Building Nation and Generation via Education

An Educator's View

Dr. P. Sathyanarayanan, Pro Chancellor of SRM IST & SRM AP and President of the SRM Group, comes from a distinguished legacy of educators. An alumnus of College of Engineering (Anna University) and Northeastern University, Boston, he embodies the belief that learning is a lifelong pursuit. Humble in demeanour and known for his gentle voice, he holds steadfast to the conviction that education is about liberation and transformation and not merely the acquisition of degrees or jobs.

Reserved by nature, Dr. Sathyanarayanan rarely steps into the public eye, but in this rare conversation, he shares his views on holistic learning, the evolving Indian education paradigm and the role of institutions in shaping the future. His ambition to create knowledge hubs that attract talent from across the globe may, in his own words, "sound ambitious", yet the remarkable growth of SRM AP, his eight-year-old brainchild, stands as a testament to his will, vision, and long term commitment.

Not known to many, he has a love for writing; in the past, he even served as principal editor for a popular Tamil publication. Inspired by minds like Darwin and Einstein, he sees his role not as a position of authority, but as a participatory responsibility in the larger unfolding of societal growth. Guided by practical wisdom rather than textbook theory, here are a few excerpts where he reflects on his philosophy, his journey and the vision that continues to drive him and through it- the ongoing evolution of Indian education.

Q: With SRM IST & Medical college, what inspired you to venture with SRM-AP? What was your vision behind same?

A: Our journey began with a strong foundation at SRM IST, Chennai. However, education should have no boundaries. We recognised a broader need for quality education in India. This led to the creation of SRM University Andhra Pradesh (SRM AP), with a clear vision: to build an interdisciplinary university that would not only meet global standards but also become a beacon of new-age learning while remaining deeply rooted in India.

The choice of Amaravati, Andhra Pradesh, was a well-considered decision. It provided us with a unique opportunity- a growing ecosystem and a canvas to build an institution from the ground up, something rarely possible in established urban centres. For us, education has never been about fancy infrastructure or technology alone; our focus has always been on creating the right environment and tools for learning. Education should be liberating and empower generations to manage and drive the change. I believed the key to achieving this was an unwavering focus on learning, centred on three critical components: What, Why, and How.

We meticulously designed a curriculum that aligns with the needs of the future, and to deliver this, we recruited outstanding faculty from leading domestic and international universities. Even our governing board, which steers our core strategy, reflects this commitment, featuring legendary educators and academicians who together bring centuries of experience in building the world's best institutions. They contribute not only academic excellence and experience but also the mindset needed to shape a truly world-class institution. We have been equally deliberate in ensuring the quality of students, bringing together individuals with passion, inquisitiveness, and the capacity to learn.

Over the past eight years, this dedication has paid off with SRM AP becoming synonymous with quality education and student empowerment. We have built a strong reputation for cutting-edge research and continue to deliver excellent academic outcomes. Within the wider academic community, SRM AP has established its own distinct identity. This, I believe, is a testament to the genuine intent and commitment of our team to raise benchmarks for education across the country.

Q: You mentioned education is about transformation. Being an educator -What is 'Education' to you?

A: For me, education is far more than the conferring of a degree- it is a lifelong pursuit. At its heart, education is about teaching students how to learn. We can't teach for whole life's needs in one go, but we can equip students with the skills, curiosity, mindset, and most importantly the ability to keep learning throughout their lives. Education, in its truest form, should liberate the mind and prepare individuals to navigate change with confidence.

Whether at the school or university level, our responsibility as educators is to inspire students and help them develop the approaches to seek knowledge, question deeply, and stay motivated. Too often, I see students choosing a programme purely because it leads to a lucrative career path. While career opportunities are important, real success comes when they pursue the field they are truly passionate about.

When students study something they love, they engage more fully, absorb knowledge faster, and enjoy the journey. This not only makes them more skilled but also more fulfilled and impactful in their work. That, to me, is the ultimate purpose of education: to ignite a lifelong passion for learning and to nurture individuals who excel because they genuinely love what they do.

Q: Most students still seem to prefer overseas for higher education, What are your views on this 'Brain Drain'?

A: When we talk about brain drain, it is important to first distinguish between two types. The first is when students go abroad for higher studies but remain open to returning once they have completed their education. The second is when individuals move overseas for employment and long-term career growth.

The second category, in my view, can actually be healthy for any society. Talent moving across borders for learning and work can lead to a positive exchange: they gain global exposure, bring back fresh perspectives, and often build valuable international networks. Even going abroad for higher studies purely for exposure is not a problem in itself.

The real concern arises when people leave because they feel India lacks the kind of institutions, research opportunities, or professional environments they aspire to. While we have world-class names like the IITs, SRM, and other leading universities, we still have some way to go in delivering truly holistic learning and pushing the boundaries of cutting-edge research.

To bridge this gap, we need stronger global connections and active collaborations with researchers, universities, and think tanks across continents. Even our top institutions face hurdles- from attracting and retaining exceptional faculty, to setting up global research infrastructure, to overcoming regulatory constraints that limit international diversity among students, researchers, and academics.

If we can address these barriers and bring richer global diversity into our campuses, we will not only retain more of our brightest minds but also elevate our institutions' standing and perception on the world stage. That is when the conversation will shift from "brain drain" to "brain exchange."

Q: From roots of Gurukuls to modern institutes like SRM, IITs & IIMs - Education is evolving, so is the process of educating. How do you see this change ?

A: Our education system is becoming too compartmentalised and too focused on specialisation, sometimes at the cost of holistic learning. In the Gurukul system, knowledge was interconnected; subjects were not silos but threads woven into one fabric.

In my own schooling, I missed seeing how physics, chemistry, geography, and history could connect to explain the same concept or objective. Each was taught in isolation — the chemistry teacher explained one aspect, the physics teacher another, and geography offered yet another perspective — but never together as a combined whole. In reality, the evolution and application of knowledge cannot, and should not, be separated. All fields of study are part of one interconnected whole, and seeing those connections prepares us to participate more fully in shaping and responding to the world around us.

If we could approach a single topic through the lens of multiple disciplines, the depth and richness of understanding would be far greater. Unfortunately, this compartmentalisation starts in school and becomes even more pronounced in higher education.

Today, we often chase skills as though they are the same as knowledge. Skills matter, yes — but without a broader knowledge framework, they lose depth, context, and the ability to truly excel or innovate. Education should once again nurture a complete, interconnected understanding of the world, producing individuals who have both expertise and the perspective to see how it fits into the larger unfolding of knowledge and life.

Q: The Newer crop of students is an aware and informed generation. They are more confident & fearless than the past. How do you see this Gen-shift?

A: Every generation tends to see the next one as "different"- sometimes for the better, sometimes for the worse. History has shown this pattern over and over, and yet these "different" generations have produced the greatest minds- from Aristotle to Newton to Einstein. Evolution doesn't happen in a single generation; it unfolds gradually over centuries.

Today's students are undeniably more informed, thanks to internet. But being better informed is not the same as having deeper knowledge. What matters is whether they can make sound decisions with the information at hand.

The perception of "generational difference" is less about ability and more about a shift in mindset, a paradigm in how we live, learn and interact. It's not something educational institutions alone can "fix." It requires a collective effort from all educators, policymakers, industry leaders and creative thinkers to adapt and engage with these new realities. And most importantly, being "different" does not automatically mean "better" or "worse."

To put it simply: my grandmother didn't know how to use a dial phone, but that didn't make her less knowledgeable. Likewise, if my son operates a smartphone effortlessly, it doesn't make him inherently superior, he's just grown up in a different environment.

The role of our institutions, therefore, is not to mould generation into replicas of the past, but to actively channel their awareness, adaptability, and confidence into meaningful, productive learning. That's how we build on what has come before, while preparing for what's ahead.

Q: When you look at SRMs, you are not just creating universities but a model of excellence. What does it truly take to nurture an institution that can compete with the best globally?

A: SRMIST has had a longer journey, while SRM AP is still in its early years. Yet, both have taught me a critical lesson — diversity is not just valuable, it is transformative. Faculty quality, infrastructure, and resources matter deeply, but when students from different regions, cultures, and perspectives come together, they learn as much from each other as they do from lectures. That cross-pollination of ideas and experiences shapes them into individuals prepared for the challenges of a global future. At SRM, we have consciously worked to build both national and international diversity, though attracting significant international diversity in India remains challenging.

If we look at the world's most prestigious universities, they have often flourished in the most influential economies. When the UK was at the height of its power, Oxford and Cambridge stood as global beacons. Today, the US, as a superpower, is home to MIT, Harvard, and Stanford. There is a clear link between economic strength, global influence, and world-class education. Societal progress and educational excellence tend to move together, each reinforcing the other. Innovation thrives where economies are strong, where industry actively collaborates with academia, and where there is serious, sustained investment in research and teaching.

For India to enter that league, we must invest boldly in our universities, in research, in faculty development, in cutting-edge facilities, and in creating an academic environment that attracts the best minds from around the globe. China has already taken this path, building universities backed by robust innovation ecosystems and national commitment. In many ways, academia can also be the cradle of startup culture, where ideas are nurtured from concept to creation.

At SRM, our vision is to be part of that transformation, to create an institution that not only meets global standards but sets them. This means building deep industry linkages, fostering a culture of innovation, and ensuring that our students graduate not just with degrees, but with the mindset, skills, and confidence to participate meaningfully in an interconnected and evolving world.

Q: India produces enough graduates, but fewer global researchers, breakthroughs or innovations? What do you feel is missing?

A: The core shift has to be in mindset, moving from a service-oriented approach to a research-oriented and knowledge-creation mindset. Our IT industry, for instance, focuses heavily on quarter-on-quarter earnings and shareholder returns; this is a short-term view rather than developing world-class products for the global market over the long haul. Only when industry has the urge or hunger to do research will academia and nations prosper.

In India, for research to truly thrive, we need to build a strong ecosystem where companies, government, funding bodies, and academic institutions work in sync. Right now, most research grants come only from government agencies like DST (Department of Science and Technology) or DBT (Department of Biotechnology), but the government alone can't sustain large-scale innovation. The Indian industrial community needs to be more ambitious and dream big- to invest meaningfully in path-breaking research, partner with institutions, and collaborate with them on high-impact projects instead of outsourcing such work abroad.

Without this industry–academia trust and collaboration, our faculty and researchers will lack the resources, industrial linkages, and problem statements needed to create breakthrough innovations. It's not about one brilliant professor or institution; it's about building an ecosystem where collaborative innovation is the default, not the exception.

Q: AI is becoming all pervasive, how should Universities manage this change? Can AI make education & work redundant? What will be role of universities in same?

A: The first thing to understand is that AI is fundamentally a very powerful tool designed to enhance human productivity. The challenge lies in maintaining balance. As AI capabilities expand, human intelligence must evolve towards areas where AI cannot replace us: especially in highly creative, original, and deeply human work. If that balance tilts too far in AI's favour, we risk not just job displacement, but also societal disruption.

Universities, therefore, have a responsibility to prepare students to work in partnership with AI, not compete against it. Universities need to teach students not only to use AI to get jobs, but how to use it to learn and perform better. Faculty can teach how to grow beyond the technology and not become a slave to it, instead becoming active shapers of its use.

We must recognise that not everything can be reduced to a code or algorithm, and not all jobs can or should be automated. For example, the love, empathy, and emotional connection in healthcare, or the nuanced expression of human emotion in the arts, remain beyond AI's full grasp. Our task is to help students see where human insight and creativity add irreplaceable value.

It's true that AI is already moving beyond coding and data analysis, entering the arts, sciences, and creative industries -- even writing movie scripts, which has already sparked resistance in parts of the world. This makes it all the more urgent for academic institutions to redefine their approach.

At SRM, our vision is to adapt by integrating AI into our curriculum: both as a subject in itself and as a powerful productivity tool, while doubling down on creativity, critical thinking, and research. We aim to equip our students not only to work alongside AI, but to lead innovation, develop uniquely human capabilities, and set the direction for how technology serves society. The university of the future will not choose between mass education, deep learning, and research: It will pursue all three in balance, with AI as both a partner and a challenge that pushes us to reach higher.

Q: We spoke of future, 20 years from now, what would make you content & happy with your journey?

A: Perhaps it is ambitious, but I would find my journey truly meaningful if, in my lifetime, we could build an institution in the country that draws students from every corner of the world: from both developed and developing nations and not just to learn, but for accumulation and creation of knowledge. Learning has to be equally for personal growth, not just professional. My dream is for it to become a global hub for knowledge, innovation, and discovery, where talent, ideas, and cultures converge, and where the pursuit of knowledge is not limited to any boundaries.

If we can create such a place: one that inspires minds, nurtures curiosity, and contributes solutions to the world's most pressing challenges: it would not only be a milestone for our institution, but also a step forward for India's role in shaping the global educational landscape. To me, that would be the most fulfilling way to serve society and leave behind something that outlives us all.

Q: Sir, Its truly been a privilege. Finally, What will be your message for fellow & new educators?

A: What I can say? They are already doing good. What can I enunciate that they already do not know.

Maybe, since you asked, I can only urge everyone in this system to look for the long term, in no way meaning they are looking short- but to recognise that leading a university is a service to society with an impact that extends across all walks of life and continues through generations. Unlike companies, which may thrive for decades, universities are for generations and build the foundation of nations for centuries to come. If academic leaders approach institution building and research with that mindset, where the goal is not quick returns but enduring impact, it will fundamentally change the way they lead and the kind of legacy we leave behind.