

BY HIMABINDU CHITTA ('02)

A WOMAN OF SUBSTANCE

DR. MEERA BANNERJI – MB WARDEN



Capturing the essence of a conversation with Meera Banerji in mere words is an arduous task. She is a master storyteller and the “interviewer” is usually lost in a maze of anecdotes. Here we’ve tried our best to sum it up without leaving out any interesting tidbits.

“Saurav, Neha – aa gaye tum log? Apni copy nikalo... Badmaash Saurav – page phadna nahin! Aaj tum handwriting practice karoge. Apni pencil sharpen karo aur shuru ho jao. Neha yeh page yaad karna. Aur Deepak tum bhi.”

Dr. Mrs. Meera Banerji is back in form. Having ended her thirty-eight year long career in BITS, she has now begun to teach primary school children at home. Kids of various ages

come to her modest home on Loharu Road to learn the basics of spoken and written English. We suspect, however, that they learn a lot more than that.

“This one is a brat,” she says, looking at skinny six-year old Saurav seated strategically close to her. “His mother cannot control him at all. But as long as he is here, he’s a mouse.” We’re not surprised. The three kids around her quietly complete the tasks assigned to each of them.

We ask her if she is enjoying retirement. “Life is cool!” she exclaims happily. “I keep myself busy.”

Busy is an understatement. On alternate days, she travels to Mandelia Home Science College on the outskirts of Pilani to teach English literature to Hindi-

medium Arts students. “It’s a challenge,” she admits, “I’ve managed to convince my students that they can understand English in English, without translating everything to Hindi. And the motivation to take up this challenge came from the girls themselves. Some of them travel more than fifteen kilometers from their distant villages to attend college. Their urge to educate themselves is inspiring.”

Her evenings are occupied by the primary school kids. (Even getting an appointment for this interview was difficult.) Is it a bigger challenge to teach little kids? “It takes more patience, but the results are immediately visible. And anyway, I’ve faced bigger challenges,” she adds with a wink.

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What might they be? “I was a student from a pure arts background. When I first came to Pilani and enrolled for a PhD at BITS, they made me do a basic undergraduate level science course called “Impact of Science and Technology” along

with the same kids whom I was teaching General English 3. My “fellow students” were always much more interested in my marks than their own! That kept me on my toes and I did well in the course.”

“When I saw couples sitting outside the MB gate in the shadows, I would tell them “I am merely telling you to sit in the light!” The guy often claims he is teaching the girl. Sometimes they say they are looking at photographs. How can anyone do these things in the dark? It beats me!”

We ask her about her most high-profile role in BITS – that of MB warden. She laughs. “Life must be easier for you girls, now that I’m gone!” Most BITSians – both male and female – are much too familiar with the legend of M Bans, as she was affectionately called. Although she is no longer on campus, stories are still told in hushed tones about how strict she used to be and how terrifying it was to try and take special permissions from her. How did it all start?

“To begin with, the administration never thought of me as a warden. I had to

convince them that I could understand the psychology of younger people and that I was approachable and fair. At that time I was the only warden and I insisted on moving into the house next to Meera Bhavan. My idea of being a good warden was to always be accessible.”

What of her no-nonsense image? “That is truly how I am. For example, when I saw couples sitting outside the Meera Bhavan gate in the shadows, I always went out and spoke to them. “We’ve done nothing wrong,” they would say, and I would retort back, “When did I say you’ve done anything wrong? I am merely telling you to sit in the light!” I have heard the strangest of stories from these couples. The guy often claims he is teaching the girl. Sometimes they say they are looking at photographs. How can anyone do these things in the dark? It beats me!”

Have the MB girls ever tried to play a prank on her? “Once or twice, yes... but I was such a mischievous child myself that I could always see it coming. The look in the girls’ eyes usually gave them away. And I much prefer to think of all the times that the girls have shown their love for me.”

Does she miss all the action? “Of course. Getting over a routine that is thirty-eight years old is certainly not easy. I still sleep at eleven, although my daughter reminds me that I no longer have to stay up that late. But I don’t believe in lamentations and I think that women are genetically adaptable. The only thing I miss is the noise of the MB girls. It’s too quiet out here.”

She has enjoyed the academic freedom available in BITS to the fullest and engaged in a wide range of activities including taking an active part in English Drama productions and being a member of the BITSAA



executive committee. But all that is in the past and she is now beginning to enjoy her new, relatively relaxed lifestyle. And so we bid goodbye to a legend who has, in her own words, always lived life on her own terms, shocking quite a few along the way (“I don’t care!”) but never compromising on her values.

BITS Pilani and Meera Bhavan in particular will miss you dearly. ♦