

## Q&amp;A

# “Working to Increase Research Component”

By **Meha Mathur**

**RIGHT:** Laxmidhar Behera  
Director, IIT-Mandi

**Overcoming the hurdle of accessibility, IIT-Mandi has created a niche for itself in interdisciplinary work, since inception in 2009.**

**Director Laxmidhar Behera, who has a Masters degree in engineering from NIT Rourkela and a PhD from IIT Delhi, talks of the range of work the faculty and students are doing. Excerpts:**

**How has IIT-Mandi gained in reputation to make a place for itself among the top engineering colleges in the country?**

As an institute, we have both undergraduate and post-graduate programmes. Our students come from JEE, which is a very competitive examination. Our faculty members come from some top-notch universities, after doing their PhD. The publications of faculty members is very high.

We have around 400 PhD students, and we are trying to double that number. The idea is to bring in more research component in the syllabi. Many core research products have come out of IIT-Mandi, among which is a low-cost landslide model. Himachal suffers a lot from landslides in the rains. And these have been installed at about 40 places now in Kangra and Mandi district.

Similarly, using a local flower called Buransh, our faculty have developed a mechanism for developing immunity against Covid. They are also working on converting forest

leaves into bio-fuels. Work has been done on diabetics too. So, we need to do impactful research. We have also started research on the Indian knowledge system and mental health. We are working in the area of sustainable development, in for instance, bio-energy, bio-medicine, livelihood generation.

Our graduates get absorbed in top-notch companies. Last year, more than 90 per cent of our students were placed in companies like Google, Microsoft, Samsung, Adobe, Walmart, Amazon, L&T and Reliance.

**With what objective is the institute promoting research in mental health?**

According to a survey, India will be top most in mental health problems owing to wrong lifestyles and the stress that has crept into our society. And we have to overcome that. We have to educate people about it. Our Indian knowledge systems, like Yoga and classical dance forms can take care of some of these problems.





### How is the institute upgrading its infrastructure?

We are a new institute. We were in project mode till last year. During this period we have built about two lakh square metres of space for academics and the hostel area. We do need to build more hostels to accommodate more students, and the academics area beyond what has already been built. But being a new IIT, we have the most modern facilities – high quality laboratories with high-cost equipment, facility for semi-conductor research and sporting facilities.

Having said that, infrastructure is an ongoing process, and each time we launch a programme, we will have to augment infrastructure. For example, we are now starting a school of management and we will be taking in 80 stu-

dents, which will create the need for more infrastructure.

### What are the top three specialisation areas of the institute?

The most popular course is computer science. Then we have the data science programme and electrical engineering. But as far as research is concerned, there are many areas where our students and faculty are working, including the advanced material research centre, bio sciences, semi conductors. Some more centres are being added, like Robotics, AI, an interdisciplinary programme in Himalaya studies like seismic studies, infrastructure, hydrology and hydropower.

### Do you feel the disadvantages of the institute being in a hilly region, in terms of access?

Well the advantages are clean air, and places to travel to. Yes, in terms of location there is a disadvantage because reaching Mandi takes time. From Chandigarh it's a six-hour drive. But we recently organised two workshops and researchers had come for it from across the globe and the country. So we are trying our best to overcome the disadvantage.

### How does the institute enable students to develop their social skills?

There are a range of clubs, like sports, drama, literature and culture. Our students get involved in organising fests, and that is the best way to develop interpersonal interaction and to develop personality as well. We organise programmes for spiritual connect too.

We are also organising a summer camp for school students in AI and robotics. More than 1,200 students have applied for 100 seats, and they will get hands-on experience in robotics. They will learn this from scratch. And to train them, we are training our students. So this is another way to develop social skills.

### What are the specific challenges that the institute is trying to overcome?

We need to develop our infrastructure, including hostels. We also need to work on internal revenue generation. Also, while we are not distracted by the hustle of metros, we are hoping for an airport at Mandi. We are also working to improve our rankings, and to get high-ranking students. **BW**