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Yale fellow, well met

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's daughter Amrit is an alumna of Yale University (class of 2001). So is his finance secretary Rakesh Mohan (class of '71) and domestic do-gooder Ramesh Ramanathan, who returned from the U.S to start Janaagraha, a people's movement in Bangalore. Then there are Yale-ites like Pepsico President Indra Nooyi, Newsweek International Editor Fareed Zakaria and Hillary Clinton's chief staffer Neera Tandon. Of course, there's the small matter of four of the last six American presidents – Ford, Bush Sr, Clinton, and Bush Jr -- being Yale graduates.

But the great Ivy League school is not entirely happy with its current engagement with India. It feels it is missing out on the great intellectual harvest that other U.S universities are reaping. Although it claims greater historical ties to India than any other university in the U.S -- it takes its name from Elihu Yale, the 17th century governor of Madras -- the school gets only about 100 students from India each year, compared to the Indian stampede to other brand-name schools such as MIT, Harvard, and Princeton.

One reason for this is Yale is best known for its humanities and social sciences studies, whereas Indians going to the U.S show a distinct proclivity for science and engineering. Yale's first Indian graduate was Sumantrao Vishnu Karmakar of Ahmednagar, Maharashtra, who graduated in 1892 with a degree in divinity studies (while his wife studied medicine at the Pennsylvania women's medical school). Since then, scores of Indians have passed through the portals of Yale's law school and its forestry and environmental studies programs. But the university's science and engineering schools have found less traction in India.

Yale wants to change that. So in January this year, Yale president Dr Richard Levin will make his first trip to India to pitch for these programs and tell us there is more to Yale than its famed law school and the oldest Sanskrit chair in the western hemisphere (going back to 1854). He will go to

New Delhi, Chennai, Bangalore and Mumbai, spreading the gospel of American education at a time when there are fears that foreign student inflow, the life blood of the country's university education system, is slowing down in the post 9/11 era. Since 2000, Yale has spent a billion dollars to crank up its science and engineering schools and bring it up to speed.

Yale's move is part of the increasing interest in India by American universities in a process that recalls the great gold and oil rush. Except now, instead of panning for gold or prospecting for oil, the emphasis is on mining minds, with India being considered the most fecund land. Such is the competition now among U.S schools for Indian students that at the same time Dr Levin is visiting, there will also be teams from Stanford and Harvard. Secure in their lead in Engineering and Medicine, they are looking to attract students for their MBA courses, which have registered a sharp decline this past year.

So what's in it for India and why should Indians spend their money earning degrees from Stanford, Harvard, Yale and other American universities? Because, Dr Levin explains, there is great value in leaving one's home country for a while and living in another nation to understand their norms and values. If you agree India is being better served now by its Oxford and Harvard returned alumni (the PM and the FM) than its provincial netas with their mofussil mindset, you may see some merit in this argument.

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