



Col Bhawani Singh (Retd)
Chairman, Mayo College Committee

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Dear Mayo College family,

On the occasion of our 150th year, the President of the General Council has penned his thoughts on the various initiatives taken by the GC to ensure that our future is as illustrious as our past.

It is my pleasure to share his thoughts with you.

Col Bhawani Singh (Retd)
Chairman
Mayo College Committee



HH Maharaja Gaj Singh of Jodhpur
President, Mayo College General Council

UMAID BHAWAN PALACE,
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BEING GOOD ANCESTORS

The 150th anniversary of Mayo's founding is a celebration of holistic education, stakeholder inclusion and institutional renewal

By HH Gaj Singh of Jodhpur. President of Mayo General Council

As Mayo celebrates its 150th anniversary, it's useful to remember Historian Arnold Toynbee's suggestion that the death of civilisations is not murder but suicide. His insight applies to institutions; the average life expectancy of a Fortune 500 company has declined from 64 to 14 years since 1950, and it's rare for any school to survive for 150 years. Of the many reasons Mayo has survived and thrived, I believe three stand out: holistic education, institutional renewal, and stakeholder inclusion. This landmark anniversary must be celebrated by a pledge from every Mayo stakeholder - founders, teachers, staff, students, parents, and alums - to be a good ancestor by giving their time, talent, and treasure and making the school stronger for future generations.

One hundred and fifty years is a lot of history. History is simultaneously a gift and a burden. It's a gift because it anchors our identity through tradition, creates community, and breeds *Sthanabalam* (Sanskrit for the strength that arises from place). It's also a burden because the past keeps changing (based on the observer's agenda), nostalgia is often amnesia (the good old days were never perfect), and time inevitably leads to organisational cholesterol (the vested interests that resist change). The decline of many boarding schools suggests that, though we all faced the same challenges, Mayo recognised that the merciless march of time favours institutions that balance preserving and changing. Before we dive into the changes of recent years, let's examine the three pillars that have endured over 150 years.

Holistic Education: Light is an old metaphor for knowledge and wisdom; the Buddha advised *Aatma Deep Bhav* (be your own light). Mayo's motto of "Let there be light" was codified into a daily routine for students that included rising early, mandatory physical activity, and complementing academics with many skills, hobbies and activities. Modern education recognises that soft skills are not taught but caught (from role models or peers), and learning how to learn is more important than knowing. Mayo's holistic education is often challenged by board assessments and entrance exams that require memorisation, but it has balanced poet Yeats' contrast of "filling a bucket and lighting a fire". This model works; our teachers have gone on to lead many schools, and Mayo alums are successfully spread across professions in the private, public and non-profit sectors all over the world.

Stakeholder Inclusion: Nature's insurance policy against extinction is diversity; Institutions that cultivate cognitive diversity need to make complex trade-offs between different stakeholders across time. Mayo's multiple stakeholders - founders, students, parents, teachers, staff and alumni - often have different perspectives on the same issue. However, if one view gets too far ahead of others, the institution ensures a level playing field. Psychologists suggest the most dangerous lies are the lies organisations tell themselves, and the only insurance is ensuring that all stakeholders act as hearing aids, mirrors, and seat belts. Another tool for inclusion is transparency, because sunshine is the best disinfectant. However, I acknowledge that more work is needed to become more inclusive, which brings me to our third pillar.



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Institutional Renewal: Greek historian Heraclitus said you can never step in the same river twice (because both you and the river have changed). The world does not stop moving, and Mayo's resilience over 150 years is rooted in a constant evolution that included expanding the student body beyond the founding rulers to setting up Mayo for the Ajmer community, starting a school for girls, and establishing scholarships to make the school affordable. In recent years, we recognised the need for renewal, and Mayo began preparing for the 150-year celebration five years ago with a broad strategic review of everything we do and how we do it.

External challenges drove part of this review: a new Rajasthan state fee policy, a new national school regulation policy, a rapidly changing world of education, a new world of work, a revised view of boarding schools by parents, more competition for students and teachers, and Ajmer's poor urbanisation that often didn't fulfil prospective teachers' demands for spousal jobs or parental healthcare. Internal factors, including capacity utilisation, capital expenditure overruns, cost indiscipline, student culture, teacher excellence, misaligned governance, poor performance management, and cash flow deficits, amplified these external challenges. Of course, these problems weren't created overnight and were decades in the making. In my assessment, the internal challenges were bigger than the external challenges, but we kept blaming the world. As Ghalib said, *Dhool chehre pe thi lekin mein aayna saaf karta raha* (the dust was on my face, but I kept cleaning the mirror).

This strategic review balanced three conflicting objectives. The first was the next Quarter versus the next Century; a twenty-five-year plan cannot be twenty-five one-year plans. The second consideration was between incremental and radical solutions; aspirin is ineffective when surgery is necessary, but surgery is invasive. The final was being what versus how; everybody knows the list of ingredients, but the *nazaakat* (grace and strategy) lies in proportioning, sequencing, and prioritising. We achieved this balance by drawing inspiration from a wise Indian, Dadabhai Naoroji, who suggested being too moderate for the radicals, but too radical for the moderates. COVID nudged destiny by creating what political scientist John Kingdon called a policy window; a higher acceptance of change occurs when a problem, solution and pain come together.

I am pleased to report on good progress in implementing the recommendations of the strategic review committee, chaired by alumnus Manish Sabharwal. We have amended our constitution to reflect a new governance philosophy: a smaller board with age limits and term limits, active specialised sub-committees for schools and horizontals, stronger board information architecture, better board dynamics, and a board agenda that focuses on substantive issues. This new tone from the top has worked with the new principals (identified through a search firm for the first time), delivering financial viability by filling up empty seats, increasing the application-to-seat ratio, raising hiring standards, and enforcing zero tolerance for bullying. The financial architecture has been revised to replace Bursars with a qualified Chartered Accountant as CFO, transition to the international auditing firm Grant Thornton, and publish an annual report. A recently submitted report by alumnus and GC member Admiral Lanba (former Navy Chief of Staff) will institutionalise HR processes by moving away from the toxic "show me the person and I will show you the rule." A *One Mayo* project that respects individual school identities while leveraging economies of scale and catalysing economies of scope is also moving forward.

Poet Ramdhar Singh Dinkar said, "*Kshma Shobti us bhujang ko jis ke paas garal ho* (only the strong can be kind, benevolent and generous). What does being strong mean for Mayo? It means governance that is a verb, not a noun. It means balancing an Academic and Non-



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Academic education; in a world of Artificial intelligence, we have an unfair advantage at being human. It means prioritising software over hardware; it is easy to confuse school buildings with building schools. It means a financial model that pursues equality and excellence; great schools have low fees (for student diversity) and high costs (for paying teachers well) through rich endowments and hefty scholarships. Finally, it means every stakeholder thinks of Mayo as an Amaanat (something we only temporarily cradle and hand over to future generations in better condition than we received it) rather than a Jaagir (our personal property).

The broader context of Mayo is India, an ancient civilisation regaining its voice and reclaiming its place in the world. In 1994, a front-page article in the Wall Street Journal said, “India is more interesting than important”. I hope the journalist is eating the newspaper on which she wrote it because what is happening in India is not once in a decade or once in a millennium, but once in the lifetime of a country. But we must acknowledge missing our tryst with destiny; 200 million Indians will not read the newspaper they deliver, send their kids to the school they helped build, or sit in the car they clean. This is not a problem like cancer or climate change; it is a plumbing problem. India has made a new appointment with its destiny, one that it will keep through human capital, education, and skills. A school like Mayo will never move the needle on a population scale for India, but it is a lighthouse of holistic education, excellence, and resilience.

On Mayo’s 50th anniversary, Chief Guest Lord Irwin suggested “success in the examination room has its value but it is not and should never be the sole or, indeed, the main aim to which those responsible for the college ought to direct their attention”. On our 100th anniversary, Chief Guest Prime Minister Indira Gandhi suggested, “Real achievement is not counted in terms of rank or wealth but comes from the pursuit of excellence. Thackeray said I would rather make my name than inherit it. Many of you in Mayo College may have inherited a name, but true fulfilment will be sensed only when you make your own”. For our 150th anniversary in November, the General Council wanted a powerful role model for our students and chose public-spirited entrepreneur Nandan Nilekani as our Chief guest. He not only co-created our software revolution - India now exports more software than Saudi Arabia does oil - but also donated hundreds of crores to his alma mater and revolutionised society by providing our citizens with Aadhaar.

The title of this note comes from the inventor of the Polio Vaccine, Jonas Salk, who said the most important question to ask yourself is “Are you being a good ancestor?”. Mayo stakeholders before us lived by this dictum; they planted a tree whose shade they would not enjoy by creating an institution that has long outlived them. This *Viraasat* (legacy) is a responsibility and privilege for all current stakeholders of Mayo. As you reflect on the arc and influences of your lives, I hope you will find ways to contribute your time, talent, and treasure to a school that gave you so much. It needs you.

HHM Gaj Singh II
President
Mayo College General Council