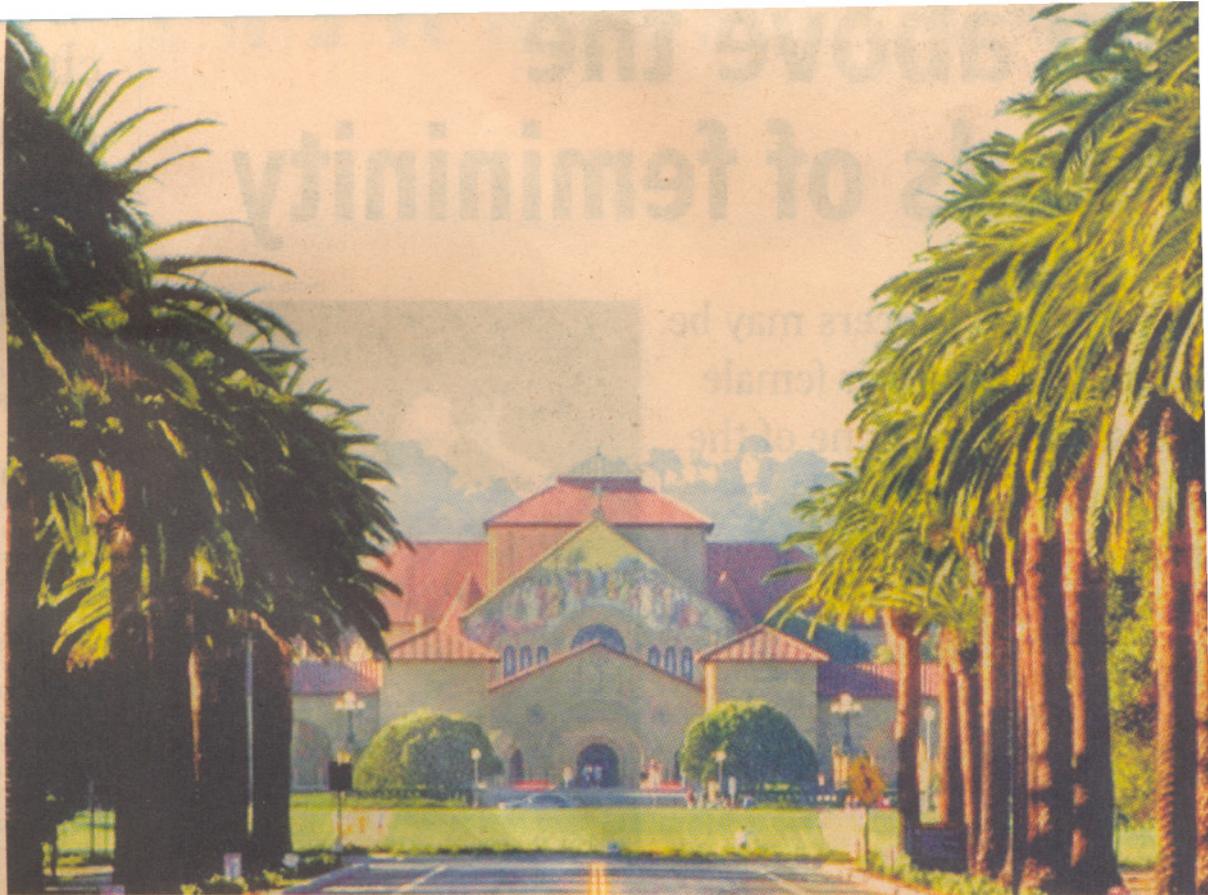




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# India's soft power

Stanford University has much to offer to Indian policy makers

**E**VERY year I make the annual pilgrimage to Stanford University to what must unarguably be the finest repository of academia combined with key Indian policy-makers. Seated at the Annual India Conference hosted by SCID (Stanford Center for International Development), I marvelled at the amazing vistas that we covered over a two-day period. From remarkable presentations by Anjini Kochar on the education system in India and what perhaps needs to be done there, to the study of savings and banking in India by Rakesh Mohan, the deputy governor of the Reserve Bank of India to the incisive comments by N K Singh, the freshly minted Rajya Sabha member of Parliament from Bihar, the whole conference was awash with some key insights that our policy makers would do well to learn from. The fact that a university on the West Coast in the United States can devote its finest academics to a cause that ideally India should be devoted to is a signal of the stature that India enjoys and the tremendous support that Silicon Valley entrepreneurs such as Kanwal Rekhi are providing to causes such as this.

The sessions included a superb one by Anne Krueger formerly of the International Monetary Fund and the facts that Anne mentioned in her outstanding presentation point to the existing malaise that India faces in her economics at least. There is no question in my mind that we in India are in denial about inflation as we are about growth rates. GDP is quite frankly an irrelevant statistic when you actually see the plight of so many Indians and the fact that even after four years of this present government we have neither a plan for infrastructure nor for food security is indicative of how mixed up the government is over key issues. Rajesh Mohan privately admitted that oil and fertiliser subsidies would create long-term damage to the economic fabric of India and I was delighted to hear N Vaghul (Chairman of ICICI) take on Rakesh Mohan when he began extolling the virtues of the public sector banks saying they were globally on par with the best of the best. And Vaghul makes a critical point: with all the farmer loan waivers, the government has further undermined both the liberal economic landscape and the independence of the banking system and the fact that the Reserve Bank of India sits hawkishly on every file pertaining

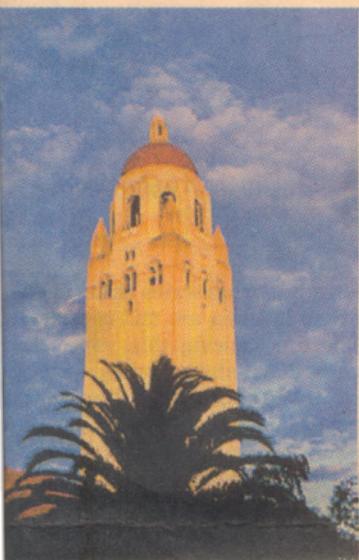
to opening of more branches is yet another testament to warped policy-making even in India's central bank.

One of the finest presentations made during the conference was by Professor Nicholas Bloom of Stanford University when in his paper he articulated the philosophy of management and management culture and how it telephonic interviews conducted over several months, they were able to gauge disconnects within organisations and how this would eventually lead to low employee morale and the disintegration of any basic business model. I was very impressed with the diligence of the delegates. This year unlike in the past, there was a serious and significant Indian presence. From the quota-seeking Vice Chancellor of Pune University Dr Niranjana Jhadav to Arvind Virmani, the Chief Economic Advisor to the Government of India to Nadi Godrej and the Forbes brothers from Pune: all deeply engaged with the program and what's more, willing to speak up and say things that would otherwise be deemed politically incorrect.

I believe it is this face of India that is leaving an indelible impression on global minds. The fact that Barkha Dutt of NDTV chose to record a We The People from the precincts of Stanford, was yet another way of establishing this new soft power that we have begun to unleash. It is this soft power that needs to be harnessed and the time has come for us to get rid of ministers intervening in this process.

P Chidambaram was to be one of the keynote speakers at this year's Stanford Conference but he informed the organisers that Dr Manmohan Singh had denied him permission to travel owing to recently established austerity measures. I think this was the single most humorous idea that was mooted at what certainly was a superb conference.

I sincerely believe there are many presentations made at Stanford that now need to be made to the key policy-makers in India. The ones on education and infrastructure bear repetition and what's more some decisive action from this government. The time is ripe and I hope someone makes it happen. The fact that the prime mover behind this initiative, N K Singh is now in Parliament should only make this more possible than it ever was.



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