

BY ABHIJIT KUMAR ('04 CSE)

BITS Pilani | Dubai Campus

## Oasis to Oasis

Tracing the journey from small town Central India to the urbane Dubai in pursuit of a great education.

When I first read about BITS-Pilani opening their first offshore campus in Dubai, I must admit I was a little apprehensive. It took me half a dozen calls to the Admissions Officer and the Student's Affairs to be completely convinced of the sound infrastructure, meticulous planning and enormous support from Pilani that had gone into realizing the vision that was BITS-Pilani Dubai Campus (BPDC). A prestigious collaboration with one the largest group of companies locally had also ensured stability, facilities and backing for large-scale expansion, in a region not known for its educational centers. The stage was all set for the students to carry forward the high standards that were part of the BITS name.

The orientation was on Sep 7<sup>th</sup>, 2000 and the sixty odd students (an all-Indian outfit) who joined BPDC were quick to realize the foundations, the expectations and the pros & cons of being a first batch. Although we missed out on guidance from seniors (which dawned much later when we had our juniors) and a few facilities (which improved with each batch), we also had a very personal rapport with the Dean **Prof. Ramachandran** and our staff, few of whom were BITSians. In addition, being much smaller in number, our batch had an amazing level of spirit, unity and cooperation. The official inaugural ceremony



was in November, and was done by Dr. K.K. Birla, who amidst his speech read out the then **Prime Minister, Shri Vajpayee's** letter to the students of BPDC.

Most of the school-kid attitude was replaced by our newfound goals with BPDC and our Dean's inspirational counseling provided a great boost and direction for all of us. The remaining part of our first year passed rather uneventfully, due to a variety of reasons from homesickness, hostel culture, adjusting to mall city, exchange rates or just plain studies. The BPDC branding in India was still at the start of a steeply rising graph. I remember how all of us volunteered to help by giving our India phone numbers. Students on vacation, from Delhi to Hyderabad, Bombay to Cuttack spoke to several aspiring students and parents, explaining everything from admission procedures, education loan schemes, VISA requirements, faculty and prospects. We were keen to make a good first impression.

With a fresh intake of students in 2001, the equation changed a bit,

with a reflection of déjà vu, plans for more activities, a fuller hostel, and new stories from India and a little bit of our version of the Arabian hospitality. The sessions with our Dean were still something all of us really looked forward to, and a new wave of being senior students added more expectations from us. Visits from **Dr. K.K. Birla, Prof. Venkateswaran** and later the visit of the Honorable President of India, **Dr. Abdul Kalam**, further instilled a sense of pride and responsibility amongst all of us. On a personal note, I began to find enormous relaxation and freshness in the strong doses of rock music that the frontbenchers pumped in all the time. This formed the backdrop for most of my late night study sessions and the stages of Need for Speed.

I strongly believe that a BITSian hostel would always have the same flavor, irrespective of geography. Midnight oil was always in – if it was not searching for cheeky material for assignments, it was the Quiz on Thermodynamics or the latest Khan extravaganza. There was always something – from Limp Bizkit to Jagjit Singh, from CGPA to distant plans for Masters. The elaborate birthday celebrations had to be one-

of-a-kind, and ditto for the wee-hour World Cup matches which were marked by a good attendance.

Our PS-I program was highly successful, with many positive figures, and these reflected on the next intake of students and an exponential increase in the number of stations. Due to lesser academic pressure during PS, a new level of socializing set in – College Road shows, mass counseling sessions, Driving Licenses, beach football, bus rides, budget eateries and in-house parties; we had them all. *Onam*, Christmas, *Eid* and *Iftar* were all redefined to mean colorful, high-energy celebrations attended by everyone. I particularly want to mention two events in Dubai. First, the splendid *Navaratri* celebrations, of which *dandiya* was the highlight (and to which our batch has been a regular for the last four years). Second, an underground rock concert that proved that even the heaviest rains could not dampen the spirits of the hundreds (including yours truly) who nudged the local bands to proceed with the show.

As our time at BPDC drew closer to the end, I slowly began



to comprehend what I would be missing – the jogging with **Manish** behind the hostel, playing chess with Anna, the group studies in the hostel, news with **Nachiket**, *dandiya* with **Charles**, lab assignments with **Abhishek** and the plethora of activities that were now built into the BPDC culture. In addition, although the nostalgia was always playing in the background, we tried to face the next episodes of campus recruitment and college applications. As a batch, we probably missed a senior's advice most at this stage. While some were keen to go back to India and cash on the explosive market growth, some chose to apply to the fleet of new and enterprising companies that participated. By

God's grace, I was amongst the first to be recruited on campus along with my long time pal lab/hostel/class mate Abhishek. Some chose to apply individually.

The graduation ceremony was very impressive, and it is not uncommon to feel weak at heart, on your G-day. Anyone could tell that the faculty (especially those from Day 1 onwards) were probably just as emotional as the first batch. BPDC, now set for its sixth intake of students (still predominantly Indian), is a well established name in the academic circles, and has an impressive new campus in the Knowledge Village campus, adjacent to the Dubai Internet City and Media City.

Now scattered all over, from Masters, to Media, Consultancy, Banking, Oil, Software Engineering, Marketing and Sales, we go that little extra to stay connected. We often have small or medium reunions mostly in Dubai, and have planned a small one in Delhi later this year. Rains still don't stop us from cheering at concerts.

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*Abhijit can be reached at*  
[k.abhijitkumar@gmail.com](mailto:k.abhijitkumar@gmail.com)

