VISITORS

SUDHIR JAIN: BUILDING AN INSTITUTION

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In 2009, Sudhir Jain, an earthquake engineer and a professor at IIT Kanpur, was appointed as the first Director of the Indian Institute of Technology Gandhinagar (IITGN). Jain, who was at the Indian Institute of Science (IISc) recently, spoke to CONNECT *about the challenges of building an institution from the ground up and his vision for IITGN.*

Working with Students

As the first director of an institute that was being built from scratch, Jain had to deal with many challenges. Among them were the hurdles that the first batch of students faced, including the lack of resources. This, he believed, required his immediate attention and he worked directly with them to address their concerns. He also believed that this would help build their morale. "For a first year student to be able to work with the director was empowering," Jain says.

Jain also took a personal interest in helping students find internships at the end of their first and second year. To do this, he tapped into his well-knit network to help them find paid summer internships both in India and abroad. "This system was unique to the existing IIT system. It enabled a first year student to do a project on fire engineering, for example, that was not even taught in the class. Such an initiative mobilized the students, made them confident and began to make them feel that there are advantages of being at IITGN," recalls Jain.

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Faculty Recruitment

Jain's next challenge was to scale up faculty recruitment. Unfortunately, in its early years, IITGN did not always receive applications from the most competent candidates for faculty positions. Jain

Courtesy: IITGN

roped in retired professors from the IIT system to assist in teaching and running the Institute. "I had to persuade retired professors to come to Ahmedabad and join us. We also invited talented teachers from local institutions to come and teach courses," he says. Besides making use of local talent, Jain also got scientists and scholars from foreign universities to teach at IITGN as visiting faculty.

Global Philanthropic Foundation

Jain's earlier experience as the Dean of Resource Planning and Generation at IIT Kanpur made him believe that in order for IITGN to compete with the best, the Institute needed to attract and retain the best talent from around the world. So he facilitated the creation of a charitable foundation with the help of well-wishers of IITGN in the United States. The foundation helps raise funds both from within the country and abroad. The funds enable the Institute to pay some of the faculty members top-up money in addition to structured government salaries.

Outreach

From his first day at IITGN, Jain took an active interest in devising a strong communication strategy. The first step in this direction was to start a newsletter called *Connections*. According to Jain, the newsletter is being sent to about 35,000

people. He also visits universities in the US, Europe and Singapore to meet potential faculty candidates and to spread the word about IITGN. According to him, this outreach effort has helped the Institute bring in outstanding faculty members, who bring with them a fresh vision for the Institute.

Attracting Bright Young Minds

In order to get quality students to join the Institute's PhD programme, Jain's team came up with a number of initiatives. One such scheme is called the 'Start Early PhD Programme'. As part of this initiative, IITGN targets toppers of the best undergraduate colleges after their third year. Once they graduate, they could join IITGN for a PhD directly. This programme also provides students a scholarship of INR 10,000 per month in addition to government scholarships. "This enabled us to bring many top rankers from good engineering colleges to our PhD programme," says Jain.

Courtesy: IITGN

Students enjoying a classroom session

Coursework

Some of the programmes offered at IITGN like an MA in *Society & Culture* or an M.Sc. in *Cognitive Science* at IITGN may seem out-of-place in a technology institute. Even the B.Tech engineering programmes at IITGN have a strong component of humanities and social sciences as part of the curriculum. Jain offers an insight into why these disciplines are important in today's world. "When I was young, technological needs were different. We had to learn how to build a dam or an electronic device. But today, the needs are different. We now know that the dam will not be built if the societal

issues of the affected people are not adequately addressed. So the training too has to be different. If our students do not understand the society, they cannot be technology leaders, and in that case they can only aim to be the best technicians working under other technology leaders. This is why it is important for a technology-driven institute to have a strong focus on the humanities and social sciences in the curriculum. It is equally important to hire very high quality faculty to teach these disciplines," he says.

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Changing the Mindset, Changing a System

Bringing in changes into a well-established IIT system was not easy. According to Jain, the biggest hurdle he faced, and continues to face, was not any opposition to these changes, but the mindset of people both within and outside the Institute. "We often look down upon ourselves thinking, 'Oh, we are not MIT or Harvard,' or that 'we are a poor country'. We don't aspire to be in the top league of academic institutes. This is particularly true for an institute in its infancy," Jain elaborates.

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Future vision

Jain is clear about his priorities for IITGN for the next few years. He says, "I would like to continue what we started in the first few years of developing the Institute. Secondly, better connect with industry. Industrial relations will only help us bring in new perspectives, ideas and resources, besides boosting our research activities. At IITGN, we also look forward to giving our students a global education experience by having very vibrant student and faculty exchange programmes with international universities."