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New Dawn in India Rise of an IIT

IIT Gandhinagar and its Spirited Leader

Many of the "older" IITs are turning the Indian sky golden, very much like the sky bathed by a shining bright sun at noon on the Indian soil. But there are many "new suns" rising, quite abruptly and rapidly, on the Indian continent. These are the seven new IITs sanctioned by the Indian Government, which in very rapid succession and in a short time span, are taking shape in different corners of India.

One such corner of India is Gandhinagar, near the ancient city of Ahmedabad (now called Amdavad) in the State of Gujarat. The new IIT Gandhinagar (IITGN) is taking place on a makeshift region on the outskirts of Ahmedabad in a makeshift campus of a regional engineering college. But there is nothing makeshift about the intensity and the pace with which it is being formed and nurtured by its energetic and ebullient Director, Professor Sudhir Jain. Professor Jain is a seasoned veteran of IIT Kanpur (IITK), which itself is celebrating its Golden Jubilee this year. So, it is quite a coincidence that the Director of the new IIT is an alumnus of a Golden IIT. Dr. Jain, a Professor of Civil Engineering and an expert on earthquake engineering, served for many years as the Dean of Alumni and in other leadership capacity where he was well known for his enthusiasm for the IITK, its accomplishments, and its future and how he parlayed

it into winning the hearts of the IITK alumni, and raising significant alumni contributions.

Now, Dr. Jain has brought his team to Gandhinagar and has gone about energetically and systematically building the new IIT from scratch. That would certainly be a daunting proposition, but that challenge is mitigated by the guidance of IIT Bombay (IITB) which is the guardian of the new IIT. The Director of IITB, previously led by Director Dr. Ashok

Misra and now Dr. Devang Khakhar, and its faculty provide the vision, the teaching and other academic resources, and the day to day operational guidance to the new IIT. Professors Urjit Yajnik and N. Ramakrishnan, are such pioneering faculty helping launch the academic programs.

So, now within two years there are around 150 students, 30 or so faculty, an administrative staff and a vibrant little campus, bustling with classrooms and





laboratories and makeshift hostels in the nearby apartments. The campus, for now, is shared with a local engineering college, but even if it is a temporary arrangement, there is brand new construction, with a very well laid out plan of laboratories, classrooms and offices, grounds for the students to play or do other extra curricular activities; all these amenities make for a pretty little campus. Passing through the classroom where the young students intensely focus on the lecture by one of the seasoned IITB Professors, such as Yajnik and Ramakrishnan on loan to IITGN, or a laboratory where dozens of students are intensely doing experiments using the state of the art Physics lab equipment, it becomes evident that there is nothing unusual or makeshift about what is going on – not only inside the building but inside the minds of the students, faculty and the Director.

What is going on inside the mind of the new Director is to make IITGN one of the best, and do so in a hurry. Jain and his staff are hard at work firming up the plans for the new campus and acquiring considerable resources. Equally rapidly he has started to grow the faculty, which is no mean task, given the significant shortage of faculty at all IITs. He has already hired more than 30 Professors,

who assisted by the faculty from IITB, are now offering many core courses to the first and second year students. There are only three engineering specialties, Computer Science, Electrical, and Mechanical, perhaps because of the large interest in these fields among the students and employers or perhaps because of the facilities and teaching resources available. No matter, the teachers are teaching, students are learning, the labs are humming and the first batch of graduates are set to out in two years.

The most palpable impression about the new IIT and its leader, Director Jain, is the unbridled enthusiasm and optimism! Director Jain is intensely motivated and fired up to make the most of the opportunity, almost unlimited resources and growth potential available to him. He is most enthusiastic about the students, or “bacchas” (young kids) as he calls them, who have joined IIT Gandhinagar. He is full of pride in these kids who, he feels, are as smart and as energetic as at any IIT. As examples he cites the considerable leadership and ingenuity the students have exhibited in creating the social groups, the sporting events, and in starting many technical and volunteering activities. He gushes with pride about how these bacchas are going about engendering the

IITGN spirit, exemplified by the intense recruiting drive they initiated once the Joint Entrance Exam (JEE) results was announced, to recruit top JEE students. Jain is confident that even though IITGN is new, it is attracting some the most motivated and inspired students. The same can be said about the faculty, even though many are young and with newly minted Ph.D.s from many other IITs. A promising element of Jain’s recruiting drive is the faculty in humanities. Jain feels that humanities are as important as the technical fields, and believes that he can recruit the very best faculty and help make IITGN a center of excellence. To guide the development of the new IIT, Jain has recruited an advisory board and is reaching out to the alumni from Kanpur and elsewhere that he has known over the years. He has also forged international collaborations with Universities such as the Johns Hopkins University and Cal Tech and organizations such as the Underwriter’s Laboratory in the USA, for collaborative opportunities and for internships for the students.

The pace of growth at IITGN is as frenetic as a speeding Tata Nano, which ironically is going to be manufactured not too far away. Both are small now but share the vision of growing rapidly in India and casting a worldwide reputation. This growth and eminence of the new IIT is certain to happen, as it is clear that the Indian Government is investing hundreds of Crores of Rupees. The Government of State of Gujarat is also very progressive, very entrepreneurial and is backing the new IIT fully with the promises of new buildings that it is allocated at the temporary campus while it goes about setting aside significant space for its permanent home. There are plans nearby for building research institutes as well as an industrial park. It would not be surprising if bustling metropolis cities, such as Ahmedabad and Gandhinagar will soon turn into “technopolis” cities. That transition will certainly be facilitated by the new sun, IITGN, rising on Gujarat State’s horizon, and let us not forget, its pioneering Director and faculty and the first generation of young IITians who will graduate in two short years!