BY VIKAS CHANDRA

WHEN ACADEMICIANS BECOME ENTREPRENEURS

THE THIRD IN A SERIES OF PROFILES

Prof K.R.V. Subramanian (popularly known as Raja to BITSians) has made contributions to BITS by the creation of institutions that have given BITS an edge over other institutions, and will outlast all our lifetimes. He remained at the helm of technological leadership of BITS during a tremendously successful and satisfying 26 years that he spent there. Prof Subramanian joined BITS, Pilani in 1974, and joined BITS upon graduation in 1979 with MA (Hons) Economics.

After 1985, he taught courses in Computer Science and Information Systems. He served as Group Leader of Computer Science for 3 years during 1986-1989. In 1989, he started the Center for Software Development and served as the Chief Coordinator till 1995. During 1990-2000, he served as the Dean of the Distance Learning Program Division.

In May 2000, Prof. Subramanian left BITS and moved to Bangalore to start AnswerPal (now Ascendum). He currently serves as the CEO of Ascendum. He is also one of the Directors on the International Board of Standards for Training, Performance and Instruction. He still maintains very close ties to the BITSIAN community in India and Abroad.

Name: KRVS Raja

Academic Position: Former Professor & Dean of Distance Learning, BITS Pilani

Entrepreneurial Venture: Founder and CEO, Ascendum

Contributions to BITS Pilani: Key in setting up the Distance Learning Division and the Center for Software Development

Education: PhD & MS, Computer Science; MA (Hons) Economics, BITS Pilani

You spent almost 26 years at BITS. How do you remember your BITSian days?

I remember my BITSian days (26 continuous years) in a number of ways:

Very vividly. I remember quite of number of events very vividly from my Freshman year to my last day of work there in May 2000. Often, my wife Usha (she spent 16 years in Pilani) my daughter Nitya (while she was not born in Pilani, she spent her formative years till she was 13 in Pilani) and I reminisce our Pilani days and recall many events very vividly. These memories are very special for all of us!

With lot of fondness. I remember my BITSians days with a lot of fondness – love for the institution, love for the place (dust, heat, cold, and all…), love for the people (I think Rajasthanis – at least the people I met in Pilani, are among the most honest, simple and hard-working ones).

With a lot of pride. Over the years, I came to respect the institution and what it stood for in the world of education. I came to respect the processes, the flexibilities, the transparent nature of conducting business, and the opportunities for growth that it offers for faculty and students. I came to respect the selfless dedication of a number of teachers. I came to respect the batches of students who made me feel younger and vibrant with each passing year. I remember my BITSian days with a lot of pride!

With immense gratitude. It was BITS that gave me everything I have today. It gave me a good education, it gave me an opportunity to follow my dreams, it trusted my abilities, it enabled me to grow in multiple dimensions, it helped my wife blossom into a good teacher and a professional, it gave me a community life that I cherish very much. It gave me nearly everything I have today – more than what I gave BITS back. I remember my BITSian days with immense gratitude.

What were the reasons to leave an illustrious career i n academia to start AnswerPal (Ascendum)?

I enjoyed every aspect of my stay in BITS (teaching, research, development, managing, mentoring, whatever). After I started the Center for Software Development at BITS, I had the opportunity of working with many brilliant students. The numerous discussions that I had with them contributed a lot to widening my ideas of technology, development, ideas, opportunities, etc.

During my stint as the Dean of Distance Learning, I had the opportunity of honing up my management skills. I had the opportunity of interacting a lot with industry. I tried to run the Distance Learning Programs as though it were an independent business division of a corporate body (from the operational

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efficiency point of it). This gave me the confidence that I can possibly run a good business too.

On one of the cold winter nights in 1999, a few students and faculty (who worked with me and Usha at the Center for Software Development) started a freewheeling discussion on what it would be if we moved out of BITS and started to run a business. What started off as an "agenda-less discussion" or a typical BITSian "lachcha" quickly took the shape of a compelling choice for all of us. Well, we discussed some more, did some soul searching, and then we decided to move out and take up this challenge.

Talking to Dr. Venkateswaran about our decision to move away from BITS was one of the toughest things Usha and I have faced in our lives. Dr. Venkateswaran has been a great teacher, a wonderfully warm friend, mentor, philosopher and guide. Suffice to say that Usha and I choked on our words with intense emotion the day we talked about this decision to him!

Did your experiences at Pilani prepare you for your entrepreneurial activity?

Yes, they certainly did. First was my experience of setting up the Center for Software Development and running it somewhat successfully.

Second, my experiences in running the Distance Learning Programs for nearly 10 years and helping it grow healthily.

Third, the opportunities I had in interacting with wonderful people from the industry. They taught me so many things!

Of course, there were several things I was not prepared for (I am still learning). I tried to learn and adapt as fast as I could. Perhaps the BITS educational system subtly prepared me for that too!

Tell us more about AnswerPal (Ascendum).

AnswerPal started off as a simple software solutions & services company. We began working with software product development companies in the USA (small-to-medium sized companies), providing some high-end architecting, designing capabilities, R&D support, and the like. Even today, the software solutions & services remains a large part of our business.

In 2001-2002, we had the opportunity of working with IBM in the development of courseware products (in the broad areas of software engineering). We quickly realized that learning solutions is our passion and also our core competence (we have a good number of BITSians with us!). Today, we also provide custom eLearning solutions for corporate entities. We are also developing eLearning courseware products in specific areas. We employ a very unique and compelling learning methodology called "Learn by Doing".

In January 2004, we changed the name of the company to Ascendum. Ascendum has two divisions – one that deals with software solutions & services, and another that deals with learning solutions. We have a lot of exciting development initiative underway in the learning solutions.

Have BITSIAN connections come in handy in your new venture?

Surely, it has! I am probably a lot more fortunate than many others in that I have known BITSians of various batches – from my seniors to those who were there in 2000 too! BITSians have helped me in various ways. Some have directly helped with routing some business our way. Others have helped in introducing me to people who are potential customers. Still others have helped shape my thoughts, attitudes and actions with helpful advice.

Having said that, I honestly believe that business networking among

BITSians is still in a nascent stage (as compared to other alumni groups). There is a tremendous potential and I am hopeful that BITSians would come together sooner than later and network furiously.

You have been involved with so many things at BITS; which one do you think made the most important impact on BITS?

I can think of two things, one from the viewpoint of BITSian students and the other from the viewpoint of the institution.

The Center for Software Development that I started provided opportunities for several students to shape themselves for a career in the software industry. I have observed (as many others have) over several years, that many highly intelligent and gifted students do not necessarily have an impeccable (or even a good) academic record. The CSD helped nurture students who were talented, but did not find scope for expression in regular academic work. It provided a safe haven for students who wanted a free, creative and challenging work environment. I think that this made the most impact on at least a section of the student community.

My involvement with the Distance Learning Programs was another satisfying experience. I think that many of the advances being made in BITS in terms of infrastructure, faculty well-being, diversity of programs/courses, and several other things can be traced back to the gains from the distance learning programs in some ways.

In both these involvements, I was fortunate to have had the active support and cooperation of students and my colleagues there (Dr. B R Natarajan, the present Dean and my buddy). More importantly, my involvement was passionate only because Dr. Venkateswaran trusted my abilities, constantly demanded higher performance, and mentored me to be useful in these activities.

What are your future career plans? Any plans of returning to BITS to teach part-time?

Future career plans? I am still grappling with a startup (albeit a modestly profitable one). I have miles to go in this…

I did manage to teach a few courses for the off-campus programs in Bangalore a few years ago. And when my travel schedule became quite hectic, I could not manage this.

Yes, I do miss teaching, and would love to take up any opportunity to teach (time and logistics permitting). In fact, my wife Usha misses teaching and Pilani far more than I do! I do not have any plans moving away from the current role of building Ascendum.

What are the biggest goals for you to achieve in your lifetime?

You are probably going to be disappointed that I do not have any

"inspiring" things to say here. I do have goals, but modest ones. I have some nice ideas on making a difference in the world of eLearning.

What is your advice to BITSians who want to pursue a career in research or academics?

Three words – Passion, Perseverance, Patience ⁞

BITS & the Rankings. A looming threat to our Top 10 Status ?

In the **India Today 2004** Rankings BITS slipped for a third year in a row, inspite of the new network, the media blitz and all the joint faculty-alumni efforts. For reasons we do not understand, we have been unable to stop the slide. With the entry of two new schools – DCE and Anna University into this year's rankings, and the likely incumbence of the 7 IITs, it means that BITS is going to be fighting four excellent non-IIT schools for three spots next year. If the announcement of 5 additional IITs goes through, BITS may cease to be a Top 10 school within the next five years. Does anyone have any ideas or "real" insights into these rankings ? Mail anupendra@bitsaa.org

2004	Overall Rankings	2003	2002	2001	2000
1	IIT Kanpur	2	2	2	4
2	IIT Delhi	6	10	3	3
3	IIT Mumbai	3	4	3	1
4	IIT Chennai	4	5	3	2
5	IIT Roorkee	8	8	11	-
6	IIT Guwahati	7	15	-	-
7	IIT Kharagpur	1	1	1	5
8	**BITS Pilani**	5	3	3	6
9	Anna University, Chennai	10	9	16	-
10	Delhi College of Engineering	-	-	-	-
-	Institute of Technology, BHU Varanasi	8	8	11	-
-	REC, Tiruchirapally	9	17	-	-