

INTERVIEW BY ASHISH GARG ('97 INSTRU)

THE QUARTERLY BITSIAN BALAJI KRISHNAMURTHY

He was recently among Time Magazine's 25 Global Business Influentials and the chief architect of an inverted-bonus plan at Planar Systems that put his associates before executives and himself. Greed may have been good for some in the '80s, but Balaji Krishnamurthy ('71 Math) is setting the standard for leadership in this century.

You have a long history with Pilani. Tell us something about your Pilani experience.

My relationship with Pilani goes beyond my BITS days. My father was a Professor at BITS. I finished my high school from Birla Public School and lived in Pilani from 1965 to 1976, almost 11 years. Because of which I knew the place [Pilani] better than most students in BITS might have.

My father lives six months in US and six months in India. In fact he came here in Portland a couple of weeks ago. I get most of my Pilani updates from him.

So you have a long Pilani connection. Were you born in Pilani as well?

I actually was not born in Pilani. My father joined Pilani in 1965 and that is when we as a family went to Pilani for the first time. I finished my middle school and high school in Pilani and then joined BITS.

What degrees did you get at BITS?

The years when I was at BITS were when we used to have the BSc degree and then the idea of integrated MSc came about. I went on to get an MSc in Mathematics from BITS in '76.

Why did you choose mathematics? Was that because your father was a Math professor?

Not really, I actually wanted to study law but people advised me

against it. In fact my uncle took me to the Supreme Court area in New Delhi and showed me how most of these 'black coat' people were standing on the street filling out forms on a pedestal. So that was end of the law degree for me.

Then I wanted to get into management but you couldn't do so as an undergrad so I took the usual route of applying for an Electronics degree but I had just received a National Science Talent award that required you to be enrolled in a science degree for receiving the award. During my



time an engineering degree would not entitle you to the very lucrative National Science Talent scholarship.

I knew BITS very well and I knew how you could enroll in one program while still taking courses in another program. And this is what I did. I pretty much finished an engineering degree while I enrolled into the MSc program.

How about some activities you were involved in during your Pilani days? Any courses you particularly liked?

Balaji Krishnamurthy (BITS '71)

President and CEO, Planar Systems



Education

- M.Sc. Mathematics – BITS Pilani (1971-1976)
- Ph.D. Computer Science – University of Massachusetts, Amherst (1976-1981)

Key Accomplishments

- Transformed Planar Systems from a display component manufacturer to a full-service provider of flat-panel displays.
- Effected an "Inverted" bonus plan that rewards associates before executives.

Mr Krishnamurthy resides in Oregon with wife Pat and their two teenage sons.

I was part of the BITS soccer and basketball teams. Those were things I really enjoyed during my Pilani days. We got into a few tournaments around the area and I have some

really good memories from those days. We used to play at the Rajasthan basketball meet of some sort at Jaipur. But we didn't do that well. Those were fun times!

What did you do after BITS?

After BITS, I got a PhD in Computer Science from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, in 1981. Then I went to work for General Electric Co., where I did research until 1984.

After that I went to Tektronix where I did Computer related R&D activity, ran a research lab, then moved into running a business and never looked back at research again. I was at Tektronix until 1999.

And that's when I joined Planar Systems as the President and CEO.



That's pretty intriguing. In Silicon Valley you find a lot of Indian CTOs but not that many Indian CEOs. How did things work out for you to get this break as a CEO right after Tektronix?

At Tektronix I was running a billion dollar business for about 10 years or so. I had already moved from a technical discipline into general management. The shift really happened one day when I decided that I wanted to run a business.

Were Tektronix and Planar in the same businesses when you

became the CEO of Planar Systems?

Tektronix and Planar were in totally different arenas. The fact that both companies were in the same city was co-incidental. Planar was looking for a CEO all around the country and that is when someone called me from the other side of the country and asked me if I wanted to do it. I had already established myself as a General Manager at Tektronix and the time was right to move on to the next thing. And so I did.

“That is the advice I would like to give to people – Be very clear about what your aspirations are and then rise to the challenges of meeting those aspirations.”

What were the challenges you faced you when you joined Planar?

Planar was going through a very prototypical transition from a founding CEO who had unfortunately left the company due to health reasons. The company was looking for an external CEO. It is always challenging for a company to transition from a founding CEO to a professional CEO. When I came in as a professional manager, my first task was to revive a business that was heavily focused on a technology (display component manufacturing) that had long become obsolete.

Since then, we have dramatically transformed the company into a provider of flat-panel display hardware and software solutions for demanding applications in medical, commercial, industrial

and retailing markets. We still have more challenges ahead of us.

Was it at Planar that you came up with the Inverted Bonus plan or was this something going on in your head for quite some time?

It was an idea I had developed when I was at Tektronix. It was not quite in this form. I had a few complicated ideas all of which came from the same fundamental value system. These thoughts were that management should definitely be rewarded well when the company succeeded and when the company didn't; institute a certain degree of responsibility. The whole idea is that the management has a stewardship responsibility to the stakeholders who depend on the management for the company to perform. I had that concept in my mind at Tektronix.

When I came to Planar, I had the opportunity to put that into practice. It of course involved a significant amount of thinking, analysis and simplification of complex ideas.

How has Planar Systems changed as a company since you took over.

We have transformed the company significantly from a components supplier to a display solutions provider. We have also achieved some really good financial results.

But over the past twelve months we have performed poorly and have lost our momentum. Our challenge now is to regain that one more time.

How do you drive innovation in

Dome Dashboard
Remote display management made specifically for medical imaging.



your company?

There is a culture of innovation that you need to create in your company.

Innovation, unfortunately, is too often associated with technology. It may not have anything to do with technology. For example, the inverted bonus plan is a very innovative concept. Innovation has to occur in all aspects of business life. Sometimes there is far too much focus on innovation in technology.

How did you feel after getting into Time Magazine's 25 Most Influential Businessmen list?

I knew about this about three months prior to publication of that particular issue of Time. My PR person got the phone call from Time that they are going to do an article on me. I

immediately asked her, "How much do they want to get paid for it?" She reassured me that it was not a paid editorial, which I obviously didn't believe at that time. It took me by surprise as well.

Are you in touch with Pilani or any ex-BITSians?

I was more in touch with Pilani when my father was there. After he retired I have not been able to follow much on news from Pilani. My father is in touch with Prof Venkateswaran and even I have exchanged emails with the Vice Chancellor a few times. I get to hear about BITS from my father. I am still in touch with some of my old friends from BITS.

I visited Pilani last about 20 years ago.

Any advice on what BITS students or fellow Alumni can do to emulate your success?

I think you have to be careful in assuming that success has anything to do with hierarchical position in a company or financial worth or designation by some magazine when they happen to pick somebody.

Success has much to do with one wants to accomplish and whether they gave all they had to accomplish to what it is they wanted to do. When you define success more about rising to your aspirations, there is a greater contentment with success.

That is the advice I would like to give to people. Be very clear about what your aspirations are and then rise to the challenges of meeting those aspirations.



57,000 Sign Up for BITSAT Computer Based Testing for Admission to BITS

Admission to the integrated first degree programs, both at Pilani and Goa campuses is now being administered through an online computer-based test (CBT). The test – called the BITSAT – will be conducted between April through to June, 2005 at several centers in India. However, toppers in the respective boards would continue to get direct admission irrespective of their scores on the online test. While all admissions will be based on the scores obtained by students on the CBT, the minimum qualification for admission will be a pass in 12th year examination with at least 80% aggregate marks in physics, chemistry and mathematics subjects with at least 60% in each of physics, chemistry and mathematics subjects.

While talking about the test pattern, Dr Venkateswaran said that the three-hour test would be based on NCERT syllabus and would consist of questions from a large question bank. The domain of testing would be Physics, Chemistry, Math, English proficiency and Logical reasoning. Students can get a feel of the real test by going over a sample that has been provided on the BITS website.

Soon after news broke out about BITSAT, several coaching centers immediately scrambled to offer tutoring for the test. One such example is of The Premier Academy for General & Educational Services Pvt Ltd (PAGE) Hyderabad that has even set up a website for this (<http://www.bitsatpage.com/>) complete with demo tests, mentoring programs etc. For those concerned about the test quality, transparency and security Dr Venkateswaran says that, "The test will be the most fool-proof one ever conducted in the country." The test is expected to be conducted on lines of the GRE and the process is reportedly efficient and mischief free. The testing process is to be completely transparent and the student is given the results immediately just like in the GRE. BITS authorities are excited about the new process and hope that it will provide a fair chance to all students aspiring to join the BITSian community.