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My priority is to bring academic reform: Prof. Rakesh Sehgal

Currently serving as a Director of NIT, Srinagar, Professor Rakesh Sehgal has a vast experience in engineering, academics and research. He has worked in several institutions across India in various capacities.

Since he assumed the charge of Director at NIT, Srinagar, he has made a number of reforms while streamlining various things which were disturbed from years.

In conversation with Rising Kashmir's feature writer Insha Latief Khan, Prof. Sehgal talks about academic improvements, recruitments, new initiatives and other aspects of NIT Srinagar and his role as a director of the glorious institute.

Tell us about your job history and experience.

I am from a Mechanical Engineering background. I pursued my M. Tech. from IIT Delhi, in design of Mechanical Equipment with 9.75 grade point and was the topper of my batch. I have done my doctorate in the area of Design Engineering specifically Tribology from Regional Engineering College, Kurukshetra. I have pursued my Post Doctorate under UGC fellowship award. I have 35 years of experience.

For two years 1986-1988, I worked with HP State Public Works Department and after that I joined as lecturer in Mechanical Engineering at REC Hamirpur (H.P). Then I became assistant professor in the year 1995 and got further selected as professor in 2003 in the same institute.

I have worked in many positions. I was Head of the Department, Mechanical Engineering three times, dean industrial research and consultancy, dean faculty welfare, coordinator for Technical Education Quality Improvement Program Phase 1 where NIT Hamirpur was placed at 2nd position in the best institution of India. So, I come from the institution which got the best campus award consecutively for two years.

From 2014 to 2017, I was picked by the Himachal Pradesh government to establish a new government engineering college at district Kangra which I established from scratch. Today, it is one of the largest engineering institutions in the state of Himachal Pradesh.

In October 2017, I was selected as Director of NIT, Srinagar where I have already completed 4 years.

Since you assumed charge of the director, what changes have you made in academics?

My first priority is academic reform. Academic calendar was not followed here because of the situation. I made it a point that the academic calendar should be followed religiously. I introduced the Central Evaluation System. It used to take a lot of time to evaluate the answer scripts of the students. Now, immediately after completion of end semester exams, the answer scripts are evaluated centrally and results are declared within two-week time.

I regularized the Ph.D. admission. Currently we have more than 400 candidates who are pursuing Ph. D. The senate meetings are held as per the norms; at least three meetings in a year are held. Also, I ensured four Board of Governors meetings are also held every year.

Then another academic reform is a change in curriculum. Curriculum was not revised for a long time so I took the initiative with the help of various departments.

Since you assume charge of the institute, is there any change in recruitments and promotions?

There were no faculty recruitments from the last 11 years. When I joined here, we had 86 regular faculty members. Out of them 5 were in Jammu who had migrated back and never returned. They were drawing all the benefits. They used to take salaries and were not teaching. We sanctioned 198 positions so we advertised 129 positions at that time and I could recruit new 43 faculty members at the entry level. They were from different states including Jammu and Kashmir.

Then there were no promotions from the last many years. Almost all 86 faculty members were promoted to one level higher. Another recruitment drive was conducted during February - March 2020 and this was unique because nowhere in India recruitment could take place at that time. The interview was conducted in offline mode in Delhi. I recruited 44 new faculty members and promoted the existing faculty to the next higher level.

I also carried out recruitment of non-faculty members for middle rung administrative positions. Also, promotions in non-teaching cadres were held which were also pending for a long time. Departmental progressive was also given in which 150 non-teaching staff members were benefitted.

Earlier, there was no regular registrar. The recruitment drive for registrar was taken. There was no audit for many years. It was not proper and there were many audit objections and we have removed almost all of that. I ensured a regular audit is carried out every year. Regular annual report is made and is sent to the Ministry. It is then put before the Parliament because it is an institution of national importance.

> I hope when I leave this place, things should continue to work in a better way. The person who takes the charge should be a good person and has a vision to take this institution further. It is a very high-ranking institution. It was established as the third **REC** in the country after REC Warangal and **REC** Durgapur.

An institution requires better infrastructure for growth. Tell us about the changes that were brought in the infrastructure?

We are constructing an auditorium of 1000 capacity which will be completed by next year. We have constructed a new gate and constructed a new girl's hostel. As per government of India's policy, girls' strength is to be increased by 25% this year. So, our intake has to be increased too. There was no sufficient accommodation for male students as well so we are constructing a mega hostel. We took a loan of 85 crores from Higher Education Funding Agency through the Ministry of Education. Now the work has started and will be completed in two years. It will be a self-sufficient green building.

In 2014, the residential quarters and the hostels were damaged due to floods. We are carrying out the renovation process. My residential quarter, which was 55 years old, was never renovated. I renovated it before shifting.

We got a funding of 100 crores under the Prime Minister Development Package (PNDP). We have utilized 70 crores out of that and we have created good research infrastructure and good data centers. We have made two state of art computer labs. Each lab has 100 computers. Apart from that, we are upgrading the sports facility. We have also created special gyms for boys and girls. We have also upgraded our medical facility. We already have a pathological test facility. We have an x-ray lab and we have a dental section. Now we are adding physiotherapy equipment.

We have also upgraded our library. We lost 30 thousand books during floods so we purchased many new books and we purchased e-resources as well. We have an RFID system in the library. We have automatic issue and return of the books without any involvement of the person in the library. We have increased the seating capacity by around 500 users. We also constructed lecturer halls and made smart classrooms. We are also making heating arrangements for most of the buildings like dining halls, library etc. We have good subscriptions for libraries like Springer, IEEE. We spent almost 3-3.5 crores annually on subscriptions so that it can help students in research.

How many programs have you organized in the past few years?

We have organized more than 116 online programs in the last two years. We have organized three international conferences, many online workshops, and short-term training programs for the benefit of the faculty and the students. We invited great personalities like Sonam Wangchuk twice. We also carried out our Alumni meet where old alumni came here.

How many departments of this institution have received accreditation?

Accreditation was also pending for a long time. In 5 eligible departments we have gone for accreditation by the National Board of Accreditation.

How is placement in NIT Srinagar?

When I joined, placement was around 43 percent, now it's more than 75 percent.

Where does NIT, Srinagar stand on the ranking scale?

We have worked on the ranking as well. In the National Institutional Ranking Framework 2021, we figured in 239 last year. We brought it down to 69 this year which is reasonably good while looking at the circumstances here. I want the ranking of this institution to be below 50. We should be in 1-50 brackets.

One of the main reasons for getting good ranking and accreditation is admission.

Another reason for not getting a good rank was the Research. Earlier, people were very casual in research and were publishing in any journals. In the senate meeting I decided that no Ph.D. thesis can be submitted without having two publications in SCIE or high-ranking journals so that it will help us in future.

How many patents have you filed?

Patents are an important thing that I emphasized on. We have filed around 29 patents in the last two years. Three or four patents have been granted also.

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Tell us about your research with international projects?

We have a good research facility. Some of our labs are the five best labs in the country. We have a tribology lab and good facilities for material synthesis. We can make good material, test them, and characterize them. We also published a booklet of research papers. I emphasize a lot on research projects. We have 3 international projects. I am part of two of them. We completed with Tunisia. 2nd is going on with Uzbekistan and we have applied for the third research project with Russia. We are developing material for space crafts and they will be tested as well.

What about the recruitments? Are there going to be any more recruitment drives?

We are carrying out the recruitment. If this recruitment is successful then not less than 35-40 people from Kashmir will get employment. It will be regular employment because these are non-teaching positions so most of the candidates are locals and I would wish them to be selected and join the institution. For teaching, we need to have mixed faculty from all states. That will give a good culture. That will motivate others also. Sense of competition is very important to progress in the institution.

How can students get admission in NIT Srinagar? Is there any quota for the students of Jammu and Kashmir?

For B. Tech. courses, the admissions are done through JEE mains examinations. After the results, students have to apply to a central portal which is alternatively done by one of the NIT. This year the nodal agency is NIT Jaipur. They hold the admission and the students apply online and give the preferences. Depending upon the score of the students in the JEE examinations, they get their streams. Also, there is a 50% quota for Jammu and Kashmir and some percentage of quota for Ladakh. The remaining 50% quota seats are filled with all India ranking.

For M. Tech courses, there is no quota for the state and the admission takes place through a central portal called CCNT and for applied sciences admissions are done through central portal CCMS. Ph.D. admissions are also conducted through all India levels and there is no quota for J&K students but most of the candidates are from J&K.

Are convocations held yearly in the institution?

Convocation was also pending for many years. In September 2018, we carried out convocation for the last three years. We had the then governor, Satya Pal Malik as the chief guest and Ved Prakash former chairman UGC was the guest of honor. In the ceremony, 49 Ph.D. degrees were also awarded to the students. Convocation has to be regular.

How many events has this institution hosted so far?

We hosted many committees here like the parliamentary committee. We hosted LG Manoj Sinha twice, and Minister of State, Jitander Singh. We organized one international conference on Nano Technology for better living through offline as well as hybrid mode.

Have you faced any problem while working here?

The major problem is the lethargic attitude of people. People are disinterested towards work. All the faculty members of this institution are highly qualified. I felt the sense of belongingness was missing. That was the biggest challenge for me to make people work not only for them but for their institution because I believe this institution belongs to them but we have come far and obviously I can't do anything without their cooperation. Slowly people changed.

Have you faced any criticism here? If yes, how did you address it?

There is only one criticism: the system is slow. I am trying to energize it. I want files to be cleared within no time. I clear everything within 2 hours from my table. I answer queries on phone and mail. I keep checking the mails till night also. We have an RTI cell/legal cell as well. For an online grievance portal, we have a person who looks after that. In a transparency audit done by an external agency of Chandigarh, we got 97.6 % which is very high.

What do you hope for this place after your turn is over?

I hope when I leave this place, things should continue to work in a better way. The person who takes the charge should be a good person and has a vision to take this institution further. It was a very high-ranking institution. This was established as the third REC in the country after REC Warangal and REC Durgapur.

Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru had inaugurated this institution. I tried to get admission in 1981 here but I couldn't succeed. I had to be satisfied with some other institution. Our students should get the best facilities and placements. It's my ambition that our students will be placed with more than one crore package annually.

What will you take along with you when you will finish your term here?

I will go with the sense of highest satisfaction that whatever I started got completed one day. In fact, I never thought that I would be a director of the institution where I had applied for the admission. There were many restrictions from my family. They thought it's not a safe place but I took the challenge. I have the habit of taking challenges. Otherwise, one can't progress.