

BY SAGARIKA JAGANATHAN ('93 BIO)

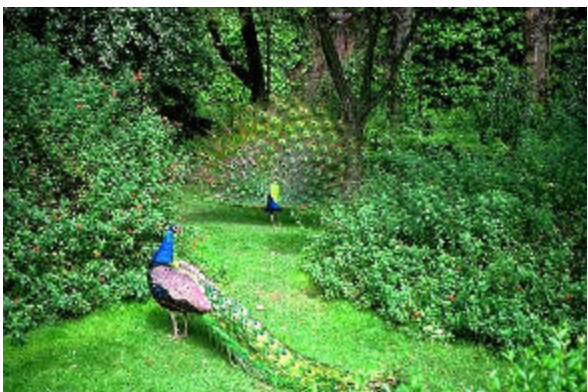
## BACK TO ROOTS – A SABBATICAL IN PILANI

*Professor Aditya P. Mathur ('70 EE) teaches Computer Science at Purdue University, one of America's top schools. He has taught in the US for 18 years—but most recently this year, he returned from a much-cherished sabbatical at his alma mater, BITS Pilani.*

“ALTHOUGH I’ve practically been visiting Pilani every year since 1990, this time I was there for a different reason,” says APM, as he is fondly referred to in BITS circles. “I’ve wanted to go back to BITS for a long time. I love the place,” he adds. “The BITS campus is, to me, the most beautiful campus I’ve seen anywhere.”

APM has strong educational ties to Pilani. In a seven-year stint from 1970 to 1977, he completed his bachelors, masters, and doctoral degrees—all in Electrical Engineering! And not only that, he taught at BITS for 14 years, starting in 1972 and continuing till he eventually left in 1985. APM’s position at the helm of India’s first Computer Science department is just one of his many distinctions during the teaching tenure at BITS. With the help of some friends among the faculty, APM established the graduate and subsequently undergraduate CS programs at BITS.

“I wanted to make use of my



sabbatical opportunity to also

meet the hundreds of people I’ve come to know at BITS and in Pilani,” says APM. With his family staying back in the US, APM had the excellent VFAST guest house facility all to himself, enjoying overwhelming hospitality and courtesy from students and staff.

“Everyone I’d met made me feel welcome and important throughout my stay at Pilani,” says APM. “The facilities that were provided—both academic and non-academic—were excellent.”

I’m amazed at how some things in Pilani have withstood the test of time,” says APM. “The lovely Saraswati temple I visited twice each day during my student days at BITS; peacocks all over the campus; well dressed little children going to school early in the morning—what a wonderful sight; the tea and samosas in the cafeteria (IC); the sight of some classes overflowing and some

remaining mostly empty—all due to the popularity or unpopularity of the respective professors; and the rickshaw-wallahs, the redi-wallahs, the dhobis, and many other people who have managed to retain their simplicity and affection over the years.”

“I must admit a few things have changed,” he says.

According to APM, the positive



changes include enhanced computing facilities; new buildings (e.g., the library, more hostels); good social atmosphere among the faculty and staff—most seemed upbeat about the progress BITS has made under the leadership of Dr. Venkateswaran, and about the future; salaries are at par with the IITs; the greenery on campus—“It’s like a flower garden; bougainvillea plants are all over the place and in full bloom! Lots of vegetable and fruits available for purchase, unlike in the 60’s and 70’s”—and the supermarket on campus for students, staff, and faculty.

A few negative aspects to the modern day Pilani campus also caught APM’s eye. “The campus is dirtier than it used to be in my days,” he says. “This is especially pronounced when you go towards Connaught. Vehicular traffic has increased on campus to the extent that I never felt comfortable taking my usual evening walks; too much noise pollution from religious

organizations right outside the campus—the loudspeakers come on as early as 4am; and the number of bicycles on campus has increased dramatically,” he adds. “Not that I’m against it but parking is most haphazard.”

APM did get a chance to make one trip to the US and back, in the middle of his sabbatical. The quick transitions caused him to mull over the stark differences in both environments. “During a brief stopover in Amsterdam, I noticed the huge number of neatly parked bicycles in many places around the city...all in a neat fashion. But not in Pilani! I tried my bit but did not succeed,” he admits, ruefully. “I asked myself, why can’t we be as clean and disciplined in Pilani and in India?” But his heart is still with the small town in his native country.

BITS management went out of its way to ensure he had an incredible experience. He had a light course load, teaching classes only on Tuesday and Wednesday. BITS also provided him with financial support so that he could make the most of his time in India by touring the places he’d always wanted to visit. A car was at his disposal whenever he wanted to go to Delhi. “I traveled a lot in India” he says. “My colleagues in CS even offered to cover any classes I may miss during my travels.”

APM taught one seminar for PhD students and one regular course during this time. He also initiated and organized a conference in Pilani for various companies and Indian universities to convene and share ideas. The Ranjit Singh Chauhan Award for Undergraduate Research, which

APM instituted, will be given to one or two undergraduate students at BITS, whose research is judged as superlative by a committee of BITS faculty and chaired by the dean, R&C. The award amount will vary depending on the interest earned from the endowment.

During his stay, APM had an opportunity to gauge the depth of knowledge among the PhD level students in Electrical and Electronics engineering as well as in CS. He attended talks by six PhD students—“Some of them were pretty outstanding,” he says. APM was also invited to talk to 75+ students and



faculty members at the IITs in Delhi and Kanpur.

APM admits the sabbatical validated his opinion that undergraduate education at BITS is simply outstanding. “The quality of students and the popularity of the BITS name and image, in India and abroad, are at par with that of the IITs,” he observes. “I immensely enjoyed working with the students. In fact, I had such a great time at BITS that in the thick of the sabbatical, I did not feel like returning to the US!”

Although he did not get to do much research except with students in the US. (Via email

and the one vis it in the middle of his sabbatical), APM initiated two research projects which have now resulted in two M.S. theses. He did continue to advise BITS students—via email and phone conversations—after returning to the US.

According to APM, a sabbatical at BITS is a wonderful opportunity for all ex-BITSians—who are teaching in the U.S as well as across the world—to relive their BITSian experiences. “You’re taken care of as if you’re family,” he says. “BITS paid a lump sum for my travel to India as well as for my work there. Besides covering my accommodation and food for all

six months, the administration, upon request, provided me with a brand new Mercedes—Yes, a bicycle of my choice! This served me very well during my stay,” APM adds.

APM counts himself lucky to be able return to BITS at a time of incredible change. “I had the opportunity to experience some profound changes in India and at BITS, firsthand,” he says. “The facilities at BITS are excellent, the staff is congenial, and the students are brilliant and very enthusiastic—what more could a professor aspire for?” APM concludes.

*If you're considering a sabbatical at BITS Pilani, or know of professors who may be interested in spending a semester in India, please feel free to contact APM directly for feedback: [apm@cs.purdue.edu](mailto:apm@cs.purdue.edu)*

