

VIEWS

In the Thick of Things

■ **ASHWATH KIRTHIVASAN** Fifth Year Undergraduate, Department of Aerospace Engineering

If student-faculty interaction is touted to be minimal and unsatisfactory, staff-student interaction is abysmal and almost non-existent. In an effort to change this situation and draw our readers' attention to the immense, behind-the-scenes work that our staff members do, I spoke to Mrs. Shanta Sreeraman about her job, her experience of being on campus and her changing perceptions of the students who populate IIT Bombay.

Mrs. Shanta Sreeraman is Personal Assistant to Prof. Gopalan, Dean of Student Affairs, and has been in this position for every Dean of Student Affairs in the past 30 years. Extremely unassuming, soft-spoken yet well-informed about the happenings in the institute, she spoke on the transformation that IITB has been through in the years that she's been here.

She narrates a long, fascinating and intricate story about how things have changed in the past three decades. The first anecdote is about the establishment of the Dean of Student Affairs (DoSA) office. Before 1978-79, the position of a Dean to look after the affairs of students did not exist. In order to bring all student activities under one administration, this office was established. Many a student back in the 80s spent 10 years in IIT to complete his or her degree. Such a lifestyle eventually became a burden for the system. Rules had to be formed to govern the academic and the non-academic aspects of students' lives.

She narrates that the students back then were much more united for a cause. There wasn't as much of a UG-PG divide as it exists now, and all the students

coexisted in relative peace. Every hostel had one mature senior student or PhD student who would come forward to solve problems. Although the times seem rosier, she reminds me of the menace – ragging – that plagued IIT. Ragging was a rage and a few students also faced harsh punishments. It was around mid-1990 that freshmen started being allotted hostels 2, 3 and 4 in their first year and this rule has continued ever since (except in 2004, when the authorities gave into the requests of students and distributed freshies across hostels.)

She attributes that if there is a decline in student-faculty interaction, it could be due to students being exempted from meeting their professors to finalise their semester registrations. This used to be mandatory for all students, she says. Now, the entire process is online. Also, sizes of the batches were much smaller as compared to present times. This meant that the faculty knew their students personally and helped them whenever necessary. When a student was performing poorly, his parents would be called to the institute to meet with the faculty and discuss solutions to resolve the issues.

One of the biggest concerns she expressed was the reducing interaction between students themselves. Mrs. Shanta considers computers to be a big hindrance and feels that this technology has single-handedly reduced the amount of time students spend interacting with each other. Earlier, the Gymkhana would be filled with people and activity while now it presents a dull and quiet state. Students are too involved with their personal lives. This, coupled with the increasing immaturity of students coming into the institute has presented a plethora of

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unseen problems for the administration, she says. Rising incidents of alcohol abuse, misuse of freedom and the utter lack of respect for faculty from the students has left the authorities puzzled.

She categorically states that there were problems in the past too, but the rising intake of students and their increased exposure to various influences have led to many problems.

Not too many professors are keen on becoming the DoSA, considering its job profile. It demands a lot of time and patience to attend to the problems relating to students. It's an ungrateful job; do it well and students blame you for over-regulation; don't do it well and you still face brickbats.

As a member of staff, Mrs. Shanta has been as much of an observer as she has been a player in workings of the campus. She has seen the nature of interactions change even as she played her part silently and with a great sense of pride. She loves the campus, she concludes, and will continue to work in IITB. ■

THE UPSIDE OF DOWN

Walking Makes me Happy

■ **PROF. H. AHLUWALIA**

In the 1980s, the British rock-n-roll band Police sang "Giant steps are what you take walking on the moon/ We could walk forever walking on the moon". They could well have been singing about walking on IITB campus, since walking is surely one of the great pleasures of our campus life. Progressively, the steps that one can take on campus are less than "giant", as it gets crowded, especially with vehicles and construction. Car parks and concrete structures sprout out of nowhere, as grown-ups play at being town planners and landscape designers for this campus with relative impunity. But still, walking on campus is a joy – the wooded Soneri Baug route, running into the occasional mongoose, climbing the hill behind Ananta, the lake-front walk and watching cormorants, kingfishers and other waterbirds, memories of the Pipeline road and the Vihar area when it was accessible from campus. The same walks appear different depending on the season, with monsoons surely bringing the most dramatic of all changes. The winter haze around the streetlights, framed by trees on the hostel route in late December nights can bring out the romance in some of the most hardened.

Sometime back, Raintree carried an opinion piece titled, "Why am I in IIT?", where the author opined that "helping consummate the dream of a lively public institution, with meaningful public scholarship" was what was important to him. This set me, Prof. Happy Ahluwalia, also thinking. But for me, and surely for some others, one of the important reasons behind being here could be slightly more prosaic: like maybe the good fortune to be able to walk to my workplace through relatively pleasant surroundings. In fact, one feels blessed that in the five places (spanning four countries) that one has worked in (or attended graduate school), one has had the good fortune to either walk, or at least cycle to the workplace. But I do not think this is an accident.

Henry David Thoreau, in his delightful book simply titled, *Walking* put it as "It comes only by grace of God. It requires a direct dispensation from Heaven to become a walker. You must be born into the family of walkers..." Thoreau, probably the greatest of men, in his eulogy to walking further goes on to say, "...but the walking of

which I speak has nothing in it akin to taking exercise, as it is called, as the sick take medicine at stated hours – as the swelling of dumbbells or chairs; but is itself the adventure and enterprise of the day". This gentle sage lived in 19th century America, and had little idea how lesser men after him would turn his country into a civilisation of obese people, driving gas-guzzling SUVs, and that wars would be fought to preserve this lifestyle. Obviously, suburban living, lack of well-planned public transport, ready and cheap ownership of private automobiles, the greed of the automobile industry along with the usual suspects like fast food, corporate greed, advertising, etc. also contributed to this decline.

A not very dissimilar story is being played out here in middle-class India. But coming back to IITB, there is something which puzzles me, Happy Ahluwalia, to no end. Given that, we on the campus, live in a verdant oasis in one of the world's most polluted cities; given that most faculty members are pushing middle age or whereabouts; given everything that medical science tells us

about the fickleness of the South Asian heart (and sundry other organs); given that we do not allow our students to own and operate private, motorised vehicles; given that the workplace is a maximum 15 minute walk through relatively pleasant surroundings.. Given all this, why do supposedly intelligent faculty members in IITB routinely drive to work?

Some years back, the famous German physicist Dr. Walter Mitty who had also spent time at the institute as a visiting professor, was asked what he would ask God given the opportunity. The great physicist replied: "When I meet God, I am going to ask him three questions: Why relativity? Why turbulence? And why do so many supposedly intelligent faculty members at IITB routinely drive to work? I really believe he will have an answer to the first two." ■

1. Adaptation of a story variously attributed to the German theoretical physicist Werner Heisenberg and English mathematician Horace Lamb (with quantum electrodynamics instead of relativity).



Illustration by Ankita Roy, IDC