

INTERVIEW BY VIJAYA GANESH (BITS ME STUDENT)

THE QUARTERLY BITSIAN: PROF. GP AVASTHI, FORMER HEAD OF DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMICS

An era ends at BITS as a legendary professor takes his last class in Pilani. Known for his fiery, passionate and entertaining classroom sessions, on a wide range of subjects from macroeconomics to student smoking, he has been revered by many generations of BITSIANs. His famous quotes and dialogues were more popular than those of Ajit. He has inspired students to forsake a career in Engineering for a more rewarding pursuit of Economics. Many students went on to teach at some of the world's greatest Economics departments including Chicago, Harvard, London School of Economics and Princeton. In this last interview while still at BITS, he talks about economics, offers fatherly advice on student responsibility and mentions his plans for the future. On behalf of a thousand BITSIAN students whose lives you touched, and whose minds you helped shape, we thank you !

Prof GP Avasthi studied Sciences and Mathematics like many of his peers and when he was unable to secure admission into an engineering college he took up the Arts instead. At first almost all fields of study in the Arts disenchanted him. Economics was the notable exception since as he found the subject extremely analytical as its fundamentals were rooted in mathematics. Prof M A M Muralidharan of the PUSA institute also influenced his preference for Economics.

After completing his MA in Economics in 1964, he went on to pursue doctoral studies in the same field and started his teaching career in 1967 as a Junior Lecturer at Rajasthan University, Jaipur. In 1971 he received an invitation to join the faculty at BITS, which he accepted. It would turn out to be an intellectual shift too as he fondly recalls the enthusiastic reception by the students to his Mathematical approach to Economics.

On his career... In addition to his academic responsibilities he was also a part of the Planning and Development Cell and working closely with Prof C R Mitra, he co led the development of a broad based education system in BITS. Practice School and the 5 Year Integrated programs, critical elements of the BITS education

system today, are a consequence of their recommendations.

When asked about his views on teaching as a career path he shares that he has found the past 30 years extremely fulfilling and has derived a great deal of intellectual satisfaction by virtue of having taught and learnt a broad range of courses in Economics.

His mentors and mentees... His favorite economists include his own doctoral advisor Dr. Raja J Chelliah who was, at the time, the Economic advisor to former Indian Finance minister Manmohan Singh. Harvard University's Prof M V Mathur has also had a profound impact on him. As for his students, they are in various Multi National Corporations and Business Schools across the globe. He fondly remembers Adanki, who was a Professor at the Harvard Business School prior to joining Nera Consulting, and Shantanu Dutta, a former World Bank Economist who later joined the University of Chicago as an Associate Professor and currently teaches at the Marshall School of Business at the University of Southern California.

On BITS... Prof Avasthi believes that while the normalization based admission process is best suited for BITS, as the institute should not relinquish control of its admission process, there is a need to review and

evaluate the current admission procedure for potential improvements.

A message for his students and alums... He expressed his concern about the lack of discipline among today's students, warned them against complacency and stated that the increasing academic freedom permitted by the system has to be complemented by a greater sense of responsibility on the students' part. In his message to the BITSian alumni community he reiterated the need for hard work and concentrated efforts in their respective fields.

Looking Ahead... Subsequent to retirement he'd like to spend more time with his family and retain his ties with BITS as well.

The Quarterly BITSian

This segment replaces Person of the Month. It is an honor given by Sandpaper 2.0 for achievements made by BITSians in fields as diverse as social causes, politics, business, research, entertainment and academics. Past profiles include:

Vinod Agarwal (2003), Chairman & Founder of Logicvision, most successful tech IPO (2000)

Dilip D'Souza (2003), Author of two books and champion of social causes in India

Aditi Pany (2003), First woman President of BITS Pilani Student Union

If you know of someone who deserves to be nominated, please send a short note to anupendra@bitsaa.org letting us know why this person should be nominated.