

N-reactor, top secret Army facility at state R&D hub

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Jan. 9: For a state which pioneered the IT revolution in the country, and massive public sector enterprise much before that, the jewel in the crown will be the country's largest research and development hub that is taking shape 200 km from Karnataka's capital.

Chellakere, a nondescript town in Chitradurga district, will play host to a string of laboratories to foster research in frontier areas of science and technology in sprawling campuses that will be built by organisations including the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO), Bhabha Atomic Research Centre (BARC) and Indian Institute of Science (IISc). BARC's facility, planned on a 2,000 acre campus, will include a nuclear power station.

The Indian Army, that will provide security to these laboratories, has also requested the government for 10,000 acres, a site on which it plans a top secret facility and where it will station a brigade.

At the top of the list is DRDO, which has acquired 4,290 acres for an advanced R&D complex including a 3.5 km runway. It plans to develop long-endurance vehicles at this centre for surveillance operations lasting between 48 hours and 72 hours on the country's borders. Defence scientists at the complex will also design and develop unmanned combat aerial vehicles (UCAVs) or 'combat drones' that will be able to fire at enemy targets with a highly advanced degree of autonomy.

The 3.5 km runway will be able to operate transport and fighter jets, apart from the combat drones, sources in the ministry of defence said. The sources said work on this project will commence in a couple of months.

As part of its expansion, IISc has acquired 1,500 acres for a new campus in Chellakere and requested another 200 acres for housing and other amenities for its staff. "We have just started the survey. We will make a crude master plan sometime this year," IISc director P. Balaram told this newspaper. "Our plans include an Energy Research Centre, including a solar thermal power plant, some advanced research in aerospace, and sustainable development of arid areas. We are also planning many national projects for long term research."

According to Chitradurga deputy commissioner Amlan Aditya Biswas, BARC has asked for 2,000 acres for a nuclear power station and other laboratories. "This proposal has reached an advanced stage of approval. Next in line is the army, which has sought 10,000 acres. But we have offered 2,900 acres because we do not have any more land in our district," he said.

Mr Biswas said the state government will hold on to about 400 acres around these massive R&D centres to house ancillary industries and various public amenities required once all the projects are on stream.