

LEARNING CURVE **PERSPECTIVE**

Make a sacrifice for social engagement



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MORE than 20 Right Livelihood Laureates converged on Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) in Mumbai, India for the Regional Conference of Asia-Pacific from March 3-6.

The Laureates, also commonly known as Alternative Nobel Laureates, are recipients of the Right Livelihood Award which honours their achievements in upholding right livelihood principles around the world.

Their work often "entails personal sacrifice, being opposed by the powerful forces around them". In fact, a few of them have been murdered in the course of their work.

In a world troubled by so many forms of subtle oppression, these are the individuals and groups of people who have valiantly devoted themselves to pushing back widening injustices globally.

It all began almost 35 years ago,

in 1980, when journalist and professional philatelist Jacob von Uexkull came out with the novel idea to recognise people who were passionately defending humanity dignity.

He established the award "to honour and support those offering practical and exemplary answers to the most urgent challenges facing us today".

Presented annually at a ceremony in the Swedish Parliament, the Right Livelihood Award is usually shared by four recipients.

There are now 158 Laureates from 65 countries, the latest among whom includes Edward Snowden who is recognised "for his courage and skill in revealing the unprecedented extent of state surveillance violating basic democratic processes and constitutional rights".

Since 2009, the Right Livelihood College, acting as the global capacity initiative of the Right Livelihood Award Foundation, has aimed "to harness and spread the knowledge and experience of the Laureates".

Malaysia, through Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), was privileged to host the first campus globally in line with the Accelerated Programme for Excellence (APEX) aspiration to promote the

practice of local knowledge and wisdom.

There are now seven campuses at universities in Bonn, Germany; Lund, Sweden; Addis Ababa, Ethiopia; Port Harcourt, Nigeria; Valdivia, Chile; Santa Cruz, the United States; and the latest in Mumbai at the Centre for Livelihoods and Social Innovation of TISS.

The Mumbai campus is the only one of its kind in Asia, after USM defaulted from the network of campuses. The Global Secretariat has relocated to the University of Bonn, Centre for Development Research (ZEF).

Over the three days of the conference, vibrant discussions were held on topics ranging from disarmament, sustainable energy and violence-free Asia to changing the global human rights approach; from climate change and poverty in South Asia to sustainable food production and consumption; and fighting genetically modified organisms.

True to their mission, the Laureates engaged the local civil society of Mumbai in thematic seminars on various issues of global interest including globalisation and development, gender and livelihoods (microfinance), peace,

conflict and development, human rights, justice and future of social movements, as well as the ubiquitous problems of climate change and health.

An open public forum titled *Transforming Livelihoods: Creating an Enabling Environment for Civil Society in the Asia Pacific* was also held.

Without doubt, the three-day exposé provided a unique opportunity to interact with some of the top minds in handling some of the challenges that are urgently unfolding and devouring humanity in an unprecedented way.

It demands not only knowledge but also activism in putting it into practice while seeking new answers to old intractable problems of inequity in all its forms.

It demands not just scientifically-informed decisions but also the arguments of the heart for more balanced approaches and outcomes.

So, too, the balance between the tangibles and intangibles, local and global, now and tomorrow.

Above all, it demands the kind of "courage" that the academia alone cannot provide because of its aloof stance on practicalities of life-threatening issues on the ground. Universities are counting on a

"third mission" (community engagement) to close that gap but the approach is still very academic with grades and credits being the driving force rather than personal sacrifice and consciousness to stand up for the truth.

The latter cannot be taken into account for any material points to be awarded, given the manner that community engagement is currently constructed as part of the university's "third mission".

One is reminded of the word *satyagraha* made popular by the Gandhians as way of resisting injustice and oppression in a non-violence way.

Satya and *graha* make up the essentials — the combination of "truth" and "firmness" — needed to make the meaning of engagement real.

Satyagraha, therefore, conveys the meaning "firmness for truth" which the Right Livelihood experiences are well-positioned to offer. It is this experience that universities need to embrace too.

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