

Aakanksha Sarada... Mumbai girl at Physics Olympiad

MUMBAI: Three years ago, as a student at Jamnabai Narsee, Aakanksha Sarada just about managed to go past the red line in physics. A decision was arrived at that day: Sarada would pursue English literature at St Xavier's, and would never have to look at the complex formulae and equations that physics throws up. In that short journey from school to college, though, something changed fundamentally and on Monday Sarada became the second Indian girl to qualify for the International Physics Olympiad (IPhO).

Sarada and four others — Mehul Kumar from Jaipur; Sanchar Sharma from Jodhpur; Shivam Handa from [Delhi](#) and Vipul Singh from Bhilai — will all represent [India](#) in the 41st IPhO 2010 to be held in Zagreb, [Croatia](#), from July 17 to 25. "My mother pushed me to relook at physics and the logic of the subject soon dawned on me. Physics is my favourite subject," said the 18-year-old who has been admitted by the [Massachusetts Institute of Technology](#) to pursue her undergraduate education.

About 36,000 students from across the nation participated in the first level examination. Of these, 312 were selected to move up to the next level, the Indian National Physics Olympiad (INPhO) examination. The INPhO examination was conducted in 15 centres across the nation and 37 students were selected to participate in an intensive training camp from May 4 to 17. On Monday, the five finalists were declared.

"All the students who participated in the camp were brilliant. The top five we have selected will go on and represent India at the International Physics Olympiad 2010 and I am sure they will do the country proud," said [Vijay Singh](#), National Coordinator for Science Olympiads.

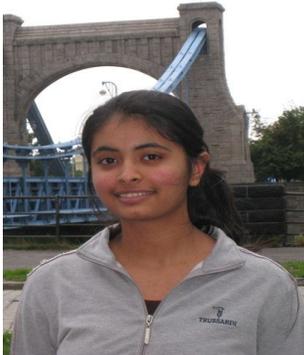
In physics, India has been faring rather well at the Olympiads — since some years, the Indian team's tally has remained similar — it has bagged four gold medals and a silver. "This year, we are hoping for all five golds," said Sathaye College student Sarada. A student who has topped the ranks since some years, Sarada also topped the Class X ICSE exams two years ago and has spent the past two years preparing for various entrance tests along with the Olympiads.

"I am sure that Aakanksha will make it to the Indian Institutes of Technology too. But she feels that MIT is where she belongs. She has been a student who used to hate physics, but had an open mind towards it. She is now one of the finest brains in the subject," said Praveen Tyagi, proprietor of IITians' Pace, a coaching academy, where Sarada was tutored.

But does falling in love with physics alter more than her career path? "Not really. I still manage to catch a couple of movies every week. I learn French and I am going for the international linguistics Olympiad. Last year, I won a silver," said Sarada.

Along with Sarada, Mehul Kumar from Jaipur is also part of the team. He said his preparation for IIT-JEE helped him since it required in-depth studying. "Also, several topics for the Physics Olympiad are similar to those in the CBSE curriculum for Standard XI, XII. A strong hold over the basics is also a must," said Kumar.

Topperspeak: 'There's no formula to crack JEE'



Aakanksha Sarada, the topper amongst girls at the IIT JEE, shares her success mantras.

It is a busy day at IITians PACE, a Mumbai-based coaching academy that trains IIT aspirants. There has been a steady stream of journalists queuing up to meet some of the toppers who have been tutored at the academy. One of them is Aakanksha Sarada, a student of Sathaye College.

Aakanksha has stood first amongst the girls who appeared for the Joint Entrance Examinations (JEE) and her all-India rank is 18. Dressed in a pair of fashionable gladiator shoes and sunglasses resting on her head, Akanksha looks everything like a diva should. Beneath her fashionable exterior however lies a passionate physics student.

Being in the limelight isn't new to Aakanksha. She was recently in the news for being selected to represent India [Images] at the International Physics Olympiad that will be held in Croatia in July.

Aakanksha completed her schooling from Mumbai's [Images] Jamnabai Narsee School where she topped with a 97-per cent score and recently cleared her HSC exams with a score of 89.5 per cent.

'There isn't a formula to crack the JEE'

"I never timed my study sessions," she says. "There were days when I studied for half an hour and other times when I studied for over ten. I never followed a timetable. The only time I'd stop is when I would feel exhausted.

"You have to love what you study. If you don't, no matter how much time you spend with your books, you will not get the desired results. (Many of the toppers) are where we are because we study for the love of it and not because we have an examination ahead of us. That is what makes the difference."

'I used to hate Physics'

The 18-year-old who is representing India at the International Physics Olympiad once hated the subject. She says, "I almost took up Arts just because I didn't like it. But my mother insisted that it might be something to do with the way physics was taught in school. Around the time I attended an orientation lecture at IITians PACE and have never once looked back."

She points out that one of the biggest flaws in the schooling system is the almost obsessive need to stick to the syllabus. "If you ask something out of the ordinary you would be told that it wasn't in the syllabus. It was very putting off. However here (coaching class) and at the (Olympiad training) camp, you are encouraged to ask questions."

'Eleventh grade was the most fruitful year'

While she admits that her first year in college was most fruitful, it was also when she was recovering from a culture shock. Her school, Jamnabai Narsee counts some of the city's affluent children amongst its students. Her college, Sathaye on the other hand attracts most of the studious lot of children.

"There weren't many extra-curricular activities in college. They didn't even have a Student's Council! Back in school, I used to participate in every extra- and co-curricular activity. So the shift came something as a culture shock. I made up for it by participating in activities outside college.

"I started learning French and Chinese around that time and also participated in the Linguistics Olympiad," she says.
In college, she scored 89.5 per cent, a modest tally by her standards.

Dealing with setbacks

The topper says that the last six months have been the most difficult. "I got malaria thrice during this time. The third time it was in the middle of my board examinations. They had to carry me out during one my papers," she says adding that you cannot afford to dwell on such things.

Aakanksha adds that while there was never a time when she failed an exam, she did do poorly once in school. "Thankfully everyone supported me and I took it as a learning experience. If I were to advise someone on setbacks, I'd say you have to think of all the successes you've had, learn from your mistakes and move on."

'Won't be joining IIT'

With the JEE behind her though, Aakanksha doesn't plan to get into IIT at all. "I was contemplating between MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) and Stanford. After visiting the two institutions I've decided to get into MIT (where she has already been admitted into the undergrad programme). The reason I didn't want to get into IIT was because I am still unsure of what I want to do. MIT will give me the option of switching not just courses but also streams. If I want I could walk out with a degree in linguistics or economics. It also offers me to take courses in the sciences at MIT and humanities at Harvard."

Ask her why she decided to appear for the JEE and she says, "It is supposed to be the toughest exam in the country. It was a challenge I wanted to take up. Also I was prepared for it so wanted to give it a shot anyway."

Tips for IIT aspirants

Don't make IIT the be all and end all of your existence.

There is no point in studying day and night for it because it doesn't help.

Live your life so when you look back at these two years you will not regret having spent them with books.

If you don't get into IIT don't be disheartened. Remember there are successful people who weren't part of IIT or weren't engineers either. So take it easy and enjoy what you study.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HovBFDYFVZo>