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Home > Front Page > Story

Front Page

PAGE 1 ANCHOR

Why Arjun needs to drop by TIFR before he imposes quotas

Reshma Patil

Posted online: Thursday, June 08, 2006 at 0000 hrs

At frontier research institute, seat hike no solution: 'bigger crisis' is finding outstanding students and retaining the high talent

MUMBAI, JUNE 7: If HRD Minister Arjun Singh pays his first visit to the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research (TIFR)—a deemed university and a national centre for frontier research in nuclear science and mathematics—he will learn why the proposed quotas with a mandatory seat hike may not work on this Mumbai campus that struggles to find quality students despite scouting via a nationwide entrance test at the BSc-level.

In this autonomous institute funded by the Department of Atomic Energy, the nation's future top scientists gain entry based on their knowledge of basic sciences—not college grades, reservations, or an arbitrary seat strength.

"We don't know how quotas will be implemented," says G Krishnamoorthy, Dean of Graduate Studies. "So far, our research does not depend on grades or quotas or a notional number of seats. Why people are not coming to science is a much bigger crisis for scientific institutions than reservations, and it needs to be addressed. Students from the deep south have almost vanished from science, they go to IITs."

The concern here—also faced by top science institutes nationwide—is not the number of seats, but finding, as TIFR advertises, "exceptionally talented, strongly motivated" students despite a competitive, merit-based selection system extended up to Siliguri, West Bengal, last year. Candidates are encouraged to walk-in for the test without prior notice.

"Every year, we find it more and more difficult to get a fairly acceptable number of good quality students. We're worried, it's hurting our experimental programmes," says Krishnamoorthy, who's coordinating selections for 2006.

This year, about 60 PhD-level candidates were selected from 6,105 applicants, but the Institute "hopes" at least 30-35 accept and join. On an average, only "50-60 per cent of students selected" turn up to join the programmes, with others preferring the IITs or more lucrative options.

For admissions here, the number of seats is almost a non-issue.

Last year, for example, 13 PhD candidates students were selected for mathematics but 10 joined. This year, four were selected for mathematics. In biology, 10 joined last year, up from two in 2002. During one year, five were selected for chemistry but none joined.

Director S Bhattacharya told The Indian Express that the institute has not received any information from the government about the proposed legislation. "We'll be happy to be

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part of any decision-making process," says Bhattacharya. "My hope is that the legislators in their wisdom devise a plan that won't affect us negatively and will ensure our activities remain of high quality."

About 400-600 of the test applicants are called for hour-long interviews during February to May. Last year was a "better" year with 49 joining, from 85 who were selected.

"It's a high-pressure environment. Regularly, students in specialisations like mathematics are asked to leave mid-way if they cannot cope," says a senior faculty member.

Soon, they'll start preparing for 2007 selections.

"We can't think of a substantial increase in numbers," says a senior faculty. "Faculty is getting old. The absence of young minds can be detrimental to science. Even in computer science, quality students are not joining."

Best applications are coming from a "catchment area" of science—Bengal and Orissa.

"We test knowledge of basic sciences and understanding of scientific principles," says Krishnamoorthy. "We need people with a clear aptitude to seek further knowledge. Some years ago we stopped selecting based on grades because they vary as per regions."

India's top scientists work at TIFR's School of Mathematics, School of Natural Sciences, School of Technology and Computer Science. C N R Rao, the Prime Minister's chief scientific advisor, is on TIFR's council of management, along with scientists like Atomic Energy Commission chairman Anil Kakodkar.

Rao recently told this paper: "A difficult situation has been precipitated without a proper discussion with people who know about education". Some TIFR's PhD students had joined anti-quota protests in Mumbai, but the faculty says it's going to "wait and watch."

TIFR's 2006 PhD candidates

- 6,105 attempt written test
- 30 selected in physics
- 6 selected in chemistry
- 5 selected in computer science
- 4 selected in mathematics
- 13 selected in biology

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