

**INTERVIEWER:** This is an interview with Professor Bish Sanyal for the MIT150 Infinite History project. Professor Sanyal is a Ford International Professor of Urban Development and Planning, and director of the Special Program in Urban and Regional Studies and Humphrey's Fellows program at MIT. He first joined MIT in 1984 as an assistant professor and later served as the head of the Department of Urban Studies and Planning from 1994 to 2002. He also served as the chair of the faculty at MIT from 2007 to 2009. Thank you so much for speaking with us today Professor Sanyal.

**SANYAL:** Thank you.

**INTERVIEWER:** So let's start by talking a little bit about where you're from, your family background, and your upbringing in India.

**SANYAL:** Well, I was raised in Calcutta, in the state of West Bengal in India. And I went to school at the Indian Institute of Technology Kharagpur, which is like 80 kilometers from Calcutta. And I pretty much stayed there until I finished my undergraduate, and then came back to Calcutta for two years to work with my dad, who was a civil engineer and had his own construction business.

He built bridges around the eastern part of India and also even outside. So I worked with him for two years. And then I left for a Master's degree, for the US.

**INTERVIEWER:** And tell me a little more about your childhood. What kind of family environment did you have? Was it a very academic family with an emphasis on education? Obviously, your father was quite a successful businessman.

**SANYAL:** It was a family with a lot of family members who have had advanced degrees. And many of them had degrees from England, because at that time England was the main source of good universities. So it was not uncommon in our family for young men to go abroad to study at all.

So it was not that difficult for me to convince when I wanted to go abroad, except that by this time the situation had changed and the United States was becoming more the prominent place to go to study. But I do come from a very well-established and educated family. It's been a privilege.

**INTERVIEWER:** And what were your early--- earliest academic experiences? What subjects do you remember interesting you? And did certain courses really inspire your love of learning?

**SANYAL:** In school--- I went to a Catholic school. And it was a very good school, now I think back. The school was known as Saint Lawrence High School. I liked painting, art, writing, math. I liked biology a lot, I remember.

So when I applied for higher education, there was an all-India competition for the few slots in the Indian Institute of Technology, which is the best university in India. And I got in. And when I applied, I wanted to do my degree in architecture.

That was my first preference, because I thought that I like art and that was kind of an overlap with my dad's business on construction. So why not go for something that we can combine in architecture and civil engineering? And so I started as an architect.

**INTERVIEWER:** And one of your bios says that you credit contradictory forces in your life for your intellectual journey. Can you expand on that a little bit?

**SANYAL:** Well, there are a couple of the things that I think I would call dual demands on the way, I think. And I'll give you one example about architecture and aesthetics, which I still enjoy very much. I just like looking at beautiful things, well designed things, parks, beautiful environments, beautiful clothing, furniture. And at the same time, having been raised in a city like Calcutta, I'm very conscious about poverty and about deprivation and inequalities. And this tension between aesthetics and inequality has always influenced my thinking.

So I worked in architecture. Then I moved to city planning to look at cities, how poor people manage to live in cities. But now if you asked me like you asked me before about JP, my first thought was the Arboretum. So I am still very drawn to beautiful things. And that doesn't mean JP doesn't have poor people. JP actually has much larger share of poor people than probably Cambridge.

**INTERVIEWER:** And JP being--

**SANYAL:** Jamaica Plain.

**INTERVIEWER:** Where you live now.

**SANYAL:** Where I live now. So that was one set of tension that I had to deal with. I still kind of struggle with it. But I think it makes me a more interesting person, because I have this kind of dual need.

I'm also very much an academic. And I enjoy academia. I'm married to an academic person. I have family members who are academic. But at the same time, I like getting things done, professional things. So building things, like architecture, you have to build something to show. Same in planning. You make the city run. And so there is a difference between just understanding, which is in academia often the dominant mode, and actually getting things done and supervising it, doing it well.

And again, so I thought for a moment when I came to MIT, well, if I don't get tenure, which is possible, because it's so difficult, I'll just go back to practice. Yet, I know if I go to practice, I will miss the life of the mind, which is academia. Reading wonderful things, being with colleagues who have incredibly new questions to ask. So again, that's a duality.

So I wrote in that piece about this. I think I have two or three examples of that. Between India and the United States, but the allegiance to my place, my country where I grew up.

I still go. I just was there last week. I visit.

I do work there. I advise the planning commission. And I'm quite attached to my family members who are still alive, and to my old university, which just gave me a very nice award, distinguished alumni award, which I went to receive last week.

And yet I'm deeply drawn to the United States. This is the place where I got my best education. I married somebody from here. My child is here. And the level of things I have received in this country, starting from good health care to exceptional education to a lot of emotional support from my wife and my daughter, neighbors the setting, beautiful places to visit. It's just part of me now.

So you have this kind of dual allegiance, right? So I don't have to choose if I enjoy both. So it's another example of that.

**INTERVIEWER:** Growing up in India, this awareness of the poverty and the dichotomy between those who had resources and those who didn't, was that something that your family discussed? Or was it just something that you ended up coming to realize over time? Was it openly acknowledged?

**SANYAL:** I think West Bengal, where the City of Calcutta is located, is a very political state in terms of being run by political parties who do make inequality an issue. And it was one of the states that were controlled by the Marxist Communist Party of India for almost 30 years. And that's really one reason why I even left working with my dad, because we had a lot of labor troubles in managing the business.

But the empathy for labor, for inequality, it was cultivated in me also by the Jesuits. I think in my school, Catholic school, the Jesuit Fathers who taught us, they drew attention to it, that we were privileged that we were in a school in the heart of Calcutta with a vast amount of land. And right outside the school, there were very poor people sleeping on the pavements.

And same at home. And we'd come home, and right outside the main entrance to the building, there are people sleeping on the pavements still. Still. We're talking about 2012. And so it's not really possible to ignore that inequality if you are observant of anything in social life.

And I also realized that that was painful, that that was painful for me to watch. And because I like aesthetics and beautiful things, I wanted everything to fit into a beautiful setting.

So later I got more studying of economics, because I came to realize that the problem was not one of architecture and design, or physical design only, that the economy had to produce jobs for the people, for vast number of people. And then if their income goes up, they'll be able to buy. Then the city can respond to them.

They need disposable income. And so it's still a very central part of my writing and thinking as to how to create policies that would benefit those groups of people.

**INTERVIEWER:** And your undergraduate degree was earned in India, as you talked about. How different do you think that experience was versus maybe had you come to the US and come to MIT or an American undergraduate university? How do you compare?

**SANYAL:** It's hard to compare, because I didn't go through the undergraduate. But what I know of it now, I think I would have had more flexibility in the US in terms of choice of courses. In India, the curriculum is totally set. You don't have any choice. Everybody in the class they have to take the same courses.

And I think that also in terms of advising, specializing, let's say, within architecture, I had to come to my own decision what I wanted to do my thesis on, which was actually on a large student center that I designed. But I think if I was here, I probably would have had a number of people advising me on different things, like design of museums or design of amphitheatres or design of colleges. We didn't have that variety of options.

And how did it affect? It affected in two ways. One was that you had to do what you were asked to do. And there is some discipline that you need to do, sometimes you have to do. The downside of it was that you couldn't be as creative as you wanted to be, because your special parts of your strength was not sought out.

So I think the American universities are brilliant the way they do. And the flexibility they provide is immense. And I'll give you one example that really blew my mind. When I first came it was not for undergraduate. It was a course I was taking in my master's level.

And somebody told me in November, it was November, don't panic. Because if you don't finish, well, you can take an incomplete and work over the winter break. And then you will get a grade. I had no idea that something like this is possible.

And when I remember talking to this individual saying, so how did you guys start this, providing this incomplete? They said, the point is whether you know the material. If you know the material and you need one more month to finish and complete but ultimately you know it well, that's the goal, not to just push you in a corner, which is a very nice approach. I love the American approach to teaching and learning.

**INTERVIEWER:** Was there also an advantage to the more disciplined and the more narrowly focused approach that your undergraduate school took in India when you then came to the US for your graduate work?

**SANYAL:** There was an advantage in the sense that I was trained to work very hard. And it came from the Catholic school and it came from undergraduate work that you had to put an enormous amount of work. I was also quite used to very stiff competition, because there are many, many people in India competing for a few slots. So that kind of competitive mold that sometimes allows you to go that extra mile, that was cultivated well.

But I do think that you pay a price for that. I think that competition is, of course, natural in any setting. But does that bring out from within us our best performance? Maybe sometimes it does, but not always.

**INTERVIEWER:** And did you pursue architecture because you wanted to be an architect? Or was it an area that interests you because of the beauty and the combination of many things that interested you?

**SANYAL:** Both. I mean I like beauty, as I said. I like aesthetics, I think they're more interesting aesthetics. And I wanted to go with that feeling that I had.

And then there was a kind of utilitarian approach towards doing something that is not just painting and art, which is very hard to make a living in India. And my father had the construction business, so I thought, if I do architecture, we could do something together, that I could do the design and maybe the other parts of the firm could do the construction.

But a beautiful living environment, I think it's exceptionally important for me. And I still feel that that's where I do my best work, when I'm in a setting of that nature.

**INTERVIEWER:** Would you say MIT is a setting of that nature?

**SANYAL:** Initially when I came, I was not that taken by MIT, because I came from University of California, Los Angeles, which has a very beautiful campus, as you probably know. UCLA campus was a place that you could take a walk.

You could sit in a cafe, there would be mountains you could see. Beautiful foliage. The buildings are beautiful. University had a beautifully planned campus, because the way they got land, they could do that.

So when I first came to MIT, what struck me was this 77 Mass Avenue sort of bifurcating the campus. It just created a different pace for me to deal with this busy street. And also, I didn't see the river as much as I wanted to see it. I wanted to feel that I am next to a river, beautiful river, right? It was still being cleaned at that time.

I found the hallways of MIT kind of drab. And it was not a place for aesthetics. It was a place to get work done. So I think the labs are the central part of MIT.

But I have to say that being here for all these years and having participated in this conversation about the Stata Center and this new group of buildings that have come up-- and our ex-dean, who died two years back, Bill Mitchell, was very strongly involved in that. And there was a conversation about do we need something like Stata Center? Do we need Stewart Hall's building?

And through that conversation I have come to realize that in MIT's own way, there is an aesthetics. If you define the term aesthetics differently and not in a kind of classical way, the students who come here, the faculty who are here, they have a very unique approach to life.

And this unique approach is what I think Frank Gehry tried to capture in the building, something very strange that from people outside say, what is this? And you often say that about MIT students. They are brilliant, but at the same time you can't exactly put them in a box. And so I thought isn't that interesting intellectual challenge, to capture the psychic of this faculty and student and express it differently in a built form?

And so MIT has grown on me. I have to say it's grown on me. I still like the Killian Court. But my best, absolutely my favorite spot, where I would go if I'm really looking for peace, is the chapel.

I love this chapel. I think it's an incredible piece of work. And it is very small. Inside it's not that many people can sit. But I have been there a couple of times, because many of my colleagues have died. Because I came in '84, and people who were at that time senior, many of them died.

Some died when I was department head, so I had to organize the memorial service, et cetera, for them. And so I would go to this chapel earlier, to make sure everything is in place. So there's not that many people. And you see the stream of lights coming down, and on this brick wall that's curved. It's a beautiful piece of work.

I was sitting there the other day in the student center looking at it from outside. And if you see the top of it, I was really asking myself what was Saarinen thinking? Why did he create this space? It's absolutely my favorite spot.

Now the new building, the new media lab building, which is also beautiful, I think, which Bill Mitchell also instrumental. You go to the top floor, which just has the conference rooms now, and there's a big patio that you can walk out and see the river. It's the first time I feel like there's a building at MIT where I can be in the building and observe the river at the same time.

It's very beautiful. And on a beautiful day, and you see Back Bay on the other side, it's just a gorgeous, gorgeous, place. So-- yes.

**INTERVIEWER:** So you found the spot with the river view that you were so seeking.

**SANYAL:** Yes. I think river is very important for a city, and for just the sense of water. Water has a different quality to it. And the water, quality of the water, the color of the water changes a lot in this city, because of the weather. And its volume changes. Its shade changes.

It deflects in a different way the light. It's very beautiful. And I think that the cities that I like generally all have water running through them.

**INTERVIEWER:** I bet there aren't very many people running around the MIT campus who notice the color or the texture of the water of the river like you have.

**SANYAL:** Maybe not that many. But I think there are people who still appreciate. I have come to realize that even though there is this kind of technology and science and all of that, when I ask people questions about so where do take a break if you are feeling harassed or something? Do you go for a walk? And they would often say, like, oh, sometimes I take a walk across the road, which is a very busy road, which is sort of a barrier.

So people find peace. You ask doctoral students, for example, who are the most harried, and the doctoral student housing on Memorial Drive-- I have asked many doctoral students, so what do you love about the place? And they would say, oh, the view from the apartment is just beautiful. And then I asked how many students share that apartment? Oh, we have to share with three or four.

And I'm thinking, oh, wouldn't it be nice to have your own? So you can really see it, watch the sun go down and have a cup of tea or something. So I think that people are aware of it. But it's not as much celebrated at MIT, because that's not the culture of the place.

**INTERVIEWER:** Is that sad to you?

**SANYAL:** It's not sad, but I think I have seen that that's another approach to life. And I think that more and more you see that your approach is not the only approach. So I have mine. I know what I prefer.

But there are many others. And there are some of them are very well articulated, well thought out, and they're very smart people. And so MIT has this very nice style of look, you can do your work as long as you do it well and you do it very, very well, exceptionally well, no one will bother you.

I have to say this about when I came as assistant professor-- and as I said, I was a student at UCLA. I was struck by how little senior faculty tried to tell me what I should be working on. Not one. And in a way, people told me, maybe you are not getting enough advice. You should get some more mentoring. And this will hurt you later when you come up for promotion.

I don't know if it was because I was fortunate, but I felt like totally free to do what I wanted to do. And I did good work. I was engaged with what I did. And I was lucky to get tenure.

And that's the same policy I follow when we hire junior faculty. I don't want to sit over their back and tell them what to do. And if those are the types of people who need help, I don't think we should-- we don't want them at MIT.

**INTERVIEWER:** And you found that out once you had gotten here. But what was it about MIT that drew you here?

**SANYAL:**

Well, the name. Of course, MIT the Massachusetts Institute of Technology is world-known. And when I applied to MIT, I also had the option of going back to the World Bank, where I had done some work for them. And I was posted in Zambia, you might have seen in my CV. So I had a choice of either going to the World Bank and working on development issues, or this position opened up as assistant professor.

My wife, who always wanted to be an academic and also was a doctoral student at UCLA-- that's where I met her-- when I asked her what do you think we should do, she said, go to MIT. And I said, well, why? And she said, well, we would be in Cambridge. I could probably get a teaching job there. There's so many other universities there.

And then I called my father, who I respected, and he told me, if you have an offer from MIT, you don't think of any other things. I mean, this is the ultimate. It's because technology, the idea of technology, is so central to the people who are into development process. And he was a civil engineer. So far engineers, this is it. There's nothing better than this.

So I thought, okay. I have a choice. And after a while, some people did warn me. If you're going to MIT, it's a very highly ranked place. You may not get tenure.

So I said, I'll take a chance. And if I don't get, I'll look for elsewhere or I'll go back to practice. It worked.

**INTERVIEWER:** And how much did that mean to you to get that first teaching position here and kind of launch that next phase of your career?

**SANYAL:**

It meant a lot to get into MIT. And I remember when I mentioned it to my adviser at UCLA, after the interview-- I had borrowed his coat to come for interview because it was cold, and in California you don't need a coat. So I went and gave him back the coat. And I told him that-- he said, how did it go, the interview?

I said, I think it went well, but people were not overtly friendly or were not overtly critical. I think it went well, because California, the culture is very different. And then I got a phone call that I got the job. And they told me the salary. And I said, listen, I don't even to know the salary. I knew that this is an incredible, prestigious position.

So I went to tell my adviser I got the job. And he was just ecstatic. And I didn't know at that time, which I later found out, that he was at MIT for a while. And he was denied tenure, which I did not know, because he later went to Chile. And then he went and worked in Chicago. Then he was the head of the program at UCLA.

So I knew there was some association with MIT, but I didn't know that he really wanted to be here and be tenured. So he announced to everybody, my student got into MIT. And until now, when I go to UCLA-- and I was there in September, because they had a meeting, they brought some of the alumni together-- it's always so nice when they introduce me as their alumni from Urban Planning who has been chair of the faculty. I mean, they're so proud of me.

And so I am more and more realizing how privileged I have been and how fortunate I have been. You know, when it happens to you directly, it's too quick to even sort of internalize it. But as I come, as I grow more into it, I see my daughter, other people, other friends, I just have an exceptionally successful and a privileged life. I don't know who I owe it to, but I have it.

**INTERVIEWER:** What a nice problem to have.

**SANYAL:**

Yes. It's a problem only in the sense of do you feel like you're giving back enough? I think it's important. And still when I go to India and I see this level of poverty, et cetera, I'm really struck by how my life would have been different if I was born to one of those families. It would be totally different.

And so when you have the privilege and the opportunity to contribute, you have to. That's part of your moral upbringing. That's what we teach our students.

So are there more ways to give? It's a thought that comes to my mind quite a lot, because now the election's going on. And did you see the statistics on what share of the income each of the presidential candidates actually give to charity? It was very interesting for me.

And I know that some Christian families, like my wife's family, they're Methodists, they actually give like one percent a year. They decide at the beginning of the year. And so did they give it every Sunday when they go to church.

And I don't go to a church. But I think that the idea of giving back in many different ways, including monetary, it's important. Because ideally my income, between two of us, is more than sufficient, even with one child. So that's one way to give.

Do you feel like am I giving enough or am I buying more beautiful things because I like beauty? That goes back to the question I was saying. If I see a beautiful piece of furniture my immediate thought is, oh, it would be so nice to have this writing desk.

Do you need it? Could a kid go to school for this writing desk that you are taking for yourself? I think those are the questions that are very important.

And I think that I wish MIT as a place, as a university, would have more of those kinds of courses. That's one thing I would very much like to see offered. Our philosophy department is very good, but very small.

And I find our students-- because I teach a course called D-Lab with Amy Smith, who got actually the MacArthur prize award. And I see these are young kids who come and they want to go around the world solving problems for the poor. Small technological devices they do. And so I know that that is there.

They are also thinking about the poor. Maybe they have come from a different angle, different trajectory, but they are concerned. And this is something that I'm very proud of MIT. People from outside did not realize how socially conscious our students are who are very smart technologically.

And so you need to get into the conversation. You need to share with them your thoughts. You need to say, this is what I did. This is what are the different options. And that's what I'd like to see more of at MIT, done in a more formal way.

**INTERVIEWER:**

And when do you feel like that sense, that compassionate approach, the human element to looking at the world started to infiltrate your chosen career of architecture and then urban planning? Or was it always there?

**SANYAL:**

I think it was there partly also in the Catholic school. I think this Catholic school, there is a very strong moral undertone to it. And these Jesuit Fathers now, even when I go now-- I was in Belgium two years back for another very nice conference, some occasion.

And I said, well, I'll go see the cities where these Jesuit Fathers came from near Brussels. These are beautiful cities, beautiful places. And then I started thinking, what made these young men leave these beautiful cities to go and stay-- stay-- in Calcutta when I'm leaving Calcutta, right?

They spent their whole life teaching, educating people, in Calcutta. So it made me think, why are they making these choices? And I think-- so the school cultivated by sort of examples. And there was a course called Moral Science in the school from class 1 to class 11.

And then the other part that I think cultivated this in me is reading fiction, which I like very much. And I think that's a very important source of looking at the world. And I still like fiction. I read widely. I also read many journals.

And at a moment like this now, with the way the economy is, with the way income inequality is, you can't start a conversation without addressing this issue. So unfortunately, it's going to be more and more important. And for us, people like us, who have the advantage of a good income, a good life, we need to lead that conversation.

**INTERVIEWER:** Going back to when you started here at MIT as an assistant professor, what was the transition like to the MI culture for you, both as someone who came from India originally, then from the West Coast and your schooling, but particularly because you were born and initially educated abroad?

**SANYAL:** It was hard a bit, but not as hard, partly because I was married to an American woman who helped me in many ways culturally to interpret how I'll be seen, how my gestures will be seen. But she's very social, like me, and both of us like friends. And we had a lot of friends in California, almost too many. And that's why I took time to finish my dissertation.

I love organizing parties in our house. It was a small house in California. So when I came, almost every weekend or so we would invite some faculty, even though they were not my age.

And they would come. They were surprised, because first of all, we are junior people, but we have both very strong sense of a social life. We read. We can have a very good conversation.

And gradually these people began to come. And that was a very big issue later for me. I realized that I was able to break through some of these power relationships because I had taken the initiative to do the social things.

They also were very impressed by my wife, because she was a scholar. And now, after being at MIT for 10 years, she just started at Harvard. She just moved to Harvard starting this January first. And she also loves the life of the mind. So people enjoyed our company. And we made some nice food, not huge, but some nice food. And I think MIT, what I realize is that MIT has a lot of people who would love to do that. But they don't do it.

So you might say, okay, let's have a coffee or something. But to say, let's have dinner and we will make the dinner and we'll make something unusual, it takes time. And that is why I think people often hesitate, because time is so precious, because of the tenuring, et cetera.

But I made so many friends. And I think the reason I was selected to be the department head after being here for only-- I came in '84. And 1994, when Phil Clay became the vice chancellor, they asked me to be the chair.

I think it was because I had created a sense of trust among a number of people within the department just because of social-- being together, reading their material, arguing with them over dinner. And I think it's helped me later, even in the larger MIT level. That's a big strength I have.

**INTERVIEWER:** That you were almost creating a community within a community.

**SANYAL:** Yes. Yes. I'm able to do that. That's a part of the strength I have. And fortunately I'm married to somebody who also loves that. So it works.

**INTERVIEWER:** Otherwise it wouldn't work, if she was an introvert.

**SANYAL:** Yes. Or if she would have been more sort of-- you know, if you have a set of beliefs that you very strongly stick to, then it's very hard to be with people who don't believe in that. But I think what is nice about MIT is that you could have a group of people who don't agree with you. And they will argue with you in a very forceful way and that you can't just dismiss.

And that's so interesting. That's how you grow. That's how you subject your own thinking to scrutiny. And if you do it over a nice dinner at a nice place, beautifully laid out table, it's the best moments.

**INTERVIEWER:** I was going to ask you about the sort of intense, high pressure environment that MIT is known for, mostly for the students, but it also sounds like it bleeds into the faculty life. And you are providing an outlet for that. Why do you think that was such a unique gesture on your part? Why is there a culture here that can't have both, that it's often a little more skewed towards the work and a little less towards the play? Is it just the prestige of the place?

**SANYAL:** I think that work, to do excellent work takes time. It takes time. There is no doubt about that. And people want to put that time first on their work.

And the junior faculty are even very worried because of tenuring. So they just see that socializing as the last thing. And they want to spend their time-- senior faculty, once they've got used to this junior lifestyle, they think it's very hard to get out of it. So they might socialize with one or two people, but not a lot.

Look at our faculty club. MIT doesn't really have a serious faculty club of the kind that Harvard has. And when I ask people, how come we don't have a faculty club, because people will go there for a drink, I was told that, listen, most people do not live nearby. And there is no culture of that kind of hanging out in a faculty club having a drink and then thinking of something like at Harvard.

There's a different culture to the place. But I don't think we want to make it black and white. What I'm saying is if I was able to create this small community, I am totally sure there are people like me in every department. There are one or two who can play that role. And they are probably playing that role. And often we don't hear about them that much.

**INTERVIEWER:** Right. Exactly. How do you think MIT today is different from the way you found it when you first got here? How has it changed?

**SANYAL:** Well, they are definitely more diverse. When I came it was not bad. But the international faculty, share of international faculty students have increased. African Americans have increased, not as much increased. Women have increased.

And my best moment so far was when I was not the chair of the search, but I was a member of the committee that brought Susan Hockfield. So serving in this presidential search committee and getting the first woman scientist to accept the job-- and I remember we had a small lunch with Susan before she was introduced to the whole MIT crowd in Building 10-250. And I was walking before her coming back from the lunch.

So I come in. And I looked at where you usually go and sit and I couldn't find a place. So I had to come through the stage. So I come in through the stage.

And I look up and like jam-packed 10-250 waiting for Susan. And so I'm looking. And Chuck Vest was sitting in the front seat. I found a seat next to Chuck. So I sit next to Chuck.

And then walks in Susan Hockfield. The level of applause was just moving. It was-- I knew that I had participated in a historical moment, that this is a historical moment that an institution like MIT has a woman scientist who is the president.

You wouldn't believe the feeling. I still cannot explain the feeling of that moment, that, oh, so I was part of this moment. So it has been one of the high points in my life to be able to participate in that way.

I think financially MIT's situation has changed. I think that the kind of way we finance ourselves, I had no idea when I came that it fluctuated so much. Because we were not that dependent before on endowments.

But now this current crisis-- and because I was also chair of the faculty, I could see the crisis from within, what was happening to the investment portfolio-- I was surprised. Though we are still one of the universities with one of the largest endowments. We are probably seventh in the nation.

But still if, we look at where the money's coming from, so there's research, there's endowment, research money from government research money was still okay. But it had gone down after the end of the Cold War, which was late '80s, right? So the Soviet Union fizzled out.

So the kind of way we funded ourselves had to be rethought. Endowment became big. And so that financial structure I think has shaped, partly, how we operate as a university.

And the last crisis when we had to basically freeze faculty salary, et cetera, made me realize that the institution was still somewhat vulnerable to the external economy. And since this external economy is still not in full steam, that's a worry I have, about how will it work. And particularly I think how will it work means, how will we ensure access of large number of undergraduate students who are not from wealthy families?

The statistics that I am so proud of MIT, this is something that I tell people when I mention MIT, almost 18 percent of the first incoming class last year were from families where they were the first one to go to college. And compare that with me. In my family, third generation back we had people going to England to study.

And these kids are here. But they didn't have the privilege. But we opened the door. And they're brilliant kids. What a wonderful thing to do. That is what I want MIT to be able to preserve.

**INTERVIEWER:** That's wonderful. Opening the doors even wider to this amazing place. Did you have many mentors early on in your early years here at MIT?

**SANYAL:**

You know, I was thinking because I thought about this question. Because it was not a mentor in a formal way, but there was a professor here, professor Lloyd Rodwin, who was very respected. And he was the one who was instrumental, I think, in bringing me. Though he and my advisor who was my dissertation advisor at UCLA were archenemies.

And Professor Rodwin was instrumental, later I found out, in denying tenure to my advisor. But when I came and applied for the job he was polite. And he really wanted somebody who come from a different sort of school of thought. And my advisor had created a very different school of thought in development planning, very different from what Lloyd stood for.

So when I came in, I was very taken because Lloyd was very nice to me. But he gave me all the opportunity. He told me the courses I could teach. But he was not willing to listen to a not well-developed argument. He was very strict when given an argument's sake he would defend his position very well.

And I could develop my position well. And so I didn't need the kind of advising that sometimes we say to junior faculty, like what do you have to publish? Where are you publishing, and how many papers you've published? It just didn't happen in my case.

People are very happy with me from the beginning. I wrote. I wrote a major piece of work that I think got me the tenure. And the mentors were people who were mentors by their work. I just saw how they published, how they wrote, how respected they were in the profession, how rigorous they were.

And then they were mostly men, but one woman, I have to say, she came with me in 1984. But she came from Berkeley. And she had never taught at Berkeley, but she was much senior to me. Had just gone through a divorce and she was looking for a job. MIT offered her a visiting faculty position because she done an enormous amount of work for development agencies.

Her name is Judith Tandler. She just retired last year. And because she came in '84, I came at the same time, I was assistant professor. And of course, she didn't have any family. And my wife and she got along quite well.

Now looking back, I realize that in terms of intellectual impact, of shaping my thinking, I think this woman had immense impact. And that is why I went to a great length last year to play a big role in arranging for her retirement party, which was incredible.

What I think is interesting is when you look at institutions, there are some people who consider themselves marginal. And often people who are not mainstream or you're not white or male, you have to find your place. Now, of course, I was from international faculty.

And I never felt marginalized, to be honest with you. But nevertheless, there are conversations that happen that are kind of unusual conversations on the fringe. And I think women, particularly this woman, and others often create small conversations. And those are on the fringe of institutions, but they're often very interesting.

And I was fortunate, because of her, to bring a critical perspective on the mainstream issues which my other advisers were working on. But the other advisers were never turned off by this. They were actually quite excited. They wanted some fresh voice.

So I had the benefit of both. I had the support of these people whose support mattered in terms of political power. And I had the intellectual support of this woman who really give me a new way of looking into problems. And she's still there, around. And I think that-- so it was a very good combination.

**INTERVIEWER:** That's pretty invaluable, to have people in your career--

**SANYAL:** Unusual. Very unusual.

**INTERVIEWER:** Now are you in the role of mentor today? How do you approach that? Do people come to you now?

**SANYAL:** Yes. They do. And you know, when I was department head, of course, I was in a formal role of a mentor. And we hired a lot of people, junior faculty.

And I always remember what had happened to me. I never forced myself as a mentor, but my door was open. I told them, tell me what you will need.

I started creating some new policies, like giving a fully-paid semester off before people come up for tenure, because I realized time is what they need. We gave good salaries. I gave starting salaries to junior faculty so they didn't have to immediately go and apply for grants. Lower teaching load, et cetera.

And then they did their own work. And they were not all hired in my field, because we have a very big department. So for me to go and advise somebody, let's say, who was working on environmental issues-- which I don't work on, though of course it's an aspect to think about-- it's not appropriate because there's other people who know more. So I didn't formally advise people.

But one thought I'll share with you. I think that when you have to tell a junior person that they have been wonderful but they're not going to be up for tenure or they didn't work, it's the most painful thing for me.

As a department head, that was the worst thing that I had to go through, when I had to sit with somebody young and give them this news without breaking their confidence, which obviously it's devastating when you tell this to somebody, that it didn't work. It's not you're fault. What do you say exactly, that you are not good enough for us? And I just think that the less we have to do that, the better.

And the best way is to be very strict about who we bring in. We should bring in the very best. Then the process is easier later. But if we just bring in thinking, well, they'll come. And then after seven years they'll leave-- like what happens at Harvard. Harvard, their rate of tenuring is very low.

But the process, the emotional cost that a young man or a women have to go through, it's a huge damage that they will spend their whole life reconstructing. And that, I think, needs to be talked through more, how to do it.

**INTERVIEWER:** How to avoid it.

**SANYAL:** How to avoid it and what arrangements do you need. It will invariably happen in a top place. But there are good ways of doing it and there are terrible ways of doing it. And within mentoring, I would say that's one key element that I would like to think more about it.

**INTERVIEWER:** You have multidisciplinary interests, clearly. You have a degree in architecture, but this strong interest in social sciences, which then led you to doctoral studies in international development and planning. Does any one of these disciplines resonate with you any more than the other? Obviously you have the architectural foundation for all of it.

**SANYAL:** I think it varies in terms of your intellectual trajectory. When you solve a problem or you have addressed a problem for a while, then other things may come up. For example, I've been working on India and the cities in India. And you know, I have been very worried about this, how to house this large number of poor people who are sleeping on the streets, et cetera. Housing, housing for the poor, I've been working with a lot.

And lately when I was there, I realized that in some of the cities the parks were over-used, because these poor people have nowhere to go. They don't even have house. So the parks, they're sleeping. They're not taken care of.

And I started thinking, oh my. I think I would give a little more thought to how to design some beautiful parks. Of course, I use a beautiful park myself, which is Arnold Arboretum.

But it will again bring me back to aesthetics. So it's a constant fluctuation between worrying about this income, poverty, how to do this, and worrying about other things in life that are not can be tied down to money, but are just aesthetically beautiful. Beautiful park.

I really think for a poor person that-- there was a time in my field when there was a discussion about whether we should be spending money on these things. When people don't have water, don't have electricity, why are we worrying about aesthetics, et cetera? I have come to the point, thinking now, that aesthetics matter a lot. It actually matters more for people who don't have anything else.

**INTERVIEWER:** Because of the psychological impact on them?

**SANYAL:** Yes. Give them a sense of meaning, that they can take their kids there. They need some space that they can feel attached to, and some beautiful space that is not overly expensive.

So they are not going to go to the opera. They are not going to go-- but they might take a little Sunday lunch box. Wouldn't that be nice if they could sit below a tree in a park and they have a lunch? So why shouldn't I design that?

**INTERVIEWER:** I want to go back to-- in general you talked about things you saw in India that developed this great concern for poverty issues. But you had some really eye-opening experiences when you worked for your father at the engineering firm. Tell me a little more about that and how that experience so influenced your thinking and your ultimate career path.

**SANYAL:** Well, the main thing was because he had asked me to supervise the construction of this bridge. And you know, I came out of architecture. I didn't know how to design a bridge. But he told me, well, I'm doing the design. But you can do the-- with a part of the construction, you can supervise.

And why I agreed was because this bridge had a separate site. And he told me I could live on that site. Not in a very fancy place, but so I didn't have to stay home, which I liked very much. At that stage I didn't want to come and stay home, because I had stayed in a dorm for my undergraduate. And I had gotten used to my own lifestyle.

So anyway, I go there. And every day at the end of the day, I had to pay the daily wage laborers, which I had no idea that people are paid on a daily basis. But I had to do it.

And at the end of the day, I often saw women or children sometimes would stand by near the door waiting to be paid. And I didn't even think in the beginning. I thought, well, that's the way it is.

And then some days there would be rain and they had not worked, so you couldn't pay them. And so these women would come and ask me saying, can I borrow, because I didn't get paid today. I have to buy food for tonight. So I realized that they're extremely vulnerable people.

Anyway, so later in the construction site, we are doing the construction, like laying out the cement. And you would see people without shoes walking on this cement, and kids running around, women carrying bricks without any protection on their head, no gloves. And gradually I came to see the level of their vulnerability.

And it was sad. And it made me question the kind of sense I had about aesthetics. I thought, maybe I just-- I'm in a totally wrong path. Maybe what I care about means nothing, this aesthetics and this what I have learned. Maybe their income is to be the main thing. And so I was pretty much concerned about it.

But lo and behold, the government at that time, the Communist Party was in power, came to the state. And they had organized labor, their own organization. So of all places, our house in Calcutta they developed a term called kira which means the laborers would surround your house and would not let you go out until you either increased the wage, you give something, for all of summer.

My father was generally a progressive man. But in a business circle, you do not go out and change laws by yourself, because you are with a group of other people. They will say, come on. What are you doing? They'll be making the same demands.

So when that happened, and I felt restricted at home-- and my father, at that time, he told me, listen, instead of wasting the time because you cannot do the work, why don't you go and get a degree abroad? And so I say, okay, I think that's not a bad idea.

So I had to do my portfolio. But my portfolio-- and I look back now-- was design a series of parks. It had nothing to do with poverty. Isn't that interesting? Here I was struggling with the idea, but my portfolio was cities or parks.

Now, this is a difference with American education. If I was educated in an American university, my adviser would have known enough about me to say, Bish, you care about that. Why don't you bring that in your portfolio? Be real. Be who you are.

And I think to tease that out of you, what is inside you, and to make it into something beautiful, that is a job of an advisor. And that's what academic life should be. That's what I hope I can play with my students. So to really know them well, what is it that they care about, that if they are trained well, that same concern, they can express it in a very wonderful way.

**INTERVIEWER:** Once you had focused your efforts on urban development and planning, were there some seminal moments when you knew that you had chosen the right path, where sort of the light bulb went off that you had found your calling, if you will?

**SANYAL:** I think there was a moment when I was in UCLA when I found out that the field of urban planning in the US was very broadly defined. In urban planning, when I came from India, I thought that urban planning would be more physical planning, like master plans of cities, et cetera, which used to be that way in the US.

But the 1960s in the US, there was a huge turmoil about cities and urban renewal, a revolt against urban renewal. There was the Model Cities Program under President Johnson, the Civil Rights Movement. So city planning had completely changed. And it had become much more multi-dimensional, interdisciplinary. So you could take courses in psychology. You could take courses in sociology, political science.

And this I immensely enjoyed, immensely enjoyed. I really thought when I had that option of taking those kinds of courses, I thought this is the kind of an education I always wanted. Now, the only problem is that you have limited time to do a degree. And if you start doing many, many things, it sometimes is hard to get into the depth of things, which I now sort of try to take into account as we do our own program design.

We are one of the most known planning schools, the number one planning school in the nation for the last 10 years, because we have many diverse courses. But I think rigor, which is also what MIT stands for, a seriousness of explanations, that requires a reading of one thing very well. And so that balance, between making something very diverse and interesting and making something very deep, is an issue that we grapple with as academics.

**INTERVIEWER:** And how difficult or easy was it to incorporate this interest that you had in poverty and in lower income segments within a city into urban planning generally? Was that an innovative idea?

**SANYAL:** It was already beginning to happen. And American universities like University of California, Los Angeles, their program was based on the notion that planning of the old kind, which was master plan, was not really working. And that came because of historical reasons, because American, African-Americans, the problems of them, the construction of suburbs.

So some schools were more ahead of others in bringing that. And UCLA was a school created in 1969 by my adviser who was brought in to create a kind of alternative school of thought. And this alternative school of thought was very interesting for me. Because it put every conventional idea on the table for scrutiny.

So let me give you one example. The idea of modernization, which is the central idea in planning, you modernize the city. You modernize the economy. You modernize your social culture. People took it for granted. The question is, what is it? What is it for?

And within modernization, there is a very strong component for technology, because modernization and technological change are supposed to go hand-in-hand in the old theory. So when I came to MIT, I had already scrutinized the role of technology. And in a way, I was skeptical of technology and the way technology was being sold as this is going to solve your problem.

And then I realized after I came here that many people here were asking the same questions. It's not that just because it's MIT that nobody is questioning the role of technology. There was a Science, Technology, and Society program. There's Media Lab program.

There was our own program within our School of Planning. There was a woman, Lisa Peattie. So I found it very vibrant, and people understanding technology, but saying, well, that's not the only solution. We have to do other things. And I was thinking that's been a central issue in my intellectual growth as to redefine the role of technology in addressing issues of poverty, let's say.

So in standard planning argument, you would say technology for the very big projects and you have for the poor, small little things. But it doesn't have to be. It doesn't have to be that separation.

**INTERVIEWER:** And how well- equipped is MIT to help you and your colleagues bring urban planning to that next level? Why is this the place to do that?

**SANYAL:** Oh, very well -equipped. Very, very well -equipped. Very well equipped. And I was very, very surprised-- not surprised, I have to say. But I found out here that there are a large number of people, and not just in urban planning-- like engineering, which I co-teach a course with Amy Smith on D-Lab, Development Lab, where 55 students each semester, they take the course.

Then they go to the all these countries. All are working on poverty issues during IAP. They're coming back now in a week and we're going to meet with them as to what they have developed, small gadgets to help the poor in their household.

There are multiple parts of MIT that has been an issue. The Poverty Action Lab in economics, that deals with that. In the humanities, social sciences, there are courses on that. So there's a lot going on.

I think that the only thing I would say is that we are looking for somehow to give it a shape, to give it more of a format, a set of courses, a sequence of courses. And that, MIT have been involved with it. The iHouse, the International House, which I also now serve on their board, which is learning and living, where 25 students stay there. They go abroad.

Many things are happening at MIT. But in the MIT tradition, it hasn't been put into one format. So the good part of it is that it's kind of decentralized and many things are happening. I think the bad part of it, the downside of it is that students still have to find it out themselves, where to look for it.

**INTERVIEWER:** You had a lot of important life changes going on in the early '90s here, where you had a new post as head of the Department of Urban Studies and Planning, and then big news happening in your family on a personal level. Tell me more what was going on then and how do you think you handled it all, looking back on it now?

**SANYAL:** It was a big, big change. And I don't know how I did it, to be honest with you. My wife, her first tenure-track appointment was at the New School for Social Research in New York in '88, '89. And she's an urban sociologist, but she also works on planning, developing countries issues. Her major interest is Mexico, because she speaks Spanish. But she grew up here, in St. Louis.

Anyway, so when she got the job, she said, look. I mean, should I take the job? I'd be in New York. And I thought that she should take the tenured job, because it was hard to find a tenure-track job here.

And you know, my life here at MIT was full. Of course we missed each other, but she would come back on Fridays. And New York and Boston is not that far off if you fly.

But '94-- and I was actually enjoying my sabbatical, my first sabbatical. I had just got my tenure. And I took my sabbatical in Hawaii. In Honolulu, of all places, there's a very good center in [UNINTELLIGIBLE] development studies.

And we had been married for 10 years already. And we didn't have a child by choice, because it was not possible at that time. Anyway, one thing led to the other, the sabbatical, my wife gets pregnant.

And so she said, what should we do? And we said, well, we'll have the baby. Of course we'll have the baby. And how are we going to manage this?

So I thought, well, my mother-in-law lives in St. Louis. She could come and maybe help. We said, whatever it takes, we'll face it. But it's not that we wanted a child. Now that we have this, this is something important for us.

So when she came back-- and I'm just planning to come back, and I get a phone call from the department--- Phil Clay has just become vice chancellor or associate provost, and we would like you to be the department head. And I thought, oh my God. How are we going to do this?

But I said, okay, department head. What are we going to get out of it? So I met with the dean. The dean told Bish, you will get three months of summer salary. And what else do you need, tell me, to do to the job?

So I told him, well, I need some help with child support. We cannot do-- there are a couple of things. He really liked me. And by the time I came up to my office after telling him all these things he sent me a note. I'll take care of it. Do it. So I said fine.

Finance was a big issue, because we knew that we would be needing more money. And this was going to ensure us more money. That was a very central part.

So Diane, it was difficult for her. She had to manage this pregnancy and still teaching at the New School. And she was very worried that once you get pregnant, for women faculty, you are not taken seriously. And New School is a very top-ranking school in social sciences.

Alexandra was born. My colleagues were very helpful. I think why I was able to do it was I really think that my job as a department head was not that difficult a job, partly because I dealt with colleagues who were very civil.

There were very few moments I felt like this job was too demanding. It actually was a very nice job. And I was nice to people. And they were nice to me.

And it was expensive. We had to get a child care. And there was an Italian architect, a man, who came to town through one of our friends and who said he was going to stay with us and take care of everything, including the food. And these guys stayed with us. Diane commuted. And he stayed with us for I think four years, to take care of our daughter.

And this guy had very good taste. He gave my daughter, I think, her sense of taste. And it worked. And Diane got tenure, which was very hard. But she did get tenure at New School.

And then I had done that for like almost eight years. I was getting exhausted. And then the dean told me, Bish, your wife is tenured-- he liked her-- her work overlaps. Let me see if we can bring her here.

All my colleagues supported it. And she came with tenure as associate professor at MIT in 2002. And then I stepped down, because you can't supervise.

And so I was also-- I made eight years I had done that. So I stepped down. And then I had a very wonderful sabbatical.

And Diane was here for 10 years. And now look at us. Now she's moving to Harvard. So our daughter is going to go to college. What I have to-- what can I complain?

The institution has been very nice to me. I got an endowed chair. I have a huge research account. I got the MacVicar Fellowship for teaching.

I have a teaching load that I can decide. I have wonderful students. I have secretarial assistance.

I have a beautiful office. You have to come and see my office. It's part of my aesthetics. Again, I have to say I've just been very fortunate.

**INTERVIEWER:** I was going to ask you if there was anything about that period that you would have done differently. But it sounds like it turned out quite well in hindsight?

**SANYAL:** I think it worked out well. The only thing I'll say is that when you take on administrative tasks of that nature and you have these family obligations-- because the child was based here and Diane would leave Alexandra and then go to New York for three, four days-- you do not have time for research. And I think in a serious academic institution, if you stop doing research, I think it takes time to come back to research. It's not a machine.

And I think that I would have thought through my research agenda maybe a little more carefully, because it did take me almost two years when I finished, stepped down, to get back to writing. And I couldn't write a lot during the time when I was head. So that affects your productivity, or more than productivity, your seriousness of engagement with an issue.

You have to read. You have to read. You have to write. And it's only a limited time. So yes.

**INTERVIEWER:** And how much do you think MIT allows for that balance? It sounds like it's quite a challenge between the work and the family here.

**SANYAL:** Yes. But MIT is moving in that direction, partly also because MIT has more women faculty now. And I know that the last provost, Bob Brown, started this thing of getting senior faculty. And he created this policy, actually, under which Diane benefited, that if a department would bring senior women faculty, then the department didn't have to pay for the full fare. The Institute was paying part of it.

And as more and more women faculty came in, then decided the family policy where you could take paid leave before you have a child, now MIT is offering a policy where you can take care of senior family members. And I think the institution is aware of this, that there are demands on the faculty's lives. We could do more.

But we are moving in the right direction. And that is why we have more women faculty. And imagine if I felt pressure, at what level the pressure Diane must have felt.

**INTERVIEWER:** Yes. Exactly. Totally switching gears, I wanted to talk to you about the Special Program for Urban and Regional Studies. Tell me about that program and how you think it embodies MIT's approach to solving big problems.

**SANYAL:**

It's a very interesting program. And it was created in 1967 by my mentor, if you can call mentor, Lloyd Rodwin, at a time when MIT wanted to create a program to bring mid-career professionals from around the world to spend a year at MIT without any strings attached. And Ford Foundation funded it for the first five years. They used to bring around 15 mid-career professionals from around the world to come to MIT.

Only one luncheon on a Monday on something of issues of development. That's it. The rest of the time, you do what you want to do. If you want to attend classes, you want to write, you do.

And I managed the program after Lloyd stepped down. I like the program. You know why? Because it brings practitioners to MIT. And I think the idea of somebody grappling with a problem and using the time to think about the problem, and we being able to tap into that process, I think it's the kind of learning that MIT really likes. Because MIT is actually about problem solving.

So problem solving you can start with theory, which is classical mode. Or you can tell me, let me see if you are struggling with a problem, what are you facing? And these are people who don't have advanced degrees. But they have grappled with the problem.

Like let's say they say, I tried to provide housing to the poor in the City X, or I tried to create transportation network, or I tried to do water. And I'd ask him, so what happened? Were you able to do it? And they might say, well, maybe I did this well, but I didn't do this well.

So these basis of knowledge that they bring in, I think it's fairly precious for us to have this. And now I have it also funded by the Hubert Humphrey Foundation, which is actually named after Hubert Humphrey, and is the Fulbright. It's Fulbright not for scholars, but Fulbright for practitioners.

These are wonderful people. I met with them last night, because the semester ended. All kinds of interesting things they're doing. And I think the challenge is, how do we take that kind of knowledge and then theorize about it? So it's theorizing from practice. And this is my challenge I'm working with.

A second challenge that I think I take as seriously now, is because it's paid for by Hubert Humphrey Foundation, which is American taxpayers-- it's given from Congress. These are people coming from abroad. After September 11th, there was a lot of concern about what is the image of the United States? What do we want these people to know about the US? They're here for a year.

I think it's a very important challenge, because the nation is in a very important stage. And so we are engaged in wars, et cetera. So I see this task of saying, come to MIT, and not really that you have all these courses, et cetera, that you can take. It will have one year for me to give you a glance of this country.

Imagine. This country that I'm still trying to understand myself, right? And for me to say, okay, I will help you understand, I find that a very intellectually exciting thing. What is it that I want them to know about the US before they leave?

And they're here for two semesters. So I've been trying all sorts of things. I run a seminar called Myths About America. For example, when I ask them, what do you know about the United States from outside, they'll tell me things like, oh, people here are so individualistic. They don't care about families.

The second one that really blew my mind was they're saying people are not religious. I mean, there are Americans that are really-- I mean, look at this election. So they have these ideas about the United States. Oh, you don't care about social things that much. It's everybody into making money.

So yes, but there are other things happening also. And so I see this as an incredible challenge of creating a one-year program which they can do their own work, whatever problem they're working on, and at the same time that they will return to their country with a nuanced view of the United States. And that's why I'm still doing it.

**INTERVIEWER:** When those people have returned to their countries, can you relay any anecdotes about hearing how they're doing after their training here that you said, we're making a real impact with this program?

**SANYAL:** I think that they do. And I have a lot, because it's been almost 50 years. '67 the program started. So they're in all sorts of high-level positions, minister-level positions. But the return, which is the issue that we are looking at in the last issue of the journal that comes out every year, you know what I didn't realize? That the return is very hard for them because they leave for a year and much is expected of them when they come back, because they have gone to MIT.

Socially, after being here, their family relationships change. Because they are here and they don't have servants, et cetera, they have to do their home, household, work. Many cases, the husband and wife when they come, they have told me that their relationships have changed as a result of the one year.

Children, if they bring them, the schoolings are very good here. And they get used to this very flexible American approach to education. And then they have to go back to this old schools, which are very rigid. So the reentry, which I'm thinking about how to make the re-entry less painful.

But in terms of the impact, they're doing very, very interesting work, on all five continents. We didn't get as many people from Africa. That's one thing I'm trying to do, because that's really where the help is needed.

At MIT, we could use more of a conversation on Africa. Really, within the development field, that's lagging. We don't have an African study center. We have a lot going on in China, a lot going on in India. But we need more in Africa.

**INTERVIEWER:** And that place has a special meaning in your heart, right? Because you spent time there.

**SANYAL:** Yes. That's where I really got my learning of education basically on urban planning, because I was based in Zambia. And it was a very interesting time, because it was before South Africa even became independent.

So I think that Africa is where they really need help. And I hope that we could think of doing something interesting for Africa. But my program definitely will.

**INTERVIEWER:** What did you learn during your time as head of the MIT faculty?

**SANYAL:** That could alone be material for a whole interview. I learned representing MIT faculty is a huge task, because the faculty are exceptional. Exceptional.

And it's an honor. It's an honor, and I still know when I go to places and people introduce me as, he was the chair of the MIT faculty. I mean, you should see what that does to this audience. A chair of the MIT faculty? I mean, MIT faculty is like incredible collection of people.

**INTERVIEWER:** What does it do to you when they introduce you like that and remind you that you've had that amazing role?

**SANYAL:** I'm reminded of the honor of being there. You know what is interesting for me is that the chair of the faculty's role is partly shaped by who is running the administration. Because the chair of the faculty actually do not have that much power.

I mean, you go to the academic counsel. You are the only one who is representing the faculty. In most cases, you have a faculty senate. So you are the interface between the faculty and the administration.

So if the administration is generous about faculty, are connected to the faculty, which most cases they are, because in MIT, administration used to be from the faculty who would come up. And still, fortunately, it is to some extent, though many universities are bringing administrators who are not connected to the university.

But I still found that time I was-- was a difficult period, because MIT had just hit the financial problem 2008, and I began in 2007. There were a lot of anxieties on both sides. The Star Simpson case had happened.

Susan and the new administration was trying to create a new set of guidelines for administering MIT. It was not Chuck Vest's time. Chuck Vest came out of a very different tradition.

So Susan was the first woman president, from outside MIT. Chuck was from outside MIT too. But she was trying her best. So she created a legal framework.

And I think when you try to create these new things, faculty are often skeptical, because they are used to a place. And they just think that that has worked before, so why do we need these new things? And I was in the interface of that. I had to deal-- I'm on both sides.

So it was not easy. It was actually-- after being a department head, I thought it would be nothing. It would be like a piece of cake. It wasn't.

It was a very political position, because I wanted to protect the faculty. It was my job. And at the same time, I had to work with the administration, which did not see the faculty always as being friendly. And they weren't.

It was not just one department. It was the whole Institute. So faculty in physics, faculty in math, et cetera, I did not know. I had not had dinner with them. I had friends in my department.

So we were trying to change the undergraduate education. We had created a committee. And that was my first wake-up call, when I realized after 10 years of work on this committee with all of these senior faculty members supporting it, it still didn't pass in the faculty meeting. At an MIT faculty meeting, you have to approve everything before it gets institutionalized. So when that happened, it really made me think, what is it about the process that has to be done differently to create this kind of large base of support?

And then the financial crisis comes. So the provost said, well, I'm going to create a set of committees to advise me. And you know, the thing is the faculty do not want to see you being used.

So I think what I learned is if you are the chair of the faculty, you should not think of a future position in the administration. If you are looking for a job in the administration, you really do not keep in your mind the best interests of the faculty. And the faculty will sooner or later see through that, that you are just making up your career. And I didn't. I'm glad.

And I think that I had the privilege of knowing a lot of faculty who are Noble Prize winners, meeting the Dalai Lama, meeting many, many people, top people, through the administration. And more and more-- the head of the World Bank, the president of the World Bank. Each one with some controversy, unfortunately.

It was not easy, including the Dalai Lama's visit, which many faculty opposed. Some faculty wanted. The head of the World Bank, many faculty liked. Some didn't like. So I was in the middle.

But when I met with them and I saw the way they think of this institution, it was stunning for me, the respect this institution has globally, and to what extent this respect is what we enjoy when we travel abroad. It is simply mind-boggling for me how this institution has created this incredible sense of reputation and what people associate with you when you say, this is a faculty member for MIT.

And I just hope we can preserve this. I don't know if we need to enhance it, because it's already-- but it has a sense of quality to it. And the work that we do should be up to that level of the reputation. It has to have that level of reputation and rigor and kind of creativity. That takes a long time to produce.

But truly, I'm truly humbled by this reputation of this place. And even-- you know, I just came back from India. And you should have seen when they introduced me in my university, that IIT. It's called IIT, Indian Institute of Technology.

They had a seminar in the afternoon, after they gave me the award. And the first seminar, the first question is, what will it take for IIT to become MIT? And I'm sitting there thinking, my goodness. What will it take for IIT to become MIT?

So there was a student in my panel. He is the head of the student group. He told me, first of all, let them give us better dorms. We don't want to share the dorm with four people. How many students are sharing dorms in that MIT? And so--

**INTERVIEWER:** It might take a little more than that. Good start.

**SANYAL:** At least you have to start somewhere. But again, really, don't you think the reputation of this place? I mean, how did it happen? And I think it happened more after the Second World War. And let me say a little bit, because I thought of that when you asked me in the interview.

The Second World War was a major turning point. MIT prior to the Second World War was known, but was not this reputation. And after the Second World War, with the Cold War, et cetera, I mean, we played a huge role in technological change and technological development.

But after the Second World War was only when the School of Humanities was created. Not Architecture. Architecture was before. But School of Humanities and Social Sciences was created because there were a lot of people who were horrified by what technology did in the war, particularly Germany.

And so understanding technology and its social embeddedness and its political meaning are very important intellectual questions. And I think our students, who are now at MIT and who will be graduating, if we can give them that understanding, some of the social basis of technology-- and not just the technology itself, but how and why it flourishes, what kind of institutions you need, what are its impact on people-- I think that is our challenge, to develop curriculum, to develop practice, to develop an awareness of research.

And the 150th celebration that we had was an interesting way to reflect back on that and to see what we learned, because we were created during the Civil War. And what a major historical moment for our institution that we created. And I think now we have come all the way out.

And I think that if we maintain the rigorousness of work, we have resources, I think. We need to hire absolutely the very best. And we need to bring the best students.

The concern I have is access. Financial access, because of the economy that's happening. And from middle class families, these brilliant kids that we used to get, these first-timers in their family to go to college, they cannot pay this level of tuition. They simply cannot pay. The president is now aware of it. It's becoming a presidential issue in the campaign.

So we need funds to say, don't worry about the money. You have shown by your work, that you are brilliant in this work. We want you to come.

We want to educate you by knowing about this technology and its social and its political impact. We want you to do research in one of the best labs. We want you to associate with one of the best faculty in the world. And I hope, I really hope, that every one that would watch this interview would have the time I have at MIT. It's been absolutely the best thing in my life. Without any hesitation I can say that.

**INTERVIEWER:** That's wonderful. I was going to ask you how MIT played into your intellectual journey. I don't think I need to ask you, because you just answered it.

**SANYAL:** Yes.

**INTERVIEWER:** And your legacy here, I mean, you mentioned the chapel earlier, your favorite building on campus, and how you attended several funerals and memorial services for colleagues who passed away. Being at those services, how did that make you reflect on the sense of legacy here and maybe what mark you want to leave on this institution ultimately?

**SANYAL:** The people whose memorial services I was able to participate in, in some cases I organized, were giants, intellectual giants, in the field. And when I had to reread their work, because I had to talk about it in the service and also sometimes we would have journals devoted to their work, each one of them broke new ground in their field. And it's a huge task to break new grounds. The kind of knowledge you need of a field to break new grounds, and the playfulness you need to say, that doesn't have to be the edge, it's how they came to it I have often thought.

And my journey has been different. I was not educated here in undergraduate. I went through a very different trajectory. And it makes me think as to why, what could I do to contribute? And I think I do have, in my own ways, tried to sort of question the broad field of development planning, the broad field of what does it mean to compare countries in terms of education, et cetera.

But ultimately, I think hard work, just staying at it, working with it, working with a good group of students who are going to be able to question, because the breaking of new grounds often come from students, because they're so fresh and they're so smart. And they always would ask you a question. Then you start thinking, that's interesting, right? So I think that the students are a huge resource, huge resource for us, for people who are trying to think of a new field.

But the institution also provides us the financial resource, the infrastructure, a good group of colleagues who would read your material or would come to a talk and would question you. That excitement, to create that level of vibrancy, intellectual vibrancy, I think with the resources we have is the challenge. It's a challenge. And I know, because I have been an administrator and I am now teaching, that I can see both sides.

But I'm very hopeful that we will continue to perform exceptionally well. We are just one of the strongest placed university in the world. And what a privilege. What a prestige and honor to be here.

**INTERVIEWER:** Using those resources that you have here at your fingertips, what is the next big challenge that you'd like to tackle, or the thing that's keeping you up at night now or getting you up out of bed every morning?

**SANYAL:** You know, because I work on cities in developing countries, my one thought I have now is how to manage this huge, huge megalopolis. There are millions, 18, 19, 20 million people, many, many, many poor people right? What kind of planning would it take?

And what the challenge is that we have figured out that planning of the old kind-- which often people associated with the central planning, like Soviet Union, everything is planned, land is allocated-- doesn't work. Maybe your intentions is good, but that's not how administration, that's not how organizations work. That's not what flexibility is.

So what will it take? What kind of institution will it take? What kind of policies will it take to give these poor people a better approach, better opportunity in life, that they could work, that their kids would go to school, that they would have a beautiful park to go to, that they have a cultural life?

I think that's-- the whole world, if we look at the number of people who need that, is huge. That has to be a concern that we would like-- that I would like to say I thought of that as an approach.

A second thing that I like very much is I like explanations that are counter-intuitive. I enjoy that immensely, because I know the standard explanation. And so things that surprise me with a completely new explanation, whether it comes in a fiction or it comes in a research, that is very exciting for

Me. So I do get bored very quickly with things that we already know. And so again, you have the same thing again. And I can't stand it. I just simply can't stand it. And I need new things, new explanations.

And Cambridge, not just MIT, but both Harvard, Cambridge, and the whole group of people that are here, they are very good in the way they are asking all sorts of new questions about the human mind, which I think is an incredible frontier of work, of brain. And that's one thing I would have studied if I was undergraduate again. I would have done cognitive sciences, I think, brain, the relationship between human beings and social structures, the relationship between social structures and institutions, I mean---

But the unit of analysis is the human being. And we are now, through work on the genome, the brain, I mean, look at how much more we could know about why we do what we do. So aesthetics-- which again, let me end with again, because that's something I'm still concerned about, I still value a lot.

It will be interesting to know, when we study the brain, what aesthetics does to the brain. We know a little bit about what music does, because music is a series of sounds. But what happens when you see a beautiful sunset, or a beautiful river?

And I think that what has happened to me at MIT is those questions that I loved to deal with when I was young, they're coming back to me through a different route now, because of the work on science and technology. But I want to be able to blend, to make some way of explaining aesthetics in a more scientific way.

**INTERVIEWER:** So if you weren't in your field now, would you be a cognitive scientist? What job do you think you'd be pursuing if you weren't--

**SANYAL:** I would like to study the brain. I think that excites me immensely as to what people are finding out and what we can do about it, and how to be able to influence it. Now, the brain is not all hard wiring. And in a way, being in academia, I was always concerned about the brain, figure out how people think.

But I'm now realizing that thinking has different elements to it. There is a hard wire part to it that we didn't understand as well before. We are just beginning to understand that. So if we can know that and we can also know sort of learning environments and learning methods, how to bring the two, then we have somebody who should really be in the business of teaching, of teaching helping people to learn.

But learning is a central element of being in academia. We are in the business of learning. And we should know what that is.

And we are just beginning to learn about learning, just beginning to learn how people learn, why some people don't learn as fast, what affects learning. So I would say after urban planning, that's my second very precious thing to follow.

**INTERVIEWER:** Your second career, if there were to be one.

**SANYAL:** Yes.

**INTERVIEWER:** And you've obviously-- you're very grateful for your path through MIT from the moment you got here. How would you say the institution is doing in terms of welcoming foreign-born students and faculty into the fabric of the culture here today?

**SANYAL:** I think they've done quite well. I mean, if we look at the Institute's faculty now, almost 30 percent are foreign-born faculty. And I think the student's body, also international student's body also, for the graduate students, is almost 40 percent.

Undergraduates, we have a cap. We put a cap to 10 percent, because we also fund them most cases. So we have limited funds for that.

But MIT, I think Chuck Vest was the one who really explained it to me well. MIT owes a lot to international minds. But it's true that MIT gave them the opportunity, but they also give back in terms of research, in terms of vibrancy.

I think that connection has been very important for MIT. The world came to MIT. And I wrote a piece once when I was the chair of the faculty, because what surprised me a bit was MIT was making an effort to go abroad. So we are creating a campus in Singapore, in Abu Dhabi, in Russia now. And that's not bad.

And these are also very lucrative things. And when the Institute is financially in trouble, you need money. And these are very well-endowed efforts. But I was very struck that instead of the world coming to us, that we were beginning to go to the world selectively. And I wrote in my piece that we have had students come to MIT from abroad since 1873.

I wanted to see a center at MIT that, a building that would be sort of a global center, that we could have languages being taught. One floor could be languages. One could be research on developing countries, all these technological things we are producing. One could be an international cafe that we have--- I mean, we have the resources.

There was a lot of support for it when I presented it to the academic counsel. But then people say, well, we have other things to do right now. So I think that MIT's engagement with the world, what form would it take, what institutional form will it take, is an issue to be thought through more.

I think we cannot afford to just go in places that are giving us money. I don't think it will be good for our reputation in the long run. The respect that we have, if we start squandering that respect by going to places that are just giving us money but not really good research is coming out of that, it will hurt. So the work we are doing in Abu Dhabi or in other places, even in Singapore we had created a new center for design, I think we should watch very carefully what is the research, and is the research really cutting-edge research, you know?

But I see the administration very concerned about it. MIT created two ad hoc committees to look into this, our relationship in the world and what we should be teaching our students about the world. I was in both committees. And not that we came up with very firm answers, but it told me that a good group of people are worrying about it. But we still don't have a concrete, fixed answer, I think, as yet.

**INTERVIEWER:** So for MIT's next 150 years, what are the few issues that you would like to see the institution really, really set its sights on? Is it access? Is it this more global perspective? Or is there another topic that you think has yet to be researched?

**SANYAL:** Yes. I think the idea of excellence and access, some people have portrayed it as a trade-off. I think we have to do both. And I think there is a way to do both and have the access of average people, brilliant but average, who cannot afford to pay this very high tuition at the same time the excellence of the research. We cannot compromise on excellence. Our reputation is excellence.

But I think that as the world changes, I think the political economy is changing. And so we need to keep that access of people. We have been pretty good. I have to say we have been pretty good.

And as I told you, the statistics, if we look at even now how many students come from these kinds of families--- I mean, it's admirable--- and then from obscure places, small towns that I have never even heard of. And there this kid is full of energy, talking, saying things in class. I think we should keep that.

And yes, the world will come. And we can go to the world and do joint research projects. I think research, the way scientific research is going now, it's become very expensive.

The US does not have monopoly over those research centers anymore. A lot of good research centers are in Europe, because Europeans have invested a lot. The American government has not invested as much as European governments, because most of cases, MIT has been private.

And I think that a lot of research, I think, in the future will be done collaboratively. And so the challenge is, I think, when we get involved in this research, how are we going to divide the intellectual property. Because intellectual property rights is a very central question.

And I think we don't exactly know the rules. The rules are changing because the situation is changing. But if you would think of cooperative research, we also have to think of new rules of who will get credit for what, what will be the investment. And those kinds of things will take us, as scientists, into a different domain of conversation.

**INTERVIEWER:** How much do you see MIT being a leader in that evolution? It seems like the perfect place to help make those rules.

**SANYAL:** I think MIT is playing a role. And our vice president of research, Claude Canizares, is very aware of it. But so are other places. If we look at patents, et cetera, Europeans are also quite aware, because they are producing good stuff.

Yesterday-- I don't know if you heard--- it was Scotland that produced the first-- you know, they had first done the mimicking the Dolly, sheep Dolly. They invented something else for doing work. And I thought, that's very interesting it's coming from Scotland. And so they're also going to ask for their share of the intellectual property.

So I think we need a new round of conversation. We need a new round of conversation. And this will ultimately link us to the larger issue of where the United States is vis-a-vis the rest of the world.

So MIT is an American institution. It is true it's a global, but it is still United States, right? That's where it is based. And so I think our president understands that. But you need new presidents, new provosts, in the future who will understand the kind of importance of those issues.

It's no more just inventing in your own lab. We are working in a very different world. And we have to work with other people. And at the same time, we need to protect our share of the things that we put in, so that we can run this place well. But it's a geopolitical question.

**INTERVIEWER:** And that MIT has a unique position in leading those discussions.

**SANYAL:** A lot. You know why? Because people trust MIT. This goes to the issue of this reputation. There is something about these engineers and scientists that they think, these people are really after truth. These are not people who are fabricating things.

And retaining this sense of trust in a global form is an immense responsibility for us. And I think you need a set of faculty and administration who can really be trusted at the global level. People say, yes, if this person is saying this, I trust it.

So imagine the level of responsibility that we are asked to shoulder. And I think that that's why hiring the best people and bringing the best students, not just based intellectually, but morally, who if they say something, they stick to it. They say what is the real truth. And I think it's a big, big responsibility in a world where there is a huge amount of distrust, huge amount of misunderstanding, to have a voice that you say, oh, a professor of MIT's saying that, that must be true.

**INTERVIEWER:** Thank you very much, professor.

**SANYAL:** Thank you so much.

**INTERVIEWER:** It's been a pleasure.

**SANYAL:** It's been my pleasure.