



Y-Point

the webZINE of the IIT Bombay Alumni Association

Winter 1997

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IIT Bombay



MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR

Dear Friends,

Let me begin by wishing you and your families a “*Shubh Deepawali*”.

The alumni of our Institute are spread out in many parts of the world and the number is increasing each year. Reaching all of you in time with news on recent happenings concerning the Institute and our alumni is not an easy task.

It is therefore, a great pleasure for me to welcome the beginning of a regular news magazine “Y-point” being started by Ram Kelkar and his friends. It is also very satisfying to note that the electronic publishing media proposed to be used will permit quick publication and instant delivery.

I wish this important initiative grand success.

Suhas P. Sukhatme
(Suhas P. Sukhatme)

October 29, 1997

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-

An evening with Kanwal Rekhi ('63-'67 / EE, H7)

by [Hemendra Godbole](#)

Pretend you are in the hostel mess at 4:20 pm on a Friday. Chai ... the weekend ahead. As you read these words, let this story grow on you ... hear the echoes of your own memories rhyme in with Kanwal Rekhi's impressions of a time gone by.

1963 : The nation is seized by political fervor after the Indo-China war in 1962. All vestiges of free enterprise are giving way to the "Jai Jawan, Jai Kisan" socialist slogans. The campus is alive with political discussions. Russian faculty is still on campus, and the

HSS courses in Economics assure that capitalism cannot work. Long walks is the norm, bicycles is for the fortunate few. Powai is free of water hyacinth, and about five structures exist at Y.P.

Kanwal Rekhi, who at two had embarked on his first long journey to India as a refugee, now sets course from a sleepy Kanpur to Johnny Walker's "Ai Dil haih mushkil haih jeena yahaan" Bombay. Kanwal endures the ragging - and in hindsight as he speaks about it - has a faint smile on his face as he mentions the experience. Like most 17 year-olds that have been filtered out by the JEE, Kanwal is strong in his analytical skills, and leans towards Mathematics in particular.

1965 : The Indo-Pak war. Shastri wins the war for India, but succumbs to a massive stroke in Tashkent. Indira Gandhi goes on to use her position as the Minister of Information and Broadcasting to work the media. She quells the caucus to become the P.M. These events deeply affect the campus community. Nationalization of industries becomes the norm. India refuses the US overtures and remains neutral (much to Johnson's chagrin). The Russian faculty diminishes in numbers, but the Russian motors and mainframes rumble on to ensure their presence on campus. Inter-hostel events pick up and rock-n-roll comes to town. Like many others, Kanwal is nationally seen as one of the Engineering elites, the creme de la creme.

Meanwhile in the US, the media and the president are captivated by Khrushchev's bold move into Space with the Sputnik launch. The nation demands a domination of the space-race, and huge investments are made into improving education in the Sciences and Mathematics. A law from the 20's limits the number of immigrants per nation as a percentage of the current ethnic population. So, for example, if the census found 8% of the population to be Irish, 8% of the immigrants were allowed to be Irish. That limits the Indian and Taiwanese immigrants but not the inflow of students.

Like his peers, Kanwal really believes in what he tells the VISA officials "I wish to go to the USA to study for my MS". He does intend to return, or settle in an European country. Since the standard of living in Europe is on-par with the US, few Europeans do what the Indians, Iranians, and Taiwanese (amongst others) begin to do in larger numbers. Upon graduation, these early few begin to sink roots in the US.

1967 : Kanwal at Michigan Tech follows the trend to repatriate some money. Amongst a handful of Indians in a 1000-mile radius, there are no precedents. These few are trailblazers of sorts and work hard to figure out the system in the US. Kanwal has always been physically weaker. He tends to wake up each morning weary and fatigued, and all for no apparently good reason. At class, he tends to fall asleep with his listening faculties "on". One particular "EE-machines"-like class, the instructor jokes aloud about the sleeping student and goes on to impart his esoteric fundaes. Kanwal pops awake just in time to be handed a surprise quiz on the contents just imparted. He does his thing, and the professor is astounded to see Kanwal ace the quiz ! Kanwal cannot explain it either. It seems like he had "crashed out" except for his on-line listening faculties.

(Author's note: We thank folks like Kanwal for establishing the myth that all IITians have this special ability. It saved many a later IITian from being administered a surprise quiz in a post-crashed-out situation)

Post-MS, jobs galore in the US. A \$10,000/pa salary launched the early ones into upper-middle-class status. The X+1 syndrome hadn't been the observed norm yet, and still, the early waves of eligible bachelors were heading home. Kanwal met his love in Florida. The defense industry was a strong provider in the pre-Silicon days, and Kanwal moved on to Singer-Link in the valley by the Bay. Back when \$2000 bought you a car, and housing was at \$150/pm, the valley was a sedate place. And yet, it was humming with promises of things to come in the 70's post-Fairchild era. Kanwal had promised his wife that they would be "rich" by the time he was 40. As the adjective "silicon" began to be attached to the valley, Kanwal at 35, did not find himself inside the Chip-tornado.

Meanwhile, he had established a commendable reputation as a techno-firefighter on the job. With his uncanny savvy and an 'hands-on' habit, he had become a de facto system-level guru. As he looked around, IITians seemed still not to be caught up in the entrepreneurial passion that seemed to seize friends around him. Now c'mon - how could they ? This was a species given to tearing out vital pages from single-source "reference" books while on campus. They were more adept at rising quickly through the ranks, and trying out Amway as an exciting business thing !

Kanwal still crashed out in midstream sometimes even 'on the job'. Nobody could pick on his contributions, so they attributed his inexplicable sleeping to "Uh-Oh! he is a party animal - must've had a long night". All this left Kanwal perplexed but he set it aside. He was at the "early Bird" program at Santa Clara University, picking courses that excited him. Economics and History were his compelling thing, and he was an authority of sorts on the American Civil War.

(Authors' note: I was amazed at Kanwal's dexterity in borrowing separate events from global history and weaving them into a compelling fabric supporting his point throughout the interview).

One of Kanwal's reports (David Jackson), a technician, left Singer to found Altos computers. Kanwal began to feel a restlessness that plagues budding entrepreneurs. The catalyst that launched him out was a new manager with an East Coast attitude. Kanwal quit. It was still too early for Kanwal to really launch his own firm. So, onwards to Zilog, where he met Inder MohanSingh (IIT KGP) and Naveen Jain (Pitani '73). They got along well enough to eventually leave Zilog to launch Excelan.

At Excelan, Kanwal saw his role as THE technical 'doer' with Inder playing more of a marketing role. However, with some early downturns and some dis-satisfaction on the part of the VCs of Inder's performance, Inder was asked to leave Excelan as the CEO. Lots of lessons here for social friends getting together to form an enterprise and the bitterness of parting.

Kanwal went from the head-techie to the CEO of Excelan. And yet, Kanwal sometimes, wandered off into a deep snooze right in the middle of very important meetings ! This time though, it added to his reputation since everyone assumed that he was working too hard. Strange how people's perception of you is driven by your status in the ranks, regardless of the truth ! The reality, as it turned out, was a very harsh one.

Kanwal had "sleep apnea" - a respiratory-disorder induced disease that prevents one from even having a deep sleep. The good news was that Kanwal had found the cause, the bad news was that the cure was a long-term, painful one. Overcome it he did, with characteristic elan - as did he his second disorder : speech impairment.

Pilots will testify to the one cardinal truth that they all know well: "Once in the air, fly the airplane!" No amount of complaining or self-pity will reverse the adverse weather or the leaky fuel-tanks. Got to fly the airplane and land it safely - you own your life. Kanwal is an ace pilot in that very sense - imagine going through IIT without any deep sleep, through CEO-level negotiations with a speech-disorder !

And when asked about it, the man replied "God gives you ways to overcome your disabilities with gifts in other faculties". The rest of this story could have several interesting endings. Kanwal went on to take Excelan public ... is on the board of a few companies ... has been profiled in magazines from the Wall Street Journal to India Currents ... helped launch Novell-India prior to leaving Novell. At home, he is a loving father to two kids, and is known to the TIE community as a large-hearted mentor. I have picked a small story to end this article. It has to do when Kanwal wanted to donate \$50,000 to IIT-Bombay.

Kanwal wrote out a check to IIT Bombay (it was still "Bombay" in '91). The RBI came back with intelligent questions such as "Where did you get this much money?" with "How did you earn it" etc. This from a man who took a \$140M worth Excelan public many years ago ! To make a long story short, there was enough hassle from the gatekeepers to force Kanwal into an alternate arrangement. He bought \$50,000 worth of stock in "Onward Technology" - a Harish Mehta venture (who had coaxed Kanwal to have his company be a Novell distributor in India in earlier years). All profits from this \$50,000-equivalent investment are now directed as Rupee contributions to IIT-Bombay.

As some of us alum's struggle to nourish the roots that we all share, a project that facilitates the giving would be very beneficial. Kanwal goes on to cite the pushy alum-letters and attitude taken by campuses in the US as an example. Time to work with the like-minded at IIT Bombay to make this happen ?

Time for another round of Chai folks ? Should we draw from successful stories like Kanwal's to leverage the alumni and work on projects that give us a sense of fulfillment ?

By the way, Kanwal has been profiled in the May '97 issue of India Currents . This article for Y-Point has not focused on Kanwal's professional life - which was in any event covered very well in the India Currents issue.

From the editor's desk ...^{\$}

by [Ram V. Kelkar](#) (EE80 H2)

It is with great pleasure that I welcome you to the inaugural issue of "Y-Point", the online newsmagazine of the IIT Bombay Alumni Association and the IIT Bombay Heritage Fund. The [editors](#) of "Y-Point" intend to work hard toward ensuring that we begin an initiative that will endure, and I am confident that this webZINE will be of great value in bringing the global community of IIT alumni together.

I hope reading Y-Point motivates more IITians to read about the efforts of the [IIT Bombay Heritage Fund](#) in helping our alma mater. Amongst the highlights of the inaugural issue are an [interview with Kanwal Rekhi](#), CEO of Excelan, and one of the most generous contributors to the IIT Bombay cause to date. A regular feature which should be of interest to IITians is "[Class Notes](#)" to help them keep up with their classmates. Other articles include one on the [1997 Bay Area picnic](#) and a [book review](#) by Madanmohan Rao. The inaugural issue has a letter from [Director S.P. Sukhatme](#), and one from [Anil Kshirsagar](#), President of the IIT Bombay Heritage Fund. Please write in your comments and suggestions on the [bulletin board](#). And last, but not least, we have [pictures from IIT Bombay](#), courtesy of Milind Kamble.

The genesis of "Y-Point" and the IIT Bombay website itself goes back to almost an year ago when Deputy Director Sahasrabudhe was visiting with me on a trading room floor in New York City. We had been debating back and forth on how to get the alumni effort started. In the spirit of the old saying - "Kal kare so aaj kar, aaj kare so ab ...", right there on a surreal trading floor, surrounded by traders and flashing screens of market prices, Dr. Sahasrabudhe and I called up a few ISPs, and decided that we lock up www.iitbombay.org as the name of the website. I volunteered to pay the bills, and thanks to an understanding family and many late nights, Y-Point and the website were under way.

The launch of Y-Point is a matter of great satisfaction for me since I am certain it will help bring IITians back in touch with each other and their alma mater. The Powai days were certainly one of the most important life experiences for me, as they were for most of the fellow alumni I am in touch with. The memories of days of close friendships and camaraderie cushioned what many also found to be an extremely stressful and competitive educational environment.

The magic of the web is evident in the fact that the editorial board is spread out over California, Connecticut, Seattle and India as we put this issue together. Y-Point - the project - has been in the making for many weeks and months, and it took the efforts of many IITians who are busy with their own jobs and families to put this new endeavor together. Like with any start-up, the road will be rocky at first. Please bear with us as we learn from our efforts and gain in experience, and I am hopeful that this issue will become the first of many more issues to come.

An update on the IIT Bombay Heritage Fund

by [Anil Kshirsagar](#)

Hello everyone! On behalf of the IIT Bombay Alumni Organization, I wish you a very happy Diwali and a prosperous New Year! This is the first "webzine" put together by Ram Kelkar and his enthusiastic team. This will be a great forum for all of us to be in touch with IIT and each other. Your comments and active participation in making this a success will be greatly appreciated by not only the team here, but also by all the alumni and IIT.

Let me give a brief overview of the Heritage Fund and its activities so far. The Fund was established last year as an official entity recognized by the US Government. Even though the organization is called a Fund, it really is the Alumni Organization with the focus to conduct activities that will help IIT achieve its goals. One of the goals of course is to assist its alumni - you - in furthering your own careers. Some of the information about the Fund is detailed on the website. More detailed information can be requested by writing to us.

The major highlight of this year was the visit by the Director, Prof. S. P. Sukhatme. His main purpose of the visit was to make the alumni around the country aware of changes in IIT, its charter and how we can help achieve its objectives. He was enthusiastically received by alumni in the country. As a result of this trip, he has established a permanent Alumni office in IIT to deal with issues related to us.

Here is the progress made by the Fund so far.

- We have established the website that is diligently managed by [Ram Kelkar](#). The website provides information about IIT, alumni organization activities. Several hundred have so far registered their email addresses. Plans are under way to create a central database where all our vital contact information can be updated and found on the website. This should help us network amongst each other tremendously.
- An Advisory Board is being formed by Raj Mashruwala. The Board will be made up of alumni who are very successful in their fields and can guide the organization to become viable and vibrant. If you would like to nominate anyone to this board, please do so by contacting Raj. Currently, due to proximity, he has several alums from the Bay Area, but even they feel there is a need to involve others from across the country. The Advisory Board members have pledged and contributed a significant amount for beginning the operation of the Fund.
- Several batches are sponsoring special projects at IIT. They each have a project in mind:

Batch of '72: They are preparing their silver jubilee celebration. Their goal is to raise funds for painting the hostels. The target is to raise \$25,000 from the US and \$25,000 in India. So far, they have raised \$8,500 in the US. Contact: [Deepak Sabnis](#).

Batch of '75: The goal is to provide better Internet access to students in the hostels. The target is to raise \$50,000 for extending the campus LAN to hostels, and for additional bandwidth to VSNL. So far, \$13,000 have been raised in the US. Contact: [Pari Choksi](#). (Incidentally, Pari would also like to hear from you if you have fund raising ideas for the organization. So far, we have raised a total of \$100,000.)

Batch of '87: The goal is being discussed among the batchmates. So far they have raised \$4,000. Contact: [Dushyant Pandya](#).

- The alumni organization work has begun on two coasts - San Francisco and New York. We need to expand the network to other cities in the US. The Heritage Fund can provide assistance in forming local chapters and in helping coordinate activities. Please contact [Subhash Tantry](#) if you would like assistance in this regard.
- We are approaching the end of the year. It is time to review our finances at this time to see the tax impact of our earnings. It is an opportune time to donate to IIT Bombay Heritage Fund. Please contact [Sandeep Pandya](#) if you have questions regarding donations.
- Last, but not the least, [Mahesh Krishnamurthy](#) is taking charge of the "outreach" program -- traditionally known as marketing. Please do not hesitate to contact him with your own ideas and if you need help in extending your local chapter.

In conclusion, let me thank the editors of "Y-Point" for putting out a terrific webzine with a great purpose. Wish you all the best and hope to be in touch.

1997 Picnic of the San Francisco Bay Area Chapter

the IIT Bombay Alumni Association

by [Dushyant Pandya](#)

The Bay Area Chapter of IITBAA organized a day picnic at the Huddardt Park on October 4th, an event that was attended by about 50 alumni. This site will soon have photographs from the picnic that show what a rousing success it was.

It was a potluck picnic and we ran out of the food but Hari Narayanan, the handsome smashing model for Toshiba, saved the day by bringing additional food at last moment. Madan Avadhani was the most cursed man at the picnic. He was supposed to bring the plates and drinks by 12:00. Instead he shows up at 2:00 p.m. Imagine the sight of 50 to 60 hungry people waiting for the food. Then rubbed salt on the wound by shamelessly collecting \$10 from all the alumni to defray the cost of organizing the picnic. However, due to his heroic effort we have broken even for once.

Ashok Raman, on the other hand, the lovable guy that he is, had brought his camping stove and made chai for all of us. Subhash Tantry of IIT Bombay Heritage made a succinct speech eliciting the purpose and the benefit of the Heritage Fund. I was the next speaker, and was on a roll thanking the volunteers for organizing the picnic when Hemendra Godbole (Dabba) (H4 EE, '85) cut me short by reminding me to not let the speeches degenerate into a mutual admiration society.

Many thanks to Allwyn Sequerira and his daughters for providing us the entertainment. The number of alumni from Hostel 4 amazed us. Almost 30% of the attendees were from Hostel 4. We expect higher participation from the other hostels in future, especially Hostel 3. We had a very wide spectrum in terms of year of graduation from the respected (Vibhu Shah and Vijay Grover of Class of '69) to bachchas (Moses Charikar and Rohit Negi of Class of '95).

We hope that all of you who attended met people from the glorious past with whom you had lost the touch. We encourage you to stay in touch and make sure that there are at least 100 alumni at the next event. The next event will be held in early spring 1998. In the mean time, if you are in the Bay Area, you can still stay in touch by attending the monthly luncheon on the first Friday of every month. Please contact hmehta@leguator.com if you are interested in attending the luncheon.

Lessons learned from picnic:

1. Never have the picnic from 10:00 am to 7:00 pm. Kevin Nazareth was the first one to show up at 10:20 am. But he had to leave soon for dragon boat racing. He did come back late in the evening again after the remarkable achievement of not capsizing. Rahul Shah was the last one to show up at 6:00 pm. Most of the people showed up around lunch time. We will organize the next picnic from 3:00 p.m onwards with the option for overnight camping.
2. Truth in advertising: We had touted the picnic advertising that Prof. Phatak, Dean of Resource Planning, will attend the picnic. I do not know how many alumni came to the picnic wanting to meet Dr Phatak. He never showed up for the picnic and we are left with the dread of a law suit for false advertising.

I would like to thank Ashok Raman, Pushkar Hingwe, Sudeep Kumar and even Madan Avadhani for organizing the picnic. (I love you, Dabba).