

A Conversation with Vikas Swarup | Text Transcript | CIRCLE

This is a text transcript for the Canada India Research Centre for Learning and Engagement's (CIRCLE) podcast conversation with Vikas Swarup, recorded June 16, 2022 at the University of Guelph.

Transcript:

Dilshan:

Hello, welcome to the podcast with writer and former Indian diplomat Vikas Swarup. My name is Dilshan and I'm a PhD student in Sociology here at the University of Guelph. I'm joined by Dr. Sharada Srinivasan, who is an Associate Professor of Development Studies and Canada Research Chair in gender, justice and development as well as the Director of Canada India Research Centre for Learning and Engagement, CIRCLE for short. CIRCLE is an interdisciplinary nucleus in Canada for cutting-edge research on India, South Asia, and their diasporas. At CIRCLE we are committed to advocate, showcase, catalyze, and foster exchange of knowledge between Canadian and Indian scholars on complex, emerging and unexplored topics related to sustainability and social and economic well-being.

Dilshan:

We are delighted to have Vikas Swarup join us, as he received an honorary degree from the University of Guelph on June 16th this year. Our guest Vikas Swarup joined the Indian Foreign Service in 1986 and served in various Indian diplomatic missions including in the U.S, the UK, Turkey, Ethiopia, South Africa, and Japan. In April 2015, he was appointed as the Minister of External Affairs' Official Spokesperson, to head its public diplomacy divisions. He was India's High Commissioner to Canada between February 2017 and November 2019. In 2019, he took charge as the Secretary at the Ministry of External Affairs in New Delhi in its West Division, overseeing relations with Europe, Central Asia as well as the United Nations system. In over 30 years of service as a diplomat, Vikas Swarup represents the best India has to offer, celebrating democracy, diversity, erudite, gracious, personable, and yet firm and forthright.

Dilshan:

As is better known around the world, Vikas Swarup is a prolific writer. His most well-known book Q&A, the book that gave birth to the multi-award-winning film *Slumdog Millionaire* that

includes eight Oscars, is definitely not an occasional classic but a consummate classic with cult presence. He has since then written two other novels at a time when he was a full-time diplomat, but only an occasional writer. They are “*The Six Suspects*”, and “*The Accidental Apprentice*.” *Six Suspects* was adapted to a web series on Disney and Hotstar titled “*The Great Indian Murder*.” *The Accidental Apprentice* has been dramatized for BBC Radio Four’s 15-minute drama. In all his work, Vikas Swarup privileges the underdog, and their struggles and hope in everyday India. He's bold and strongly rooted in India, never shying away from showcasing multiple realities, its best and worst.

Sharada:

Hello Vikas, welcome and hearty congratulations, I must say welcome back to Guelph. Wow, how much the world has changed since your last visit to Guelph in 2019, with the COVID-19 pandemic and the Ukraine war and everything else in between. So, what I want to start with is really at the macro-world level. ***Today the world is grappling for answers to so many questions. When you think about the state of the world and where countries like India and Canada fit into the big picture, what comes to your mind?***

Vikas:

Well, first of all, thank you Sharada for having me on this program. It's wonderful to return back to Canada and especially, to return to the University of Guelph. Now, you rightly said that much has changed since my last visit to your fantastic institution. Our troubled world is indeed fraught with conflict, instability, scarcity and inequality, as social media has exacerbated divisions and tensions. At this time, I think we need moderate voices that promote inclusion not division, and I think that is where Canada and India fit into the big picture. We are both vibrant multicultural societies which share similar values and beliefs. Above all, I think both India and Canada are models on how to manage diversity. Now India, as you know, is easily the most diverse country on the planet. We have 23 official languages and thousands of dialects, we have all the major religions of the world, and a wide variety of food and dress, and yet underlying their diversity is a thread of unity. The Constitution of India protects the fundamental rights, the basic and civil liberties of every citizen, irrespective of their religion, race, caste, creed, place of birth, or gender, and I think the same is true of Canada. In fact, Canada has gone one step further to open its doors to immigrants from across the world. So, at a time when much of the world is busy

building walls or fortifying borders, Canada stands as a beacon of openness and acceptance. So, the world needs more Canada, and the world needs more India.

Dilshan:

Let me ask you, Vikas, *is there a slumdog millionaire living in every country? I mean low- or high-income countries vote, or are relatively peaceful, where would you find one?*

Vikas:

That's a really interesting question Dilshan. Well, when I wrote my debut novel *Q & A* in 2003, I really wrote it as an insider for insiders. I had no idea that it would find a worldwide readership with translations now into 47 languages, or that it would be made into an Oscar winning film. I thought it was a very Indian book and only readers in India would be able to relate to it, but I guess it has appealed to readers across the world because the quiz show format is universal and so are the themes, and the emotions it evoked. The underlying message is also a simple one and one that resonates in every culture and community, of creating your own luck of the underdog, beating the odds, and winning. From this point of view, yes, there is a slumdog millionaire living in every part of the world. You can find them in the Favelas of Rio, or the East End of London, or even in Scarborough, Ontario. The only question is, will they get the right opportunity to showcase their talent? If yes, the slumdog can become a millionaire, if not they will be condemned to live the life of an out-of-luck vagabond.

Dilshan:

I guess your achievement is that you make heroes in their brute, real, social reality. For example, Ram Mohammed Thomas in your *Q & A*, also known as Jamal in *Slumdog Millionaire*. *Quite a distinct literary form in the Dickensian style as some critics might say. What does this mean to world literature?*

Vikas:

Look it is very flattering to be compared to the great Charles Dickens, who had the sublime gift of being able to illustrate an awful searing reality with a personal story. I also see myself primarily as a storyteller, I didn't do an MA in English literature, I didn't attend a creative writing workshop, so whatever craft I have as a writer I really acquired from being a reader and learning from the authors that I admire. My primary purpose in writing is to create a gripping, engaging narrative, a tale that can hold the attention of the reader. At the same time, I do want my books to

engage with social issues to have a conscience as it were. I also believe that one of the purposes of literature is to give voice to the voiceless, to tell the stories that connect us as human beings, and that is what I try to do. If people want to ascribe certain labels to it then it is entirely their prerogative, as I said I see myself merely as a storyteller telling a story.

Sharada:

Great, so a storyteller telling a story, a consummate reader before a consummate writer. I'm going to ask you to elaborate some of these things a bit further. *So, in your view, what is your contribution to world literature and to Indian writing in particular?*

Vikas:

That's a very big question, and really that is not for me to say. You know, "what is my contribution?", that is really for my readers and critics to evaluate whether I have any contribution at all. But the fact that researchers are doing PhD thesis on my books, that they are being taught in many schools and universities, means that people have connected with my stories at some level. Now, some have seen it as a reflection of post-colonial writing, some others have found *Q & A*, for instance as a picaresque in the tradition of *Don Quixote*. I personally do not want to burden my books with any tags, my second book *Six suspects* in any case was a novel that tried to bust genres. I wanted to experiment with the polyphonic narrative structure, one in which I could play around with both the voice and the form of the narrative. Thus, you have six different characters telling you their stories, through six different mediums, ranging from diary entries to a telephone transcript. It was my attempt to try and capture the dissonant pitch of our times. I also try to experiment with a structure that allows me to capture India through as wide of a lens as possible because India, you know, is such a complex country that a uni-dimensional narrative cannot do justice to its many layers. So, as I said before, I see myself primarily as a storyteller and if through my stories people have a better appreciation of India's many realities then truly, you know, I feel blessed, I feel very gratified.

Sharada:

Great Vikas, so, I am going to follow up with a question. What does your writing mean for Indian writing in particular?

Vikas:

Now, again, Indian writing in English has become a genre of its own. It has come into its own ever since I think Salman Rushdie came out with *Midnight's Children*, and maybe even earlier. But since then, there has been a steady stream of Indian writers who have made it, let's say "big" in the world of international publishing. I don't really see myself as part of that pantheon because I had a day job as a diplomat, so I always call myself a diplomat who writes. I have been lucky that, you know, I got published with my very first book. I did not have to face piles of rejection slips that many other writers do, and I also don't say that I am the best writer out there. There are millions of writers far better than me, but probably who have not had the advantage that I had of getting published with my very first novel. So yes, my books are certainly now part of Indian writing in English, because English is the primary medium through which I have expressed myself. What their contribution is to Indian writing in English, is again not for me to say, it's for the critics and for the researchers to pontificate upon and to make their own analysis.

Dilshan:

Let's come back to the film *Slumdog Millionaire* for a minute. The film was adapted from your book *Q & A*. It won eight Academy Awards, Oscars, among many other accolades, including for Best Picture, best adapted screenplay with wider claim for its plot. I want to ask Vikas, ***what has been the impact of its success on you as a person, a diplomat and a writer?***

Vikas:

Look Dilshan, what I wrote was a book. *Q and A* was my first book. The success of *Slumdog Millionaire* has made it into a brand. I mean that film is now something instantly recognizable across the world. *Jai Ho*, for a time became the global Anthem. It was being played everywhere, I heard it play in American shopping malls, it was in dance halls in the Philippines, it was literally everywhere. Perhaps there was something about its message of humanity and hope that resonated with the world feeling beaten down by the tough economic times. So, I would say the success of the film did not change me, but perhaps it changed people's perception of me. I mean, earlier I was known as a diplomat, but post *Slumdog Millionaire*, increasingly as a writer. I personally prefer to call myself, as I mentioned earlier, a diplomat who writes. My life certainly became much more hectic after *Slumdog Millionaire* came out because of the demands from my various publishers and media organizations all over the world. What is incredible is that more

than a decade after the release of the film people still remember it. So, I will now always be associated not just with the book, but also with the brand.

Sharada:

Great so, *what has been the impact of that kind of a brand on you as a person?*

Vikas:

As I said, I do not think that I have changed, again it is for others to say whether I have changed. I personally do not think I have changed, what has changed is how people perceive me because if you are a writer people perceive you as a writer, but if you are a writer whose book has become an Oscar-winning blockbuster film, then you are perceived very differently. So, I think what happens is that people's perception of you changes. Of course, there are people who change themselves, but I think I have been grounded enough. I have been kept grounded by my family, my wife Aparna, and my two sons, not to indulge in flights of fancy.

Sharada:

So, with that, we will turn to the other great success story of Vikas Swarup's career in our next segment, his foreign service.

Sharada:

Hello and welcome back. We are with Vikas Swarup, former High Commissioner of India to Canada, and author of *Q & A*, *Six Suspects*, and *The Accidental Apprentice*.

Dilshan:

I can think of writers who had exemplary parallel careers, like Pablo Neruda who was Chile's ambassador to Sri Lanka. Or even someone like John Le Carré who wrote wonderful espionage novels based on his secret service career. *Your parallel careers, Vikas, are second to none as well. Tell us what happens when the writer and the diplomat come together.*

Vikas:

Well as long as I was in the Indian Foreign Service, work came first and writing was something I did in my spare time, and there was a reason for this. Unlike other writers with their jobs who can write in the crevices of the day, I can only write when I have a clear horizon in front of me. Meaning several hours without any interruptions. Since that was possible only on holidays, I used to call myself a weekend writer. I was also very lucky that the Indian Civil Service conduct rules give complete freedom for artistic expression to civil servants. You don't even need

government's permission to produce and publish a literary work, so technically speaking there is no bar to what you want to write, as long as it is made clear that the views expressed are your personal views and do not reflect the views of the government. The only conflict I suppose is that as a bureaucrat you are supposed to work behind the scenes, and neither be seen nor heard in public. Whereas as a novelist, you must be out there promoting your work. Since I did not write under a pseudonym, the writer and diplomat were always together and that worked to my advantage. I received many more invitations to talk at universities than I would have received only as a diplomat. Many more doors opened up to me to talk about India. Let's not forget that even Indian writing in English is now part of India's soft power. So, anyway, I have now retired from the foreign service so now there is only "ex-Diplomat." I just hope it also does not become "ex-writer."

Sharada:

That's a great answer. *You spent a few years in Canada as India's top diplomat, sometime between 2017 and 19. What are your most memorable moments from that time?*

Vikas:

Well, let me say at the very outset that it was an absolute privilege and honor to serve as India's High Commissioner to Canada for the two and a half years that I spent in your beautiful country. I was fortunate to have the opportunity of visiting all 10 provinces and the three territories. I got to experience the four seasons that Canada is known for, see some of the most beautiful sites of Canada; from sunrise on Lake Moraine to the northern lights in the Canadian Arctic. I heard Diana Ross sing at the National Arts Center, and Martin Scorsese talk about his films at the Toronto Film Festival. I met Michael Bublé, and the late great Alex Trebek. What touched me most was the warmth, honesty, and hospitality of the people of Canada. It is truly a society that cherishes tolerance, resilience, and humility. Canadians are also very informal. I saw prime minister Trudeau biking with his children in my neighborhood, ministers commuting by public transport, and university presidents having open house sessions with freshers who have just joined the university. When it came to India-Canada relations, the landscape was slightly more challenging. Mainly because of the information gap that exists between the two countries. Indians did not know much about Canada, beyond the fact that it had a lot of Sikhs and Punjabis, and most Canadians still thought of India as it was in the 1990s. There was inadequate appreciation of the tremendous transformation that was underway in India and the many

economic opportunities it represented for Canadian companies. So, one of my primary tasks was to end that information gap. I spent most of my time in trying to educate businesses in Canada on the value proposition that India brought to the table, and I held business meetings not just in Toronto, Montreal, Calgary and Vancouver, but also in places like Yellowknife, Thunder Bay, Victoria, and Saint John's. By the time I left Canada, I could see that the conversation among businesses in Canada was moving away from “why India?”, to, “how India?”, and things have only gotten better since. It is good to see that India and Canada have now resumed negotiations on a free trade agreement and Canadian pension funds have upped their investment in India to more than 60 billion dollars.

The other sector I focused on was education. I visited almost all the top universities in Canada and talked about how Indian institutions could partner their counterparts in Canada. I'm happy to see that a number of Indian universities, IITs, and IIMs are having wonderful exchange programs with Canadian counterparts, and the number of Indian students in Canada has of course gone through the roof with over 220 000 and counting.

I believe India and Canada are the most natural partners in the world because we share a truly unique relationship. There have been ups and downs in India's engagement with Canada, but that can be said for any two friendly nations, including Canada and the United States. There is much more that unites us than divides us, we are both vibrant democracies wedded to the rule of law, we share the Commonwealth tradition, have a similar parliamentary model, speak the same language, we see eye to eye on most geopolitical issues, we both champion UN based multilateralism, north-south cooperation, and a rule-based international order. So, taken together, there are very few countries in the world which can match the complementarities that bind India and Canada together. All we need to do is leverage this unique relationship to deepen our strategic partnership.

Sharada:

Great! You know, addressing information gap, moving the conversation from why India to how India, and building strong educational collaboration among researchers, among student exchanges, I think these are enormous contributions that I'm sure have strengthened Indo-Canadian relationships. *While we stay on this, what are your impressions of the Indo-Canadian communities, their contributions to Canada and India, their struggles and their prospects?*

Vikas:

Sharada, I think the story of the Indo-Canadian community is one of determination, diligence, discipline, and dedication. We all know the story of what happened to the Komagata Maru when the first wave of Indians tried to come to Canada at the turn of the 20th century. From facing rule-bound systematic discrimination, to the challenge of adjusting to a bitterly cold climate, from overcoming the hurdles of racism, to the task of preserving their own culture and identity, the history of Indo-Canadians shows that no obstacle is insurmountable and where there is a will there is a way. Through sheer dint of hard work, enterprise and, commitment to family values the Indian community slowly became part of the society and started excelling in every walk of life. Whether it's teachers, doctors, lawyers, real estate agents, entrepreneurs, and especially politicians. The first turbaned Sikh entered the British Parliament only in June 2017, but in Canada a turbaned Sikh entered Parliament way back in 1993.

Today, I understand we have 17 members of Parliament and three ministers who are of Indian origin, a number that no other country in the world can boast. This is in a way also a tribute to Canada, to its openness and its embracing nature that immigrants who came to this country more than 10 or 15 years ago can also aspire to not only become citizens but also represent citizens by becoming members of Parliament.

Today, the Indo-Canadian community has become a microcosm of India itself truly reflecting its diversity. Almost all the major linguistic groups in India are now represented in Canada. This meant that as High Commissioner, I got to celebrate Eid, Teej, Holi, Diwali, Onam, Pongal, Ganesh Chaturthi, Vaisakhi, Easter, and Christmas with the community on weekends. No wonder I could not produce a new novel from Canada.

Dilshan:

Leaving all of that behind, how do you practice diplomacy since you retired in 2021?

Vikas:

Well, that's a great question Dilshan. I thought I had left the world of diplomacy once I retired as you said in June 2021, but diplomacy did not leave me. Within a few months of my retirement, I was approached by the CEO of India's Parliamentary TV channel, which is like India's C-SPAN, with the offer to anchor a weekly program on international affairs called *Diplomatic Dispatch*. I was reluctant to accept it at first because I was worried that a weekly format would suck most of

my spare time and prevent me from getting to work on my new novel, but I took it up as a challenge just to see what this TV medium is all about, to understand its vocabulary, its unique texture, and yes, it keeps me busy seven days of the week. It is preventing me from working on my new novel, but I don't mind because it is allowing me to engage more deeply with the world of diplomacy and diplomacy as you know has never mattered more than it does today. The world has become a complex interdependent global community in which everyone shares the same fate, and no country can prosper in isolation. The internet obeys no borders unless you live in an authoritarian country with its own firewall. Our economies are interlinked, our education and our entertainment are drawn from global content pools, the technology that we use is designed in one country, manufactured in another with components coming from multiple others. Even the air we breathe and the water we drink are drawn from global commons. That is why a malfunction of one part can lead to disasters throughout the system. The best example of course is the COVID-19 pandemic that we all have been grappling with since December 2019. Viruses do not recognize any nationality, boundaries, or political affiliation, and that is why the COVID-19 virus, which began in Wuhan, quickly spread across the world.

So, diplomacy has become much more central, and I dare say even indispensable to our lives. I'm happy to contribute to creating greater awareness of its importance, reach, and its power through my TV program.

Sharada:

Okay so we are going to move on to tapping your thoughts on something bigger. We all know *this is the 75th anniversary of India's independence, CIRCLE has been running a lecture series titled India 2047, where leading experts articulate their vision for India in 2047 and how we get there. So, what is your vision for India 2047?*

It's very difficult to, you know, pick up the crystal ball and gaze into a country as complex as India so far into the future. I would say my vision for India in 2047 is to redeem the pledge that we made in that momentous tryst with destiny in 1947, when we attained Independence. So that we create an India which is free from corruption, free from poverty, and free from illiteracy. My vision for India 2047 is an India that is clean and green. An India where women are given their rightful place not just in their homes but also in business, and politics. Above all, an India which

reaffirms its secular creed in the finest tradition of *Sarva Dharma Sama Bhav*, equal respect for all religions, so that India can truly become a beacon of hope in a fractious and divided world.

Sharada:

If I could follow up on this question, *where do you think we are in the 75th anniversary of India's independence? Do you have any thoughts that you want to share of how we get to the vision that you just so clearly articulated?*

Vikas:

I think it's one of those things where you could look at the glass as half empty or half full. I mean there are some people who will say India could have done much better, but there are others who would say that we could have done much worse and could point at some of the countries in our own neighborhood. India at least has maintained its tradition of being a plural democracy right since 1947 barring a few years during the Emergency and I think that's a tremendous achievement. Also, we have remained a tolerant, open, plural society, barring a few aberrations here and there. I think the most important way in which we can attain that vision of India 2047 that I articulated is by investing in our public education system. No country in the world has managed to overcome its challenges and become a prosperous country without having a quality public education so that every citizen of that country has an equal opportunity. I think in India because we have, you know, those who get the privilege of a good education in private schools, and those who have to go to public schools, where it has been a problem. We have suffered from, even things like teacher absenteeism, etc. I think if that can be fixed and if every Indian child every Indian boy and girl is able to get a level playing field where he or she can attain his or her full potential then I think we will get to that India of 2047, where every Indian is well fed, healthy, secure, and most importantly reaching their full potential.

Dilshan:

Wonderful thoughts, Vikas. I gather that during your posting in Canada you visited many universities. *I want to ask, what attracted you to visiting them? Was it a matter of duty, or was there more to it?*

Vikas:

No, certainly it was not a matter of duty, as such, that you know it was my mandate to go to every university. I look at universities really as places of ideas, you know, places which have a

conglomeration of some of the best talent in the world, especially Canadian universities, which are publicly funded, and have produced so many noble laureates. So, I looked at Canadian universities as centers of excellence and I felt that it was important for me to visit those centers of excellence to see what they had to offer, and to create partnerships between them and Indian universities. Because, you know, India also is an education hub. India is also a country where there's a lot of talent, where there's a lot of capital. In fact, we are now the third largest startup ecosystem in the world. So, I thought there was plenty of opportunity for India and Canada to collaborate together and incubate new ideas, new technologies, new initiatives which could help both the countries together. That is why it was almost a pilgrimage for me. When I visited any city, the first place I went was the top university in that city. I met the president, met the deans, had an interaction with the Indian students, because now literally every Canadian university has some Indian students, in fact, some have thousands of Indian students, as was my visit to Cape Breton University demonstrated to me. Because of those visits, because of those meetings, because of those conversations, I was able to create an interest in forging durable partnerships with India. That of course, has continued even under my successor, and I'm happy to see that now so many Indian and Canadian universities are creating these excellent partnerships.

Dilshan:

Well, let's say hold on to those thoughts, because we have a bit more time to talk with you about education and of course the University of Guelph in the next segment.

Sharada:

Welcome back to the interview with Vikas Swarup, former High Commissioner of India to Canada and author of *Q & A*, *Six Suspects*, and *The Accidental Apprentice*.

Vikas, let's continue our conversation on Canada, and in particular to higher education especially in the context of the honor you've just received from the University of Guelph. In the last segment you talked about the pilgrimage to a university in each city that you visited as India's High Commissioner to Canada. I mean clearly your passion for intellectual pursuit embodied in these universities is evident.

I also would note that you have visited several universities in all the provinces and territories of Canada, and that's really saying something about your passion for education. *You have visited*

the University of Guelph twice during your tenure in Canada, so what are your impressions of the University?

Vikas:

Thank you, Sharada. I was really fortunate to forge a close relationship with your fabulous university. Now this is a university that traces its history to more than 150 years. It is a university that is equally adept at arts and science. You have campuses that span both urban hubs and rural communities, and you do groundbreaking research not just in laboratories, but also in libraries, art studios, and hospitals. You educate, you innovate, you invent, guided by that one overarching objective to improve life. You turn knowledge into action, and that is why India's partnership with the University of Guelph mattered so much, and that is why I visited your institution twice. Once, of course, I was fortunate to deliver the Gandhi lecture also and that was very well received. I think one very important reason why the partnership between India and University of Guelph matters, is that food security is the number one issue facing the world. Especially in the wake of the supply chain disruptions following the Russian invasion of Ukraine. I mean 30% of the world's wheat came from that region of the world, which has now been completely disrupted. I think it is universities like UoG which will eventually come up with innovative solutions to feed the planet. So, these are my impressions of the University of Guelph, I think it's a really one of the jewels in the crown of Canada, and may it continue to prosper and continue to come up with innovative solutions to improve life.

Dilshan:

You have received honorary degrees from the University of South Africa in 2010, and Concordia University in 2020. *The honorary degree from the University of Guelph is the latest. It is not obviously to your achievements as a writer and a diplomat, and to the best of Indianness that you represent. I want to ask you what emotions did you feel upon receiving this recognition?*

Vikas:

Truly Dilshan, an emotion of great happiness and also tempered with great humility. I mean there was really no reason at all for the University of Guelph to confer on me an honorary doctorate. I just visited your university twice, but your university embraced me as one of your own. The ultimate symbol of that is the honorary doctorate that you have bestowed upon me, so I truly feel humbled. I also feel very honored by that spiritual embrace that the University of

Guelph has conferred upon me, and rest assured that I will be the proudest brand ambassador for this University as long as I live.

Sharada:

Wow that was inspiring. *You inspire people around the world through your talks, so what's that one message you want to communicate to young people, young writers, and to young civil servants?*

Vikas:

I would just say one sentence, to stay true to yourself in what you do. To pursue the truth and not get swayed by the avalanche of fake news being spread through social media. I think the graduates from the university of WhatsApp are really the greatest menace to society because they are ready to believe anything and everything that comes to them on WhatsApp. It's important that young writers, young activists, and young civil servants continue to follow the truth, by knowing what the truth is, by separating the signal from the noise.

Dilshan:

In the past few years, we have seen an explosion of writers. At the same time, the Arts and Humanities everywhere seem to be on the decline. *What is going on, in your opinion, Vikas?*

Vikas:

Dilshan, I think we are witnessing the victory of economics over idealism. The crisis of the humanities did not begin yesterday or today. It began really in the early modern period, but I think the Great Recession of 2007-2009 was the tipping point. When the economy sputtered, most college students all over the world began turning away from degrees in history, philosophy, and political science. Then opting to study science, technology, engineering, or math, because they wanted a degree that could get them a job. But a degree in the liberal arts prepares students not only to make a living, but also to make a life. It reinforces the importance of soft skills such as communication, problem solving, and most importantly, writing. A liberal arts education makes us think critically and hence ask the right questions, not be afraid of making mistakes, and make judgments after looking at various points of view. So, at a time when we are seeing the resurgence of old conflicts and dogmas, it is essential that we learn from history, not repeat or be trapped by it. This is only possible if liberal arts education is given the funding that they need, and I am hopeful the students will continue to turn to it.

Dilshan:

You mentioned funding, I mean I want to probe a little bit more on that thought. *What are your thoughts on how to revive or prevent the slide in the Arts and Humanities? Of course, you mentioned some of those ideas, can you elaborate a bit?*

Vikas:

I would say there are no easy solutions or quick fixes. Eventually the solution has to come from the corporate world itself. The belief is that it's the corporate world that has prioritized, STEM over the liberal arts. If they recognize that in order to make a great product, you don't need just a great engineer, you also need people who have a sense of design, who can communicate ideas and problem solve, then you will have a great product. I think the clearest example of that is Steve Jobs. I mean he was not a technician; he was not a techie; he was not an engineer. He was someone who had a broad vision of what a product should do, what a product should be like, and what a product should look like, and that's why he, you know, he was the prime mover behind creating the iPhone. He got the engineers to create the product that he wanted the world to have. Here I would say I'm heartened by a study done by Google. Now at its core, Google is an engineering firm, so one would assume that its best workers would obviously be engineers. However, Google being Google, it tested its hiring hypothesis by crunching every bit and byte of hiring, firing, and promotion data accumulated since the company's incorporation in 1998. This was a project called Project Oxygen, and it shocked everyone by concluding that among the eight most important qualities of Google's top employees STEM expertise came in dead last. The seven top characteristics of success at Google were all soft skills; being a good coach; communicating and listening well; possessing insights into others; including others different values and points of view; having empathy towards and being supportive of one's colleagues; being a good critical thinker and problem solver and being able to make connections across complex ideas. There was another study by Harvard University economist David Deming, which found that jobs requiring high math and high social skills are rising, while jobs that require neither are shrinking. Observations that should surprise no one. However, the observation that jobs that require higher social skills, but low math skills are growing while jobs requiring higher math skills and low social skills have been declining for the past several decades may indeed surprise people. So, the bottom line is that social skills and critical thinking skills are both

valuable and highly marketable. I would say we need engineers, scientists, and technicians, but we also need historians, philosophers, poets, economists, linguists, and political scientists.

Sharada:

Great and finally the one question I'm sure all of us are wanting to ask and that's on top of every listener's mind is when can the world expect to see your next big novel?

Vikas:

I'm asking myself the same question. It's not that I have a dearth of ideas, I have several ideas. As I said I already started my fourth novel, it is because of this TV program, and some other preoccupations that I have I have just not been able to find the time. As I told you earlier, I am a very finicky writer. I can only write when I have this clear horizon. I'm not under any deadline pressures, and I can create when I have, as I said, no other pressures on me. I'm trying to manage my time well. I'm trying to ensure that I do my TV program one day a week and then six days at least I get to work on this novel. So, if all goes well, I should be able to produce something in 2022.

Sharada:

Fingers crossed.

Vikas:

Fingers firmly crossed.

Dilshan:

Well, we are all rooting for you, Vikas. I look forward to getting hold of a copy of your new novel very soon. It has truly been a privilege, and an honor to have you with us. Congratulations once again, and our best wishes for your future endeavors.

Vikas:

Thank you very much Sharada and Dilshan for having me on the podcast. It was wonderful to return to the University of Guelph, and I do hope that my third visit to your fabulous institution will help synergize even more cooperative opportunities between India and UoG. The University of Guelph specializes in improving life and India as you know is teeming with life so the collaboration between India and the University of Guelph is indeed very important. It was wonderful to speak to both of you, thank you for having me, and goodbye.

Dilshan:

Thanks very much for this candid conversation, and thanks everyone for listening in. You can learn more about Vikas Swarup by visiting vikasswarup.net, his website. You can also follow him on Twitter. His Twitter handle is @VikasSwarup. I hope you all enjoyed listening to this podcast with Vikas. It's a goodbye from all of us here at CIRCLE. Feel free to follow us on social media, our Twitter handle is @circle_guelph.

Check us out at canadaindiaresearch.ca.

A special thanks to Kyle Ritchie and Lindsey Robinson, and the media team at our excellent library here at the University of Guelph for their tech support in bringing this podcast to you.

Thanks, and take care.

[End of transcript]