

Where Students Get Their Due

By Svetlana Lasrado | Bangalore | Published: 19th January 2015 06:00 AM Last Updated: 18th January 2015 10:01 AM



Professor Sudhir Jain, as an influential academician, contributed not only to engineering education but to engineering practices during his teaching days at the Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur. He played a key role in evolving methods suited to withstand earthquakes, the development of many important seismic codes in the country, and was the driving force behind the National Information Centre of Earthquake Engineering (NICEE) at IIT-K and the National Programme on Earthquake Engineering Education (NPEEE) supported by the Government of India. Now, after more than a decade's service at IIT-K, Prof Jain is at the forefront of affairs at IIT-Gandhinagar (IITGN) in Ahmedabad. When he took over the reins of the elite institution as its Director, he decided that IITGN would follow a model very different from that of the other IITs.

“Given that it is a new IIT, we wanted to revisit some ideas to make it truly innovative,” he says. And it has become innovative, in ways more than one. The curriculum, for instance, has a special emphasis on Liberal Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, all with an aim to promote non-linear thinking and an appreciation for other disciplines

of knowledge. He states with pride, “We became the first institution to offer a compulsory course in design and innovation. Then there is a course on world civilisations. Students can also take up electives in languages like Urdu, Sanskrit, French and even Chinese; Anthropology, Archaeology and Indian History through Cinema, to name a few.”

He makes a case for the importance of teaching a little of other disciplines to help students decide for themselves what is their cup of tea. And in doing so, extends an assurance that IITGN allows engineering students to change their field of study, depending on their interests. He observes, “We understand that students can change their minds. I know a girl who came to Srishti School of Art, Design and Technology in Bangalore to pursue design after her BTech. Now, she has moved to Austin to do her Master's in Finance. Then, there are two students of mine who are learning design at National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad. Our idea is to celebrate the strengths of every individual rather than to make them feel guilty that they are not doing anything in the field of engineering.”

Prof Jain, who is a Bachelor of Engineering from the University of Roorkee, and holds Master's and Doctoral degrees from California Institute of Technology, Pasadena, US, feels strongly about the disconnect in the present education system; it encourages students to excel in competitive exams but does not place a premium on channeling their creative pursuits, he feels. Hence, when a new undergraduate batch comes to IITGN, they are not taught anything for five weeks. “During this period, we make them go through a foundation programme, which has no engineering, no sciences, no humanities, no course work at all.” They have identified five areas where most Indian engineering students find themselves at a disadvantage: physical activity and sports, creative avenues such as dance, music, painting, knitting and pottery; people skills like teamwork, communication and leadership; ethics and values and a deep knowledge of societal concerns.

Another aspect Prof Jain finds pride in is the way the college treats the students, which, like everything else, departs from the traditional IIT way of doing things. “When a student steps into our campus, s/he is treated as an adult. And not just on paper. They are wholly accountable for their actions.” He offers an example saying that unlike other IITs, they do not micromanage the students, even when it comes to academic performance and do not involve the parents at all. “We do not want to run a student's life. And after producing three batches of graduates, we firmly believe in the advantages of this teaching system. By treating them as adults, we make them responsible as well as confident of themselves,” he says.

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