

REFLECTIONS OF THARAMANI DAYS

Start-Up: It was the fall of 1960 when a group of about 100 students arrived at the Tharamani Hostel of the new national Engineering college. We all came from various parts of the country – from as far away as Kashmir, Assam and Kerala; we spoke many tongues as the political structure was seeking to establish an acceptable national language; Our hostel Warden, Dr Chaudhuri, (an associate of our Director, Dr. Sen Gupto and a former Manager of Bridge and Roof (who built the Howrah Bridge) in Calcutta had taken a sabbatical to start up this venture to establish high engineering standards of education for India wanted that each student select a room-mate from a state other than their own in order to develop a cohesive group and it worked. My classmates became a close-knit fraternity not just with each other but also with our faculty; – There and then began our friendships with a strong foundation.

Hostel: The hostel was shaped like a square octopus with several wings and 2-3 stories – some areas were still under final stages of construction but that did not deter the young students from having a unique experience. We had a reasonable sized mess-hall at one end of the hostel and two “Common-Rooms”, one of which had a TT table and other had several board games, (and newspapers from several states) including Chess, checkers etc. Tharamani was within the Guindy Deer Park adjacent to Velacheri and it was a good 10-15 minute drive to go from the Guindy Road to the hostel. Our Seniors were housed in Saidapet (several miles from the hostel) and it took a while for us to get connected with them. The only post-box was a village postal office in Velacheri – It took a while before the IITPO (Madras 36) opened inside the campus

Mess: One of the critical items for the youngsters was sustenance – food. All of us had come from various sub-cultures with likes, dislike and prejudices of various foods from our homes. The local mess Manager, Mr. Ganapathi Iyer (a bespectacled gentleman with just the knowledge of South Indian Cuisine) tried his best to accommodate various wishes – eventually Dr. Chaudhuri formed a “Mess Committee” comprising of students (C R Muthukrishnan, Sunanden Sen, the writer and Mr. Ganapathi Iyer) to establish a “Menu” for the hostel. Those were the days when computers were still in the embryo stage and Excel was non-existent. Hand written menu was posted for student comments and given to the mess manager for implementation. The menu had some resistance and it took a while before we all accepted.

Mess had fixed time window schedules for breakfast, lunch and dinners. Interesting issues relative to the mess was the Movie Night Dinners and Sunday morning Breakfasts. Most of us attended the movies organized by Pritam Lal Kapoor/Mallick/Randhawa) and the dinner had to be served early and the mess staff had to accommodate it. Sunday mornings was “Dosa Day” at the hostel. Most of the students woke up late on Sunday mornings and wanted delayed

breakfasts and this impacted kitchen schedule since breakfast time extended almost past lunch time but the staff including Krishnan Kutty did a great job

Hostel Activities: Activities inside Tharamani kept us busy – We had TT challenges in which several of us excelled – games between S Kumar and Madhok or Vikram kept the ball in play for several minutes; we had photographic exhibitions with some beautiful photos courtesy of Olia, Mahesh and Basu. Quiz competitions with Father Murphy of Loyola were always interesting. Debating activities with classmates TS Ananthu, V Siddhartha and R S Vaswani secured several awards for the school. Several of us had friendly “nick” names like Ghost, G1, G2 etc and we often called each other by those names always in friendship and with good intent

The Annual Day affair at Tharamani was a major event in which almost all of us participated. Our teacher, A C Gangadharan (Applied Mechanics Dept) coordinated the main event – a musical shadow play based on a Kerala story of jilted love. The excitement of the event involved setting of the stage, the sound system, the lights, the program the seating etc. All of us did our little share to make the event a success. Following this event, IITM participated as the only college from Madras in the All-India Youth Festival in New Delhi and we were also featured in the local issue of Sport and Pastime. Our Registrar’s participation in the Sports activities was also interesting.

The kinship among the students was always friendly and the intersection of our faculty with us was unique in that it was mentoring of young minds. Kinships developed into true friendships that are cherished even after 60 years – Even though we maintain contacts on an irregular basis, we connect immediately when the writer talks with OP, Ghost, Anand Singh Bawa, Ananthu, Saha Aravi and others

There was always excitement when a faculty or a student went abroad and some of us would make the trip to Meenambakam Airport to wish them well and always hoping that we too would have the chance to go abroad – It was a thing that many aspired but few stated publicly

Going to meet and interact with our seniors in Saidapet was also a treat – Riding our bikes thru Guindy Road -- Different Dining Experience – Different friends – New friendships – Some “friendly Ragging” – Experiences to remember a life-time

Since we (except those from Madras proper) had all come from different parts of the country, the holiday time was a bustle of activity at the hostel – with packing our “Hold-Alls”, suit cases and taking taxis to go to Madras Central to take the train journeys back home to our parents.

Buying train travel tickets was also a shared responsibility. If a student was planning to go to the Central Station, he would buy tickets for his friends. The return to the campus was an equally interesting event. Many of us would bring sweets and “goodies” from our parents and we would share it with our room-mates and neighbors

The Lorry trips to the AC College workshops was always a challenge – Open trucks – Standing room only - holding to the truck roof-framing – took a long time for the busses to come to Tharamani. The idea of naming the busses after the mountain peaks and the hostels after the rivers was a unique one – probably originated with our Registrar.

Campastimes: The idea for a printed campus newspaper came from our German Professor, Dr. Klein whom we all liked and respected. Dr. Klein assembled a group of dedicated staff with a variety of talents – Saha with a natural ability for graphics, Anand Singh Bawa, a meticulous organizer/editor and interesting writers to keep the publication alive. We used to meet in our Professor’s house – he was always cordial and kind and helped to set it up the paper with high standards on a firm foundation. Our archives has the first year issues of Campastimes (provided by Anand Singh Bawa) and the first issue has a history of how the name evolved.

Academic Activities: All of us had strengths and weaknesses in our character, ways of studying, working, interacting etc. Some of us were very good in the practical side of the degree program like work-shop and drafting – Basu in Work-shop and Saha in Drafting. This writer could not appreciate the need for “Workshop” at that time but later realized that theoretical knowledge does not translate into reality unless one knows the practical issues of space and lay-outs. Dr. Scheer in his little VW Beetle appeared to drive around the campus quite a lot and as the teacher-in-charge of drafting was meticulous about the 75degree slant required for proper lettering. Some of us were early risers and some were night-owls – but we always did our best. The hostel provided an atmosphere where we interacted with each other and learned about our subjects from each other

Summary: The Tharamani days provided us unique experiences in interacting with people of our own age and our teachers; at the same time learn the fundamentals of engineering – to solve problems of the physical world; to help our community to the best of our ability in our own ways.

Looking back after 60 years, we see that some of us have become teachers, some professionals, some politicians, some businessmen, some industrialists– yet there is a common thread that we all spent time at Tharamani. The thread of friendship leaves images of kinship that time cannot erase. Philosophically, all of us are nothing more than images in time – our work in this world is limited by our talents, our skills, our talents and our time.