

Towards 'globalising' educ

V Radhika reports on the recent international conference of universities in

IN A context where *vasudhaiva kutumbakam* is no longer just a desirable goal but a harsh reality the question facing the world community is the principle which is going to govern the family organisation: is it going to be run according to the diktat of a patriarch or along democratic principles?

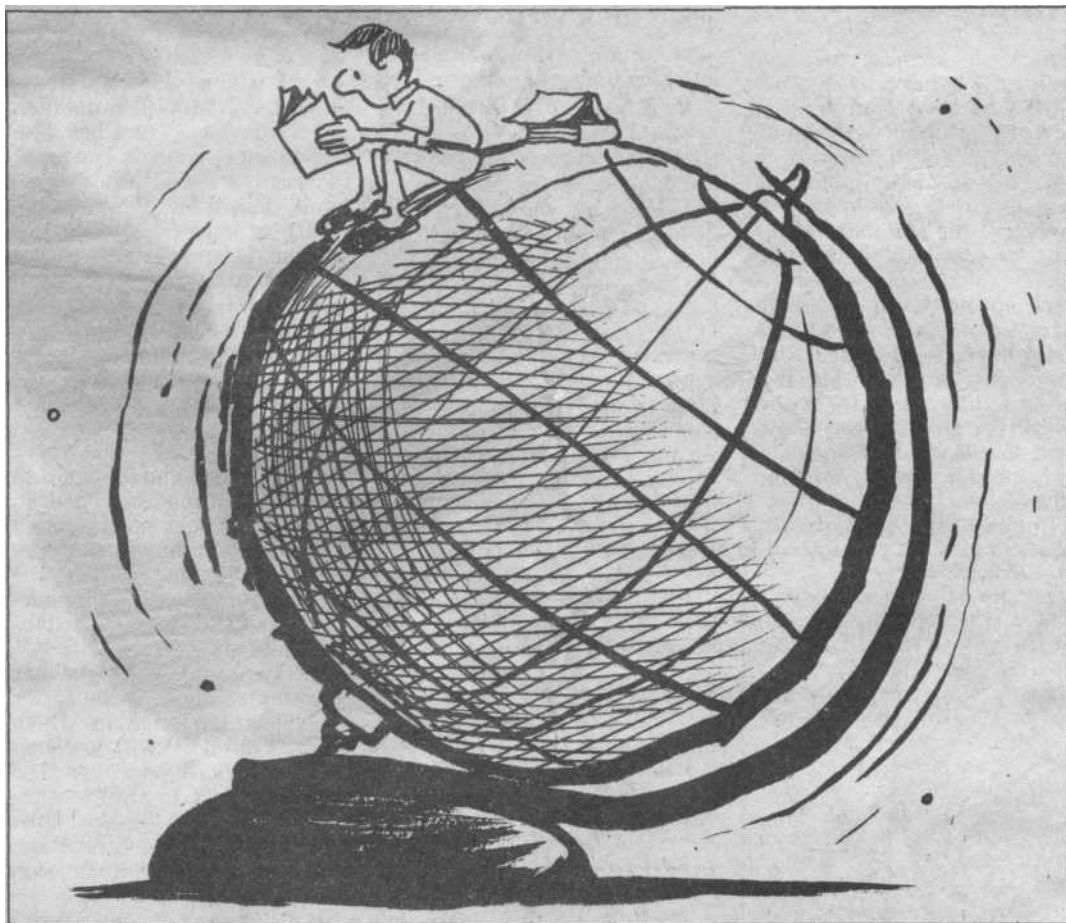
For the academics attending the International Association of Universities' (IAU) tenth conference, the choice was clear: integration but not at the cost of local culture and identity. It was for the first time that an Asian country was hosting it. The theme of the conference (which was organised by the Jawaharlal Nehru University) and was attended by over 500 Vice-Chancellors from all over the world was, "Global civilisation and cultural roots: Bridging the gap — the place of international university cooperation."

However, the theme evidently suggests much more than reiteration of faith in democracy. It reflects the changing character of universities and chalking out a proactive role for them. As Walter Kamba, founding dean of the department of law in the University of Namibia and former president of IAU said, "The traditional emphasis on pursuit of knowledge for its sake has to be re-examined. Persistence in that regard will render universities irrelevant, particularly in the context of developing countries."

This opinion in a sense reflects the changing character of the IAU which has come a long way since a couple-odd universities first met in 1950 to "deliberate on issues of the academic community and suggest areas of cooperation by meeting once every five years".

"The discussions basically veered around issues which were academic, but the term itself was defined very narrowly," said some delegates. But with the passage of time and expanding membership the issues also changed, reflecting the changing socio-economic-political scenario.

This is not to say that "pure" academic questions are not part of the agenda. Along with them and equally important if not more questions like, "what kind of research should



ests should it serve and what relevance does it have to our societal context?"

As Kamba put it, "We have to address the question of availability of and accessibility to resources and relevance of research work of universities." This question assumes particular significance in the context of developing countries.

The sub-themes of the conference reflected the growing concern of striking a balance between the inevitable process of globalisation and the requirements of individual countries.

One important concern was that of sustainable development. David Johnston from Canada stressed the need for universities to promote sustainable development within their own institutions and also pooling in resources with others, first in their own countries and subsequently with other institutions in the region. By pooling resources, "They can begin with environment audit, teaching and research to promote collaborative efforts and can improve efforts and access the global information," he said.

"By collaborating at various

the global information highway and serve as rallying points to reduce the gap between the haves and have-nots," said Johnston.

"Reduction of this gap requires much more than that," said Martis Romeo Jr of Universidade Fluminense of Brazil. According to him, the time has come to modify the dichotomy of developed and developing countries into "countries that sell technology and countries that need to buy technology". However, he pointed out, "the technology that they have but may not necessarily be appropriate."

According to him, the role of technology should form an important part of any deliberations of global civilisation because, "science is global but technology should be regional". According to him, many agreements are signed between universities in developing countries and research institutions in the developed countries, "but these are in science and not technology"

"By doing this, developed countries want to use our intelligence but do not want us to

our technology," he said. According to him instances abound of developing countries buying technology from the developed but very often such technology is not appropriate.

Romeo and others also added a word of caution against universities becoming victims of globalisation.

"To serve as good institutions, universities need good libraries, laboratories and equipment. But books and equipment cost money and right now these are low on the priority list of governments of developing countries." In this context, the World Bank came in for criticism. "It wants to maintain the state-of-art of world situation," Romeo said.

At least, Brazil has its territory intact. Representatives from Croatia and other countries which once formed USSR, are struggling on the one hand to come to terms with the changed economic-political scenario and on the other to keep the academic cycle going ever under "war-like" conditions as a Vice-Chancellor put it.

Representatives from former socialist countries which

education

of universities in the Capital

pointed out that while science and technology were accorded high priority even earlier, it is primarily social sciences which need a thorough re-orientation.

"Moreover, suddenly people have been catapulted in a situation where they and they alone have to fend for their needs. The state is just not there to look after you.

In such a situation the first casualty becomes education because one has to fend for oneself and in any case education now costs a lot of money and money is hard to come by," said a representative.

Some representatives pointed out that even in socialist countries, the governments have been forced to introduce economic reforms but they have firmly resisted political reforms. "It is hard to liberalise one to the exclusion of the other," said a professor of political science.

There was one issue over which all the representatives from developing countries had a uniform stand the state cannot absolve itself of the responsibility of higher education. "Why should international funding agencies ask us to cut our state spending on higher education whereas in all the developed countries the state plays a major role in providing higher education," they remarked.

"Globalisation which takes place in the context of gross disparities between the industrialised north and developing south and a concentration of science and technology in the north is unacceptable," said Kamba and others.

"This so-called inevitable globalisation has not saved us from suffering and ending disparities and this apparent progress has not prevented the occurrence of brutal conflicts. Something is missing in this globalisation phenomenon. By initiating a debate we have sought to seek out the missing element and suggest that perhaps, we are not paying sufficient attention in the cultural sphere to those areas which deal with values" said Kamba.

At the end of the conference, the IAU formulated a policy and developed a which "has called university community pro-active and indefining and defining and assuming the decisive responsibility of universities in shaping a common future

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