

# FORTUNE

SPECIAL  
ISSUE

PRICE Rs 150

## LEADERS ON LEADERSHIP

INDIA

**BILL CLINTON, JEFF  
BEZOS, CARLOS GHOSN...**

The world's **50 greatest  
leaders** and what you can  
learn from them

WHY SHIV NADAR'S IDEAS  
ON CREATING LEADERS  
DESERVE ATTENTION

NARENDRA MODI'S  
NEOPHYTES



APRIL 2014

# THE REDISCOVERY OF DOON

Peter McLaughlin has had enough of people calling his school the Eton of India. "We want to go back to our founder's vision of being a truly national institution, with boys from all classes and backgrounds," says the headmaster of The Doon School, one of India's most prolific leader incubators. Founded in 1935 with the ideal of creating rooted Indian leaders, McLaughlin says the school had drifted from its vision somewhat. This fuelled its familiar uber-elite image. But the helmsman to graduating 'DoscOs'—the moniker Doon's protégés often prefer even when they reach the inevitable high office—tells *Fortune India* that a radical course correction is quietly afoot at the venerable institution. Edited excerpts.

BY ANURAG PRASAD

PORTRAIT BY NILANJAN DAS

#### How do you view leadership today?

Leadership is not about holding a position but making a difference. I think there is a lot of gimmickry around leadership these days. The more the conferences and workshops we hold on the subject, the more the certificates awarded, the worse the leaders we see around us.

#### What's the way out?

At Doon, we push our boys to exercise leadership in real life—whether social service or managing prestigious school functions—where they have quite a lot at stake. We are willing to take risks on the boys as we believe they have to take risks in real life. We also lay down some theoretical foundation, particularly when it comes to ethics. We believe that being a good citizen is at the heart of leadership: 'Leaders' can sometimes be appalling citizens. You should also learn to follow others. This I see as a big problem in a world where everyone is a certified leader.

#### How has Doon's approach towards building leaders evolved?

The Doon School was set up in 1935 for a free and democratic India, when it was neither free nor democratic. There was a bit of a drift as India attained both freedom and democracy. A few years ago, before our 75th anniversary, the board asked if the Doon way was still relevant. So we had a re-visioning exercise, keeping in mind what India needs for the next 75 years. India is now a democracy, but it is not yet a meritocracy. We agreed that for the next two generations, the school should commit to ensuring that boys from every caste, creed, and socioeconomic background come together [and be trained] to build a meritocratic India. We are now focussing on accommodating India's changing demographics in our student body. We want to be a truly national institution, as we feel more and more schools are becoming regional.

April 2014



**The way the system works almost feels like a conspiracy by the ruling elite to keep those who are down from ever rising.**

**How are you achieving this?**

We have set up a talent scouting system. We are trying to replicate a model from the U.S. where scouts find talent from rural areas. As this gains momentum, we will throw the net wider and wider. As of now, when I go to any school, I ask them purely at a personal level if there's any kid who could benefit from a Doon education. Now, we have 40% of our boys on scholarships, some of them from extremely poor families. We have children of gardeners and housemaids along with the children of billionaires.

**How do you manage the shift for these children? How are you raising resources for them?**

Once they are here, they are all Doon boys, with equal access to these 70 acres. Yes, there are issues when they go back home during holidays, but we also give them financial support during these times for additional tuition, or if the boy wants to go on an international exchange programme. This is a cause dear to many of our alumni, and money is coming from there. We have also created a financial plan from our own resources. No boy on scholarship loses any aspect of a Doon School experience.

**What kind of results are you seeing?**

A lot of the underprivileged boys have real fire in their belly, and the school's environment—with all its competitive ethos and leadership tradition—is a tremendous machine for assimilating boys from various backgrounds and making them loyal to [an ideal] in a very intense way. People were worried about these [disadvantaged] boys not fitting in. But they have proved that fear wrong.

**Is this approach towards inclusiveness a universal phenomenon?**

I think there is a worldwide movement that we at Doon are trying to plug into. In Britain too, schools have students on scholarships, and there have been government-assisted placement schemes.

**What are your most important filters for selecting students?**

There is no set pattern, but the critical things for us are culture and character, which you can never be coached for.

**Doon has often been seen as an elitist school, even though it started as a counter to the elite British public schools.**

I would say 'elite' and not 'elitist'. Elitist means snobbish and exclusive, while we are elite in the same way special forces are. Doon was always meant to have an inclusive culture; it had perhaps faded for some time, but now it is gathering momentum once again. We have a spartan environment. Everyone sleeps in the same bed. Every student has a boy bag, and nobody is allowed to keep more than a certain amount

of money in it. If a boy is caught possessing more, he is punished. They are not allowed to have expensive gadgets either. We want our students to believe in 'servant leaders' and not 'serve the leaders'.

**Do schoolkids really understand things like 'leadership'?**

Beyond a certain age, about six years or so, children are capable of taking on much more responsibility than you can imagine. Our boys have started showing the courage to say that they might not do what their parents have chosen for them. It is happening at the secondary school level, but I would like to push it deeper down. To nurture leaders, you have to allow them to make mistakes and learn from them. The biggest problem is that adults want to intervene and stop children from making these mistakes. This takes away the experiential aspect that is vital to leadership development.

**Can leadership be taught?**

Leadership cannot be taught the way the system works now. But it can be learnt, and you need great teachers for that.

**What are the main problems with the system?**

Everywhere there is terrible destruction of imagination. If you see some of the board exam papers, they are an insult to my boys' potential. The system stops citizens from thinking about why the world is as it is. It almost feels like a conspiracy by the ruling elite to keep those who are down from ever rising.

**Where do you see the school in 2020?**

We don't want to be known as the Eton of India. Schools in the West should say, 'We are like Doon.' ■