

Women still minority at IITs, efforts on to achieve gender parity, says Preeti Aghalayam

Press Trust of India

NEW DELHI

Preeti Aghalayam, first woman to become the Director of an Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), said that women were still a minority on the campuses. She said that despite constant efforts to improve the gender ratio on campuses, there was still a long way to go.

While the first IIT was set up at Kharagpur in 1951, it was after seven decades that a woman has been appointed head of the prestigious institute. But for Ms. Aghalayam, Director-in-charge of IIT-Zanzibar, it is not just about breaking the glass ceiling but also living the "once an IITian, always an IITian" theory.

IIT-Madras, set up in 1959, has become the first IIT in the country to launch an international campus,



Preeti Aghalayam

with the new institute in Zanzibar in Tanzania set to begin its first academic session in October.

"It is not just about breaking the glass ceiling for me. It is more of 'once and IITian, always an IITian' for me," she said.

"I studied at IIT Madras. I have worked at IIT Bombay before and have been teaching at IIT Madras since 14 years... Many of my great friends are from IITs and I also met my husband at IIT Madras," Ms. Aghalayam said.

Her appointment comes at a time when several IITs have been making an effort to improve the skewed gender ratio on campus. "It is a fact that women have been a minority at IITs. Things have improved a bit in the past few years but the problem still exists and it is at all levels – both at student and faculty [level]. The problem is not about gender inclusivity on campuses but about whole perception around technology institutions," she said.

Engineering colleges in India have come a long way since the 1990s when the ratio of men and women enrolment was 10:1. This decreased to 7:1 in the early 2000s, and to 4:1 in the mid and late 2000s. It deteriorated further in 2014 when most of the IITs had anywhere between 5% and 12% of women population on their campuses.

Lightning not a natural disaster, says Centre

Number of deaths due to lightning has been increasing of late; if it joins the list of natural disasters, victims will be entitled to compensation under the State Disaster Response Fund; but an official says Centre is not in favour of it as deaths can be prevented through awareness programmes

Vijaita Singh
NEW DELHI

The Union government is not in favour of declaring lightning a natural disaster as deaths caused by it can be prevented by making people aware of safety steps, a senior government official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, says.

India is among only five countries in the world that has an early warning system for lightning – the forecast is available from five days to up to three hours.

The States such as Bihar and West Bengal have been demanding that lightning deaths be covered as a natural disaster. Once this is notified, the victims will be entitled to compensation from the State Disaster Res-

ponse Fund (SDRF). The Centre makes 75% of the contribution to the SDRF.

Cyclone, drought, earthquake, fire, flood, tsunami, hailstorm, landslip, avalanche, cloudburst, pest attack, frost and cold wave are now considered disasters under the SDRF.

Massive toll

Bihar's Disaster Management Minister Shahnawaz Alam told *The Hindu* that Bihar is one of the most vulnerable States and as many as 107 had died after being struck by lightning till July 6.

"In the past few years, there has been a spurt in deaths due to lightning. It is possible that climate change is one of the reasons. In the past five years, more than 1,500 people have lost their lives in Bi-



A flash of lightning illuminating the skies in Mysuru. PTI

har. On June 25, 2020, more than 100 people died in a single day after they were struck by lightning," Mr. Alam said.

He said he had raised

the issue at the July 13 meeting of State Ministers of Disaster Management that was chaired by Union Home Minister Amit Shah in Delhi.

The Minister said that timely alerts were sent out to people and pamphlets were distributed at the panchayat level to make people aware of the dangers associated with lightning.

"There are times when people acknowledge the message and take adequate precautions, but during peak farming season, sometimes people tend to ignore the warnings. Some of them are receptive but it is the poorest who bear the brunt," Mr. Alam said.

National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) data show that 2,880 people died in lightning strikes in 2021.

The deaths made up 40% of all accidental deaths caused by "forces of nature".

While 2,862 people died in 2020, the number stood

at 2,876 in 2019. There has been an increase in proportion of such deaths compared with the total accident deaths caused by events related to nature.

For instance, in 2003, deaths from lightning made up just 0.2% of the total deaths caused by "forces of nature".

A presentation made by the Director-General, India Meteorological Department (IMD) at the National Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction Conference (NPDRR) in March said the frequency of lightning was the highest in northeastern States and in West Bengal, Sikkim, Jharkhand, Odisha and Bihar, but the number of deaths is higher in the central Indian States of Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh and Odisha.

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PSLV-C56 to lift off with seven satellites

The Hindu Bureau
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM

After Friday's spectacular start to the Chandrayaan-3 moon mission, scientists at the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) will be back in Sriharikota for another important launch later this month.

The Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle-C56 (PSLV-C56) mission is expected to lift off from the Satish Dhawan Space Centre on July 26, as per the latest updates. The ISRO will be using a "core alone" variant of the PSLV for this mission, S. Unnikrishnan Nair, Director of the Vikram Sarabhai Space Centre (VSSC), ISRO's lead facility for launch vehicles, told *The Hindu*.

A commercial mission, the PSLV-C56 will have seven payloads in all including the 351.9-kg earth observation satellite DS-SAR (short for Synthetic Aperture Radar) from Singapore. The others are Arcade (23.58 kg), Velox-AM (23 kg) and Orb-12 Strider (12.8 kg). The remaining three are nanosatellites weighing less than 10 kg each. They are Galassia-2 (3.84 kg), SCOOB-II (4.1 kg) and NuLion (3.05 kg), the VSSC said. These satellites will be placed in a low earth orbit.

Something special

India's relationship with France is unique and multidimensional

Celebrating 25 years of the India-France strategic partnership was at the top of the agenda during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's two-day visit to France and his meetings with French President Emmanuel Macron last week, which ended with a number of agreements and a slew of defence deals. Mr. Modi's visit, just months before Mr. Macron is in Delhi for the G-20 summit, was a special one, as he was invited to be the chief guest at the Bastille Day parade – it saw Indian tri-service participation – and was the second time that an Indian Prime Minister has been extended the invitation (Manmohan Singh was the first in 2009). Chief among the agreements was the strategic road map for the next 25 years – "Horizon 2047" – which includes cooperation in defence, space, nuclear energy, climate change and green transitions as well as education and people-to-people ties. Another road map was released on how to cooperate further in the Indo-Pacific region, which includes military and naval exchanges and a trilateral development fund to help countries in the region. There were also the decisions, in principle, to buy 26 more Rafale fighter jets off-the-shelf (Rafale-M), this time for the Indian Navy; three more Scorpene submarines in continuation to the purchases of 2008, and an agreement between Hindustan Aeronautics Limited and Safran for helicopter engines.

In the broader picture, the France-India strategic relationship is built on a respect for each other's strategic autonomy. France has remained steadfast in its refusal to comment on India's internal affairs or its foreign policy choices. While France has taken a leading role in the western pushback to Russia's war in Ukraine, it has not joined other western countries in publicly exhorting India to change its stand. In 1974, and in 1998, France did not join the western push to sanction India for its nuclear tests either; it even stepped in with uranium supplies to power the Tarapur reactors. Mr. Modi's visit was also at around the same time that the European Parliament decided to adopt a resolution criticising his government for the violence in Manipur and alleged violations of human rights and freedom of religion issues. Yet, none of these issues was discussed or brought up. India too, made no mention of the violence in France after the killing of a teenager belonging to the Algerian immigrant community. Further, neither country has any desire to pull the other into a coalition, grouping or alliance the other is a part of, and both seem content with the success in forging the relationship bilaterally. In this and many other ways, their relationship has proven itself to be different from the other major partnerships that India has built across the world, explaining both the symbolism and the substance of the Prime Minister's visit.

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Coral bleaching

Arkatapa Basu

Record temperatures around the world have left animals, including humans, in dire straits. Of them, corals are particularly vulnerable: when the water around them becomes too warm, they are susceptible to bleaching. When corals lose their vibrant colours and turn white, they have bleached. This appearance-based definition is valuable because, just by the corals' pallor, an observer can say that the surrounding water has changed somehow.

There is more to bleaching, however: most corals are home to a type of algae called zooxanthellae, which give the corals their colours as well as have a symbiotic relationship with them. The zooxanthellae provide amino acids and sugars, and receive many minerals and carbon dioxide in return.

When the ocean environment changes – for example, if its temperature rises beyond a point, it becomes too acidic, or it becomes too bright – the zooxanthellae living within the coral leave. As they do, the coral fades until it appears to have been bleached; if the corals continue to be stressed, they won't welcome the algae back and eventually die. Other



Coral gone white due climate change. GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

stressors include low tides and water pollution, as well as ecosystem changes wrought by the climate crisis.

Bleaching is not always a death knell. Some colonies have been known to survive a bleaching event, like, famously, one near Japan's Iriomote Island: it was bleached in 2016 but showed signs of recovery in 2020.

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