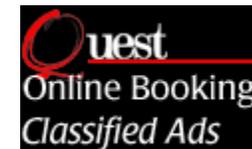




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Waiting for the nod:

Why is the West Bengal government so indifferent about having Bengal Engineering and Science University upgraded to the status of an Institute of National Importance, asks Manas Joardar

A PROPOSAL by the Ministry of Human Resource Development to upgrade the Bengal Engineering and Science University (BESU) to the status of an Institute of National Importance (INI) has been widely applauded. Considering the institute's role in the last 150 years of its existence, the honour is highly deserving. The proposal, provided it is passed, will be implemented early next year.

The state government is, however, yet to make its opinion public.

At a meeting with BESU authorities last week, Prof Sudarshan Roy Choudhury, West Bengal Minister for Higher Education, assured of the state's support in upgrading the institute to the Indian Institute of Engineering Science and Technology (IIST) as recommended by the Anandkrishnan Committee. However, the minister failed to clear upon the issues of governance and admission procedure that were to prevail after the upgradation.

Teachers and students at BESU are getting increasingly apprehensive as to whether the state will at all give the go-ahead. The university has asked for an early decision of the state government so that the upgradation can be done around 24 November, the day when the university will start celebrating its 150 years. They had threatened to start a sustained agitation if the state did not approve of the idea within October.

The history


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One of the very first Indian engineering schools, Bishop's College started imparting civil engineering training to its first batch of 10 students inside three rooms of the Writers' Buildings in 1856. From 1865 to 1879 Bishop's College worked as the civil engineering department of Presidency College. The college was moved to Shibpur in 1880. In 1921 it was renamed Bengal Engineering College. Run under the aegis of the West Bengal government's education department, BE College was given a deemed university status in 1992 – working as a constituent college under the University of Calcutta. In 2004 it was turned into a full-fledged university – BESU.

The build-up

During their regime, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government in Delhi had announced that five new Indian Institutes of Technology would be set up. The present United Progressives' Alliance (UPA) government decided, instead, to raise a few front-ranking colleges to the IIT status and set up a committee under the chairmanship of SK Joshi in 2003 to identify such colleges.

The Joshi Committee picked seven: Institute of Technology (Banaras Hindu University); University College of Engineering and Technology (Osmania University); Zakir Hussain College of Engineering and Technology (Aligarh Muslim University); Andhra University College of Engineering; Cochin University of Science and Technology; Jadavpur University Departments of Engineering and Technology and, of course, BESU.

A three-member committee, comprising M Anandakrishnan (chairman) - a former professor of IIT Kanpur, DV Singh, a former Roorkee University vice-chancellor and Amitabha Ghose, a former director of the IIT, Kharagpur, was formed.

The committee visited all the seven institutes referred by the Joshi Committee and went on to meticulously survey the data on parameters like faculty, infrastructure, governance pattern, research activities, students' admission etc. and submitted its report to the MHRD in February this year.

In a meeting convened by the MHRD in September in Delhi, the report was discussed with the representatives of all seven institutes along with their parent universities and also associated state government officials.

The scheme

In the Anandakrishnan report the short-listed institutes were ranked according to their assessed potential and happily for its protagonists, BESU topped the list.

In India, over 90 per cent of the 1300 odd engineering colleges offer only

Bachelor's degrees. More colleges are needed now for providing degrees at the postgraduate and doctoral level. Under the new scheme students would be taught engineering enriched with the knowledge of frontiers of science. In this system - a blending of IITs and the Indian Institute of Science - the upgraded institutes would be called Indian Institutes of Engineering Science and Technology (IEST). Through an Act of Parliament, they will be accorded the status of an Institute of National Importance (INI).

The IESTs will offer a five-year integrated dual degree (BTech-MTech) in engineering and also a five-year integrated MSc programme in applied sciences. MTech (for students from other institutes) and PhD programmes, with the provision for scholarships, will also be conducted. The existing BTech programme will be discontinued in the next five years.

Housing facilities for students and faculty shall be provided at the campus. Salary scales and service conditions will be similar to those in the IITs.

The committee recommended that an IEST will be under the control of the central government and the governance system will be similar to that of an IIT with faculty council, students' council, dean etc. The IEST Council, a central body, will be formed to coordinate activities of all the IESTs,

IESTs should be fully financed by the central government. They will receive Rs250-300 crore each, spread over the first five years, to improve infrastructure.

After the 11th plan period, each college will get an annual grant of Rs40-50 crore.

Admission to an IEST may be through IIT-JEE, AIEEE or an all India entrance examination.

The BESU case

Upgrading BESU to the level of an Institute of National Importance will surely add glory to the academic scenario of the state. Given that the institute would be funded by the government at the Centre, it won't be a burden on the state exchequer. Tuition and other fees, it could be expected, are not going to be exorbitantly high and should not deprive the disadvantaged sections of society.

But why then is the state government silent? Once they complained of students of the state not doing well at the IIT-JEE, blissfully forgetting that the Higher Secondary syllabus followed in West Bengal does not equip one well enough to tackle the IIT-JEE entrance test. Now, of course, the syllabus has been updated to a significant extent.

Is the West Bengal government unhappy with the idea of losing control over BESU then?

(The author, a former member of the Senate and Syndicate, is a retired teacher of Applied Physics, Calcutta University)

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