

BY THE SANDPAPER 2.0 TEAM

## THE HISTORY OF BITS ADMISSIONS

*This article traces the history of normalization, a corruption-free, decades-old method of admitting students that has stirred a raging debate in the entire BITSian community about its relevance. The controversy has arisen largely due to the admission of very large number of students starting in 1985, from only one or two states in India. The last government wrongly interfered to change the system, but it resulted in intense discussion about the pros and cons of the alternatives. Since we have not verified the figures, any facts should be taken to be directional at best, rather than a completely accurate reflection of the reality. The article cites the opinions of alumni who volunteered to share their views on this theme. The Sandpaper Team did not pre-select people or endorse specific opinions in this regard.*

BITS, Pilani since its inception as a Deemed University in 1964 has admitted students purely on merit. Till 1972, merit was based on the total marks obtained in the qualifying examination; the subjects considered being Physics, Chemistry and Mathematics (PCM) for engineering. This system was also followed by Delhi College of Engineering and most Regional Engineering Colleges.

From 1970 to 1980, several changes were introduced including the integrated curriculum, Practice School and the Dual Degree Programs. Indian schooling also changed to the 10+2+4 system. BITS moved to four year degree programs instead of five years.

In 1972, BITS introduced a new admissions policy, admitting its students on the basis of normalized percentage of marks. This was also the time when the "Unassigned System of Admissions" was introduced. This was immensely unpopular and was discontinued partially in 1978 and completely in 1979.

From 1979 onwards, programs were classified as Groups A, B and C programs, which was significant since it assured all group B programs a dual degree from one of the programs of Group A.

**Dr. G Raghurama**, Dean of Admissions at BITS Pilani, says "The Institute decided on the scheme of normalized percentages of marks in order to remove the disparity in the evaluation systems of different boards in the country.

This method worked well over the years. It was a new and unique system which was highly appreciated."

### A COMMENT ON BITS DIVERSITY

Prior to 1970's, BITS predominantly had students from one state – Rajasthan. Then students began coming from places closer, Delhi, UP etc. There were a few persons from the South, and even then those were the persons who were living in Delhi, etc. By the mid-to-late 70s, geographical distribution of students does not appear to be an issue, although the majority of the students were from North India, since there was a good dispersion of students amongst all regions including excellent Southern representation.

**Chandra Bhople** ('74 Maharashtra-resident) remembers his days. "Even though BITS was really popular in the South especially Tamil Nadu and people would sometimes consider going to BITS instead of IIT, still we used to have substantial people from other boards as well. The diversity was as good as it can get." The geographic diversity of BITS probably peaked during the early 80s.

### THE RISE OF THE SOUTH

Dr. Raghurama says "Starting in 1985, large numbers of students from the southern parts of India started applying to BITS. Many regions in South India had the concept of seat reservations for the backward classes, following which the so-called 'forward classes' had

reduced opportunities in Institutes present in these areas."

**Venu Palaparthi** ('87 CBSE Board and Hyderabad resident) says "In 1987, out of the 500-odd students, approx. 150 were from AP, which was less than the 200-odd TN contingent. Barring a year or two, I have seen a gradual increase in the numbers of AP students, who equaled TN in numbers by the time I graduated." He goes on to add that "On a recent trip to Pilani, I was struck by the overwhelming number of Andhra students I met. The percentages are clearly much higher now."

**Ganesh Venkatraman** (Phy EEE '95 and a Chennai resident) concurs: "Through the '95-'99 batches at BITS the percentage of students from AP and TN were approximately 60-70%. While I don't know this for a fact or have verifiable numbers on it, I do believe this is the general perception and is reasonably accurate." Ganesh adds that "At least until 2000, most students from CBSE were from TN."

Over the last two decades, students from TN and AP appear to have kept an even grip on Pilani seats. **Abhijit Pethe** ('97 EEE) agrees that during the time he was in Pilani, 80% of the seats used to go to students from the South with those percentages becoming higher and higher closer to 2001.

The strong showing of AP students has been responsible for much of these increases. Unverified numbers suggest that substantially

more than 50% students at BITS Pilani campus came from AP in 2003. In 2004, we understand that this percentage on the Pilani campus fell due to some changes made by BITS with respect to AP Board results. But, in its first year of admissions, a very significant majority of the 560 students entering Goa in 2004 came from AP, according to a student at BITS Pilani-Goa.

As awareness increased about the BITS Pilani policy of admitting students on merit, and greater numbers were admitted, it created a cycle of even greater applications from the South. Today, 80% of the 10,000 applications received by BITS Pilani every year are from the five Southern states.

### THE SUCCESS OF ANDHRA PRADESH

Chandrababu Naidu was a big supporter of higher education, and his efforts have reaped rich dividends for the state's aspiring students. His government paid Rs 20,000 per year to every AP student who got admitted into BITS or IIT, effectively providing them with a free education. AP students have done well, thanks in part to the incentives, and the popularity of engineering as a career in the state.



AP has several schools that are "factories" fine tuned to producing

high marks in Class XII exams, such as Vignan, that (according to their own website), contributes 30-60 students to BITS every year. This is similar to the coaching institutes for JEE in Kota, a topic we will touch on in the next article. AP students do well at IITs, although the percentages are significantly lower. **Nagendar Bandi** ('98 IIT Guwahati) says "Approx. 16% of all IIT JEE seats were filled by AP students in 1998". A significant number come through the Ramaiah, Nalanda and Gowtham IIT coaching institutes.

Andhra students reportedly do significantly better on the AIEEE. One student reported that they have taken more than 50% of the available AIEEE seats last year.

This clearly shows the outstanding performance, ambition and determination of the AP student, especially when it comes to AIEEE and Board exams.

However, the enormous percentages of AP students in Pilani resulted in rumblings amongst the alumni when an alum visiting Pilani in 2003 observed in an email on a BITSAA yahogroup that he saw and heard that over 70% of the students admitted to BITS were from AP in 2003.

Venu explains the popularity of BITS. "In 1987, students were

generally coming from urban areas such as Hyderabad, and were generally split between the CBSE and AP Board." He adds that "As awareness about BITS Pilani increased in other areas of AP, and amongst AP Board students, with their advantage of being allowed to write improvement exams for the 11<sup>th</sup> grades, the numbers just exploded, which reflects the current population."

### THE BATTLE BEGINS: THANKS TO MURALI MANOHAR JOSHI

In a separate an unrelated action, in October 2001, according to Dr. Raghurama "The Government of India passed a resolution stating that all



engineering, architecture and pharmacy seats in the country will have to be filled only by IIT -JEE, AIEEE or State Level Entrance examinations. While the IITs were allowed to carry on with their exams, it was made compulsory for all other universities having other modes of admissions to join the AIEEE. The reason given by the government was that it would help reduce multiplicity of exams, ease the financial burden and tension on students. The AIEEE exams would be based on the common minimum syllabus, which students, irrespective of the board they come from would be able to attempt uniformly. "

Dr. Raghurama says "It is important to note that the normalization method was not being challenged by anyone, including the government. The issues involved were much bigger, including the autonomy of a university, the role of government and UGC on university affairs etc."

Dr. Raghurama indicates that BITS immediately expressed its unwillingness to join the AIEEE citing three reasons. Firstly, the government resolution violates Article 19 of the constitution of India, which says that the admission procedure is the prerogative of the Institute. Secondly, the current method is a fair, transparent purely merit-based system with no quota or reservations. Lastly, the planned system was discriminatory - JEE for IITs, AIEEE for everyone else.

BITS offered alternatives to its current system that should be followed for all schools in India. The government ignored its wishes, and BITS went to court.

### **BITS GOES TO COURT**

BITS filed a case in the Rajasthan High Court regarding the enforcement of this Central Government policy to dictate the admission procedure.

An interim order was passed by the Rajasthan High court allowing BITS to carry on admissions in its own way. Later in April 2004, BITS got a permanent judgment in the case.

On this basis the Admissions Office went ahead with the advertisement for the admissions process.

But the Government moved the division bench of the Rajasthan High Court against BITS, and the case was heard all over again. The division bench reversed the earlier decision, and ruled that BITS should join AIEEE. By that time, AIEEE exam had already been conducted for 2004 and there was no way BITS aspirants could take it if they had not done so already.

BITS had already received more than 10,000 applications based on its advertisement. It was a trying time; the court was on vacation till July, which meant BITS was in danger of not being able to conduct an admissions process at all that year. The HRD Ministry was not sympathetic.

BITS management notified the applicants of the switch to AIEEE, which enraged many students who were sure of getting into BITS. Some of these affected students moved the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court then 'stayed' the Rajasthan High Court order and decided to allow BITS to conduct

admissions using their original criteria.

### **MM JOSHI DEPARTS!**

With the change in government, on Oct 1st, 2004 the new ministry passed a notification stating that autonomy would be given back to all universities and that it was no longer necessary for deemed universities to join the AIEEE. This supports the stand taken by BITS all along.

### **IN CONCLUSION**

Although the court case had nothing to do with the normalization process or the rise in AP students at BITS, the timing of the case resulted in significant discussions and deliberations at BITS to start working towards a new admissions process. The case should never have gone to court, but it had an unexpected outcome generating healthy debate and a proposal for a unique new examination by BITS

Pilani. ♦

