educationists we must invest in building mental resilience. No quick, short routes to long and stable forms of excellence. I sometimes say to very ambitious students in my class that excellence is a marathon, not a sprint. You must build muscle, patience, resilience, keep an even-breathed pace, in order to pull off the long haul. Learning is not only a matter of esoteric curiosity or passion, but a matter fundamentally of building cognitive muscle. We find often in early year classrooms, that students are lacking the stamina to read carefully across ten odd pages of even a little bit of technical or dense prose. They are often looking for the Instagram reel impact in a classroom – something eventful, quick, reaction-provoking, and viscerally entertaining. As much as advanced learning can be a form of challenging entertainment, early steps in learning are often like taking numeorus rounds of the football field before you even put your foot against the ball. This round and round running routine cannot be compromised on in building strength and resilience in the player, who, in future, we hope, will score the perfect goal. But we must start him off slowly, with repetition, tolerance, resilience, and patience. We must build fascination of an indeterminate nature. Must one only weigh one's success in terms of a timed exam and a percentile score? Those are useful instruments for the governance of education as a system, yes. But they are not to be taken at face value as meaningful markers or indicators of actual learning.

Often at a loss when students are not reading, far from the lofty project of reading *against the grain*, I find myself asking them to slow-read a paragraph at a time, sometimes even at the sentence level. This is not exciting, least of all, entertaining. But it does the work of running rounds of the football field to build tenacity and resilience of the mind.

Now to reveal my peculiar trump cards, let me say that these and related conversations are already afoot at the NLS. Our six-course series called the Common Core is built exactly to cater to such concerns of building early on, a tenacity of the mind, a cognitive endurance. Such a mind which has reasonable grasp of language, writing, reading, and numerical operations, we believe at the NLS, will then be able to combine such skills and pick up a range of domain knowledges whether it be high abstract political thought or application of legal reasoning to a statute or performing some statistical operations on a data set. Once this is done for all our undergraduate students of the first year (both in the tracks of law and BA), we believe the ground is prepared thereafter for a combination of instructions in domain knowledges or disciplines. We believe most in assuring the student that their initial difficulty or setback in picking up a skill or an idea is not a reflection on their learning capacity or personality. We hope, at the NLS, in our various programmes, especially the undergraduate ones, will be able to attack the strong and rigid negative feedback

loops and fear-traps with which young students enter our campus. Some of this training requires tough love, I admit. But all of it is geared with a tone of assurance saying, the journey might be long, and hard, but it's one that you have within you the strength to complete.