

Temples and World-class Universities

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It is not a routine event that a Hindu temple—or anywhere else—would discover US\$22 billion (approximately Rs. 98,000 crore) buried in the basement. Now that the Sree Padmanabhaswamy Temple in Thiruvananthapuram, the capital of the Indian state of Kerala, has this windfall, everyone is suggesting ways of using the funds. Here is one idea that would make a real contribution to India and to the state of Kerala and is much in keeping with the mission of developing culture, science, and civilization: build India's first truly world-class university.

Surprisingly, India, despite its rapidly growing economy and its long tradition of intellectual excellence, does not possess a world-class university—no existing university scores highly in the rankings and none of the institutions are considered top level globally. Only the Indian Institutes of Technology and the Indian Institutes of Management are well known, but they are not universities. Establishing a world-class university would not take all of the available funds, and of course all items of religious or historical value would need to be preserved—in a museum related to the university. Perhaps US\$200 million (approximately Rs. 900 crore) can be used to build a top-level campus in

Thiruvananthapuram, seat of the former Travancore kingdom—and another US\$8 billion (approximately Rs. 35,000 crore) set aside for an endowment that would conservatively yield (at a 7 percent payout) about US\$560,000,000 (Rs. 2,500 crore) annually for operating the university. That would leave more than half the current estimate of the temple’s worth to keep or spend for other purposes.

Sree Padmanabhaswamy University would serve several important purposes at once. A world-class institution would provide a model for higher education in India and the developing world. The university would contribute to Kerala’s economy and indeed jump-start key fields, such as information technology and biotech.

Kerala is the ideal place for a world-class university. It calls itself “God’s own Country” for good reasons. A pleasant and green environment is combined with decent infrastructure, and the society lacks many of the tensions found elsewhere in India. The state has good links with the rest of the world through the Gulf. Kerala has universal literacy, and 18 percent of young people access higher education—double the Indian average.

WHAT WOULD KERALA’S WORLD-CLASS UNIVERSITY LOOK LIKE?

Just as important as financing a top university are the ideas behind it. Sree Padmanabhaswamy University will be in virtually all respects un-Indian. It will be neither public nor private but rather independent and controlled by a public trust linked to the temple and to civil society in Kerala. Its controlling trustees would be chosen from among these groups and would include the most senior member of the Travancore royal family, with some additional distinguished international educators. Similar to the great private universities in the United

States, Sree Padmanabhaswamy University would have an independent board of trustees. Its funding will be assured by its endowment, although tuition would be charged to students who could afford it, and income might be earned through research contracts. Additional philanthropy will be encouraged. The university would be free of the politics and bureaucracy that are so stifling to India's public universities. And it will be free of the for-profit motives or the capriciousness of business moguls who control some of the new private universities.

The university would be international in vision and scope. Professors and students would come from around the country and the world. The university's endowment would finance both salaries and scholarships that, while they might not match the richest universities in America or Europe, would be attractive.

The curriculum and focus would be consciously international. At the same time, the university would stress issues of importance to Kerala, south India, and the subcontinent. Sree Padmanabhaswamy University would not, like many recent efforts globally to establish world-class institutions, focus only on the sciences. It would be a comprehensive university, choosing carefully those fields in which it could excel. Some subjects of clear importance to the economy of the state and region—including information technology, some fields of agriculture, and perhaps some areas of biotech. Because of the university's link to the temple, it would aim to be the top university in the world in the study of Hinduism and Indian religions; and because it is in Kerala, which has large populations of Hindus, Muslims, and Christians, it could cultivate an interreligious dialogue. The university would also focus on the history, art, and society of Kerala and south India. Foci will be chosen carefully, and faculty strength built deliberately to create strategic strength and distinction.

GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT FOR THE WORLD-CLASS UNIVERSITY

Governance is central to any university. Sree Padmanabhaswamy University's academic staff should be central to making key academic decisions. At the same time, world-class universities must be effectively managed, and top university leaders should have significant control over strategic decisions. The university's vice chancellor, deans, and other key leaders will be chosen for their talent and leadership capacity—and not because of personal connections.

The university must be a fully meritocratic institution. Both faculty and students would be chosen for their academic quality. Academic staff, once hired, will be carefully evaluated for their teaching and research over a period of years, prior to being given permanent appointments. Students will be chosen on merit and without the strict constraints of the reservation system—although able students from disadvantaged groups could be given some special consideration—and provided with scholarship and bursary assistance and academic support.

India has a unique opportunity to establish a world-class university with some of the unparalleled resources of Kerala's Sree Padmanabhaswamy Temple—using the best international practices and focusing on the needs of Kerala and south India in an international context. The chance to build a world-class university free of the constraints of a bureaucratized system is unique. Higher education is very much in Kerala's traditions, and the state is a logical place for a well-funded university, far from the distractions and politics of New Delhi.