

An Awakening In Bihar

How one rural school helps prepare poor youths for the Indian Institutes of Technology

BY MANJEET KRIPALANI

SANTOSH KUMAR, 19, aims for a doctorate in chemistry

2%
of exam-takers won admission to the IITs in 2006

Data: IIT, BusinessWeek

EVERY APRIL, SOME 230,000 INDIAN youths sharpen their pencils and sit for the intensely competitive entrance exam to the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs)—the seven prestigious schools that train India's top-notch engineers and entrepreneurs. After the grueling six-hour test, only 5,000 students are offered a place in the IITs. Most come from middle-class backgrounds and prepare for the exams through private coaching. But in the past few years, a small group of desperately poor, talented students have made it into the IITs, thanks to the Ramanujan School of Mathematics.

The school, named after a famous Indian mathematician, is even more intense than the IITs themselves. Located in Patna, the capital of Bihar, one of India's least developed states, the Ramanujan School trains just 30 students a year to take the IIT exam. Anand Kumar, 33, a local mathematician, and Abhayanand, 52, Patna's deputy director general of police and a lover of physics, founded the school in 2003 to help promising locals get ahead in the caste-based society.

They scoured Bihar's least privileged communities for 30 bright students to coach for the exam, providing free lessons and housing. They call their group the Super 30. "Intelligence is not birth-specific," says Abhayanand. In the first year, 16 of the group made it into the IITs. The next year, 22 made it. "This year," Kumar says confidently, "all 30 will get into the IITs."

Santosh Kumar, 19 (no relation to Anand Kumar), is one of this year's Super 30, and his story is typical of his classmates. He's from Dumari, a village in the Bihata district, about 22 miles from Patna. Nearly all the village's 3,000 residents scratch

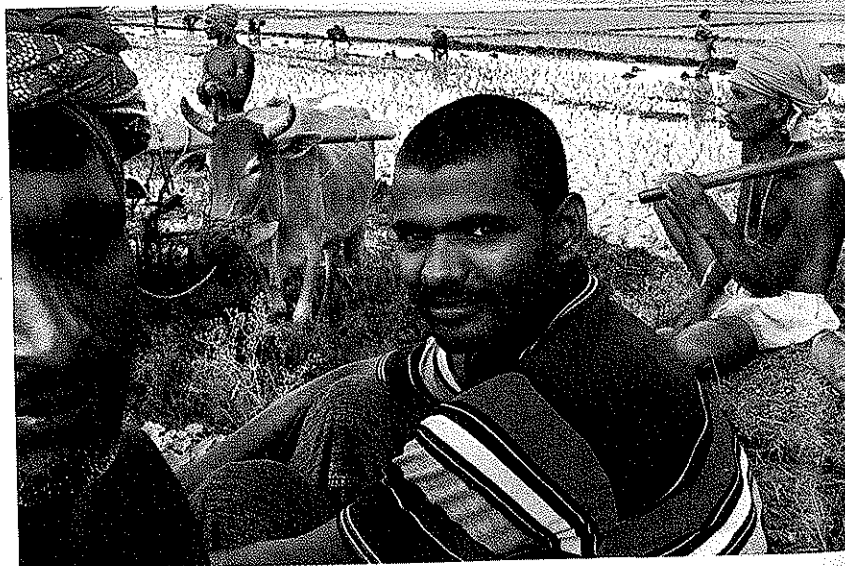
out meager livings as farmers. Santosh's sister and three brothers studied up to 10th grade but then returned to the fields. "Studying further required money, so that was that," he says.

Village Hero

SANTOSH WANTED MORE. His school had no roof, no doors, and no teachers half the time, but he borrowed books and tutored two young students for 70¢ a month. He also sold vegetables the family cultivated in a nearby market town. "I didn't even know which subjects I was good at, and I'd certainly never heard of IIT. No one had," he says. Then an eighth-grade teacher noticed his mathematical talent and encouraged him to study further.

Santosh saw that "education was the only way out of poverty," he says. At first, he planned to study so he could become an officer in the Indian civil service. After high school, he enrolled in the Patna College of Commerce, and then he heard about the IITs and the Super 30. "I went straightaway to Anand Kumar and told him: 'I dream of IIT, but I have no money.' He gave me his test, and I came second in the class. [He] let me into his Super 30—free," Santosh recalls.

For seven months, Santosh studied every morning for four hours, then sat down for a three-hour test in math, physics, and chemistry, and after a



break studied three more hours. From six to nine in the evening, he attended a class in the same subjects and prepared for the next day's test until 2 a.m. His work paid off last spring, when he won a coveted seat at the IIT in Kharagpur, near Calcutta. (He ranked 3,537 out of the 5,000 students chosen.) Santosh now aims to earn a doctorate in chemistry and become an inventor. His hero is Abdul Kalam, India's current President and father of the nation's missile program. Just as important, Santosh is on track to be the first person from Dumari to graduate from university, making him a hero in the eyes of his village. ■