

# The Genesis of St. Xavier's University, Kolkata (SXUK)

An Interview with the Vice-Chancellor **Fr. Felix Raj, SJ**



Fr. Felix Raj, SJ with Mamata Banerjee, the Hon. Chief Minister of West Bengal

Photo Courtesy: Aritra Das

*Thank you for accepting the interview for JIVAN, dear Fr. Felix Raj. You are the Vice-Chancellor of one of the first Jesuit universities in the South Asian Conference. Given the short period of time since it has begun, its progress is clearly visible. Congratulations for this achievement. What are your topmost consolations about St. Xavier's University, Kolkata (SXUK) as its first Vice-Chancellor?*

My topmost consolations are:

- (i) As we began the journey, I deeply felt that God was with us and I kept telling everyone "this is God's work and so it will definitely continue whatever be the problems, whether human or natural".
- (ii) On our way we found very many good people who

encouraged us: they said that a Jesuit University was something that was long due in Kolkata, in West Bengal and in this country. Our Xaverian alumni came forward to support this mission in the spirit of Nihil Ultra.

- (iii) My provincial, Fr. Jeyaraj Velluswamy understood the project and wholeheartedly supported it, but expressed his inability to help with funds.
- (iii) The government was with us, particularly, the Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee. In fact, it was she who suggested to us to start a university. She was also instrumental in giving us the land.

The clarion call was 'We are Xaverians, once a Xaverian, always a Xaverian.' I shared the project details with many of them especially LN Mittal, Sudhir Maheswari, Firdausal Hasan, Snehasis Sur and GP Gupta, and found everyone supportive of this mission. Today what the university is, is because of the efforts of these people.

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*You are also the founding Vice-Chancellor of SXUK. Can you speak to us about the genesis of SXUK? The idea of starting it? The steps it grew in with?*

In 2012, when Mamata Banerjee was the Chief Guest at the Convocation of St. Xavier's College, Kolkata (SXCK), she suddenly asked whether the Jesuits could start a university. That was the spark.

I responded that if she gave us land, we would definitely start a university. She instantly agreed, and herself handed over the land lease document to me in December 2012.

Finance was a challenge, but the Alumni Association and many individual alumni helped generously. Many Jesuits, alumni, political leaders, educationists, and industrialists joined in, to complete the project.

A committee of Jesuits and educationists prepared the draft document of the St. Xavier's University Act 2016 that the State Assembly unanimously passed in December 2016, with minor changes. With the Governor's assent, the Bengal government notified it on 8th February 2017, which is observed as the Foundation Day since then.

*Can you single out the difficulties you faced in founding it and bringing it to its present firm stage?*

Not difficulties, rather they were challenges. Frankly, I faced many and felt that they made me stronger and more convinced of the mission.

In the initial stage, I had to look after both the College and the University.

I had to constantly negotiate with the Government with regard to land, passing of the Act, exemption from fees and other duties, corporation permission for construction of buildings and various other permissions.

Even, acquisition of the land was another big challenge because, as per the prevailing rates at that time, the entire land would have cost us around ₹187 crores. But, the generous Santa Mamata Banerjee provided it to us at a nominal rate.

Management of a university is unlike managing a college. Universities, whether public or private, can only be established by the Government, Central or State, after the passage of the relevant acts.

Mobilisation of financial resources was a major challenge. I deeply believed that if the mission is for common good and divinely blessed, it will draw its donors like a magnet.

We faced some problems from the local political leaders, but they were resolved amicably. It was also important to build a team of committed people in the institution.

Meanwhile, I had to undergo some health-related issues because of the toll that all the work was taking on me. But it was all for the good, and so it's better left unsaid.

*You have succeeded immensely in raising funds for it, from what we know. Would you be comfortable to share the journey of this - the most important aspect of any mega enterprise?*

For any project, mobilisation of funds is an important task.

Firstly, we mobilised the alumni of SXCKAA within and outside the country through national and international chapters and conventions and identified people who could participate in the project in a big way. We initiated various types of sponsorship programmes like 'brick-sponsorship', 'room-sponsorship', 'floor-sponsorship', 'laksha project' and 'building-sponsorship'.

We are grateful to a number of individual Xaverian and non-Xaverian sponsors and companies like Sanjiv Goenka of RPG, LN Mittal of Arcelor-Mittal Group; RS Agarwal of Emami Group; Exide Industries, the Jalan group, the Rungta group and many others. However, I must mention with pride that within four years we are now self-reliant and able to generate our own funds.

*We are sure you have taken care to ensure Jesuit identity or character of SXUK. Would you like to throw some light on how you realize the ideal of Jesuit education in SXUK?*

Jesuits have always been in the forefront as educators across the globe through the past 450 years. St. Xavier's is a well sought out brand, and Jesuit education is in great demand.

SXUK is yet another initiative where we have ensured that the Jesuit presence and identity are maintained in the composition of administrative boards and committees, characteristics of the education imparted, orientation and value system and public image and manifestation of the university. As per the SXUK Act, the Chancellor and Vice-Chancellor will only be Jesuits.

We try to practice the Jesuit pedagogy based on the Jesuit reputation cultivated over the past four centuries. We promote the pillars of the Jesuit charism namely – AMDG, Magis, Cura personalis, option for the poor, service rooted in faith and justice, social conscience and so on.

At the commencement of every academic year, we have an orientation for students, faculty and staff where we introduce them to the Jesuit history, spirituality, characteristics, pedagogy, charism and all that is associated with the Jesuits.

*What are the strengths and weaknesses of SXUK, according to you?*

Our topmost strength is our conviction that we are led by God's providence and that our Patron, St. Francis Xavier, continues to shower his blessings on us.

With the support of our alumni, we have developed sufficient infrastructure and facilities for our faculty and students. The sense of belongingness that we promote also defines our strength.

Our challenges are in the form of finding competent numbers of Jesuits and non-Jesuit personnel.

Another challenge is to focus on research, consultancy and innovation. This is in view of accreditations that set the benchmark for qualitative output and efficiency.

*We are sure you have ‘miles to go and promises to keep’. What are they, especially in the context of NEP?*

We are just a 4-year-old infant and have ‘promises to keep and miles to go’ before ‘St. Xavier’s must attain the status of Oxford and Stanford Universities’, as desired by the Chief minister, Mamata Banerjee.

As a university community we made an in-depth study of the NEP 2020 and reflected upon it. We had sent our reflections and suggestions to the education ministry. The policy aims to pave the path for major transformational reforms in the higher education system in the country. It is a framework to guide the development of education in the country, aimed to make India a global knowledge superpower ensuring equity, access and inclusion.

The policy envisions quality universities and colleges and points out some of the major problems currently faced by the higher education system in India. Its thrust is to build vibrant communities of scholars and peers, break down harmful silos and enable students to become well-rounded across disciplines, with an emphasis on Internationalization.

The policy is ‘old wine in a new bottle.’ Most of the programmes and initiatives are either already in practice in many institutions or are being discussed among academicians. Many of the proposed programmes are not time-bound.

As observed by some critics, the policy recommends the need for better teaching and learning, better training of teachers and more meaningful evaluation system, but it does not provide a realistic way by which private or minority institutions can raise resources to meet their needs to maintain quality.

It is ironic to note that the policy, on the one hand, lays the foundation for privatization of higher education, but on the other, claims to provide education for the marginalized and underprivileged groups.

India spent 2.8% of its GDP on education in 2019–20. Our economy, going through the doldrums at the moment, how are we going to fund education? Can we realise the target of 6% of GDP as projected in the new policy?

*What lesson do you wish to convey to those dreaming universities in their Provinces of the South Asian Conference?*

We have two Jesuit universities in India at present – XUB and SXUK. A third one is coming up in Meghalaya. Some provinces like Madurai, Karnataka and Patna are mulling over the idea of starting universities.

A time will soon come when all colleges will be told to become self-financing. Provinces must start prospective planning for

2050. In the present times, we Jesuits are very much dependent on our past glory; we are lacking visionary leadership in our Provinces. Sometimes, heroic initiatives are derailed by religious bureaucracies.

Universities have wider advantages over colleges, with greater autonomy. State Governments and the NEP 2020 are advocating private initiatives and participation in higher education. We need to upgrade our public relations and build close rapport with government officials.

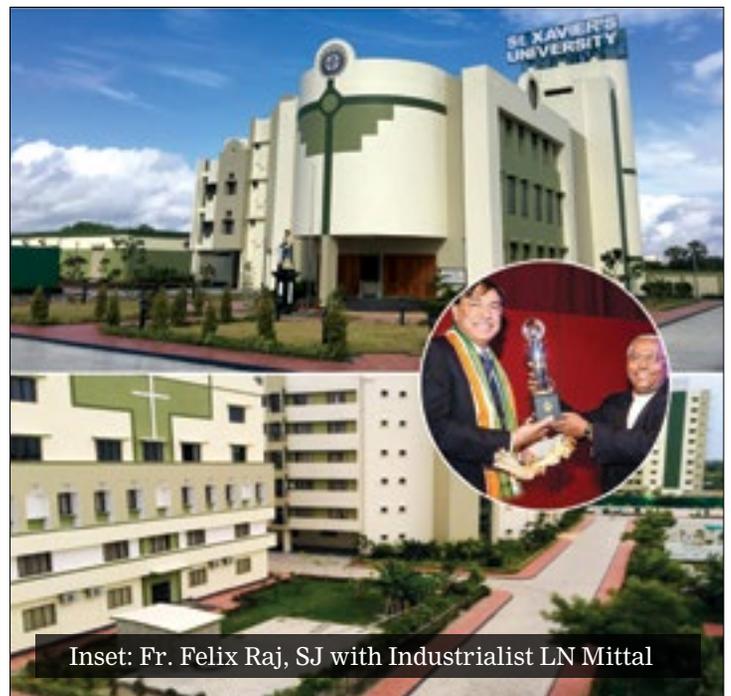
*As a veteran educationist, what message do you wish to give to those in education, particularly higher education?*

The Jesuit contribution to Indian higher education, with around 74 higher educational institutions of various types, has been significant.

Higher education must focus on quality outcomes in terms of access, pedagogy, research, consultancy and innovation, excellence, enrolment, equity and employability. A Jesuit institution is for all and so it should reach out to everyone. My simple advice is that in the spirit of our ‘option for the poor’, we must introduce beneficial scholarship and fee-waiver schemes to benefit the poorer sections of our society. No one should turn back from our institutions for lack of money.

Although, Jesuit institutions are among the best in the country there is no effective network at the Assistency level except for one or two meetings which have hardly any follow-ups. Such narrowness and self-complacency are major hurdles to our national network and collaborations.

A vibrant network of higher education institutions at the South Asian Assistency is the need of the hour for constructive outcomes and academic leadership.



Inset: Fr. Felix Raj, SJ with Industrialist LN Mittal

Photo Courtesy: Anitra Das