



## Married to maths

By Kallol Bhattacharjee

**N**arendra Sreen, 74, was watching the evening news when he heard his brother-in-law's name being read out. Some time passed before the news was verified and his fears confirmed: Prof. Manish Chand Puri, 64, was felled by the terrorists' bullets.

Sitting outside the East of Kailash residence of his brother-in-law the following morning, Sreen recalled a hot afternoon in 1965 when Puri married Raksha. The anti-dowry bridegroom wanted only flowers on his bride. "He did not want a single gold ornament on my sister," recalled Sreen. "He was against wasteful expenses and was opposed big marriage parties. So he brought just 20 *baratis* and wanted the rituals completed by sundown to spare his in-laws a huge electricity bill."

Puri was a regular at the Operational Research Society of India's international conference held every year in Bangalore. "This time he had his students with him," said Sreen. "He spent all his time helping them."

At the Delhi IIT, where Puri used to teach mathematics, the atmosphere was sombre. Sarit Guha, an engineer with the Bangalore-based Cypress Semiconductors, fondly recounted his years spent under Puri. The academic fraternity is hoping that security measures at centres of higher learning would be strengthened. J.B. Srivastava, Puri's colleague, was to the point: "Times are changing." And how!

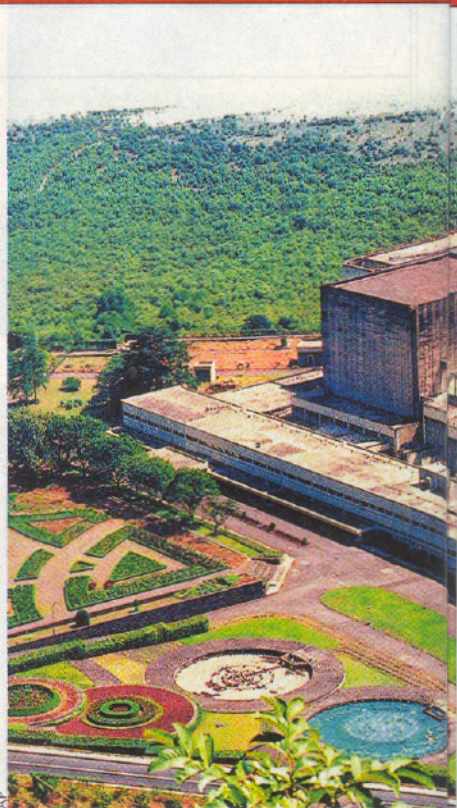
fortresses, but then these institutions draw their brain power mainly from institutions like the IISc and the IITs. A senior scientist told THE WEEK: "When you develop technology, you confront a lot of problems that are in the realm of basic science. These are the institutions that study them and offer solutions of a fundamental nature."

And that is why they also get clustered together, mainly in Bangalore, Hyderabad and Pune where key military and strategic institutions exist cheek by jowl with purely civilian academic institutions of high learning. As an aerospace scientist put it, without these civilian institutions, there would be no atomic energy, ISRO or DRDO.

The Bangalore attack has exposed chinks in the Indian armour. Said Uday Bhaskar, officiating director of the Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses: "Though not new to India, urban terrorism today is an innovation as it is zeroing on soft targets like institutions and market places." There are scores of civilian institutions—all soft targets in the sense that they are hardly defended—to which strategic technology development work is outsourced. As a naval officer reminded, the Navy's most prestigious and secretive VLF (very low frequency) communication was developed by Delhi IIT. And it is this technology that enables a submarine to remain deep under water and receive communication.

The vulnerability of these institutions—from the IITs to the IISc.—has not till today been factored into the security calculations of intelligence agencies. In fact, many in the intelligence community wonder whether the earlier neutralised plan to attack the Indian Military Academy in Dehradun was another misinterpretation.

Luckily the plan for Dehradun was foiled, but the problem persists with the intelligence mindset—of treating only establishments directly under the strategic departments as possible targets and ignoring the institutions that work on the fundamentals of the



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technologies developed by the strategic departments.

But the problem before the security establishment is: how to identify the institutions and guard them? Securing them as fortresses would go against the very fundamentals of scientific pursuit where free access and free flow of ideas are essential.

Already academic institutions have woken up to the new reality. On the night Puri was gunned down, Capt. B.N. Yadav, security officer of IIT Delhi, where Puri was teaching, received a terse message from

**The close presence of strategic institutions and centres of high learning in Bangalore, Hyderabad and Pune makes these cities vulnerable.**