INTERVIEW BY DEEPTHA GANAPATHY ('95 PHY INSTRU) & ASHISH GARG ('97 INSTRU)

THE QUARTERLY BITSIAN: PUNITA PANDEY ('84 EEE)

Punita Pandey is the Chairman and CEO of netCustomer. Punita founded netCustomer in 1999 leveraging her experience in software development, management consulting, and IT services. Under her leadership, netCustomer has become a leading provider of advanced applications support services leveraging a 24x7 global delivery model. Punita finished EEE at BITS Pilani in 1984 and holds a master's degree in Business Administration from the Haas School of Business, University of California, Berkeley. She currently resides in Silicon Valley in California and frequently travels to India where netCustomer has a support and services center in Noida.

What are the three best memories of your time at Pilani?

Pilani was a very special place for me. One never forgets what one did in Pilani and I have so many memories of my Pilani days. In fact, I had to really wrack my brains to come up with the top three.

We used to have these late night *chai* sessions just before the *comprees* or the tests. One of our *wing mates* would make tea for the whole wing around mid night and then we will be *yapping* away for another hour before getting back to studying. I really miss those late night *chai* sessions.

Of course, the *Audi* was a big fixture for anyone at Pilani. Going to movies and creating a ruckus during the movies. I remember that we barely ever listened to any dialogue. Instead, we listened to the extra commentary given by others.

I also used to enjoy hanging out at the Professors' houses. Especially during festivals like Diwali and Holi when it was tough to go home. We would go to Professors' houses to wish them Happy Holi or Diwali hoping to get some good food. This again was unique to Pilani because it was such a closed campus. The Professors were always welcoming to the students.

We'd love to hear about your activities and some [any?] courses you liked at BITS?

In general, I liked the Math courses a lot. In addition, there were other courses like Social Engineering I and II, Economics courses that were not the classical *EEE* courses. I really liked these courses as well.

Activities wise it was mostly hanging around with friends, going to CP to have *Blue Moon Samosas* or trekking up *Pahadi* to the temple. Once we all got together as a group and parked out cycles at the base of *Pahadi*. From the top, we saw some guys messing with our bikes which, of course, were prized possessions at that time. I still remember vividly how a couple of us took it upon us to "save" our bikes. Therefore, we quickly trekked down at almost 100 miles per hour without worrying about falling down and hurting ourselves.

It was all about the "little pleasures" as you know that Pilani does not have too many luxurious things to offer. Overall, it added up to a great experience.

Tell us a little about the transition you made from

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India to the US? What surprised you? What did you like the most and intensely dislike?

Growing up in India I moved around quite a bit as my dad was in a transferable job. So every three years we would be in a new city or a new state. I got a good exposure to varied cultures and lifestyles in India. I grew up with a strong belief that being different is OK and you have to be comfortable in your own skin. This was very helpful when I came to US. A lot of people ask me whether it was a culture shock but I don't think so.

Coming to US in a lot of ways has had a more grounding affect. I have been in the Bay Area for more than 5 years and this is the longest I have lived anywhere. Pilani was the longest I had lived at any place in India.

Have you ever worked with business professionals from Pilani or even India? What are your impressions of them in terms of leadership skills or technical abilities?

I have worked with a number of BITSians in the Silicon Valley and in India as well. I may be biased in saying so but I think that BITSians are the smartest folks you can find any where in the world. My experience shows that Pilani not only attracts the smartest brains in the country but also grooms people to be the best. I don't think that BITSians lack anything per se in their basic foundation.

Of course, all of us continue to grow as time goes by. I have come across great leaders like

Vivek Paul who is a great brand not only for BITS, Pilani and for leadership in general. There are many more BITSians in the Bay Area like Prem Jain, Naveen Jain etc. I have met some great people from Pilani and I continue to do so as I travel around the world.

How do you think we (BITSians/Indians) are distinguishing ourselves? What do we need to be doing better?

I don't know if I am fully qualified enough to comment on India as a whole but I will take a crack at it. I am very impressed with the work going on at building the "India" brand, especially at forums like the World Economic Forum at Davos. Going beyond being seen as a developing country with cheap labor it's really our education system and one-of-the-brightest human capital that stands us apart.

Our education system can be further strengthened by learning from the western counterparts by making education more broad based. Pilani did a much better job at providing this than most other engineering schools in India by really exposing people to many more things like business aspects. India has to do more in providing a well rounded education where people are more confident to handle different situations while still being great doctors and engineers.

I see all these things happening already with initiatives like the Centre of Entrepreneurial Learning (CEL) at BITS. I interacted with about twenty five students from CEL on my

recent Pilani trip and was amazed to listen to their ideas.

What do you think are the biggest challenges facing BITS today?

I wouldn't call them challenges but there are definitely things Pilani could do better. One of the things is international brand building, something that requires concentrated efforts. IITians have done a great job at this. We need a grass roots initiative to make people understand what BITS is all about. The onus for this falls both on Alumni as well as on the BITS Pilani administration.

Road access to Pilani could be better where the government needs to get involved as well. Research facilities in BITS have improved since the time I was a student at BITS but substantial improvements can be made on this front as well by collaborating with other universities.

What can BITSians do better/start doing to compete with the world's best?

There needs to be an effort to connect BITSians who are spread all around the world. There are already efforts in place by the BITSAA Silicon Valley Chapter to start distance learning lectures at BITS. This is what students at BITS need, a connection to the Alumni.

As the Chairperson of the BITSAA Women's Council, what role do you think the BITSAA Women's Council can play in the life of BITSian women?

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BITSian women are a strong bunch. We as a force could be even bigger in terms of some of the changes we are talking about. The council is a good initiative and as we go we will figure out more effective ways to build on the network to help each other out. Let us not short change ourselves by thinking only women can help each other out. There are guys out there who can help us and have helped us all along. I have a ton of respect for BITSian guys. The healthy (gender) mix and competition in Pilani was one of the best.

Has the BITSAA network been helpful to you with your Entrepreneurial venture?

BITSAA (as an organization) is relatively new thing for me. I know a number of BITSians, in the valley as well as in India, and I have leveraged that informal network in different ways – as a sounding board, in business partnership, in friendship and all kinds of good stuff. Overall it has made me a better leader, a better person, and more confident knowing that there are all these people I can reach out to. Having BITSAA as a concerted effort, the reach out could be much bigger.

Even though the Indian software industry in on track to $60 billion in revenue by 2010, most of it comes from software services. What do you think holds back Indian companies from launching successful products?

Business is really about growth and margins and it really doesn't matter if it's a product, service, or widget. It could be anything that you may sell. It's not the product v/s service in itself. It's about building something that is sustainable, that grows and produces profits year over year. Now if you look at some of the services companies, like Infosys with over 30% margins directed growth year over year. It really doesn't matter what they offer.

What we need to think about is very strong fundamentals and scale, which I believe, is where some of the Indian companies may be falling short. I don't get too enamored by the product part of it. As long as there is an innovative offering that is different, can be scaled and can be profitable. Not that we are there yet. That is the key drive for me personally than how to build products. There are product companies that don't do well and service companies that do extremely well. Eventually what matters is who does a better business and not what they offer.

So it is the services "seed" that was sown *x* years ago and everybody is simply following that?

Several companies that try to transform themselves from a services to a product company go from hugely profitable high growth companies to low margin non profitable companies. The important thing is to really figuring out distribution channels, cost of sales. Western companies have done a better job at building a better marketing of sales engines for products better than Indian companies have. I don't think it

is the technology of building a product v/s delivering a service.

Building a company as an entrepreneur is much tougher than working a nine to five job. What drives you to be an entrepreneur?

I can't put a finger on it. One thing I can tell you is that I enjoy what I do everyday. Even with all the ups and downs and there have been too many to name them, it's really about enjoying the downs and much as you enjoy the ups. Entrepreneurship does give you some of the freedom to not find excuses. The buck stops at you and at times you really got to make it happen. Having that sense of responsibility, accountability and freedom, I think is the part that I have enjoyed the most.

Do you see a difference in the style of business between men and women?

I do not see any such differences. When it comes to business there are certain intrinsic qualities that transcend gender, ethnicity, religion and race. Now that I have the experience of observing a number of different leaders around the world, I see so many things that are common and they do not belong to one section of the society. It's really being passionate about what you do and having empathy for people. It's about being decisive in difficult situations and taking responsibility for failures. I have observed these qualities in so many great leaders regardless of any affiliation.

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