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Science centre plot thickens

OUR CORRESPONDENT

Bhubaneswar, Nov. 29: The tussle between Orissa and the Centre over the proposed national institute of science (NIS) has intensified with the Union human resource development ministry claiming that it never took a policy decision to set up the institute in Bhubaneswar.

The court has filed a counter-affidavit in Orissa High Court in this regard.

Reacting to the UPA government's move, chief minister Naveen Patnaik said: "I am very disappointed with the action of the Centre. I had written three letters to the Prime Minister on the issue and even discussed it with the HRD ministry. We will file a fresh affidavit in the court."

In the affidavit, under-secretary in the HRD ministry Prem Kumar argued that in 2002, the University Grants Commission had proposed to set up centres for advanced science education.

In March this year, the scientific advisory council to the Prime Minister, too, suggested that two such institutes be set up.

Taking cognisance of the suggestions, the Union cabinet decided to set up two science institutes in Pune and Calcutta at Rs 500 crore each. "There was never a policy decision and Orissa was nowhere in the picture," Kumar has claimed in the affidavit, adding that the issue has assumed political significance.

On November 8, the high court had stayed the UPA government's decision to shift the proposed NIS from Bhubaneswar to Calcutta. "We direct a stay on the shifting of the NIS from Bhubaneswar to any other place in the eastern region," the high court had said in response to a PIL filed by Prasanta Kumar Das of the State Public Interest Protection Council.

Madhusudan Panda, who is fighting the case on behalf of Das described the counter-affidavit as a "lie" and threatened to file a criminal case against the under-secretary.

"The NDA government had promised to set up the institute in Bhubaneswar and requested the state government to provide land for the purpose. The state has already allotted 75 acres in Bhubaneswar," a state official said.

In December 2003, senior BJP leader and HRD minister in the then NDA government, Murli Manohar Joshi, had announced that national institutes of science would come up in the cities of Bhubaneswar, Pune, Chennai and Allahabad.

An all-party Assembly committee, which was formed recently, will meet Prime Minister Manmohan Singh soon to air their grievances on the matter.

Last Thursday, BJP and BJD MPs from Orissa had sat on a dharna on the Parliament premises to protest against the Centre's move.



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