

BY DILIP D'SOUZA ('76 EEE)

## HEEDING THE CALL

Dilip D'Souza is a prolific writer for several publications and is a member of the Editorial Board of BITSAA *Sandpaper*. For more of Dilip's musings, visit his blog at <http://dcubed.blogspot.com>.



### TRAVELED

to Rajasthan recently. By road. Entered the state at its southwestern end, town called Sanchor on NH-15. But here's the thing: almost from the minute I entered, I began feeling the distant call from a little town way the hell over on the other end of the state, that place where generations have grown to be women and men of substance. I knew the call would come, and that's why my travelling buddy and I planned a night halt there. But for various unfortunate reasons, we had to cancel, less than 24 hours before we would have arrived in Pilani.

Too bad. But the call, it was there. And when it next comes, I will heed it.

As something of a substitute, though from my Pilani-biased perspective a poor one, we visited another place where they teach things to students, MBA types. (Aside: why do people do MBAs? Decades out of college myself, and I'm still trying to figure that puzzle). Without knowing it would happen, we found ourselves thrust into a class full of them. Bright eyes and eager faces listening to what two middle-aged men, dusty from days on the road, could find to say off the top of their heads: it must have been quite a sight. But yes, they listened. Then they asked many questions, and we would have

loved to go on discussing stuff till the cows came home, but a bell rang and we were shepherded out.

But I found myself brooding over one question in particular. Apropos of nothing else that had come up for discussion, one young man put up his hand and wanted to know our opinion about what he called "recent peace moves towards Pakistan." Like it often happens, he didn't really want to know our opinion, he wanted the chance to offer his: that this was going to be a disaster for India because Pakistan instigates terrorism against us and Pakistanis cannot be trusted and they are a dictatorship and we will never compromise on even an inch of our land and we have been so kind to them for so long and our patience is wearing out and our position is morally right and Kashmir belongs to us! (Said in pretty much that breathless fashion).

This is not the space to get into a dissection of all those allegations and arguments. But I mention it here because at the time, it struck me that he was saying essentially what our governments have said for years about Pakistan. What, therefore, a lot of Indians say about Pakistan. Nothing wrong there. But it also struck me, as we discussed what he had said a little bit, that he would not, or could not, question these

statements. In fact, he seemed unable to imagine that they could be questioned at all. To him, these were givens. Much like observing that the sun comes up in the east. Who would question that? And I wondered how it was that this man had missed the fundamental lesson of education and citizenship that I think I picked up in that little eastern Rajasthan town those decades ago. In a word, questioning. Question everything, authority especially, yourself always. This does not mean that you go through life disbelieving everything. Question, that's all. Question and satisfy yourself about the answers as they are given, that's fine. But question.

Yet with this bright-eyed student, I got the distinct feeling that the very idea of questioning, at least with the Pakistan issue, was not even a possibility. Why do I say I picked it up in Pilani? It's not that our professors, whatever the subject, told us to do it in every class; not that they dinned it into our heads. We didn't have a course anything like the one I know IIT Kanpur recently offered its students, "Responsible Dissent". No, there was no explicit, overt mention of the value of questioning and scepticism.

But it was certainly there: unstated and subliminal, perhaps, but there.

And here's where I think it came from: the much tom-tommed "broad-based education" BITS offers.

Think about it. Why, after all, should an electrical engineer know anything about economics? Why should a physicist know anything about sociology? Why should a computer scientist know anything about English literature? Yet if these are BITS graduates, it's likely they have taken such courses.

And what's the value of it all? In a previous column here, I wrote about the different paths that BITS alumni have taken, and of how that's a tribute to the kind of place it was and the education it gave us. That's the value.

But more subtly, I believe the exposure to a wide range of subjects and issues gives you the tools, the confidence, for that process of questioning. When

you're immersed in one subject, it is easy to emerge thinking that's the way of the world. Yet of course, it isn't, and that's the sometimes harsh lesson you have to learn. It's when you understand that there are multiple truths out there, different ways of looking at things around you, that you begin to ask questions.

In fact, this is precisely why two professors at IIT Kanpur -- one in Computer Science -- came up with the idea of the "Responsible Dissent" course in 2001. They were increasingly worried by the kind of citizens that great institution was turning out, with its relentless focus on specific engineering disciplines.

Now I have no idea which college my young friend with the firm opinions on Pakistan graduated from. I also have no doubt there are plenty of BITS alumni who have just as firm opinions -- on Pakistan and on

other issues -- that they will not question.

Still, my feeling is -- and believe me, I am trying hard not to be the alumnus holding a worshipful candle for the alma mater -- my feeling is that as a rule, people graduate from BITS with a certain openness of mind and spirit. And I think that comes from the kind of education. BITS has always prided itself for offering.

And -- to return to my road trip - - that's really why I feel that call whenever I enter Rajasthan. Because as the years go by, you appreciate that spirit more and more. You appreciate the place in your life, the time in your life, that you learned those lessons.

So really, the next time that call comes, I will certainly heed it!



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