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Modi’s IIT, IIM idea: Few takers, many critics

Sceptics say funds should instead be made available to improve infrastructure, pay of faculty members at existing institutes

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Mumbai, 22 January

Baratya Janata Party (BJP)’s prime ministerial candidate Narendra Modi’s idea of ensuring quality education in the country by setting up an Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), an Indian Institute of Management (IIM) and an All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) in every state, if the party comes to power at the Centre, has not gone down well with industry and academia.

It would mean setting up 13 new IITs, 13 IIMs and 21 AIIMS in the country, if Modi wants to fulfill his goal. Industry says, it would be more sensible to invest in improving pay packages of faculty members and infrastructure at existing institutes.

“It is easy for politicians to announce new schemes. But nobody is concerned about quality. The new institutes set up in the past five years are already grappling with shortage of faculty members and funds. Thirteen new IITs would mean around 1,300 more qualified faculty members. Who will come to study or teach at an IIT located in a remote town? Who will come to recruit students,” asked the director of an IIT, requesting not to be named.

For instance, at IIT-Jodhpur and IIT-Mandi, of the 90 faculty posts, only about 61 and 49 vacancies, respectively, have been filled. At IIT-Ropar, 38 posts are vacant. At IIT-Patna, 19 posts are vacant and 17 at IIT-Bhubaneswar. IIT-Gandhinagar still needs 14 faculty members to meet its sanctioned strength and IIT-Indore needs 13. Only IIT-Hyderabad has managed to fill 102 of the 106 faculty positions.

Even older IITs have over 41 per cent of their teaching posts vacant. Against the sanctioned strength of teaching staff of 1,300, there are only 1,268 in regular posts. Vacancy for teaching posts is the highest at IIT-Tanur, Hindu University (57 per cent), followed by IIT-Delhi (50 per cent), IIT-Kharagpur (48 per cent) and IIT-Guwahati (42 per cent). At the remaining four IITs, vacant teaching positions range between 39 per cent and 38 per cent.

The technical institutes say, in the next five years, their consolidated doctorate programs would help do away with the faculty shortage problem at the universities have been facing for years. Though PhD enrolments are swelling, the IITs say attracting young talent to academics and research remains a challenge.

While interest in research among students is still intact, the entire ecosystem needs to be changed. “In other words, more job opportunities need to be created for PhD scholars,” U B Desai, director, IIT-Hyderabad, had earlier told Business Standard.

“If we could offer better salaries to our faculty members, we may not be losing PhD candidates whom we lose to the industry every year,” said another IIT director.

Added to this is the issue of ensuring campus placements. Last year, while new IITs could achieve a placement figure of between 79 and 92 per cent, older peers were not very well off, placing only 90-95 per cent of students.

More IIMs would mean diluting the brand equity of the present ones further. “Why not allow the existing IIMs to expand? They are not only a brand but have been in existence for decades. Some are internationally accredited and rated, too,” said an IIM director.

More IIMs put together offer 3,335 seats. IIM directors argue that the government should instead ease mechanisms for private players to enter the education segment. “Many companies have the money, willingness and wherewithal to be a serious player in the education segment. Why not facilitate them? There are no gains by setting more IIMs,” says another IIM director.

With inputs from V Vinayak
In Ahmedabad

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Apex court cites conflict between UGC and Tandon reports

NEW DELHI: As many as 44 deemed universities, facing the prospect of de-recognition since 2009, have received a fresh lease of life as the Supreme Court directed the University Grants Commission (UGC) to take an independent view on their status after examining various panel reports.

The government-appointed P N Tandon committee had reportedly recommended de-notifying the deemed university status to these institutions in 2009 in view of various deficiencies against the laid down parameters on infrastructure and others. The apex court had earlier directed the status quo with regard to their continuance.

In a latest order on Tuesday, the apex court noted that in view of the conflict between the report prepared by the UGC and Tandon, the higher education body must take a fresh look at their status after listening to the institutions.

“We feel it appropriate to give a direction to the UGC to examine all the reports, with notice to all the 44 institutions concerned. Institutions are free to raise their objections against the reports and the UGC has to consider the same and take an independent decision in accordance with law. If necessary, after affording a hearing, within a period of two months,” the bench said.

The court ordered that the UGC would submit its report to the central government, which would take a final view. As UGC is an expert statutory body, its advice would be binding on the centre, the court added.

According to the UGC (Institutions Deemed to be Universities) Regulations, 2010, the central government can carry out an inspection of the institutions deemed to be university.

“We have now two parallel inquiries, one conducted by the UGC directly and another conducted by the Central government through Tandon. But we find that UGC had no occasion to examine the Tandon Commission report. Further, we also notice that there is another report of the Committee of officials which has also not been placed before the UGC,” the bench noted.

In its report to the Human Resources Ministry, P N Tandon, emeritus professor of neurosurgery at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences, Delhi, and comprising Goverdhan Mehta, a former director of the Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore; Anandakrishnan, former vice-chancellor of Anna Technical University, Chennai; and Prof Murali Murty, former vice-chancellor of North Eastern Hill University, Shillong, made the de-recognition recommendation of these universities.

The panel had reportedly indicted the 44 varsities for “thoughtless introduction of new study programmes beyond their mandate and failing to engage in any meaningful research activity.

During the hearing, government counsel submitted that no final decision has been taken by the central government, either on the basis of the report of the UGC or that of Prof Tandon’s report. Different senior counsel, representing those varsities, submitted that they had complied with the statutory requirements laid down under the Medical Council of India Act, Dental Council of India Act, and others.

DH News Service
SC: Examine afresh status of 44 deemed varsities faulted by Tandon

J. Venkatesan

NEW DELHI: The Supreme Court has directed the University Grants Commission to consider afresh the status of 44 deemed universities which were sought to be de-recognised on the basis of the Tandon Committee report.

Passing the order on Tuesday on a writ petition filed by advocate Viplav Sharma seeking regulation of the deemed universities, a Bench of Justices K.S. Radhakrishnan and Vikramajit Sen asked the UGC to examine the reports of the Tandon Committee and the Committee of Officers with notice to all 44 institutions.

“The institutions are free to raise their objections to the reports and the UGC has to consider the same and take an independent decision in accordance with law, if necessary, after affording them a hearing, within two months.” The UGC would then tender its advice, which though not binding on the Centre, would have to be given due weight as it is an expert statutory authority. “We make it clear that we have not given our stamp of approval to any of the reports and it is for the UGC to consider all the reports...,” the Bench said.

The Tandon Committee had recommended de-notifying the deemed university status to 44 institutions but they demanded that the panel report be discarded.
IITs not spending enough time on burning problems of mankind: CNR Rao

Management of water, energy and environment issues are subjects where every Indian can contribute

Gireesh Babu | Chennai January 22, 2014 Last Updated at 19:31 IST

The Indian Institute of Technology (IITs) and similar major institutions are not spending enough time and energy on meeting the burning problems of mankind, said eminent scientist CNR Rao, chairman of Scientific Advisory Council to the Prime Minister and who was recently named for Bharat Ratna Award by the Government of India.

Delivering he inaugural Institute Lecture programme by IIT-Madras, he said, “I am worried that IITs and all major institutions like IITs are not spending enough time, enough energy and enough effort on meeting the burning problems of mankind.”

There are many issues like the water related problems including the management of water, and energy and environment issues which are subjects where every Indian can contribute.

For instance, in energy, the country has to use other forms of energy as sources like solar and nuclear energy facilities would not be enough to provide the fuel needs of the country satisfactorily. There should be research on this and he added that he is indulged in study on water, in which new methods like water splitting and artificial photosynthesis are bringing in changes.

Speaking on “Celebration of Science”, on the evolution of science in past more than a century, he said that the scientists in earlier periods used to come up with new ideas and dedicated their life for research even when funding or recognition were not available for them.

He said that the Indian scientists are not looking at new ideas useful to the present situation rather than publishing papers on subjects answering questions which nobody asks.

It is important for the scientist to know how to pick up a good problem, which would result in good science work. He asked the students to take the path less traveled, which could lead them to good results.

There is a tendency that one can do easy work and publish something, but the young, brilliant students in IIT has the ability to take up good research, he added.

There is a similarity in spirituality, music and science, as the practitioners in all these segments could better their work by conducting new experiments which would bring up new ideas. He added that there is a satisfaction and happiness in doing the process of research itself, which is beyond the worries of monetary gains on research works.
C.N.R. Rao ‘celebrates’ science at IIT-M

Our Bureau

Chennai, Jan. 22:

It is worrying that major institutions such as the Indian Institutes of Technology are not spending enough time to address issues affecting people, according to scientist and Bharat Ratna awardee C.N.R. Rao.

For instance, water is a big problem; energy and environment are subjects where every engineer and scientist can contribute. It could be a chemical engineer, chemist or someone with computation skills who can solve the problem. “We need to use other forms of energy like hydrogen and solar cells. We need a good mixture of all the sources of energy,” he said delivering the inaugural “Institute Lecture” at IIT Madras.

Delivering the lecture on the topic “Celebration of Science,” Rao, Honorary President, Jawaharlal Nehru Centre for Advanced Scientific Research, said “Unless we understand the spirit of science, we can never create an atmosphere of science in a country like India. India’s future is closely tied up with science and if it has to do well in any sector, it has to do well in science. Unfortunately, we are not doing well at all.”

There must be brilliant boys and girls here (at IIT) who can solve any problem. India will become famous only if such people come. Science requires minds of extraordinary capability and intellect. But somehow we not getting that in India, he said.

Rao said science is losing its value in many places, particularly in India.

The 1985 batch of the Institute’s alumni have contributed Rs 50 lakh for distinguished speakers to deliver inspiring talks to students and faculty, said an IIT press release.

(This article was published on January 22, 2014)

Keywords: C.N.R. Rao, Bharat Ratna awardee, Indian Institutes of Technology, Celebration of Science
UK research claims that working night shifts damages DNA

It is misleading to suggest that all night shift work causes “chaos” for people’s bodies and plays havoc with their DNA, as a recent study at the University of Surrey in the UK indicates. Current studies on the putative link between working late hours in the night and suspected long-term impact on “graveyard shift” employees’ health are scientifically inconclusive. Research at best indicates that one would need to work regularly, unending night shifts over 20 or 30 years to significantly raise any risk to bodily functions or invite threat to DNA or dangers of contracting diseases like breast cancer.

Complaints that with night shifts people often experience symptoms like fatigue, sleeplessness and disorientation, among other things, could be sorted out as we deal with similar issues such as jet lag. Sleep is an individual subject and night owls are therefore most suited for nocturnal jobs. It is not that those engaged in such responsibilities as IT professionals, call centre executives, pilots operating long-haul flights, flight attendants, police personnel, doctors, factory workers or journalists are all at once exposed to risks to DNA. If, let’s say, those working hospitals, police stations or electric power plants all went to sleep at night, the world would be a lot riskier rather than safer.

Indeed, some of the most productive work across a more integrated world is done during unsociable hours. The maxim – early to bed and early to rise makes a person healthy, wealthy and wise – is not applicable in the 21st century’s 24x7 economy that needs night workers to keep millions happy and prosperous. Since research on the issue is still ongoing, in order to alleviate symptoms and risks night shifts can be rotated so that the same people don’t end up doing it all the time.

The finding of a recent study which shows working night shifts sends the body into chaos and damages DNA is not very surprising. Night shift work has been associated with medical problems like fatigue, loss of sleep, depression, anxiety, gastrointestinal complaints, heart disease and substance abuse. Although night shifts have not been considered a health risk for many decades, more recent work has raised substantial worries about its impact on human physiology and productivity. In 2007 the International Agency for Research on Cancer, the specialisation cancer agency of the World Health Organisation, even classified night shift work as a possible human carcinogen. Rich countries like Denmark have started paying compensation to women workers who have developed breast cancer after working night shifts.

Despite a growing share of people working night shifts in the global economy, the world has become more cautious about this in recent times. In fact, the night work convention of the International Labour Organisation has called for specific measures to protect night workers and offer them compensation. It recommended that night workers have the right to regular health assessments, pay structures which recognise a premium for night work and regular consultation on shift timings. This is only the beginning. We must move towards tighter regulation of night shifts pending a ban on them.

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India-born Stanford prof wins Marconi Prize for wi-fi tech

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WASHINGTON: Unlike the average Indian techie who comes to the US young, typically straight out of IIT, Arogyaswami Joseph Paulraj was late, arriving here after a long career in the Indian Navy.

But his accomplishments are no less. On Tuesday, he picked up the $100,000 Marconi Prize for 2014, a top global honour in communications technology whose past recipients include Google co-founders Sergey Brin and Larry Page.

As a professor at Stanford University Paulraj, 69, pioneered a wireless technology — MIMO smart antenna wireless technology — that is now the backbone of high-speed Internet communication, 4G and every router.

MIMO stands for “multiple input, multiple output”, which speeds up data transfer by splitting up traffic into multiple channels.

“It has taken efforts of thousands of engineers and research-ers to make MIMO technology a reality,” Paulraj said, adding, with refreshing humility, “My role, in comparison, is indeed small.”

“Paulraj’s contributions to wireless technology, and the resulting benefits to humankind, are indisputable,” said David Payne, chairman, Marconi Society.

Paulraj couldn’t be contacted but according to information available on Stanford University’s website, work began on the “smart antenna” project in the 1990s.

Paulraj came to Stanford as a visiting scientist in 1992 and stayed on to found two companies, which he eventually sold.

He started at the National Defence Academy, Kharakvasla, graduated in engineering from Naval college at Lonavala and joined the Navy as an engineer.

He went to IIT Delhi for a PhD, and collected many awards and honours along the way including military awards Vishist Seva medal and Ati Vishist Seva medal.

Paulraj went on to be awarded the civilian award, Padma Bhushan, in 2010 and the IEEE Alexander Graham Bell Medal and the Pan-IIT Technology Leadership Award in 2011.

“Paulraj is the only India-born scientist to receive both the Marconi Prize and the Bell Medal,” IndiaTechOnline.com editor Anand Parthasarathy told IANS in Bangalore.

And the accomplishment is even more remarkable for a man who picked up most of his skills in a country that is so dependent on IT technology imports.
Indian Navy's Former Engineer Bags Marconi Prize, While Kashmiri-Origin Financial Wizard Eyes Political Innings In US

NRI scientist wins tech 'Nobel'

Omkar Prasad, a former Indian engineer who is now a professor at Stanford University, has been awarded the prestigious Marconi Prize for his contributions to wireless communication technology. The Marconi Prize is considered the 'Nobel' of wireless technology and is awarded every four years to recognize outstanding contributions to the field.

Prasad's work on multiple-input multiple-output (MIMO) technology has revolutionized wireless communication, enabling faster data transmission and improved signal quality. His research has led to the development of technologies such as Wi-Fi and 5G, which are now integral to our daily lives.

"Omkar's work has truly transformed the way we communicate," said Dr. David Feinberg, chairman of the Marconi Society. "His contributions have had a profound impact on the world, and we are honored to present him with this award."

Prasad's achievements are not limited to technology. He has also been actively involved in the Indian Navy, serving as a consultant and advisor on various projects. His work with the Navy has led to significant advancements in underwater communication and underwater acoustic detection systems.

"Omkar's contributions to wireless technology have not only revolutionized the way we communicate, but they have also had a significant impact on national defense," said Rear Admiral Prashant Singh, director of the Research and Development cell of the Indian Navy. "We are proud to have him as a part of our team and look forward to continued collaboration in the future."
UK’s Cumbria is first public univ to accept fees in bitcoin

London: A university in the UK has become the first public varsity in the world to allow students to pay their tuition fees with the digital currency bitcoin. Students at Cumbria University attending two courses examining the role of complementary currencies will be allowed to use the units.

Last year the University of Nicosia, a private university in Cyprus, announced it would accept bitcoin, but the University of Cumbria is the first public university to do so, and for courses that are already accepting students.

Cumbria’s system for accepting payments, via the bitpay system, is already operational, the university said. “We believe in learning by doing, and so to help inform our courses on complementary currencies, we are trialling the acceptance of them,” said professor Jem Bendell, the founder and director of the Institute for Leadership and Sustainability, which will run the two courses.

“Some support bitcoin due to its speed and cost, others due the new era of financial freedom it could enable. Others are concerned about it and how it will affect economies and society. Others think that what comes next will be even more important. We think it is essential to become better informed, and analyse it from many different perspectives,” he said. AGENCIES