

Featured Article

INTERVIEW BY DILIP D'SOUZA ('76) (GO ONLINE FOR THE FULL VERSION)

JULY/AUGUST PERSON OF THE MONTH: ADITI PANY ('01) (FIRST WOMAN STUDENT UNION PRESIDENT & FOUNDING PRESIDENT, CENTRE FOR ENTREPRENEURIAL LEADERSHIP)

Aditi Pany is 21 years old. Which means she was born soon after I graduated from BITS in 1981. Now there's a thought. So in one way of looking at it, you might say there's a full BITS generation that separates us. In another way, there's all kinds of changes at BITS that separate us: from the way we were assigned our disciplines to the student lingo to the great increase in the number of women students at BITS.

And, too, this interesting fact: On September 8, 2002, Aditi was elected President of the BITS Students' Union. The first woman ever to hold that post. I mean no disrespect to the fine young ladies of my time in Pilani, but I have to say I cannot imagine, for reasons they had little control over, any of them becoming President. That Aditi has done so is really an indication of what has changed at BITS, besides saying things about her. So I was very intrigued by the prospect of speaking to her for Sandpaper. In June, we met very briefly in Bombay. Briefly, but enough to get a sense of the kind of person BITS has elected as its President. Enough to look forward very much to this conversation.

Aditi came 9th in Orissa in her 12th standard exam. She wanted to study engineering, and thus applied to BITS and did the Orissa Joint Entrance Examination; but remarkably for a budding engineer, did not do the IIT-JEE. Excerpts from our conversation, conducted by Internet chat.

Lets start with a little bit about yourself. Where did you grow up, go to school?

I'm from Bhubaneswar and I studied here till the 5th, after which I joined Welham Girls' High School, Dehradun. I was there till the 10th and then I shifted back to Bhubaneswar, to BJB College.

What made you choose BITS?

Well, I had 3 options: OJEE (Orissa Joint Entrance Examination), SAT and BITS happened later. I wasn't keen on studying in Orissa, and I didn't want to go to the US so soon. I had a chance to go to BITS and pursue both engineering and economics, so I took it up.

Now that you're close to graduating, do you think BITS turned out in any way different than what you thought it would be like when you entered?

Yes, for starters I certainly thought BITS would be more cosmopolitan, that courses would

be much tougher and the classes more exciting. But I also didn't expect the fabulous amount of student activities, and the in-depth student involvement in them.

I'm intrigued when you say it wasn't as cosmopolitan as you expected ... I had the opposite experience. In the sense that for the first time in my life I met people from every corner of India, including tiny towns I had never heard of, and more than that, several of them started beating the pants off me in our courses!

Well, BITS was full of south Indians, mainly from TN and AP. The lingo, the food, everything was south Indian, and the rest were a small minority.

OK, moving on... What made you run for President of the Union? Had you been involved with student issues before, either at school or in your first couple of years at BITS?

There were 2 major candidates from my batch, and lot of politics, a lot of money. Anyway, a night before the

election the two parties broke into a fight; it was a nasty scene and the EC cancelled their nominations. Then there was uproar on campus, and a group of us decided to give it a shot. We wanted to represent a neutral apolitical participation. We believed we couldn't win, but we wished to make a difference, instead of just criticizing. So I filed my nomination, with four others. It was a very short campaign.

Yes, probably my sex had to do with students accepting me as apolitical and neutral. But there were many doubts raised, because no woman had ever taken even a STUCCA post. Yes, I did get a lot of support from Meera Bhavan, but my victory was most unexpected! And honestly, I didn't know then what it entailed. I think I won it because they wanted to see a change, and maybe the Audi-ragging also played a part. It gave me confidence, and the students decided that I could be given a chance.

You see, there were many issues then: Oasis deficits year after year being billed to students, etc. So people were disillusioned. The union had lost a lot of respect. It was eventful, it wasn't an ordinary election, which is why I'm giving you so much background.



Name: Aditi Pany

Position: Founding President, Centre for Entrepreneurial Leadership, BITS Pilani and In-charge of Rural Entrepreneurship Programs

Selected Achievements:

- ❑ First woman President of BITS Student Union
- ❑ Focussed on Rural Entrepreneurship at BITS – working with a number of rural organizations to set this up at Pilani
- ❑ 9th in Orissa Board Examinations

Very interesting. I can see it wasn't ordinary! Goings-on at BITS! I'm reacting to your use of the word "apolitical": do you think there is such a thing as being apolitical? Also, educate this old-timer, what's Audi-ragging (I think I can guess, but tell me).

Apolitical: I meant detached from BITS politics (mainly regional). Audi-ragging is held one day before the elections. A panel of senior students is selected by the EC and they grill the candidates on the stage in the audi, before a huge audience. They grill us on why we wish to stand for the post, what are the main issues that need to be addressed, etc. But when

you look back, you never know what influenced, or convinced, people to vote for me!

Isn't it true that the majority of people who come to BITS have earlier tried to get into IIT and failed, or failed to get their discipline? Isn't that the Tier 2 perception we are talking about?

True, but for a lot of them, had they tried a second time, they would have gotten into IIT. And we've experienced, in intercollege competitions, that we do as well. That's where the confidence is from. Of course they have a much larger brand. But what's tier 1 -- the top 10 institutes in the country? Top five? We're certainly in the top five. If tier 1 means the top two, then maybe not, but that would be a really small range for tier 1. Which is why we want to ask ET what tier 1 means to them.

Tell me about this entrepreneurship initiative you are involved with. Are the students excited about it?

Well, the initiative came from an alumni group called CEVC (Center for Entrepreneurship & Venture Capital) and we are working together to establish a "Centre for Entrepreneurial Leadership" at BITS. The objective is to promote an entrepreneurial spirit among the BITSian community. We have a lot of activities planned; workshops, venture partnership projects, rural entrepreneurship, student agencies, guest lectures and more. We look to ex-BITSians to guide us and support us in this effort.

And I've observed it during this Apogee. We tried to completely rethink Apogee. We wanted to make it one of the best tech-fests in the country. So we were on this roll, new ideas, new ways to do old things, focus on quality. And there was so much participation, enthusiasm and creativity.

This Apogee had a new look, and the change was appreciated. This was, of course, just the beginning. But after having been part of that experience, I think BITSians will enjoy this initiation into entrepreneurial ventures. I think we need inspiration and a dose of confidence. We hope to provide exactly that. We're working on it!

What are you going to do after BITS?

I have a dream to set up a unit here in Orissa. So I shall follow a course which will help me achieve that best. And as I understand it now, I should work for two years, do my MBA (in the US because I want a global experience) and then go after my dream.

What kind of unit?

Hmm... Well, it's an idea: I want to take up a village and provide all facilities, from infrastructure to ideas and designs, to accessibility to international and national markets, all for promoting Orissa's textiles and handicrafts. We have tremendous talent here, and I think we need to channelise that. Indian textiles are getting recognition in a lot of countries, and by top designers.

A little bit of nostalgia to (almost) conclude: what's your favourite spot on the campus? Why?

The Student Union Block easily! Because I have spent most of my time there and we've had the most interesting discussions about BITS, its present and future there. And my 24 hr permission is valid in the SUB!

Finally, if some of us alumni come to BITS for this year's Oasis, can you assure us of an event we can participate in in which we will win lots of prizes? We expect you to use your Presidential influence on our behalf.

Ha ha! OK, hmm... Yeah, I can promise influence in the Mr and Ms Oasis event. Looking forward to seeing you this Oasis. Except that I won't be Prez. But I think I could still cast some influence. 🙄