

Educating the villages

A 25-year-old institute continues to hold out hope to rural youth aspiring to become engineers



The Covid-19 pandemic did affect the functioning of the Finolex Academy of Management and Technology (FAMT), because it is in a rural area of Maharashtra's Ratnagiri district, says its president Aruna M. Katara, who is also president, Hope Foundation and Research Centre, which runs FAMT. "Both students and teachers have a problem because there is no accessibility to the labs," she explains. "And it is difficult to do engineering assignments from home."

In Pune, however, the International Institute Of Information Technology" (I2IT), which is also under the aegis of Hope Foundation, 'hit the ground running' – with lectures delivered and examinations held in the past one year. But classes which had been started had to be stopped, and the final-year exam is a question mark. "We held it last year, but six months late," she says.

FAMT, which was a dream project of Katara's father Pralhad P. Chhabria who founded the Finolex group, started functioning with a single branch in July 1996. In its 25th year, it now offers six undergraduate courses

in various engineering disciplines, two postgraduate courses – MCA and ME (machine design), along with a Ph D course in IT. It celebrated its silver jubilee in December 2020 its fifth Founder's Day in March 2021. There are also interdisciplinary courses with credits.

The impact is visible

Over the years, says Katara, the impact of the programmes became visible. The institution attracted increasing numbers of students from around, especially girls. "City kids know abundance, not challenges. In Ratnagiri, you can see the hunger to learn," she explains. "They may have the same level of intelligence, but the will is probably stronger." When FAMT had been in existence for about 15 years, its students began getting gold and silver medals; and began to be recognised by Bombay University too.

Teaching and learning methodologies kept changing and evolving: when the students were introduced to research, many of them were not interested. "But we told them, 'Just go out and do it!' They accepted the challenge - and keep taking challenges."

So do the teams at FAMT and I2IT, though Finolex Industries continues to be their biggest donor and supporter. "We instituted a new administration system and introduced a placement policy," says Katara. "We had more than 72 per cent placement till before the pandemic hit."

"Even in the current adverse circumstances, we have successfully delivered what we could," she says. "I give brilliant marks to both my staff and students for their quick adaptability to the situation, using the wealth of online open-source material that has been available to them."

Pointing out that the first-year students haven't even seen the campus on which they are studying, she says: "Online orientation is okay, but what about after that?" Going forward, in these uncertain times, however, everyone obviously needs to pull up their socks."

There was a worry that because the local community was interested in only mango growing and fishing, the 500-plus graduates every year would have no place to go to. "The placement strategy worked, and we turned the situation around," she says. "But we need to provide more opportunities in *Bharat*, rural India. The 12-th standard students from the school that Finolex runs near its plant in Ratnagiri are encouraged by the Department of Science & Technology's INSPIRE (Inspiration in Science Pursuit for Inspired Research) programme which gives fellowships to those scoring 85 per cent and above."

Explaining that there is separate funding from DST to expose children to lab work, travel and camps, Katara says: "With a 10-hectare campus in Ratnagiri and half that in Pune, I am going to do my bit."

As her father had said: "It is not what we achieve in life, but what we choose to leave behind for the future generation to benefit from, that will be remembered till eternity." His other statement is even more relevant today: "Dreams, determination, and dedication are the stepping-stones to success. So dare to dream and have courage to pursue that dream relentlessly." ♦

Katara:
"Just go out and do it!"

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