

Will IITs remain islands of excellence?

At a recent event organized at the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) in Chennai, Tata Steel managing director B. Muthuraman expressed disenchantment with its graduates. 'We are not likely to recruit them any longer,' he said, adding his company preferred students from other colleges, who, though less endowed, were more amenable to company training. IIT guys tend to think too much of themselves.

Reality is that brand IIT thrives on its past reputation.

The Tata Steel chief, recalling his recent interaction with some final-year students of IIT Chennai, observed they could not even name the authors of the subject books they were supposed to have studied. He later found out that the students were able to clear the tests without having to read books. He was in for further shock on discovering that their teachers were no more knowledgeable about the subjects they were supposed to teach.

His observations came as a deflating revelation to the IIT alumni that had come for the Ruby Union from all around the world. Muthuraman and the Tata Steel were not alone in their perception of today's IIT graduates. Some other companies are equally disinterested in recruiting from IITs. This should prove writing on the wall for IIT educationists and policy-makers at the ministry.

A reason for this sorry state is in the method students adopt to get admitted to IITs. On the one hand IIT admissions have been praised for being free from corruption and undue interference. No one, however well connected, can gain entry unless he/she manages to get a high enough rank in the joint entrance examination (JEE).

Infosys mentor N.R. Narayana Murthy told a TV show host in the US that his son had to consider offers from Harvard, Wharton etc. as he couldn't get into IIT. This one statement made much mileage for IITs reputation the world over. Surveys by foreign universities ranked IITs quite high. And yet a section of corporate India is sceptical of IIT graduates.

Why? Because most of them resort to coaching shops to gain entry into IIT. An IIT review committee report in 2004 had questioned the calibre of students selected on the basis of an extremely tough entrance examination conducted by IIT joint Entrance Examination (JEE).

Needlessly, tough standards set by the examining board drive students to coaching shops, to secure high ranks in JEE and, once in IIT, these students tend to ignore the rigors of higher education. It is reckoned 95 percent of the candidates seeking admission into IITs go through coaching shops, paying high fees.

The amount of money spent by IIT aspirants attending the coaching factories is about Rs.20 billion (around \$450 million) per year - four times the government's annual budgetary allocation for the IITs. About 160,000 students take JEEs and 3,500 are admitted to the seven IITs.

The distorted impact of assembly line coaching taken by candidates is indicated by the percentage of students admitted to IITs from different states in southern India. During a recent year under review, 979 candidates from the south zone secured admission. Of them, 769 were from Andhra Pradesh, while Tamil Nadu accounted for 94 successful candidates, Karnataka, 84, and Kerala, for

no more than 32 candidates.

Andhra Pradesh may well be producing bright IIT entrants, but those from the other three states can't be that poor. Mushrooming of IIT tutorials and coaching factories in [Hyderabad](#) may have much to do with the JEE results. In the north zone, Rajasthan is an unlikely state that is reported to have been doing well sending a high proportion of students to IITs like Andhra Pradesh. Kota in Rajasthan has a reputation for offering pressure-cooker coaching for IIT hopefuls.

In the beginning, IITs used to give admission to high-ranking students from each state. When an admission test was first introduced there were no coaching classes. However, during the past 21 years, coaching for IIT admission has become the norm. Candidates who are into IIT coaching right from their final schooling years have put IIT tuition before their studies. The all-important entrance tests system has resulted in producing IIT aspirants with a one-track mindset. By the time they start studies at IITs, they feel burnt out. But it doesn't show up, as failure rate in IITs is minimal. Getting admission into IITs is tough, but not passing out of them.

These students are good at the technique of answering questions, without grasping the underlying concepts. IIT professors have written many papers criticizing the present competitive testing procedure. Its review committee has suggested a research panel to come up with an alternative system. But there does not appear to be enough momentum to bring about the much-needed changes.

Instead of giving ranks purely on the basis of JEE performance, IITs can adapt multiple criteria, giving a weighted score. Some of the criteria are JEE test scores, some marks for showing leadership qualities, marks for demonstrating social concern and talents in sports, music, arts, etc.

It is true that some of these cannot be as objective as JEE test scores. But by adopting more representative admission standards - though less objective - IITs may be able to get students with potential for creativity and research. This may reduce the importance of coaching factories.

(Bhamy V. Shenoy is an alumnus of IIT Madras and an international energy expert. He can be reached at bhamysuman@hotmail.com)

Bhamy V. Shenoy (© IANS / India eNews)