

Transcript of an address by Prof. Arun K. Grover, the Vice-Chancellor,
recorded for Jyotirgamaya- Panjab University Community Radio Station

The hosting of three-day seminar on ‘The Making of Modern Punjab Education, Science and Social Change in Punjab c 1850-c 2000’ is a realization of an idea that I had an occasion to articulate first about a year ago. This seminar scheduled from October 24-26, 2013 is being organized by the Panjab University as part of the celebration of the Foundation Day of the University and the commemoration of the 150th Birth Anniversary Year of the eminent scholar Prof. Ruchi Ram Sahni, in the background of 150 years of Higher Education in Punjab.

Vigyan Prasar, an organ of Government of India, had taken initiative to publish an edited biography of Ruchi Ram Sahni titled ‘Memoirs of Ruchi Ram Sahni : Pioneer of Science Popularization in Punjab’ in 1994. Three years later, it was reprinted again, and it was also translated into Hindi, Punjabi and Marathi. I became aware of the multi-faceted contributions of Prof. Ruchi Ram Sahni during the commemoration of the Birth Centenary year of Dr. Homi Bhabha in 2009. Dr. Bhabha had close association with Dr. Birbal Sahni, FRS, son of Ruchi Ram Sahni and Dr. Shanti Swarup Bhatnagar, FRS, whose career was also nurtured by Ruchi Ram Sahni via a fellowship arranged for him from Dyal Singh Majithia Trust at Lahore.

The University of Punjab was established at Lahore on October 14, 1882 and it was reinitiated in independent India from October 1, 1947. The University started to shift to its present campus at Chandigarh in 1956. The University has a national character and stature as its students and faculty have come from different parts of India and abroad.

Presently, as per Times Higher Education World University Rankings 2013-2014 powered by Thomson Reuters, Panjab University has been ranked in the bracket of 226-250 best universities in the World, and it has been ranked as the premier University of the country. Since its inception, the University has followed a glorious tradition in various domains and emerged as a guiding light for future generations. The University aims at continuously striving towards excellence in academics, research, sports and contemporary studies.

Prof. Ruchi Ram Sahni was one of the first-generation scholars of Punjab who contributed immensely to science, education and public life and greatly influenced the making of modern Punjab. He pioneered the interest of the people in science through his teaching, experiments and research. A multifaceted personality, Prof. Sahni worked for the common people and was a great social and religious reformer shaping the lives of the people around him and the future generations in more than one way. He emphasized the relevance of languages, culture and aesthetics in life and work, and did not confine his study and vocation to science alone. He learnt Urdu, Gurmukhi and Persian languages and advocated the use of regional languages for scientific study. He emphasized the need for vocational training, practical work and scientific enquiry in Higher Education. He has to his credit the

compilation of all press communiques on the subject of reforms in Sikh shrines published by the SGPC from time to time in 1920s. A follower of Mahatma Gandhi in his later life, Prof. Sahni lived by the principles of Brahma Samaj, holding all religions in high esteem. He was a great friend of Sardar Dayal Singh Majithia, the founder of The Tribune.

Prof. Ruchi Ram Sahni was the first Indian meteorologist in colonial India. He was the first nuclear physicist of India and also the first Professor of the Science at Government College, Lahore, which was set up in 1864 to impart higher education to young scholars. He taught at the Government College, Lahore from 1887 till his retirement in 1918. Prof. Ruchi Ram Sahni, along with his sons Dr. Mulk Raj Sahni and Dr. Birbal Sahni, Dr. Shanti Swaroop Bhatnagar, Dr. Shiv Ram Kashyap and Dr. Sarvadaman Chowla were invited by the Nobel Laureate C.V. Raman to be among the Foundation Fellows of the Indian Academic of Sciences set up in Bangalore in 1934. The Seminar is a tribute the University is paying to a scholar, thinker, reformist and a visionary. The seminar shall focus on many aspects of his life and times, and also on how education, scientific temper, language and culture have evolved in Punjab from then to now.

The year 1863 is of special significance for Panjab University as it not only marks the birth of one of its eminent scholars, but also the beginning of Higher Education in Punjab. In 1863, the Punjab Government obtained necessary sanction to set up Degree Colleges in the State. In the following year, two Government Colleges were established at Lahore and Delhi, which prepared students for examinations of the then University of Calcutta. The combined Punjab has undergone transformation with regard to its boundaries, demography, economy and culture. It is important for us to understand the factors that have led to this process of transformation and of varying levels of progress in Punjab. From the partition of India in 1947 to the reorganization of Punjab in 1966, the University has faced many challenging moments but its focus on imparting quality Higher Education to the budding youth of India has remained undeterred. Over a period of time, education, scientific temper, language and culture of Punjab have continued to evolve and the shared heritage between the people who once belonged to the Punjab Province and the subsequent generations has greatly shaped this change. This process of transformation needs to be understood at multiple levels. We, at the Panjab University are conscious of the great heritage of the University and this Seminar is an endeavor to deliberate upon and understand this process of transformation at multiple levels.

In the globalized world of today, education is the path to the development of any society and Higher Education enables youth to compete for and seek a better future. True education is seamless and leads to a developed mind and sensibilities. The progress of a society is thus directly related to how efficient and effective its education system is. The task is even more challenging in the Indian context as the education system here is diverse and many different levels of primary and secondary education converge into a common Higher Education system. The diversity found at the entry level

education and in the socio-economic conditions of the scholars coming for Higher Education makes the task challenging for the educators.

Scientific discovery is an essential part of human evolution and societies that have made research and innovation a part of their national policy have progressed at a rapid pace. In the contemporary world, a competitive scientific environment must be provided to the young talent so that the country can be at par with the developed world. Therefore, efforts have to be made by all policy makers as well as academicians to provide a forum for exchange of ideas and facilities for working towards this goal.

The themes of the Seminar relate to the following areas of enquiry:

- Higher Education : its role and relevance, historical and contemporary contexts; needs of first-generation learners; the teacher as researcher of modern mentor;
- Science and Society : Scientific discovery and scientific research; popularizing science; teaching science through the local language; advent and growth of modern science;
- Society and Culture : Ethics and social values; diaspora and fluid identities, social and religious movements; agriculture and irrigation; architecture and town planning;

The seminar has been organized to acquaint the younger generation with the history and the great heritage of Punjab. By looking at the life and achievements of a great scholar of undivided Punjab and talking about his contemporaries, an attempt to build a bridge between the old and the new will be made.

During the seminar, delegates and participants will focus on the direction towards which Higher Education in Punjab is headed. Achievements of the policy makers and educators post-independence and the challenges ahead would be discussed.

In the inaugural session of the Seminar on the morning of October 24, 2013, a postal stamp on Ruchi Ram Sahni will be released by the Governor of Punjab and Administrator, Union Territory, Chandigarh, Hon'ble Sh. Shivraj V. Patil in the presence of Chief Minister of Punjab, S. Parkash Singh Badal. The release of stamp shall be followed by the Annual Panjab University Foundation Day Public Lecture by Gyanpith Award Winner Professor Gurdial Singh, Fellow, Panjab University.

