

ENGAGING WITH GLOBAL INDIANS

GLOBAL ²⁰
INDIAN ¹⁴
BUSINESS
CONFERENCE

FEBRUARY 2014
Volume 9 No. 9

INDIA EMPIRE

Attracting Investments
into India from Global
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Rs 70 (in India) US\$ 5 (outside India)

Dr Renu Khator

INSPIRING ACHIEVER

Dr Renu Khator, President of the University of Houston in the USA, received the prestigious Pravasi Bharatiya Samman Award in January 2014 from President of India, Mr Pranab Mukherjee. As a member of the Indian Prime Minister's Global Advisory Council on Overseas Indians, she's furthered Indo-American relationships and enhanced India's prestige globally in a major way. She spoke to us

Dr Renu Khator, President, University of Houston

“Deeply indebted to India for my foundation”

Dr Renu Khator was conferred the Pravasi Bharatiya Samman Award at the last Pravasi Bharatiya Divas on January 9, 2014. She is the first Indian-born president not only of the 40,000 students-strong University of Houston (UH), but for any American University, and also the first woman university chancellor in Texas. Each year she manages to raise USD 100 million from the private sector for the university. She is the first India-born incoming chair of the American Council of Education that comprises chairpersons of all American universities. She attributes her phenomenal rise to her deep Indian values and family traditions in which she was brought up, and believes that the way forward for India is to get heavily involved in research and innovation that can attract and retain the best brains in the country. She is a member of the Prime Minister’s Global Advisory Council on Overseas Indians, a capacity in which she has made strong recommendations to improve and take India’s education sector to the next level, and to produce world class institutions. She attributes a large part of her success to being very goal-oriented and also to her Indian husband Dr Suresh Khator, an IIT-ian who is an associate dean at the same university (UH Cullen College of Engineering) and to whom she was married when she was only eighteen. According to her, behind her success is a very secure man, a reference to her supportive husband. Following the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas she spoke at the Global Indian Business Conference (see separate story). Here she speaks to **India Empire magazine’s Editor and Publisher Sayantan Chakravarty** during an extensive interview in New Delhi soon after the two events

You have been conferred the prestigious Pravasi Bharatiya Samman Award. Personally, what does it mean to you?

Well I am touched, humbled and grateful. I have such deep love for my country. It is a recognition of the fact that I have been able to balance between my janmabhoomi and my karmabhoomi. I am proud of where I am today, of the opportunities that I received in America, what I have been able to do with those opportunities. While making the best of those opportunities, I have never even for a day forgotten where my foundations are, which is right here in India. The Samman has honestly moved me in ways that I did not think of.

One of the contributions mentioned in the PBSA citation is that you have supported India’s causes and concerns in a tangible way, and you have built closer links between India and the USA and the overseas Indian community. Give us an example of this...

Obviously, first of all, being a very public figure, you have to carry yourself always with pride and honour. There is never a forum where I speak, where I do not portray myself proudly as an Indian American. I am proud of this being

one, and people know that I am from India. I am proud of being Indian. I give credit to where I am today to my principles and to my learning here. Also, while I was with the University of South Florida at Tampa before joining UH, I was instrumental in establishing the India Studies Centre. It stemmed from my belief that people need to know that India is more than just a land of snakes and snake charmers. It is a country of the future, a nation where technology is moving things forward, and making things possible. It is a hub of green power and innovation. It is a nation with imagination. Through the Indian Studies Centre, I was able to offer courses on India for better understanding of the country. At the University of Houston, I have already established a programme for bringing students to India every year. I had brought 30 UH graduates to India one year, and majority of them are today CEOs and successful people. I speak for India at almost every public platform. I am very proud of the Indian education system, and I said this at the FICCI lecture as well, that the test of a system is not what it does to you when you are there, but what it does to you when you are out of it. The fact that I was able to succeed in a totally foreign system with so many barriers is a tribute to my Indian education. I am proud of the culture back at home,



Above: President Khator officially assumes the duties of President of the University of Houston at investiture ceremonies in Cullen Performance Hall. From left, UH System Regent Jim Wise, Khator, UH System Regent Lynden Rose

Below: Cordova Global Convocation at Purdue University





Dr Khator receives the Pravasi Bharatiya Samman Award from President of India, Mr Pranab Mukherjee (centre) in the presence of Mr Vayalar Ravi, Minister for Overseas Indian Affairs (left) and Mr Prem Narain, Secretary, MOIA

back in my town, and grateful to my mother and grandmother. I can see in my day-to-day life as a CEO that when I approach a certain issue, shape policy, I am doing things exactly the way I saw my mother handling things, and my extended family. Three years ago, I wrote a piece in Hindi titled Meri Maa Ke Naam. It was published here in Sarita magazine. Then it was picked up and translated in English, then it was printed in India Abroad. It was subsequently picked up from there by mainstream American newspapers and published on Mother's Day. That piece is about my relationship with my mother. I wrote it in Hindi. I try to keep my Hindi intact, a language in which I write fiction and poetry as well.

The PBSA is given for eminence in one's field or outstanding work that has enhanced India's prestige in the country of residence. Kindly throw light on your tenure as President of UH, and the work that you've been able to do...

I became president of University of Houston in 2008. Prior to that I was, for 22 years, at the University of South Florida where I started in a temporary position, before rising to become a senior VP. During the past six years at UH, the university has transformed into becoming one of the top 100 institutions in the USA. I was the first Indian born to become president of any research university in America, male or female. Now, there are five other Indian presidents. When I was appointed, I had had nobody to follow. There were lots of eyes on me, and if anything were to go wrong, they were going to blame and where I came from, that too in a chal-

lenging place like Texas. But I am a very goal-oriented person. I put my passion behind my goals. I just don't negotiate on my goals. I try from every angle to reach my goal. And I'd like to think that's how I have gone about things at UH in the last six years. I became the first India born president at Houston, but when I went to that city, there were already 150,000 Indians living there. They are doing tremendous work, and are very successful people. So we already had the foundation in terms of a community that is entrepreneurial. My going there was just one added element to this.

There would be other aspects to that eminence as well...

Yes. Right now, since January 1, 2014, I am the deputy chairperson of the Federal Reserve Bank in Dallas. Hardly any university president ends up doing that kind of work, and being deputy chairman brings with a lot of attention and focus. I have also been elected as the Incoming Chair of the American Council on Education, the national body of all educational universities in the USA. The board includes chairmen of different universities. This too will make me the first Indian born to be chairing this. I am the first woman chancellor in Texas, American or Indian. I am a board member of the Indo American Chamber of Commerce. If it has anything to do with the Indian cause, I try to give myself to the full extent possible.

As a long-time member of the Indian Prime Minister's Global Advisory Council on Overseas Indians,



Dr Khator addresses students

what kind of initiatives have you recommended to enhance and improve India's engagement with overseas Indians?

All members of the PM's GAC bring in their own expertise. My expertise is in the education sector. I am always focused on education, and that has been my focus over the last five years at the GAC. This time I made a few recommendations. One of them is—and this is something I've been saying for some time—that we really need to bring in a culture of research and innovation in India. Even the best of institutions do not have that deep-seated, intuitive, culture of research, and innovation. When I say innovation, I mean that when you discover, for example, drugs, you take that and put it in the marketplace so that as a product it immediately starts to benefit and impact society. Such a culture attracts the best of talents and keeps such talent excited.

Secondly, the private sector and the industrial sector need to come in and help the public sector to build universities with their charity, philanthropy and expertise. It would take a lot many years for the private universities to become world class universities, simply because the volumes they cater to are low, and, therefore, the impact on the general population is limited. But look at this way, if a major public university can be turned into a world class one, it would impact a very large number of people. The University of Houston is a public university, but each year I raise 100 million dollars from private industry. Each year it goes into strengthening the kind of faculty that I can bring in, the kind of support I can provide to students, the



President Khator poses with an infant during a Halloween game

kind of research programmes we can have, the laboratories we can build. Without that kind of support, I do not think the UH could have become a Tier I university. So once the private sector can come on board, the results are phenomenal, and that is how I strongly believe public institutions can become better.

Thirdly, I feel that there are a lot of educators out in the USA who are sitting there with lots of emotional attachment, and professional expertise. Definitely there should be a way where India can use modern technology to build a creative environment whereby good people get tied back to India. You may not get them to leave their country of work, or to be permanently back here in India. Maybe some will come, some won't. But there has to be a way in today's globally connected world for them to become part of building India's education sector.

Does the UH have academic or research partner-



(L – R) Indian Ambassador to the USA, Dr S. Jaishankar, Dr Suresh Khator, Dr Renu Khator and Consul General of India at Houston, Mr P Harish

ships with Indian institutions?

We have partnerships with many universities in India. Many of them are educational partnerships, many of them are research partnerships. But just because there isn't a deep-seated culture of research here, and there isn't so much of research money available to professors, those research partnerships have not materialized to the extent that there is a potential. But yes there are many research partnerships and many education partnerships where there are joint programmes, joint degree programmes, bringing students to America for their PhD so that they can come back to India as professors. We have partnerships with several IITs, with the Benaras Hindu University, with Delhi University, and many others. For instance, we do huge work with the DU's mathematics department, we have a PhD programme. With many of the petroleum engineering institutes, we have joint programmes.

You are UH System's first woman chancellor, the University's first foreign-born president and the first Indian immigrant to head a comprehensive research university in the U.S. It speaks something about the USA being a country of equal opportunities, doesn't it?

Yes. It does. It absolutely does. There is something about the environment there that allows you to be judged on your merit. If I could do all this, it speaks volumes. It

doesn't however mean that life is fair all the time. In no place is life fair all the time. So I always knew I am a woman, an international one, I have a different accent than anybody else. I have those three strikes against me, and I always knew that I've to work 10 per cent harder for each of those strikes. So, from the very beginning I had to work at 130 per cent to be noticed as 100 per cent. That has been my paradigm basically. So even if things happened to me where I felt that it wasn't really fair, I never allowed any of those external things to really make me feel like a victim. I always felt that if you are going to hurt me, I am going to try thrice as hard to achieve my goals.

Every time I've faced any barrier, or any setback in life, I've challenged myself to work even harder, rather than sit back and just cry over it. And that is what I keep telling the youth today, that I do not know one person you consider your role model—I don't care who that person may be—that has reached there without any failures in life.

They have been bankrupt, they have failed in their businesses before, they have failed in their elections before, and the reason they are there is not because they failed, but because each time they failed, they got up, learnt their lessons, and moved again. I say that is what you need to remember. Never be discouraged by failure, and never let any setback make you feel like a victim. Because then the whole victim mentality will give you negative energy. You have to think you will not allow yourself to be victimized. □

EDUCATION



The Education Panel

L to R: Dr. Arbind Prasad, Mr. Inder Mohan Singh, Mr. Prabhat Jain, Dr. Renu Khator, Prof. C. Raj Kumar and Mr. Aditya Berlia

The final session of GIBC 2014 was on the education sector. The panelists included Dr. Renu Khator, Member, Prime Minister's Global Advisory Council of Overseas Indians and President, University of Houston; Prof. C. Raj Kumar, Professor & Vice Chancellor, O. P. Jindal Global University; Mr. Prabhat Jain, Founder & CEO, Pathways World School; Mr. Aditya Berlia, Member Board of Management, Apeejay Styra & Svrán Group and Pro-Chancellor, Apeejay Styra University; and, Mr. Inder Mohan Singh, Partner, Amarchand Mangaldas. The special address was delivered by Dr. Renu Khator and the session was moderated by Mr. Prabhat Jain.

In her address, Dr. Khator suggested that higher education should be seen as a pyramid with a strong base. She said that global partnerships are very much required to improve quality education in the country. This would entail providing access to overseas students in Indian colleges and universities, and allowing overseas educational institutions to set up campuses in India. At the same time, there is a need for direct investment in education by the diaspora as it has the talent, skills and sentimental attachment to India. Also, a culture of philanthropy must be allowed to flourish in the country to aid education in far-flung and remote areas.

Dr. Khator outlined three recommendations of the PMGAC-OI that includes a need for a culture of research

and innovation. She emphasized that thought should be given to using cutting-edge technology to engage the Indian diaspora in non-traditional ways, such as facilitating addresses by international faculty through video chat and other technological platforms. Even though the education revolution is already on India's doorsteps, the technology that needs to back it up is disrupted and not often in place. She reiterated that the focus in India ought to be on accumulating world-class talent and providing access to quality education. Quality, she said, is important at every level.

Mr. Jain mentioned that India's education sector is on a fast growth track given that 50% of the population in India is below 25 years of age. He felt that the need of the hour is for education systems to penetrate the vast swathes of the country's rural landscape. While this requires concerted effort from both the government and the private sector, Mr. Jain felt that at present it somehow does appear that there is a trust deficit on the part of the government when it comes to acknowledging the private sector's growing role in this sector. He said that it is time to allay fears as several top business and medical schools are today in the private sector. Maintaining a positive note throughout his moderation of the session, Mr. Jain believed that the winds of change are truly blowing.

Mr. Berlia said that information technology alone was not going to solve the problems of the sector. Instead, it



Dr. Renu Khator
Member, Prime Minister's
Global Advisory Council of
Overseas Indians & Presi-
dent, University of Houston



Mr. Prabhat Jain
Founder & CEO, Pathways
World School



Prof. C. Raj Kumar
Professor & Vice
Chancellor, O. P. Jindal
Global University



Mr. Inder Mohan Singh
Partner, Amarchand
Mangaldas



Mr. Aditya Berlia
Member Board of Manage-
ment, Apeejay Styta & Svrán
Group and Pro-Chancellor,
Apeejay Styta University

was time to introduce highly innovative business practices by utilizing a limited number of training resources. The sector should work closely with institutions such as the National Skill Development Council and allied bodies that are willing to invest. He remained skeptical about great markets emerging in the next few years in the higher education sector, emphasizing that out-of-the-box thinking and innovation would be required before investment decisions are made.

Prof. C. Raj Kumar said that the good news for India is that out of 1.2 billion people, 65% are below the age of 35, and that makes it a staggering 780 million. While the world ages, India remains young. He said while the education sector was booming, no Indian university is among the top 10 universities of the world, adding that India's regulatory mechanisms are not progressive and that there is a need to establish more universities for higher education. One of the worrying signs, Prof. Raj Kumar said, is that young people

do not want to choose teaching as a profession and, therefore, there is a paucity of trained educational personnel. There are 700 universities and 40,000 colleges in India, but there is a huge shortage of faculty. The possibility of international engagement has been reduced due to limited issuance of visas to foreign scholars who would like to come and work in India. He felt that those who were looking for immediate returns should not be investing in the sector, but also added that the focus is shifting towards international collaborations.

Mr. Inder Mohan Singh said that several initiatives are being taken in the education sector and there is no restriction in the private sector for investment for profit. The Government of India permits 100% FDI in the education sector under the automatic route. The challenges on the regulatory side are that it can only be run by a non-profit institution under the current act. FDI in the infrastructure space is permitted in the education sector on a profit basis. □



PRAVASI BHARATIYA SAMMAN AWARDS WINNERS

The President of India Sh. Pranab Mukherjee has conferred Pravasi Bharatiya Samman Awards to thirteen NRIs, PIOs and Organisations for their outstanding and illustrious contribution in the country of their residence as well as to India in different spheres of their activity. The names of the awardees and their country are:

Sr. No	Name	Country	Description
1	Ms Lisa Maria Singh	Australia	Public service and fostering friendly relations between India and Australia.
2	Mr. Kurian Varghese	Bahrain	Business for enhancing India's image and for Promotion better understanding of India abroad.
11	Mr. Shailesh Lakhman Vara	United Kingdom	Public service and in promoting ties between India and the people of U.K.
12	Dr. Parthasarathy Chiramel Pillai	USA	Science and for fostering closer relations between India and USA.
13	Ms. Renu Khator	USA	Education and enhancing India's prestige abroad.



Mr Sayantan Chakravarty in conversation with Dr Renu Khator, President, University of Houston



Dr Didar Singh, Secretary General, FICCI, interacts with Dr Renu Khator.