

WITH MADHURJA BANERJEE ('01 INSTRU)

REMINISCENCES BY DR. MEERA BANNERJI

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Dr. Meera Bannerji, a native of UP has worked at Pilani for 23 years. She holds an MA from Agra University, B.Ed from Rajasthan University and a PhD from BITS Pilani. She taught M.Phil level courses, CDCs for Science and Technology, Communications and Technical Report Writing. She was a Member of the Senate, as well as Scholarships, Fellowships and Library committees, and most famously, the Warden of Meera Bhavan. She wrote the book, "Developing Communication Skills" with Professor K. Mohan in 1990.



I almost didn't come to Pilani

More than 35 years, ago, after going through a harrowing set of physical endurance tests and other examinations for the post of the NCC officer of the Women's Wing of NCC cadets at the University, I finally tasted the bitter-sweet fruit of success. Bitter because the experience was physically challenging especially for a person leading a quiet, sedate life. And sweet because I was selected as the only candidate out of 200 aspirants. I was faced with a difficult choice. Go to Gwalior for the NCC training and plunge into new profession. Or to go to Pilani to join my husband!!

I finally decided on Pilani. I had simply, irrevocably fallen in love with the place, with its big and small inconveniences and inaccessibility, a new way of life, new surroundings, the velvety, lush green lawns and the bountiful earth. It is difficult to believe that in this Oasis, one needed to plant any vegetable and just water the patch regularly. And lo and behold! It turned out the largest radishes and onions, the biggest sizes I had ever seen. Of course, the menace of peacocks was not so pronounced at that time so we

could actually taste the fruits of our labor.

Gossip sessions and the Akhand Paath

With few telephones in those days, information exchanges were exciting. Need I say, the juiciest pieces, nay, the choicest items of information were obtained at weekly meetings of the Womens Club, or in the Chit-Chat sessions of the housewives after their husbands had left for the Institute. The weekly Akhanda Paath sessions were also lively for catching up on the Pilani stories. Vidhya Vihar campus residents had to create their own entertainment and this made us quite creative individuals.

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Movies & the MB curfew

I think it was in the late 1960s that we had the opportunity to witness Hindi films in the open-

air QT of FD II. Days when the movies were to be screened were neither fixed nor announced. But everyone used to come to know about it through word of mouth. No seating arrangements were made. We had to sit on the grass or take a seat on the stone steps. Incidentally, only one set of steps existed at the time. It was much later that the three other sets of symmetrical steps were added.

Color films did not arrive till the mid-70s, and the movies that were screened were neither new nor the stories always interesting. Nonetheless, all of us enjoyed watching the memorable black and white films from those days. It used to be a special occasion to complete all routine jobs at home quickly and be there at the Q.T. at 7.30 pm. It was later in the 1970s and 1980s such movie shows became a regular feature of BITS campus life. Two separate shows were arranged in the Central auditorium. The students got the top priority and the staff the next. Seats were reserved for the MB girls on the balcony with a watchman guarding the seats as assiduously and meticulously as a cat ferociously looks over her newborn kittens! No one dared to occupy the so-called reserved seats.

Often one noticed lines of giggling, talking girls walking to and from the auditorium on Sundays when movies were screened. The girls were guarded by one matron in front and another one at the rear! The girls hostel comprised just one block of eighty rooms or so. There were only 30-35 girls and they did lead a very sheltered and protected hostel life with high boundary walls all around; one main gate in front and a small gate at the back. Every girl was expected to be in the hostel by 7 pm. Both these gates had a watchman; each on guard round the clock.

Theater meant hooters, boys playing women and Professors in-charge

Back in those days, enterprising male students put up English and Hindi plays with an all-male cast, a feature not too different from the Ramayan plays put up by the locals in our towns today ! The boys enacted the female roles quite superbly. Each club had a Professor-in-charge who was a theatre-enthusiast himself. Only in the early seventies did girls venture to act in these plays. The duties of the Prof-in-charge included supervision of all rehearsals, especially during late nights and the responsibility of escorting the girls back to the hostel after practice.

In 1973, the English Drama Club was staging an American one-act play called Cancer in which my elder daughter was one of two girls playing an important role. My daughter was the only day-scholar; the other girl lived in the hostel. After a few days, my husband who was the Professor-in-charge of EDC decided to do away with supervisory duty of the girls. He

had implicit faith in the integrity of the students. He also believed that students were mature adults who would undertake all aspects of the staging the play – including direction, stage setting, costume designing and acoustics with great responsibility. He decided to make them wholly in-charge of the job. And how correct he proved to be !

It is sad that the untiring efforts of these dedicated students were often marred in the old days by miscreants or professional hooters. Their sole job was to hoot and jeer throughout any play being put up. It was very difficult to hear the dialogues properly unless one sat in the first or the second row in the auditorium. No one understood why they acted in this obnoxious manner.

Once Prof. Madhusudan Singh of the Languages Group, a real theatre lover, had put in a lot of efforts to produce a Greek Classic Antigone by Sophocles. A decision was taken to stage this play for exclusively theatre enthusiasts in the Engineering Theatre instead of the auditorium. Invitations were issued selectively to both staff and students. The iron-grill shutter for entry into FD II was locked. The play began and we were all engrossed as the play started. But this was not to be! Hooters gathered in large numbers near the closed shutter and started shouting slogans. They demanded to be let in. Since the capacity for seating students in the ET was limited, it meant that if the miscreants were let in, there would be complete chaos. Prof. Singh was naturally very upset and so were the actors and actresses. They all wound up their stage

materials and quietly left for their respective hostels without completing the play. Many of us were shocked and sat there dumbfounded. Only two scenes had been enacted. An exquisite portrayal of an age gone by was lost forever.

Thankfully, the hooters attitude improved over time and eventually they disappeared. I don't know what made the hooting fade away, but the Pilani crowd turned into avid and sincere play-watchers. We had a gala time putting up plays with a mixed cast consisting of teachers and students. Several Hindi and English plays were staged in this manner.

Every girl was expected to be in the hostel by 7 pm then. Both these gates had a watchman; each on guard round the clock.

Once the Staff Association decided to put up a Hindi play, with as many members of the staff participating as possible. There were a number of one-line dialogues too in the play. The Director of the play (a very senior faculty member) was very strict, and he demanded perfection in every sense. Some staff members had agreed to be on the stage for the very first time, and were naturally very stage-conscious and very shy. The rehearsals were great fun, but I had a lot of trouble controlling my giggling during the rehearsals. The Director even seriously threatened to tape

my mouth ! I found a way to stop it only on the final day. Instead of making eye contact with the characters, I looked somewhere else when delivering all my dialogues. No eye contact, no shyness, no giggles. The play was a hit !

The one constant – to climb the MB wall

I've talked already of many changes. Movies, theater, curfew for girls, even the sheer numbers of women in Pilani. Life in Pilani has gradually

changed from the 1960s to today, although we have some pleasant constants that make this place so unique. Most change has been for the good. The proliferation of options – be it the many transportation options to take you out of Pilani at any time (versus the 2-bus option that was available to us), the innumerable brands of toilet items, food and beverages, clothing shops keeping pace with the latest fashion trends – and even the tailors and their significantly lower charges. These changes are welcome and

many more would take place in future too I believe, that will continue to make Pilani a fun place to spend a lifetime.

One constant ! One interesting topic among the male students through the years has been the constant desire to scale the high boundary walls of Meera Bhavan. No one has ever tried to meet to this challenge, let alone succeed, of course (I think!), but doesn't stop them from talking about it. I am no longer Warden, but I will be watching to see if anyone ever will. ♦

BITS Pilani screensaver by KM Vivek (87' Eco MMS)

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