After Peking and before Casablanca

Hyderabad has welcomed in August the first Indian batch of the prestigious French engineering school. An elite education which is entirely financed by Mahindra, the second largest industrial group in the country.

On Centrale campus in Hyderabad in September. The first batch includes 232 students among which 27% are girls, against 19% in France.

By Véronique Soulé (Special correspondent in Hyderabad)

“Bonjour, madame. Je m’appelle Shreyar…” (Hello madam. My name is Shreyar).

The young Indian student in jeans and white shirt switches to English. For the time being, it’s more or less what she can speak in French. But from this year in the Indian campus of Centrale, she will have compulsory French classes apart from the courses taught in English.

“Later I would like to work in automobile industry, it has always been my passion”, she continues. “So with an education like the one provided by Centrale…”.

17 year old Shreyar, is among the 232 students of the first batch launched in India by the prestigious French school. 27% are girls, distinctly more than the percentage in France (19%), where they tends more to turn away from the sciences.

Opened on 4th of August in the city of Hyderabad (7 million inhabitants), alternatively called “the second Bangalore” due to its important high tech sectors, the college has been named Mahindra École Centrale after the second largest Indian industrial group (after Tata) which finances it.

After Peking in 2005 and before Casablanca in 2015, Centrale has started up in India, a country of 1 billion 250 million inhabitants and whose growth makes the Europeans green with envy. It intends to double its workforce in five years and train 480 Indian engineers per year. The goal is certainly modest but it poses a challenge in terms of excellence and prestige.

The school, which organized a trip for the press to Hyderabad, hopes to spread beyond the borders “the training in Centrale style: an opening to the entire world, a taste for innovation and team work organized around concrete projects”, says its chief finance director Gérard Creuzet.
Adapted curriculum

Higher education has become a global playing field. In France, business schools were the first to open international campuses by wooing students, hiring outstanding international faculty by offering high wages. Centrale is the first French government engineering school to set up in India.

“It is obvious today: a school like ours cannot live without international exposure, explains Hervé Biausser its director. In a world that’s been increasingly globalized one has to confront more universes, especially as the jobs of the engineers are structurally international. Soon, French students of Paris campus and Indians of Hyderabad campus will be offered an exchange program.”

It took seven years to realize this project. With an education system based on the British model, the Indians are unaware of the French system which distinguishes colleges from universities. Centrale was almost unknown to them.

Besides, India is also home to a sensitive nationalistic sentiment which should be carefully handled. For this reason, Centrale had to adapt its curriculum to suit the Indian needs. The Indian students enroll at MEC after intermediate, while in France it’s after 2 years of preparatory classes (prep’ schools). For now, MEC has got accreditation to deliver bachelor degrees in four years and master degrees in technology in six years. It is now waiting for the green light for masters in five years like in France following the European model.

“Centrale has chosen to go there rather than making students come here”, explains Hervé Biausser. “To immerse in another culture is very important and it can help us to improve ourselves”.

The school which quickly gave up on finding public partners because of bureaucracy turned towards the private sector. The meeting held with Mahindra, an industrial conglomerate active in the industries of transportation, aeronautic, construction and energy, in January 2012 changed everything. This wealthy group sponsors social activities- hospitals for the poor, school in remote rural areas. . .

With Centrale it aims now to “train the wealthier”. The conglomerate feels that India has to prepare future leaders of industry, a mission which the IITs might not be able to carry out.

“Here we train mainly engineers for the Indian market”, explains Vineet Nayyar, the vice president of the IT industry Mahindra Tech. “With Centrale, it’s about training more universal engineers whom with a cosmopolitan education will be the future leaders India’s manufacturing and business .”

By uniting with Centrale, the Indians hope also to avoid the influence of the Anglo-Saxon model. Young people decide massively to study in U.S, Great-Britain, Australia and New Zeland, and for less than 2500 of them in France. . .

For Centrale, Mahindra is the ideal partner. The group enjoys a great reputation in India. And agrees to finance everything: investment, wages of Indian and French teachers. . . Centrale for its part provides the training model. It pays nothing and gains nothing other than reputation and extension of its international network.

Cricket ground and zoo

Best of all: Mahindra which has already invested 650 crores (100 millions of dollars, 80 millions of euros) in the Indian campus does not expect immediate profit.
“We would be glad if we could balance in few years, attracting foreign students especially from Asia, by creating campuses in other regions.”

Mahindra says that it wants to make all India benefit the skill of future Centraliens. But it is possible that it sees in this school the recruiting ground in which it will select among the best future recruits. The others will be interested especially by the French companies working with India.

The group has also brought wonderful premises located in the campus of Mahindra Tech: buildings in bricks and white cement constructed on a land of 51 acres with lawns, sports grounds like tennis, basketball and mainly cricket. There is also a zoo filled with ostriches, deer and rare birds. The company trains their staffs and do research.

A building of 28,000 square meters with two floors remained unoccupied: it is where the École Centrale is set up.

One year ago, Modhiray (17 years old), had never heard about this French college. It was his parents who came across an advertisement in the newspaper and by seeing the name Mahindra they were excited:

“They then looked for Centrale in the internet”, he says. “I thought it could be a plus if I want to work later in foreign.”

The recruitment was not difficult. Andhra Pradesh is home to many of the best coaching centers for IIT entrance exam, in this respect; it attracts good students of sciences. Mahindra conducted an information campaign in its centers and intermediate schools. And then Centrale made its selection among the winners of IITs exams.

If Mahindra has provided scholarships for a third of its batch, students come from upper-middle class, even of higher class. Tuition fees go to 5 lakhs per year, to which some 1 lakh should be added for the hostel: a large room with balcony and bathroom to be shared by two. The campus being away around 20 km from Hyderabad, all the students are residential.

“It’s more expensive than IIT which would cost 2.5 lakhs for the best students. But it’s far less expensive than studying in foreign”, says a student.

In India, families invest a lot in children’s education. One should see that among the advertisements to fight against baldness and obesity which line up in the roadsides of Hyderabad, all those highlight the private schools being supposedly good from primary to high schools.

“If you care for the future of your child, choose wisely his/her pre-school”, these lines written in big letters could be read on the busses. Before enrolling their children to the college, many parents came to visit the campus. During the 1st day of the college, they came along with their children for the final verifications.

“To introduce the academic year, we had organized a lecture hall for 200 people, but they were, well, 400”, recalls the Dean of studies Mr Didier Clouteau. “Parents confirm the safety of the place and, especially for the girls as well as the seriousness of the management”.

“Mostly by hearting”

The time-table is tightly packed with classes such as management, engineering sciences, humanities... But the students do not complain.

“It’s the interactive side of the classes which surprises us. The professor questions us a lot and makes us to participate. We are not used to it.”

By Lilian Besson
“The students are very good in mathematics; there is no problem of level”, concludes Lilian Besson, a young French professor in mathematics and a student of the École Normale Supérieure of Cachan who has joined to teach for one year thanks to the International Internship Program.

“But it looks like they have mostly worked to succeed in a specific exam. They know the answers but they don’t know how to explain them”.

Didier Clouteau sees here a resemblance with Peking:

“The students know a lot of things. But to solve a problem it becomes very difficult. They had done manly by hearting during their studies”.

In the physic laboratory where the walls are still in a pure white and the equipment brand new, the students are doing experimentation on the speed of the sound with oscilloscopes.

“It’s not easy because they have never used them unlike the French who have already seen such equipment in intermediate levels” explains Nicolas Vernier, a professor from the university of Paris - Sud d’Orsay.

The students express their surprise.

“Here we learn concepts and the next moment we put them in practice”, explains one of the two.

“It’s entirely new for us”.

In IITs, the classes are in fact very theoretical and very specialized with no more than two or three weeks in company in observation training.

To be initiated to this pedagogy, 22 out of 25 professors had come for few days to the head office of Centrale at Chatenay-Malabry (Hauts-de-Seine, France). With an excellent level of competence, they have been recruited after some years spent in foreign - U.S., Great Britain, Israel etc - when they were looking for returning back to India. For many of them, France is only known as a country of arts and romance. With this first batch of young Indian students at MEC, perhaps Centrale and its engineers could rejuvenate the image of France in India.

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**Note:** (1) The state of Andhra Pradesh splitted in two states, with the creation of the Télangana state; Hyderabad is still the capitale of both states, but will soon become only the capitale of Telangana.

**Other articles on that subject?**

- Anand Mahindra: « France has a huge potential » (October 20th 2014, Le Figaro).
- After China and India, the École Centrale of Paris expands in Marocco (October 20th 2014, Le Monde).