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HT Spotlight: IISER putting Mohali on India's knowledge map

Mini India in Punjab: Barely 10 years old, the sprawling IISER has succeeded in popularising science in the region besides putting Mohali firmly on the knowledge map of India

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Shub Karman Dhaliwal
Hindustan Times, Mohali





“There has been a sea change in the last 10 years,” says Sathyamurthy, adding “now IISER is a brand in itself.”(Ravi Kumar/HT)

“It’s IISER, not Eisher.” Prof N Sathyamurthy, director of the Indian Institute of Science Education and Research (IISER), recounts the hard time he had getting a hotel receptionist to correctly spell IISER on the bill. But that was way back in 2007. Ten years on, IISER is a well known and highly regarded institute of Mohali.

“There has been a sea change in the last 10 years,” says Sathyamurthy, adding “now IISER is a brand in itself.”

There is an interesting story behind the institute’s arrival in Mohali. Insiders say it was largely due to Dr Kesar Singh, a long-time friend of then Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh, who wrote a letter to him in 2004 asking him to set up IISER in Punjab. Honouring his friend’s request, Singh allocated IISER to Punjab on the condition that it be set up in Mohali because of air connectivity.

Brilliant minds

With an imposing campus spread over 125 acres, IISER is now booming with 1,400 students, 40% of whom are girls, in various streams of basic sciences. From a small beginning of 25 students, it has virtually become a “mini India” where one can meet brilliant minds from Kerala, West Bengal, Rajasthan, northeast, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. And they are not ordinary brains. Dean, academics, Ramandeep Singh Johal said there is no place for mediocrity in IISER. It is meant only for brilliant minds with scientific temperament and patience. With a five-year concerted Bachelor and Masters in Science (BS-MS) dual degree programme in physics, chemistry, mathematics and biology besides PhD programmes in all the four subjects, this institute is now rated among the finest science institutes of the country.

Planned by the Lucknow-based architect DS Bhui, the campus is dotted with lush green spaces designed to provide a conducive surrounding for research. Speaking on the evolution

of the campus over the last 10 years, Anand K Bachhawat, former dean, faculty and R&D, who joined IISER Mohali in its maiden year, says it has made an impact on both the national and international arena with many path-breaking research findings. “The faculty has also achieved significant honors and recognition,” he said. Another professor said IISER has contributed a lot to turning Mohali into a hub of academic activity. “Mohali is now popular as a knowledge city across the country. Its economy too has received a boost,” he said.

The director, Prof Sathyamurthy, says the presence of IISER in Mohali will promote the pursuit of science in the region. “Most of our students come from Kerala. We also get a large number from Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and West Bengal. The number of students from Punjab and North East is not that big but it is increasing over the years.”

“Five years ago, when I came to this institute, there was hardly anyone from Punjab,” said Harleen Kaur, who hails from Ludhiana and is in her fifth year of the BS-cum-MS integrated course. She added, “Over the years, people have become more aware about the institute and the quality of education it imparts. Earlier, people in Punjab used to prefer engineering science as compared to basic sciences, but now slowly students are returning to science streams.”

Dean, academics, says taking an inter-disciplinary approach, the institute has also introduced humanities stream and earth sciences as compulsory subjects for the students to study along with basic sciences. “We are going to tweak our curriculum to introduce more advanced and modern concepts of learning,” he said.

Round-the-clock campus

Researchers say a big USP of the institute is its 24-hour campus. There are 40 state-of-the-art labs, which remain open round the clock. Of these, three are low-temperature labs where gases such as liquid helium are kept. There is one specialised scanning, tunneling microscopy lab facility, which enables students to look at individual items such as silicon and observe changes at the atomic level.

Students can stay in the labs all night to work on their research projects. Libraries and departments too remain open round the clock. There are co-ed hostels where male and female students live in the same building. And there are no curbs on students, who are provided with transport facility in the evening to visit local markets. “What makes it most attractive, however, is the peaceful ambience. This place is almost free of noise. The campus

is environment friendly, and there are restrictions on the use of vehicles. Students are allowed to use only bicycles,” says Ankasha, a student from Delhi, who finds it a pleasant change from the chaotic national capital. (4)

The campus is self sufficient with a plethora of eating joints, an in-house market and abundant recreational facilities such as well-laid tennis, basketball and badminton courts. Students, says a professor, are encouraged to take a break from studies by pursuing a sports activity.

Fund crunch

A major downer, however, is the cut in scholarships. Until 2015, the institute used to provide all the 200 students studying BSMS with a scholarship worth Rs 5,000, but since the Department of Science (DPT) slashed its budget last year, the number of students receiving the scholarship now has been halved to 100.

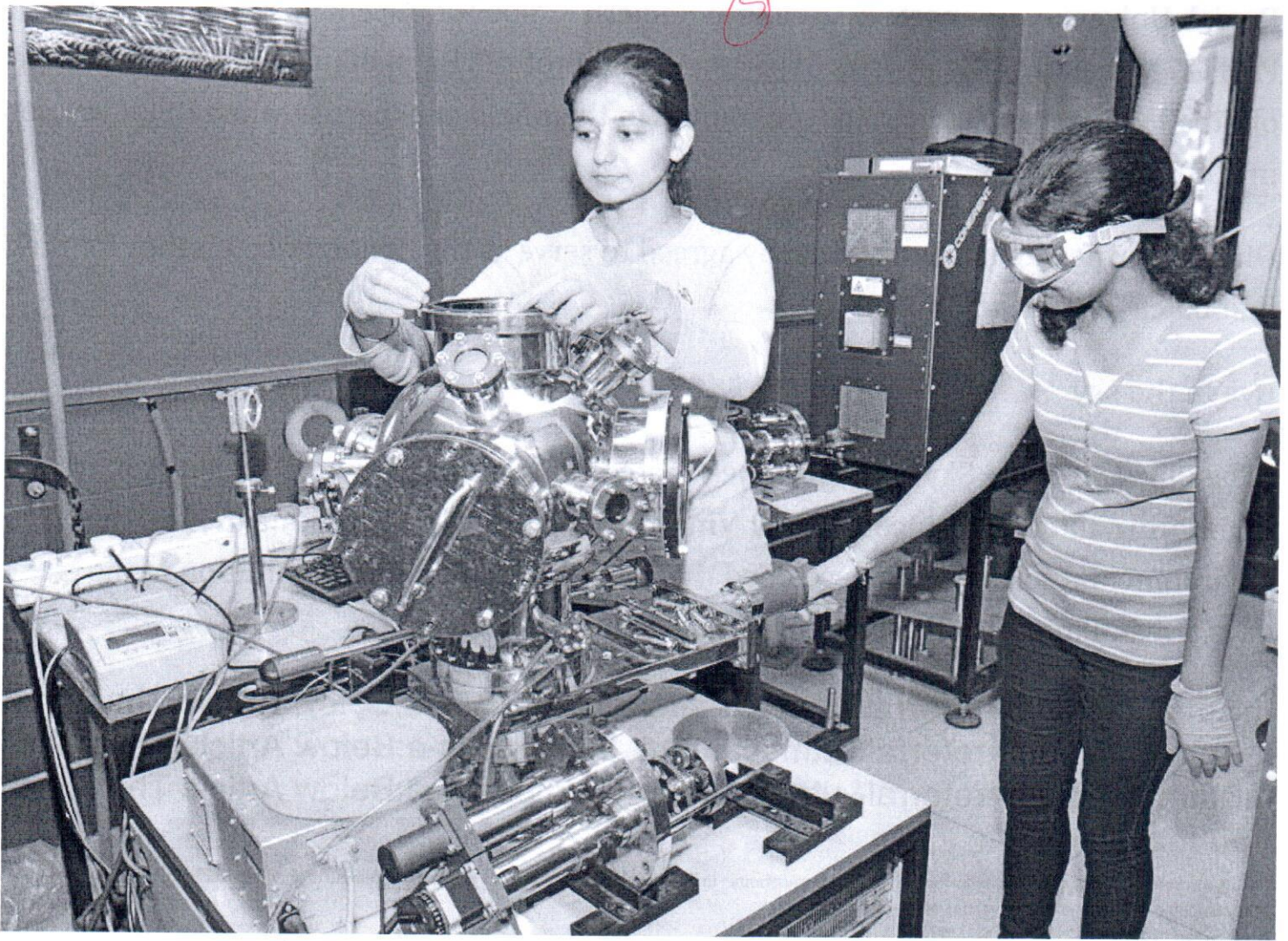
The other major issue that bothers students is the lack of placement facility. Keen to bag jobs after completing their studies, students want the institute to invite companies. Commenting on this, the director said, “We have set up a technology-based incubator to sell the ideas of our students to the outside world, and work for linkages with interested industries”.

The fee hike by almost three times has also upset the students. “We are running a campaign on twitter against the fee hike,” said a student.

Former dean Anand K Bachhawat says it is important for the government to continue supporting IISER in every possible way so that it can realise its potential. “With proper support and leadership, IISER Mohali can be among the top teaching-cum-research institutions of the world.”

The grouse

IISER Mohali has an elected Student Representative Council (SRC), a platform where students can vent their angst. Rohan Sharma, general secretary of SRC, said the opportunity cell inside the campus is not adequate as it only tells students to do their PhD from and on different projects. “Another major shortcoming is that there is no placement cell on the campus and when we apply for lectureship after completing our BSMS, we are not eligible for other state universities in the country.”



There are 40 state-of-the-art labs, which remain open at all times. (Ravi Kumar/HT)

Abhilasha Joshi from Oxford University, UK, and alumna of IISER, says: "IISER facilitated a relatively easy transition to my current research in experimental neuroscience at the University of Oxford. Being a woman in science, I often observed the lack of women in senior research positions, as directors of institutes and so on. This can dampen the confidence of women pursuing science. The humanities and social sciences courses offered at IISER led me to understand that science is a socially situated practice and its organisation suffers from very similar problems that society experiences across the world."

Birthing Pangs

On June 18, 2007, founder director Dr N Sathyamurthy reached Chandigarh with a backpack and a laptop. To begin with, Sathyamurthy worked out of a dark room in the basement of Mahatma Gandhi State Institute of Public Administration, Punjab (MGSIPAP) library. All that he had was a table, chair and peon.

With the MGSIPAP building nowhere near completion, the director designate contemplated going back to IIT Kanpur, where he was the head of Chemistry department and dean of faculty affairs for the past 29 years.

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Punjab University Connect: Retired Prof Ramesh Kapoor of the chemistry department, PU, Prof CG Mahajan of the physics department and Prof IBS Passi of mathematics department offered to give their services for the courses in their field of expertise when IISER was set up in 2007.

Director's wife Suguna Sathyamurthy agreed to serve as the honorary counsellor for the first batch of students in 2007.

Eye in the sky

"The Blue Eye in the Sky" is a machine set atop the Central Analytical Facility for monitoring air quality since 2010. Dr Vinayak Sinha from the department of earth and environmental sciences has developed the facility, which monitors pollution in the city 365 days a year. Sinha also received the NASI Scopus Award 2016.

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