Applying for faculty positions in India?

Here are some considerations that were shared with me by others. Some of them are 'useful' and some of them are just what some people think 'happens'. Find whatever is useful and use it with caution. This is not an "advice" document. It's just my attempt of jotting down the "vibes" during the application period. Go to View -> Outline to get an overview of the sections. Note: a lot of the initial text was just scribbled by me as others were speaking, so some portions below have been made readable using AI.

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What are they looking for?

Most institutes will not clearly advertise positions or lay down clear expectations about what kind of candidate they are looking for. It is a good idea to set up short calls with people in the institute (at different levels of seniority) to express your interest in applying and understand from them what they are looking for. Prepare a good intro spiel about yourself when approaching these individuals.

Some questions you can ask:

1. What are the key qualities and qualifications the institute looks for in candidates?
2. What is the typical timeline from application to decision? What are the various stages the application will go through?
3. What are the institute's expectations regarding the number and quality of publications from prospective candidates?
4. *(Can be tricky to ask)* When would be a good time to apply based on your current profile?
5. *(Can be tricky but good to know)* What resources are available in the institute to support new research programs and what financial and facility resources are available for establishing one?
6. *(Can be tricky but good to know)* Can the institute facilitate interdisciplinary collaborations and provide access to necessary facilities (e.g., imaging core, animal facility)?
7. (Important) Other specific questions related to your research program?

Draft letter cold emails

Hi xyz,
I am — . I am ready to apply for faculty positions in area —-.
I have previous experience —-.
I have funding —-. Eg if you have INSPIRE etc.
Would you have some time to set aside for a quick chat about the application process.

Advice I received while applying:

Below is a summary about considerations that many faculty (in India, US, Europe) shared with me as I prepared for the faculty application.

1. Craft a "Slam Dunk" Application:
    - Demonstrate clear abilities such as establishing new research programs, writing impactful papers, and possessing strong teaching and mentoring skills.
    - Highlight your unique ideas and how they can contribute to the institute's research goals.
2. Develop a High-Impact Research Program:
    - Focus on creating a research proposal that promises significant impact, which could mean addressing fundamental scientific questions or developing innovative methodologies.
    - Discuss your ideas with senior advisors and refine them to align with potential funding opportunities like the transition to independence awards, mandates of the institute.
3. Network and Engage:
    - Inviting yourself to give talks at various institutes. This helps in raising your profile and getting direct feedback from potential colleagues.
    - Network extensively. Engage in discussions with faculty members at target institutes to get insider advice on application timing, the faculty recruitment process, and the institute's culture and expectations.
    - This feels a bit weird and I only partially did it, but it is VERY common in India.
4. Apply Broadly and Prepare for Delays:
    - Due to the non-transparent and slow nature of hiring processes, apply to multiple places simultaneously.
    - Prepare for a long waiting period (1 year ish) and follow up regularly (every few weeks/months) to keep on top of your applications.
5. Understand the Funding and Institutional Support:
    - Investigate the kind of start-up packages available and what you can negotiate. Plan to ask for slightly more than you need to cover potential budget cuts.
    - You can reach out to junior faculty in the institutes for this information.
    - Make sure you understand the tenure track process, the expected number of publications, and other specific requirements.
6. Cultural Fit and Institutional Values:
    - Evaluate the culture of the department and the support systems in place for issues like gender equity and work-life balance.
    - Assess how the institution supports interdisciplinary and collaborative research, which is crucial for your work.

    - These are a bit difficult to assess directly as most people think/will say everything is great but will not even have an ICC in place!
7. Practical Aspects of the Job:
    - Get a clear understanding of the practical aspects such as housing, lab space, administrative support, and the quality of facilities like animal houses and core labs.
    - Ask about the challenges and advantages of working at the institution from current and former faculty members.
    - This is important as each institute will face some unique challenges.
8. Timing Your Application:
    - Understand the best times to apply, keeping in mind the academic calendar and funding cycles. Often, institutions might have rolling applications or specific times when they are more likely to hire.
9. Prepare for the Interview and Presentation:
    - Structure your job talk to include context, content, and conclusion. Practice delivering your talk and handling questions effectively.
    - If possible, set up mock interviews and talks with peers or mentors to refine your presentation skills.
10. Mentorship and Peer Advice:
    - Seek mentorship from individuals who have navigated the process successfully. Ask about their experiences and what they would have done differently.
    - Engage with early career researchers and PhD students in your field who are currently in India to get a sense of the ground reality.
11. Navigating Funding and Setup:
    - Prepare for potential delays in funding and setup of your lab. Have a clear plan for interim solutions and alternative funding sources.
    - Understand how funds are allocated and managed within your target institutions.

How to prepare for a job talk?

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nGrppCIe11o

Sharing a very effective and useful seminar on "How to Structure your presentations."

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hp7Id3Yb9XQ

How to prepare for a chalk talk?

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=03VVfk7edCc

Considerations of doing research in India that you must be aware about:

1. People costs:

    - You don't have to worry much about people costs (students, sometimes JRFs) or negotiate your salary in governmental institutional setup. Most of these are paid by the government. This is a perk!
2. Science is PhD-student driven:
    - Many students are first in their family to do a PhD.
    - Students are excellent. I am really new in the system, but the senior students I met who are doing good work in my field (across institutions) are being trained to be extremely careful and rigorous scientists.
    - Labs mostly consist of PhD students, less postdocs.
3. Bureaucracy:
    - Hiring and administrative processes can be very slow and non-transparent, often taking months or even years to finalise.
    - Funding disbursements from government bodies like DBT and CSIR can be unpredictable and delayed, affecting the timely execution of research projects. This is a known problem and there has been considerable effort to improve the situation (eg. check out ANRF). Depending on your field, there might also be non-governmental grants you could apply for.
4. Infrastructure:
    - Limited or varying quality of facilities such as animal houses and core labs across institutions.
    - Some institutes may not offer comprehensive startup packages, potentially hindering the initial setup of new labs.
5. Cultural and Institutional Dynamics:
    - Potential for sexism and discrimination, particularly affecting young female principal investigators and their career progression.
    - Caste equity issues, with discrimination persisting at various levels within institutions.
    - General culture of overwork, with expectations to work weekends/late nights, which can impact work-life balance.
6. Scientific Isolation and Engagement:
    - Some researchers experience a sense of isolation, particularly if their work requires highly specialised knowledge or tools not widely available locally.
    - Challenges in obtaining critical scientific feedback and engaging in deep scientific discussions.
7. Navigational Complexity of the Tenure Track:
    - There is a perceived lack of transparency in the tenure evaluation process, and cases where deserving candidates are asked to leave.
    - The tenure process can be highly stressful, with stringent expectations for publications and research impact.
8. Difficulties in Collaborations and Networking:
    - Related to the isolation point above.

    - Some researchers feel a disconnect between different research institutes due to geographical or bureaucratic barriers.
    - Challenges in establishing and maintaining fruitful collaborations, both within and outside the country.
9. Student and Postdoc Recruitment:
    - Difficulties in attracting and retaining talented students and postdocs, partly due to competition with more resource-rich countries or institutions.
    - Variability in student quality and motivation, which can affect research outcomes and laboratory dynamics.
    - Related to the isolation point above, it takes significant effort for trainees to understand the level at which science is expected of them.
10. Set-up and Operational Challenges:
    - Initial delays in setting up laboratories, including procuring equipment and establishing necessary research protocols.
    - Issues with importing new strains of model organisms and setting up specialised facilities like transgenic animal units.
    - There are governmental restrictions in the spending amount for various items, so even if one has the funding, being able to procure specialised items is slow.
11. Funding and Resource Allocation:
    - Challenges in securing adequate funding to cover all operational needs of a high-standard research program.
    - Negotiating budget cuts and understanding the financial administration within institutes can be complex.
12. Petty people at positions of power: be strategic in your battles as many people with decision making ability may be petty and it can hurt your chances to progress in the system (not talking about promotion etc which will be impaired certainly but about basic funding to continue your research!).

Negotiations

1. Timeline and Multiple Applications: Understand the hiring timeline of the institutions you're applying to, and if possible, apply to multiple places to leverage better negotiation terms based on competing offers.
2. Start-up Package:
    - Funding Details: Clarify how much start-up funding you will receive, what it covers, and whether it's sufficient for your research needs.
    - Budget Justification: Be prepared to justify the budget requirements, especially for costly items or those needing special approval.
    - Some institutions are quite cringy with startups and some are known to give you “what you want”! Ask around.
3. Negotiation Process:

    - Written Confirmation: Ensure all negotiated terms are confirmed in writing. Avoid relying on verbal agreements.
4. Early Access to Resources:
    - Pre-start Access: Negotiate the ability to order equipment, start renovations, or hire staff before your official start date to ensure a smooth transition. This is quite difficult given the bureaucracy but for some items like renovation or equipment that might end up in a facility, this is worth the hassle.
5. Facility and Office Space:
    - Space Allocation: Ensure you have adequate lab and office space reserved. Expansion post-hire can be difficult, so negotiate enough space for future growth.
6. Relocation and Housing:
    - Relocation Allowance: If moving, especially internationally, negotiate a relocation allowance to cover your moving costs. This might only be possible in private institutions.
    - Indian government institutes are not giving relocation allowance anymore :/
    - Housing Assistance: Inquire about faculty housing options and their costs, suitability, and availability.
7. Research and Lab Support:
    - Equipment and Supplies: Confirm the availability of essential research equipment and supplies, and the procedures for purchasing additional items.
    - Grant and Funding Mechanisms: Understand the internal grant mechanisms and any limitations or requirements for funding applications.
8. Team and Hiring:
    - Early Hiring: Consider the feasibility of hiring key personnel like Junior Research Fellows (JRFs) early to help set up your lab.
    - Student Rotation: Check if you can have students rotate in your lab before you officially join, which can help in early team building.
9. Institutional Support:
    - Mentorship and Integration: Ensure there is a supportive mentorship environment and opportunities for professional development.
    - Administrative Processes: Familiarise yourself with the administrative and bureaucratic processes at the institution to avoid delays in your research setup.
10. Cultural and Environmental Factors:
    - Institutional Culture: Gauge the cultural environment of the institution and how it aligns with your work style and personal needs.
    - Local Conditions: Consider local conditions that may affect your work, such as climate impact on research materials or facilities.

Budget

Ask for a sample budget from people who recently started.

- Make it detailed
- Consumables
- Facility costs
- Import duty

Starting a lab (ongoing!)

Still ongoing but making notes :) Reach out to me in a year!