

# There's a good reason why IIT is not MIT

## IN PRINCIPLE

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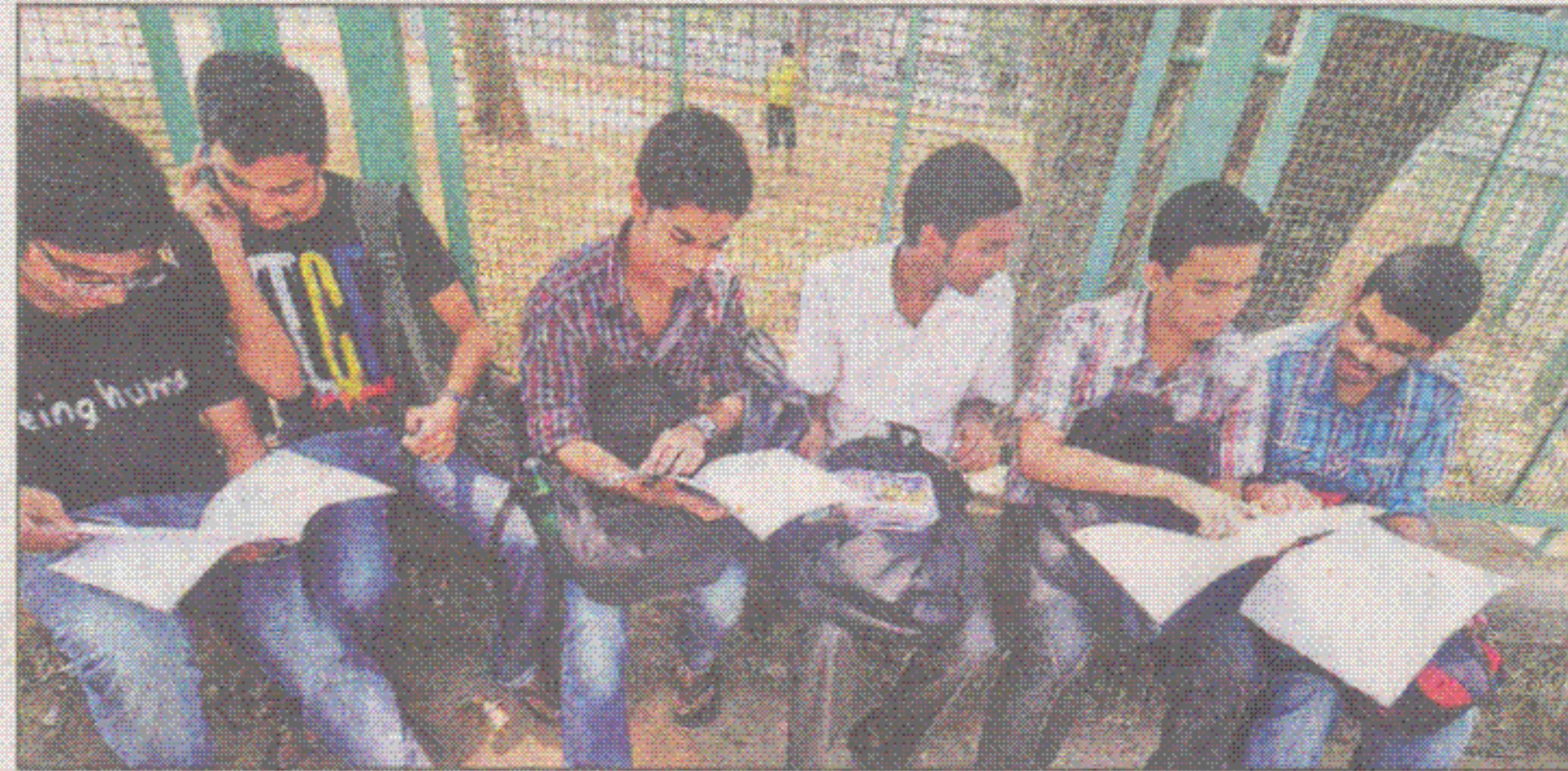


A journalist once told Bobby Fischer that a female Grandmaster had complimented the American chess player as "a genius". Fischer wryly replied that's

true, but she has no way of knowing! Perhaps Jairam Ramesh's comment can be put in the same genre.

At the outset, it's important to recognize that IITs and IIMs can't be clubbed together. They are very different institutions and need to be analyzed differently. Had Ramesh said that IITs are not MITs or that IIM is not Harvard Business School, no one could quarrel with that. But what he said is not substantiated by hard facts or data.

The mandate of the IITs and IIMs for the first 50 years was to provide the sinews and muscles in terms of managers and leaders for developing India's corporate sector and to help the government programmes. They have done so admirably. This is evident from the fact that today a Tata can go global and acquire a Corus or a Ritz Carlton and a GMR can build airports in Maldives and Istanbul. This would have been unthinkable just a decade ago.



**A CLASS OF THEIR OWN:** There is significant value-addition inside IITs and IIMs

The Institute for Lean Construction Excellence, an initiative entirely driven by the Civil Engineering Department of IIT-Madras along with some corporate houses is building information systems into new construction. A leading infotech company's research centre at IIT-Madras Research Park has managed to cut energy consumption by 22% at various sites run by the firm. Applied research like this has enormous value for a developing country like India.

Second, till as recently as 2000, IIT-Madras had a budget of about Rs 35 crore. Today, it has Rs 200 crore. It also faced significant constraints on hir-

ing. For example, Ramanujam could never have been hired even though he was a genius as he had failed his BA exams. Compare this with the endowment of say a Caltech or Harvard or MIT. That runs to millions of dollars and has a 100-year research focus and legacy! It is truly odious, therefore, to compare the IITs with an MIT.

Despite this, professors of IIT Madras have published in world-class journals such as the "Journal of American Chemistry Society", "Journal of Physical Chemistry", "Annals of Mathematics" and American civil and mechanical engineering society journals. But there is no gain-

saying the fact that IIMs have not produced as much research as they should, given the size of their faculty.

Third, as students of multiple leading institutions such as Harvard Business School, IIT and IIM can attest, there are good and bad professors in every institution. While there is no Clayton Christensen yet at IIM-B, one cannot overlook the fact that in the last two years alone, they have hired 26 new faculty members predominantly from Wharton, INSEAD, MIT etc. Why would young PhDs/ brilliant faculty from these schools voluntarily relocate to IIMB unless they saw the possibility of doing world-class research and teaching there?

Fourth, why do global companies, banks and consulting firms repeatedly hire from IITs/IIMs? They are under no pressure to do so, but the engineers and managers they produce are world-class, which means there is significant value-addition inside these institutions or else they could hire them straight after the 12th Boards! Jairam Ramesh is not right to say that IIT and IIM students are brilliant, not their institutions.

Fifth, autonomy is unarguably a good thing but the other side of the coin is accountability. At least a few

good IIMs are pushing for more accountability along with more autonomy. Accountability would include publishing in many more of the world's top journals, increased hours of teaching and research, and strict curbs on unionism and indiscipline. It is shocking that there is no annual appraisal of IIM professors. From 2007, IIMs can pay faculty whatever they want, charge whatever fees they want, open campuses abroad and buy/sell land using their resources. But still they refuse to increase the total hours of teaching and research from 90 to 160 per year.

Jairam Ramesh, a bright, well-meaning professional IIT alumnus, has made it big in politics. But he may only be able to realize his dream of becoming finance minister if he learns to emulate Bobby Fischer rather than former Indian ministers with foot-in-mouth disease.

*The author, an IAS officer, has studied at Harvard Business School, IIT Madras and IIM-B. These are his personal views*

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