

IITs and IIMs: More vs better

Alumni of these premier Indian institutions based here debate the question

S.N. VENKAT

IN RECENT years, there has been talk that a campus of the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) would be set up in Singapore. Even though both Singapore and India were keen to see this happen, the dream is yet to become a reality.

But what has been grabbing the headlines since the Indian Budget was announced on July 10 is the decision of the new Indian government to set up five new IITs and five new campuses of the Indian Institute of Management (IIM).

Many are asking whether India needs more IITs and IIMs or whether the government should focus on providing better quality education in the new IITs and IIMs that have come up in recent years. tabla! spoke to several members of the alumni of these two institutions for their views.



Great joy... graduates of the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) New Delhi after the convocation ceremony at their institute.

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For over a decade, announcements to create more IITs or IIMs have always come on the eve of general elections in India. In 2003 before the 2004 elections, the then prime minister Atal Behari Vajpayee announced plans to create more IITs.

In 2008, the UPA government headed by Dr Manmohan Singh went ahead and set up eight new IITs across India on the eve of the 2009 general elections. Continuing with the tradition, the Bharatiya Janata Party, promised in its 2013 election manifesto, an IIT and an IIM in every state of India. Soon after getting elected in 2014, the new government is going ahead with its election promise.

With about 1,000 IIT and IIM alumni living here, Singapore has the most number of them outside of India and the US. Singapore hosted the PanIIT APAC conference, a global gathering of IIT alumni two years ago and the first global PAN IIM Alumni event IIMPACT 2013, last year. Both were held under the patronage of former Singapore president S.R. Nathan.

Voicing their views

Obviously expanding the number of institutes of their alma mater is a matter of interest to the alumni in Singapore and they have been voicing their views on this at infiitvoices.podbean.com. All views expressed by them were in their personal capacities.

The president of the IIT Alumni Association Singapore Vinod Aachi felt that "more IITs per se are not the issue as much as the inadequate facilities and availability of quality faculty is".



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— IIT Alumni Association Singapore Vinod Aachi (left)



◆ **The sheer numbers of the population is such that the incidence of brilliant youngsters would be large enough in India, I think, to easily and justifiably provide entry into a higher institute of learning such as an IIT or IIM.**

— Partner (ASEAN), Climate Change and Sustainability Services Ernst & Young and an alumnus of IIT Madras and IIM Bangalore
K. Sadasiv



◆ **Yes, India needs more IITs/IIMs. India's aspiring young demand and deserve access to world-class higher education; there are growing economic opportunities to justify this. Quality education is not about exclusivity and elitism. It should be more inclusive and widespread.**

— President of Pan IIM Alumni Singapore
Sanjiv Aiyar



◆ **First identify IIT-deserving candidates from JEE scores of top 3-5 percentiles. Future capacity planning can be done based on historical patterns. Open in backward areas so that local talents are inspired to study for IITs, and those areas can develop.**

— Founder and CEO of GreenBills Anand Singh



◆ **Start IITs and IIMs only in states that have a very high degree of achievement in JEE and CAT in terms of percentage of successful students. But finding faculty is a different matter as they are not a function of population.**

— Mr Supriyo Sircar, president of IIT Alumni Association Singapore and head of Asia Pacific, Middle East and Africa's business in Polaris Financial Technology

"India," he said, "needs well-funded institutes that should be able to create good engineers, PhD doctorates, incubate ideas for innovation, source of start-ups and create a top quality industry-academia eco system."

"If the new IITs are able to identify and develop 20,000 quality students a year I am all for it. The country will definitely benefit from more capable engineers. As an alumnus, I would love to see IITs continue to retain that pole position by virtue of evolution rather than filtration by JEE (joint entrance exam) alone."

President of Pan IIM Alumni Singapore Sanjiv Aiyar highlighted that "India does not have the luxury of choosing between better IITs/IIMs and more — there is a need and an opportunity to do both."

He added emphatically: "Yes, India needs more IITs/IIMs. India's aspiring young demand and deserve access to world-class higher education; there are growing economic opportunities to justify this. Quality education is not about exclusivity and elitism. It should be more inclusive and widespread."

Mr Varun Chugh, an IIT alumnus and product manager

at Mobilewalla, too, called the decision to start more IITs and IIMs a great idea.

"With a billion people in India, why restrict good engineering education to only a few students?" asked Mr Chugh.

Another who favoured increasing the number is founder and CEO of Sharobi Technologies and an alumnus of IIT Kharagpur Biswajit Khan.

"The population of India has grown three times from when the IITs were conceived and set up during the time of India's first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru. The size of the middle class, their income and their aspirations have all gone up in this period. So why not increase the number of IITs also?" asked Mr Khan.

One per state

Adding weight to that argument is Mr K. Sadasiv, partner (ASEAN), Climate Change and Sustainability Services Ernst & Young and an alumnus of IIT Madras and IIM Bangalore.

He said: "If we were to just consider the Ivy League universities in the US, there are eight for a population of about 350 million. Applying even simple extrapolation, for India's population of three times the US, we should be having 25 such institutions which work out to almost one per state."

"The sheer numbers of the population are

such that the incidence of brilliant youngsters would be large enough in India, I think, to easily and justifiably provide entry into a higher institute of learning such as an IIT or IIM."

Here's how to do it

Founder and CEO of GreenBills Anand Singh had specific suggestions. "First identify IIT-deserving candidates from JEE scores of top 3-5 percentiles. Future capacity planning can be done based on historical patterns. Open in backward areas so that local talents are inspired to study for IITs, and those areas can develop."

Said Mr Supriyo Sircar, a past president of IIT Alumni Association Singapore and head of Asia Pacific, Middle East and Africa's business in Polaris Financial Technology: "Start IITs and IIMs only in states that have a very high degree of achievement in JEE and CAT (Common Admission Test) in terms of percentage of successful students."

"But finding faculty is a different matter as they are not a function of population. To attract quality faculty, the government has to attract talent from overseas and industries and that requires concerted effort but it can be done."

Director of StratAgile Avish Joseph suggested a public private partnership approach. "Every new IIT and IIM in a state can be adopted by 50 companies. They can be run with partial government funding and run their innovations through incubation labs at special rates. Give them a tax deduction four times the invested amount," he said.

Mr Sircar had a similar suggestion about collaborating with the private sector to set up high quality facilities for these institutions. These are "possible by doing a deal with multinational corporations (MNCs) or Indian MNCs to set up the same and make them the nation's partners", he proposed.

Improve the existing ones

"IITs and IIMs are global brands whose reputation has been built by the senior alumni. The new government must first improve the education and research standards in the new IITs and

IIMs opened by the UPA government," said Mr Dhruv Jain, an IIT alumnus who is pursuing his MBA at the Singapore Management University.

Regional operations director, consumer banking, Asia-Pac at Citibank and an alumnus of IIT and IIM Indrajit Lahiri was of the opinion that there is a need to keep more than an eye on intake quality.

"After all, the top 2,000 students will tend to be better than the top 10,000 ones. The quality of minds must be maintained," he said.

Mr Sircar also emphasised that we need better IITs and IIMs. "They have to be better in terms of faculty and instructors, facilities, research, publications, directors and deans that inspire, and align with industries outside India for cutting edge research partnerships," he added.

Brand dilution fears

As for the brand dilution feared by some, Mr Sadasiv acknowledged it and felt that, while it is indeed a danger, so long as sufficient rigour is placed in the entrance process and in the selection of faculty and the making available of top-notch facilities such as labs and classes, this could be something that could be worked on.

"Of course it needs administrators who are all of similar mind with no compromise in the setting of standards in each of the new IITs and IIMs," he said.

As the ancient Sanskrit saying goes, vidhvaan sarvatra poojyate (scholars/experts are respected everywhere). It is the quality of intellect and expertise of the alumni of IITs and IIMs that have earned the respect from around the world for these institutions. Indian policy makers cannot forget that without top quality students and faculty, IITs or IIMs will not be held in high regard.

tabla@sph.com.sg

S.N. Venkat is senior associate director at the Office of Postgraduate Professional Programme, Singapore Management University.