

## INTERVIEW

...I feel that I'm here on a Mission...

An Interview with  
the Vice-Chancellor of Tribhuvan University/Nepal,  
Mr. Kedar Bhakta Mathema

Brigitte Merz

**BM:** When you took over the position as Vice-Chancellor in 1991 you took on a difficult task; the curriculum hadn't been changed for twenty years and the finances hadn't been increased. I would like to know, what were your aims and how far have you been able to realize them?

**VC:** When I entered the University, my objective was to bring systematic reforms. I saw three basic problems: one was a rapid increment in student population, number two was an acute shortage of funds and number three was the negative impact of these two on the quality of education. We now have over 110,000 students. What we are trying to do is at least to regulate student enrollment in such key areas as technical institutes and science subjects. There was a time when anybody who wanted to enter Masters level programmes in Science could do so without restriction, but since I came, I have tried slowly to introduce entrance examinations, to achieve a manageable number of students. But we have to go very carefully on this, because it has a lot of implications and repercussions. So far as acute shortage of funds is concerned, the government allocation for higher education is not adequate.

**BM:** How big is the budget?

**VC:** Well, the government spends something like 28 percent of the education budget on higher education, but this is not adequate and the government cannot give us more, given the economic situation of the country - so what I am trying to aim at is to increase our resource mobilization ability to mobilize both internal and external resources. When I say internal resources, I've asked students to pay a little bit more partially in order to cover the costs. Soon after I came, I increased the tuition fee (which had not been increased for 18 years) by one hundred percent. There was some resistance among the students, but we were able to implement the new fee structure. We have also given each campus the authority to levy other fees from students.

**BM:** For books.

**VC:** Yes, for libraries, for campus development funds and things like that. So each campus is trying to mobilize its own resources from student contributions. We are also meanwhile trying to cut down our subsidies, such as by privatising cafeterias; we used to spend something like two percent of our total budget on the cafeteria to feed a student population of about 400. We are also trying to cut down other unnecessary expenditures. Meanwhile we are also aiming at attracting external donors. We have approached the UNDP and

been able to receive some grant assistance. We have approached the World Bank, which has given a certain amount of money.

**BM:** 20 million U.S.\$

**VC:** Yes, for the physical and academic improvement of the university. And going back to the third problem, the quality of education: before I joined the university, there was nothing like an academic calendar in the university. A student preparing for Bachelors Level had to spend sometimes three years, sometimes even four years to complete the circle of two years, because of the irregularity of examinations and classes. Now we have started scheduling examinations on time. The day the students are admitted, we tell them that their exams will take place next March, or next April, and we stick to the routine.

**BM:** Before that it was more open?

**VC:** Yes, but even now, we have not been able to come out with a full-fledged academic calendar as such. We are working hard and if everything goes right, we should be able to implement a full-fledged academic calendar by 1995/96. Well, to sum up, our problems are an acute shortage of funds, runaway enrollment growth and maintaining the quality of education. And my aims when I joined the university were - and still are - to address these problems. As I told you earlier I have achieved some success in certain areas. In some other areas, progress has been less than satisfactory.

**BM:** How about other reforms in the system?

**VC:** Well, we are also trying to decentralize the authorities to outlying campuses, institutes, faculties -

**BM:** - to give them more autonomy?

**VC:** Absolutely, autonomy to work without too much control from the centre and to generate funds.

**BM:** What you said about the money for higher education, I presume this is mainly for equipment, for teaching, for stocking libraries and so on. My question is, does it also extend to research work, I mean how is this part of the university funded?

**VC:** It is sad to say we spend almost 93 % of our budget on salaries. We have very little funds for research work.

**BM:** With the loan from the World Bank, there is still not enough money for other matters?

**VC:** The World Bank loan is for a specific project. This fund will not be used for regular university activities.

**BM:** So it's not just... spread over the university?

**VC:** No, it is not a budgetary support, it is for specific purpose, like developing our physical facilities here at Kirtipur - some of our science buildings are in very bad condition - improving laboratories, equipment, strengthening of libraries, development of curriculums, improving the exam system. And also to help us to decentralize some of our authorities to outlying campuses. So it is not a budgetary support as such.

**BM:** And what about the four research centres like CEDA, CERID, CNAS and RECAST, could they benefit from the World Bank Loan?

**VC:** No, no, the World Bank loan is not for providing budgetary support to any centres under TU.

**BM:** That means that there is still not enough money?

**VC:** No, no, we must make cuts - we must cut down our expenditure on salaries and generate additional resources. That's why I'm asking every faculty, department and campus to provide consultancy, training and research services to the governmental and non-governmental agencies or even international agencies. Work like a consultancy team, you know. The money they receive from such work, part of it could be used by the faculty members for their own benefit, part of it can go to improving the faculty or the department or the campus.

**BM:** So they can use it for themselves and don't have to give it back to the University?

**VC:** Yes, they don't have to give it to the centre except for a small portion of the overhead. We are also trying to encourage some of our campuses which have a lot of land located in commercial areas to lease some of it for commercial purposes. The prospects for mobilizing adequate resources through tuition fees are still not very bright.

**BM:** But if you give more autonomy to the individual campuses, at the same time it will make them more dependent on outside donors. If so, might this be a threat to academic freedom? And also, might this lead to a sink-or-swim situation for individual faculties - I'm thinking here especially of the Humanities.

**VC:** Quite frankly, when I say mobilizing resources, I'm not really thinking of donors. I'm not thinking of donors giving grants or loans or the like, but rather how could each campus and faculty mobilize more resources, by providing services, training and consultancy services to His Majesty's Government, to the private sector, to the donors. Each faculty and campus will continue to receive budgetary assistance from the centre, the funds they can raise from consultancy services will be additional and they can use these funds for various purposes. This will not compromise academic freedom by any means.

**BM:** Does this also imply applied research?

**VC:** Absolutely. Let's say GTZ wants to carry out an economic study of a certain district. Why shouldn't the department of economics apply for it and carry out such work? And then whatever overhead they make can be retained within the department and be used to buy equipment, furnish the library or add books etc. Some of our faculties have already started doing this.

**BM:** How autonomous is the Tribhuvan University as a whole? How far can, for example, the Education Ministry or the Chancellor interfere in decision-making?

**VC:** It is autonomous. I will not speak about the past, but under the present system we are very autonomous. Obviously we listen to good advice, from the Ministry, from everybody concerned, but in so far as decisions are concerned, it is we who make the decisions. The government knows very well that we are very independent thinking people here in the University.

**BM:** Are you independent by constitution as well?

**VC:** Yes; the only problem is that financially we are very dependent on the government, 90% of our funds come from the government. We are trying to be less dependent by mobilizing our own resources. But so far as our decisions are concerned, it is we who make them. We have our own Senate, we have our own Executive Council and Academic Council and we make our decisions independently.

**BM:** I see that you're making a lot of changes inside the university, and at the same time there are a lot of changes outside the university as a result of the introduction of democracy, so I would like to know if this - the introduction of democracy - has made your work with the T.U. easier or more complicated?

**VC:** Both, I would say. Easier because I'm independent. As Vice Chancellor I can do many things without any governmental interference. We can make independent decisions much more easily: but it's also difficult because democracy has given rights to lots of pressure groups, and whenever you make decisions you have to take into account the interests of these pressure groups.

**BM:** Were there no pressure groups, such as a Teachers Union or students union before?

**VC:** There were students' unions, yes, teachers union also. However, unlike in the past we do not like to work under pressure now. At the same time we also want to respect the interests of these groups. Difficulties arise when the interest of these groups does not serve the interest of the institution or the interest of the institution sometimes does not match with the interest of these groups.

**BM:** What do you think about the first private University, which is opening this summer in Dulikhel. Could this give a new impulse, provide competition to Tribhuvan University?

**VC:** We welcome the new University in the private sector, but I only wish it could accept more students, it has a very small number of students.

**BM:** Why?

**VC:** Fees - I wish it would not be too elitist in character. If it becomes too elitist, than it could only cater to a very tiny section of the Nepalese population. I hope the new university will also be accessible to the general public. Of course the fees they charge will be a little bit higher than ours, but if they are much higher, they will be beyond the access of many good Nepalese students.

**BM:** At first I heard that it was to be financed solely by the private sector, but then that they might also ask the government for some support.

**VC:** Well, the question is while the public universities are grossly underfinanced, can the government afford to subsidize elite education in the country?

**BM:** Something different now: the affiliation of foreign researchers with the T.U. was on a steady rise between 1980-1990 and recently I heard from the Research Division that there are still foreign researchers interested in doing research in Nepal. I would like to ask whether you think that the recently introduced 3,000 US\$ fee for foreign researchers might stop or even spoil this

trend and who is responsible for introducing it? - Foreign researchers now have to deposit it at a Nepalese bank - maybe you even have not heard about it?

VC: No, I haven't. What is this fee?

BM: Since this year, researchers who wish to have a research visa have to deposit 3,000 US\$ at a bank.

VC: Really?

BM: Yes. That makes it very difficult, for example, for graduate students who want to do their Ph.D. and who don't get funded or just get a small monthly funding.

VC: Frankly, I'm not aware of this but I shall look into it, check with the Research Division. If these are some of the things which prevent genuine research scholars coming to Nepal, then we must discuss this, if this fee is too high. I would very much like to discuss this with the concerned parties. Obviously, we are not trying to discourage research scholars from coming to Tribhuvan University and working here. On the contrary, we would like to encourage them. We are signing more and more agreements with universities all around the world for collaborative work.

BM: Yes, I have read about it, this is quite a new approach, isn't it? You have agreements with Canada, with the United States - Wisconsin and Cornell University for example - and most recently Norway -

VC: - Japan.

BM: So what do you expect from cooperation with other universities?

VC: One thing is a cross-fertilization of ideas. It is said that a good university should have at least five percent of its students from foreign countries - students who will bring new perspectives, new ideas, new culture, and enrich the university's academic life. One big advantage from this collaboration with other universities is that our faculty members will come into contact with academics from other parts of the world. Sometimes faculty members in Third World universities tend to suffer from academic isolation; they don't have access to the latest journals and are not in touch with professors in the outside world, so they tend to work alone, not knowing how the other half is doing. So collaboration between universities offers a good opportunity for them to see what is happening on the front line of physics, chemistry or geography, sociology etc. This is the advantage we are looking for. Collaboration among universities is very important also because no university can afford to be an island in today's world. We must be in touch with as many universities as we can.

BM: There have to be funds for this as well.

VC: Yes, definitely, but we don't have funds for these kinds of activities.

BM: And what can T.U. offer foreign universities?

VC: We have good professors here and some very strong faculties. If some foreign universities could come with funds, some of our faculty members could do excellent research in collaboration with foreign scholars. What we can do is, provide the services and expertise of our faculty members, who are very good and experienced. We can also offer other scientists and scholars some fertile ground for research. High mountain research for example. People

who want to carry out research in anthropology or sociology will also find Nepal very interesting.

BM: In 1992 I read an article on a schism between foreign academics, researchers and Nepalese researchers, especially in the field of anthropology. It said that the Nepalese academics are more interested in doing applied research, whereas foreign researchers are more interested in pure research. Is this also your impression and does it exist in other fields as well?

VC: Because of the level of economy and because of the shortage of funds many Nepalese researchers, I think, tend to go in for applied research. If I have limited funds, I would naturally prefer to spend them on applied rather than basic research.

BM: Because you are concerned with the interests of the fund donors?

VC: Not the donors. We would like to have immediate returns from our research in terms of contributing to the development needs of the country. It does not mean we can afford to ignore basic research in the university. There are some faculty members who are actually doing it.

BM: To conclude this interview, is there anything else you would like to say?

VC: The road to development is not a straight one, neither is the development of a university which has suffered for a long time in the past from too much governmental interference, rampant trade unionism of various interest groups, break down of academic discipline, mindless politicization... Long overdue reform programmes in the university have however been started. Some of these programmes have already shown positive results in many areas. Examinations are being held on schedule and now we are very close to implementing a full academic calendar; the curricula are being changed and improved upon; the fee structure has been revised and recovery of the operational cost from students' tuition has improved; admissions at least in technical institutes and general science courses have been started. There are however still a million things to be done. And reforms are not always easy to introduce. Bringing in systematic reforms is an uphill task because we have to continuously fight resistance to change. But I feel I'm here on a mission to bring about changes in the university system no matter how unpopular they are at the beginning. The speed with which I can implement changes however depends a great deal on the political climate of the country.

The Interview was held on 17.05.94

