BY SANDHYA KRISHNAN ('99 INFO SYSTEMS)

# ENTREPRENEURS – STARTING YOUNG

*BITSians, right out of college, start Corpus Labs, a provider of ERP solutions and systems automation solutions.*

"The idea of Corpus Labs came out of the blue. The entrepreneurial bug had been there for a while and we always wondered about starting something in the future". This was when 'Anto' ('98 MSc Chemistry, '02 ME Software Systems) was in his last semester of ME and TAship. Faced with the question of the next big step, the desire to go the entrepreneur's way came back with a vengeance. Thus Corpus Labs was started.

Armed with no business model or plan, Anto shared the idea with some of his close friends, like-minded people. Very soon Praveen Kumar Rondla (98' Mech), Ramesh Narayanan ('99 EEE), Bharath Pasupuleti ('99 Biological Sciences) and Vikas Malik ('97 Eco with Chem, '03 M.E Software Systems) agreed to give it a shot. "Corpus Labs was started with the assumption that we could do something positive as long as we stuck together".

**The team had worked together at the Centre for Software Development (CSD) before Corpus. Did that matter?**

"Working at the CSD makes you feel like you're a part of a software development company with BITS as the client. That creates a tremendous sense of independence. In fact, as of now, CSD has proved to be quite an entrepreneurial hub with 4 startups by its ex-members and even more in the pipeline."



The whole team knew each other well from the various night-outs spent in the cozy ground floor room in FD3 (S block). As a result there were good work dynamics and more importantly everyone knew the talents and weaknesses of everyone else. This has certainly helped approach the task of assigning roles and responsibilities and, of course, as they readily admit "It's always fun when a bunch of BITSians get down to do something together".

**The difficulties they faced along the way.**

"The first and foremost difficulty we faced was the mindset that 'middle class youngsters can't run a business if their life depended on it". Armed with their degrees from BITS, they had their paths chalked out in the corporate world. They only had to nod and affirm. So in many cases their parents were disappointed when they chose the path less taken.

"The whole world seemed to be at work to convince us out of this 'madness and rash exuberance' – as they called it. To work with so much discouragement around you, even before you start, was something unsettling."

"Facing both the emotional and professional pressure of being an entrepreneur was something that took a lot of effort to handle. But all this made it a real challenge. The stakes were high and there would be no looking back."

"Thinking of it now, the hurdles turned out to be small, but it was the reaction of the world that wasn't".

**I'm sure you guys had some fears too.**

 "As of fears and apprehensions, the first one was the inevitable question of whether we would click or not. As all founder partners of the firm are from middle class backgrounds, failure meant heavy consequences."

Each rupee of investment mattered and failure was not an option, as the money would have to be repaid.  To add to it, the decision to start happened right at the end of college, and they had no back up, financially and otherwise.

"We have to confess that we had no solid, in fact, no business plan at all when we set off. We were branded as BITSians who were wasting the BITSian tag. This was something that we were determined to prove wrong."

## So what did your first order feel like?

"The first order that Corpus Labs bagged was for their textile showroom inventory management software, *Vasthra*. The client was a textile retailer called Kutiappaa Silks."

"The expression on our clients' face when we approached him the first time is still afresh in our memory. To say that we felt like a bunch of novices would be an understatement."

However the hostility soon gave way to acceptance as the prototype was in sync with his requirements and the deal was inked in a week's time. The installation period was two months and the software was completely operational by then.

"As it coincided with the opening of their new showroom, our first installation itself was in the limelight. There was simply no time and space for any slipups. On the other hand, it helped our marketing team as many of the key players of the segment were available at the inauguration."

Corpus has now successfully completed one year of operation with the client and the latter has signed on for an annual maintenance contract. A just verdict for the quality of their work.

## So are things looking up now?

"Things seem nice and bright now. Having spent a good 16 months in conceptualizing, developing and testing the company and of course the products, we are now in the process of branching out into other markets – both national and international. Offices are also being opened at other locations for marketing purposes. As of now we are looking at Singapore, Hyderabad and Cochin out of which the Singapore office became operational in the recent past."

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## And your future plans?

"We have been concentrating on inventory management solutions and hospital management systems so far. Both have received several plaudits from the local markets. We have also identified niche areas where we have bagged a few clients. That should help us conceptualize products in these segments."

# Business & Entrepreneurship

They are now focusing on business intelligence and decision support systems for various verticals. Addition of tax consultants and chartered accountants to their team has made them highly competitive in these domains. So 'divide and conquer' seems to be the rule of the Corpus game.

**What do you feel was the effect of BITS on your lives as entrepreneurs?**

"BITS has a system that by itself makes it one of the best nurseries for entrepreneurship. The BITSIAN system of 'plan and build your own life' is one of the best sources to nurture and build entrepreneurial thinking."

"The participation of some of the 'Corpuscles' (as we at Corpus Labs are called) in the Central for Entrepreneurial Leadership (CEL) motivated us and enabled us to have discussions with some successful BITSian entrepreneurs. It also helped fortify our entrepreneurial


Their first office

aspirations."

Some of them have worked as TAs and the experience has been invaluable. It meant that they got used to presenting their work to large (usually bored) audiences. This way there was no escaping the quality of the presentations required to keep the audience alive. TAship also taught them to multi-task while forcing one to make the big transition from one side of the writing desk to the other.

Everyone on the Corpus team fondly remembers and thanks Dr. VS Rao for all his help and guidance both within and outside CEL. Thanks are also due to Dr. B R Natarajan, Ashish Bhinde and Anupendra Sharma. Besides that, it comes unsaid that this firm owes a lot to the CSD experience.

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## Business Standard

# Baba Kalyani is Business Standard CEO of the year



Bharat Forge Chairman and Managing Director Baba N Kalyani was named Business Standard's CEO of the year in recognition of this his leadership role in the transformation of Bharat Forge to a globally competitive company. The company today manufactures the world's lowest cost forgings company. He studied Mechanical Engineering while at BITS, Pilani. *BITSAA Sandpaper* recently featured him in our article on "Top 20 BITSian CEOs".

Winners of this award in previous years include Tata group chairman Ratan Tata, Reliance group chairman Reliance group chairman and Infosys' NR Narayana Murthy.