

The Oxford of the East

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Thousands of students shore up in Pune year after year. Arvind Gupta profiles the popular institutes which have placed the city on the global map



After every 12th board exam results trains and flights to Pune arrive packed, and lodges and hotels are quickly fill up to capacity.

From Jhumri Taliaya to Jharkhand, students come to Pune in large hordes seeking admission to colleges of engineering, BBA, MBA and scores of other courses. Especially north Indian students, who have few options to consider after failing to make it through IIT-JEE and other entrance exams. With few private institutes offering quality higher education in the north, thousands gravitate to Pune – the Oxford of the East.

Scholarship and reform

In no other city of India is scholarship and social reform so interwoven as it is in Pune. This city has been the cradle for pioneers of the Indian liberal tradition – Jotiba Phule, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Maharishi Karve, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, B R Ambedkar and others. These social reformers championed the education for the downtrodden and started the first schools exclusively for girls.

Until the 1970's Pune with its salubrious climate was a pensioner's paradise. Then industrialisation made Pune the "Detroit" of India, with every major auto manufacturer setting shop. The IT and Biotechnology revolution followed soon. The demand created by these industries could not be met by the College of Engineering, Pune (COEP).

Soon a lot of private players jumped into the fray. Public-private universities (called Deemed Universities) were set up. Initial entrepreneurs like Dr. Patangrao Kadam (still a minister in Maharashtra Assembly and founder of Bhartiya Vidyapeeth and Sri Karad) had strong political connections. These small initiatives in the early 1970's have now blossomed into degree super-shopees – dispensing every degree under the sun – MBBS, Ayurveda, Design, Fashion Technology, Engineering, Homeopathy, Catering, Computers, Animation and Finishing Schools. They have provided reasonable education at a price and in the process accumulated capital to expand their empires. Symbiosis, Bhartiya Vidyapeeth, MIT all have swanky campuses in Dubai.

Foreign students

Pune attracts almost 20% of the entire foreign students who come to India. That there are over 14,000 foreign students living and studying in Pune is a tribute to the tolerance of this city. Good infrastructure, moderately priced eateries and accommodation, good roads and plenty of entertainment have contributed to this development. Students from Korea, Thailand, Iran, Africa, Vietnam and Europe throng to Pune. While some study Indology, Prakrit or Sanskrit, most do regular college and university Courses.

They come here because a similar course in any European or American university would cost ten times more. The cost of living is much cheaper here too. Some also come to escape the conscription in their country – they often deliberately fail to extend their period of stay in Pune! Under a special scheme last year, 200 students from

Afghanistan came for college studies to Pune. These students have their own associations and support group's and enrich the cultural tapestry of Pune. They also create several ancillary jobs by spending their dollars and dirhams.

Pune is home to some legendary institutes. The Fergusson College, alma mater of luminaries from Veer Savarkar to late prime minister V P Singh is celebrating its 125th centenary this year. The famous Deccan College of Archaeology, Film & Television Institute (FTII), National Defence Academy (NDA) Armed Forces Medical College (AFMC), College of Engineering, Pune (COEP), College of Military Engineering (CME) and the University of Pune (with 1, 70,000 students and 269 affiliated colleges).

The university is spread over 411 acres has been rated the 7th best in the country after the five old IIT's and the University of Delhi.

The city houses some of the most dynamic research institutes like the National Chemical Laboratory (NCL) – the 'star' in the CSIR crown. The NCL has more patents to its credit than the 40 other CSIR labs put together! It has always been led by pioneering directors – Prof Mashelkar (FRS) being one. Two major institutes researching in astronomy and astrophysics (IUCAA and NCRA) are also housed in the Pune University.

To get into the above established government institutes students have to pass an all India test. They still remain the first choice of all bright and hard working students. However, there a dozen or more colleges affiliated to the University of Pune offering an engineering degree. Some of them offer "management quota" seats. They make money on this to fund their infrastructure.

Many other private institutes - Indira Group of Colleges, Balaji and scores of others have mushroomed all over Pune offering every conceivable degree.

The city offers over half a dozen residential schools some with names like Sharad Pawar International School which offer an IB (International Baccalaureate). The fees ranges between Rs 3 to 5 lakhs a year. The Mercedes Benz School and the Mahindra World College are truly world class institutes.

Valuable valley

As the space within the city shrinks, all major educational players are setting up campuses on the outskirts – the Lavale Valley about 10 kms from Pune. The Symbiosis International University, Bharati Vidyapeeth and FLAME (Foundation for Liberal and Management Education) have set major campuses in the valley. FLAME even boasts of a full-fledged, ready to use golf course next to it.

Tens of thousands of our students go abroad every year for higher education. This is both expensive and means being away from the family. But help is at hand. The Lavasa Valley – the first private Hill Station near Pune will soon house the Oxford University's Centre for research and executive education in India. NASA proposes to set up a big centre there. Many other big names in the world of education will soon ink memoranda with their India counterparts to set schools here.

Pune has the distinction of being the largest centre for Japanese learning in India. The city is also home to the Max Mueller Bhavan for German and Alliance Francaise de Poona for those aspiring to learn the French language.

Pune with its cosmopolitan atmosphere is a safe haven for women. It is also a very student friendly city. Apart from good academics the city offers scores of other allurements to students – great plays, musical concerts, boating, gliding and trekking and film festivals. All this makes Pune India's greatest educational hub.