

EDUCATION & ACADEMICS

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PROF V LAKSHMINARAYANAN (1906 – 1983) – A BRIEF MEMOIR

2nd September '06 will mark the Birth Centenary of Professor. V. Lakshminarayanan, the founding Director of the Birla Institute of Technology & Science (BITS) Pilani, Rajasthan.

He made his mark on the higher technical education scene in India and brought thought leadership to it for a quarter of a century (1945 to 1970). With the active support and encouragement of the Birlas, he helped transform a remote, fledgling technical college in rural Rajasthan into a premier institution of higher learning in the country, internationally recognized for its world-class facilities, faculty and programmes. On this occasion, it is fitting to remember the man and his mission and how he went about creating a great temple of learning in the face of various physical, cultural and emotional odds.

Born in a traditional, middle-class Brahmin family of South India on 2nd Sept. 1906, Vaidyanathan Lakshminarayanan had his early education in Bangalore, Madurai and Tiruchirappalli. His educational proficiency and distinction were such that, in 1924, he secured admission to the engineering course at the Govt. Engineering College at Guindy, Madras (now Anna University) – this was at a time when the undivided country itself had only a few engineering colleges and getting a seat in the only full-fledged engineering college in the State was just a distant dream for many. Specialising in Mechanical

Engineering, he graduated with a B.E. Degree in 1928. His interests in sports and cultural activities were well developed by this time – he was the general captain for Tennis and his hobbies included acting in plays and photography.

Prof. Lakshminarayanan started his professional career as a mechanical supervisor in the then Madras P.W.D. After a three-year stint, his real professional vocation, teaching and training of engineers and management of higher technological institutions, beckoned him and he joined his Alma Mater, the College of Engineering, Guindy, Madras as a Jr. Asst. Instructor in Mechanical Engineering, at the entry level. Besides teaching, he took part in a wide range of curricular and extra-curricular activities such as Editor, College Magazine; Secretary, Old Boys Association; Founder, Co-operative credit society for staff; prominent tennis player, and others. These paved the way for his developing into a many-dimensional personality in later years.

From 1941 began his career with the Govt. of India – Technical Training Scheme in the Department of Labour in the Directorate General of Resettlement and Employment. He started as a Superintendent at

the Madras Technical Training Centre in Sept. 1941 and gradually rose through the ranks as Vice-Principal, and Principal. In 1943, he took over as Principal, Ajmer Mission School – Technical Training Centre and in 1945, he took charge as Regional Inspector, Central Circle at Nagpur and Delhi where he served with distinction till 1946.

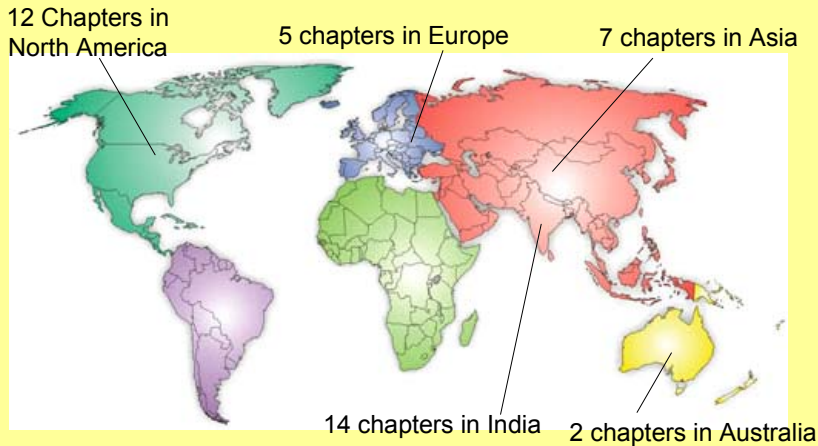
Prof. Lakshminarayanan's Life-mission of setting up a premier Higher Technological Institution at Pilani, the ancestral home of the Birlas, began in a subdued note. In July 1946, Mr. G. D. Birla offered him the position of Vice-Principal and Head of the Mechanical Engineering Department (as also Acting Principal) at the proposed Birla Engineering College, just then on the anvil as a unit of the Birla Educational Trust at Pilani. Prof. Lakshminarayanan accepted the offer and challenge. The engineering college was to be located at a remote, rural area of Rajasthan not readily accessible by rail or air. Then existing Vidya Vihar campus was about 3 or 4 km from the Pilani village. The only infrastructure available to start the engineering college was a workshop building (which doubled up as the main administrative office of the college), a gymnasium, a dispensary, a few houses for the

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staff, some barracks (the campus was a military base during World War II!) to be used as class rooms, a guest house and a couple of basic hostel buildings for the boys. A girl's school (Birla Balika Vidyapeeth) was also located in the Campus. With these beginnings, between 1946 and 1960, Prof. V. Lakshminarayanan, by his professional stature, tremendous energy and will power, technical competence, human relations skills, and single-minded devotion to the cause, with full support and encouragement from the Birlas, the Birla Educational Trust of which Dr. S. D. Pande was the Secretary, and with the excellent cooperation from the faculty and students, helped establish, develop, and raise the Birla Engineering College, to the status of a National Higher Technological Institute – well known not only in the country but internationally too. From an initial strength of about 150 students in 1947, the Institute has grown many fold now to provide educational opportunity to thousands of budding engineers and scientists.

When Prof. Lakshminarayanan initiated activities for the Birla Engg. College in 1946-47, there was also a Science and Commerce College run by the Birlas in the Pilani village. During 1947, after Independence and partition, a large number of refugees were absorbed in the college. The land-mark new building of the college with the central tower was built in the early 1950's and it accommodated in one wing the colleges of Arts and Science, Commerce and Pharmacy and the other wing, the entire Engineering College. Several new laboratories, class rooms, library, hostel facilities for men and women, sports and recreation facilities were built, well qualified and motivated faculty recruited from all over India and the infrastructure needed to make the campus self-sufficient created such that, by late 1950's, the Birla Engineering College was a National Institute of repute much sought after by students from all over India. All these institutions in Pilani were affiliated to the University of

Rajaputana which later on came to be known as the University of Rajasthan. Prof. Lakshminarayanan also ensured from the very beginning that merit was the sole criterion for selection of students and faculty.

In the early 1960's, Mr.G.D. Birla and Prof. Lakshminarayanan evaluated the trends foreseen in technology and science education in the coming decades and decided to forge an advanced higher education institution integrating technology and sciences, building on the existing engineering, science, arts, commerce and pharmacy facilities. Several new engineering colleges in the country had already been setup under the post-war reconstruction scheme. The I.I.T's, with significant financial and technical inputs from countries such as USA, UK, USSR, and West Germany had already come into being and the higher technological education scenario in the country was poised for a rapid growth and transformation. Seizing the opportunity and sensing the demands likely to be made on first-rate institutions, a collaborating arrangement was worked out with the world-renowned Massachusetts Institute of Technology (M.I.T) at Cambridge, Mass, USA. Under this arrangement, M.I.T. would provide certain needed inputs and help transform and upgrade the Pilani Institution. Visiting faculty, assistance in curriculum development, equipment and exchange facilities had been envisaged in this scheme. The Ford Foundation, U.S.A., provided substantial financial assistance to establish the Institute in its

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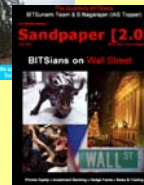
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early years. The British Council helped establish a strong school for teaching the English language. Assistance from USSR for identified programmes was also available. Prof. Lakshminarayanan led a Govt. of India Technical Education delegation to USSR in 1961 and visited a number of institutions. During this phase, Prof. Lakshminarayanan made several working trips to USA, Europe and other countries for discussions and hosted technical visits by several experts from these countries.

In March 1962, Mr.G.D.Birla announced the setting up of a higher Institute of Technology and Prof. Lakshminarayanan, along with visiting US Professors and Senior faculty from the college prepared a draft for an Integrated Institute incorporating all the engineering and science specialisations. Thus was born the integrated "Birla Institute of Technology and Science" (BITS), Pilani. It

was registered as a Society under Rajasthan Registration of Societies Act in 1964 and it was declared a 'Deemed University' under the UGC Act by the Govt. of India by a notification on 18-6-1964. These pioneers, in spite of some opposition, ensured the faculty pay scale was almost in par with those of the IIT's, so that the fledgling institution could attract scholars of distinction. Under the leadership of Mr.G.D.Birla and Mr.K.K.Birla and with active support from faculty and students, Prof.

Lakshminarayanan guided the Institute's fortunes in its formative years as the First Director. Some of the distinguished visitors to the Institute in the early years included Shri. Jawaharlal Nehru, Sardar Vallabhai Patel, Shri. Morarji Desai, Mrs.Indira Gandhi, Dr.Rajendra Prasad, Dr.S.Radhakrishnan, Dr.K.L.Shrimali, Dr.Triguna Sen, Dr.Humayun Kabir and others.

Several honours and professional recognitions came Prof. Lakshminarayanan's way during this period. He was elected the President of the Rajasthan Academy of Sciences in 1965. He was elected to membership in the Inter University Board in Dec.1964. He was offered appointment as a member of the Union Public Service Commission, which he declined. He was appointed as Hon. Colonel Commandant of the NCC at Pilani. He was President of a session of the Education Commission Seminar of the Association of Principals of Technical Institutions (APTI) of which he was the Hon. Treasurer. He later became President of the APTI which was the forerunner of the present ISTE (Indian Society for Technical Education) and perhaps the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE). He was invited by the MIT in Boston to be a Visiting Professor at the Centre for Advanced Engineering Studies and, with the blessings of the Birlas, he took up the assignment and spent 1969 at Cambridge, Mass, USA. He retired in 1970 after serving the cause of Technical Education in India with distinction for over three decades. Even in retirement, his experience and counsel was much sought after. He was consulted by several technical institutions. He remained active as the Correspondent of the Gopalapuram Ganapathi Iyer High Schools at Chennai till his very end.

