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# BITSIAN WOMEN

## YOU GO GIRL!

Several generations of women have passed through the hallowed portals of BITS Pilani and they have steadily, often inconspicuously, carved out a niche for themselves in the world. These BITSian Women boast impressive academic, professional and social credentials. They have neither shied away from taking risks nor bucked an at-times stagnant social system. And, most importantly, they have persevered relentlessly, sometimes in the face of significant cultural and attitudinal challenges. *Sandpaper's* Cover Story produced in collaboration with the BITSAA Women's Council is a celebration of the achievements of every single member of this community.

### Introduction

Circa 1981, Meera Bhavan, BITS, Pilani. Sangeeta Samar (now Patni) found herself one of the twenty girls "inducted and familiarized" with BITS, Pilani. Her batch was one that featured 20 girls in a batch of 400 guys. The previous batch had had 16 girls, and around 400 boys. And the earlier batch, an even lesser number of females. So, what did these girls find in Pilani? She fondly recollects, "They walked in as girls, older than they ever were, and walked out as women, younger than they would ever be. And, being one of them I know, it was great in the meanwhile!"

The bold parents of these ambitious girls did not know that they were setting a trend: one that would gradually permeate through the middle class and, in the process, help fulfill the potential of the Indian professional woman that had

previously remained unrealized, fettered by Indian conservatism. The talented girls took to their new-found professional freedom like a duck takes to water.

Sangeeta says, "So, we were a real minority. Did that bother us? No – for most of us, it was exhilarating. To be at a place where most parents of that time would fight shy of sending their daughters. After all, 25 years back, engineering was very much a 'Men Only' profession. Some of us, including myself, had to fight tooth-and-nail with our parents to be here and to study engineering."

"On campus, we were an 'equal' sex. Though we were unequal in numbers, there was no gender persecution. There was reason for this – our EEE batch topper was a female, and so was the previous EEE batch too."

The signs were already ominous for the parochial lot. The BITSian woman was enjoying

some success; she was here to stay.

Today, generations of proud BITSian women have passed through the Birla Institute and are now carving a niche out for themselves in the world. They are those that threw caution to the winds, bucked an increasingly stagnating social system and persevered steadfastly, absorbing massive cultural and attitudinal changes and the pressures that came with them. Some of them even drove the changes, rebelling freely against issues, unacceptable.

It was not always easy battling against the tide and society. According to Dr. Meera Banerjee, ex-warden of Meera Bhavan and someone who has seen BITS evolve over four decades, the 60's were strict times. Girls had a dress code (yes! Sarees with plain borders) and were not allowed outside MB beyond 7pm. No interaction unless necessary for academics, was permitted between girls and



Holi at Meera Bhawan, 1996

boys. In fact, girls seen to be talking to boys outside classes had to face an interview with the warden. A few girl students were not allowed to take on courses in the lunch period since only male professors would be in the institute at that time and the MB warden in those days believed in severe discipline. But the girls in the 60's and 70's, some of whom Mrs. Banerjee knew as classmates of her oldest daughter, were fun-loving and spirited. They were never docile, she asserts. Academics were a level playing field, though social interactions between boys and girls were limited. Leadership was a quality she admired in a few girls she befriended. She remembers the strong women who contested fairly for political posts and fulfilled their responsibilities with a passion. "These girls helped their fellow students adjust and truly made BITS a second home for them" she says fondly.

Dr. Raj Singh, a 76 batch BITSian currently doing innovative research in VLSI design in CEERI, remembers that his classmates, though few, were never inactive. Whether in cultural, academic or sports activities, girls were always eager and equal participants. He remembers Pragnya Nimbkar, the only female hockey player in BITS, who played with the boys' team for lack of female company!

The number of girls joining BITS increased significantly towards the 90's, but it was really the IT boom that bolstered these numbers and dispelled the notion of 'hard mechanical and physical labor' that was associated with the core engineering disciplines like Mechanical and Civil Engineering. The year 2004 saw the percentage of girls at BITS rise to nearly 40 percent and in fact, in the disciplines of Computer Science, Electronics and Instrumentation, Chemical, Information Systems,

Engineering Technology, MMS and Biological Sciences, it was even higher!

The playing field was level. The boy girl ratio marched closer to unity and the girls were moving on from strength to strength. Why; by the advent of the new millennium, girls were regularly standing up to compete for posts of major responsibilities; the likes of Student Union President, General Secretary and other key Student Union responsibilities. And they were doing a great job!

It is really no surprise that quite a few of these uninhibited achievers have translated their potential to become highly successful in their professional lives, in a number of different fields. In fact, some of them have steadily accrued national and international renown. The Sandpaper team, in this issue, seeks to profile an eclectic sampling of BITSian women who have carved their own niches in their respective

professions, through the data available to us. In doing so, we have categorized women for this issue into various professional fields.

- Entrepreneurs
- Business Leaders
- Academia
- Community and Public Service
- Engineering & Technology
- Creative Artists

Each of the women featured is the definitive BITSian Woman in the fullest sense: a shining beacon of the BITSian spirit as well as the modern day woman.

We thank all the BITSians who have helped us in compiling this list.

## Entrepreneurs

Experts and surveys conducted in recent times reveal that the lack of role models is the No. 1 factor discouraging women from pursuing MBAs and taking up roles as business leaders. But if you take a look at the illustrious list of BITS alumnae that we have been able to identify, you will find that not only has BITS left you with a fine education and memorable life experiences, it has also left you with an inspiring legacy to follow. This article profiles the achievements and experiences of BITSian women entrepreneurs from around the world, in fields as diverse as Consultancy, IT, Education and Manufacturing and batches as far apart as the mid 60s to early 90s.

Female entrepreneurship is expanding around the world. The Global Monitoring Report 2005 on Women and Entrepreneurship ([www.gemconsortium.org](http://www.gemconsortium.org)) estimates that more than one-

third of all people involved in entrepreneurial activity are women. The growth of the IT-ITES industry in recent times has resulted in the narrowing of the gender divide, particularly in the field of entrepreneurship. From mom stores and traditional businesses, today's women are beginning to make their mark in the ranks of high tech entrepreneurs.



Punita Pandey

Much has been written about **Punita Pandey** (1980-84, EEE), CEO and Founder, netCustomer, a leading provider of enterprise software support and services. Her company has customized its innovative services for clients like PeopleSoft, J. D. Edwards products, Sony, Dell, Qualcomm and IBM. In fact, netCustomer's success is taught as a case study at the Graduate School of Business at Stanford University and at several leading universities around the world. But there's more to be said, and learned from.

She started off like most of us. The daughter of retired

educationists says she owes her current status to her education and her family. "I was good at math and science in school. My father encouraged me to pursue engineering schools and recommended BITS. That was my entry ticket into the field of technology. After that there was no turning back. I pursued a career in IT and software development and later, after my MBA, I started refining my business skills with a career in management consulting and marketing. A culmination of all these experiences led me to found netCustomer," smiles Pandey.

And today she's an icon in the Silicon Valley. For Punita, starting her own business has been a most rewarding experience. "The creation process is so exhilarating - to conceive something, assemble a team, execute, and offer your customers something which is valuable for them, your company, and all the individuals involved.

There have been lots of ups and downs, but I have never been more satisfied", she says.



Vandana Malaiya