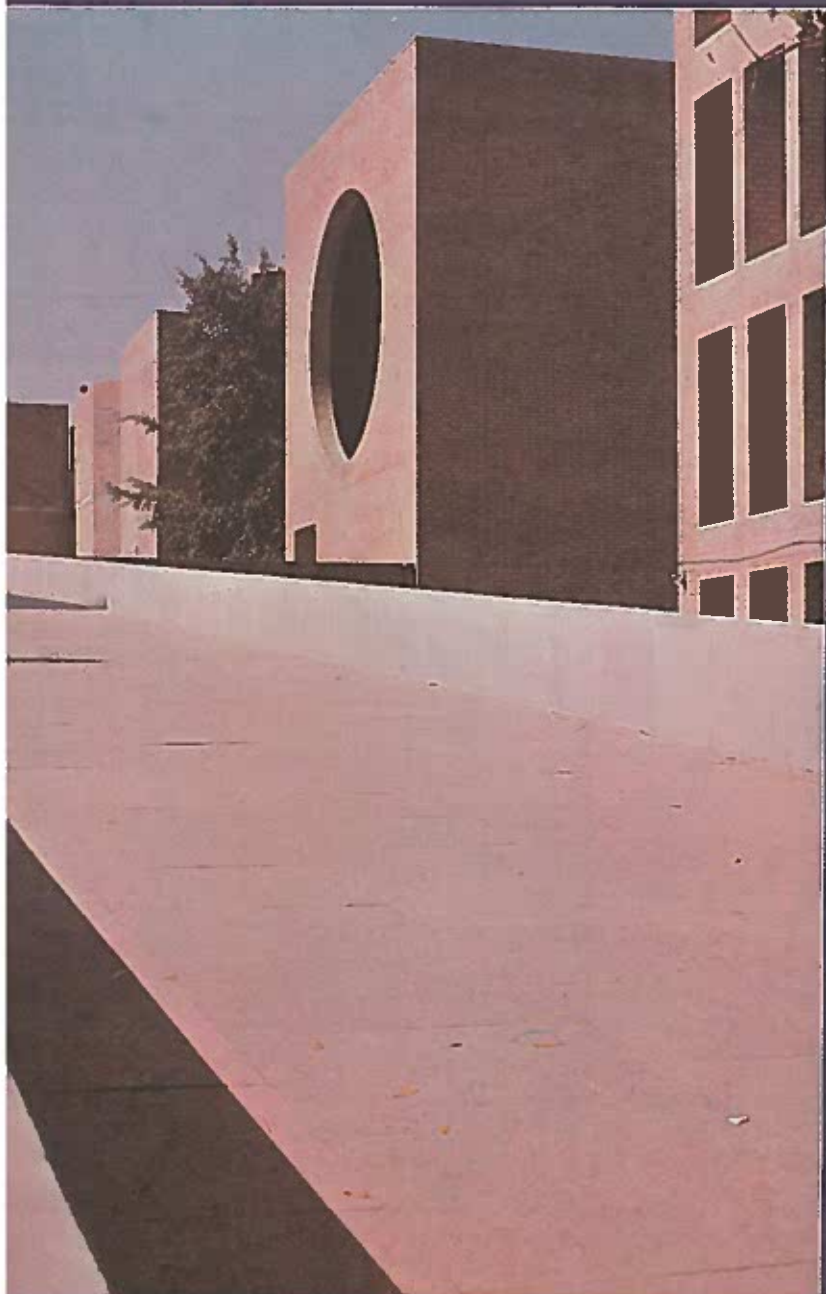


Ahmedabad's I.I.M. : West Point of Capitalism



SALKAR

By Vinati Tikku

"Munagement?, Chalo, chalo," the Ahmedabad scooter-rickshaw wallah says in gleeful anticipation of the huge fare the meter is going to tote up. (The Indian Institute of Management, like all dignified places of learning, is located at a respectable distance from the wretchedly real world of Ahmedabad city. And he's not the only one glad to be going there. Every year some 10,000 of the country's best and brightest compete for a seat in the Institute's post-graduate management programme — for reasons that are not very different from the scooterwallah's. It is the shortest (in the scooterwallah's case, the longest) route to making money.

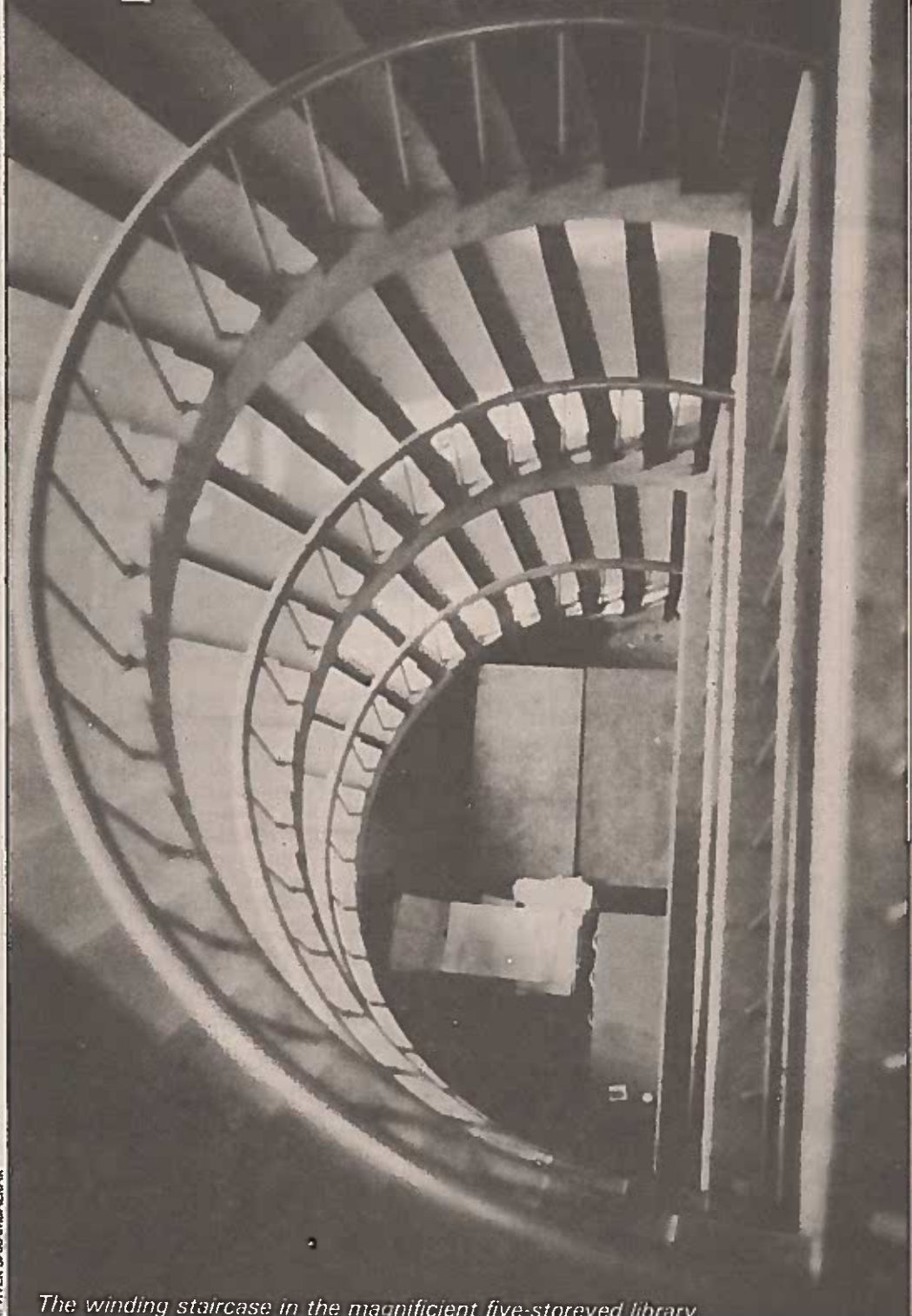
The lucky 180 who finally make it through the highly competitive admission tests land some of the most coveted jobs in Indian private industry. Even before the end of the two-year diploma course in fact, talent scouts from various firms swoop down and pick the classrooms clean. The average starting salary for a management student from this institute is a mouthwatering Rs. 1,800, plus perks, plus rapid promotion possibilities, which adds up to quite a bit. Especially in a country where jobs are difficult to come by and other professionals like doctors and engineers slave away at pesky Rs. 950-a-month jobs, for years. No wonder then, the rush is on. As the scooterwallah said, "Munagement? Chalo, chalo."

There's none of that air of musty disuse that is so commonly associated with grand old universities and academic indulgence in general, only a no-nonsense air of brisk efficiency that slaps visitors awake.

Moreover, through the complex money-status linkages that exist in the collective Indian mind, the IIMA has also become one of the most prestigious educational institutions in the country. Our very own Harvard. Ha! Ha! Harvard, the envious alumni of other management institutes may jeer, but it's the Ahmedabad types who get the first choice in jobs and have the last laugh. So widespread has its reputation grown in recent years and so persuasive its seduction, that grand-

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Getting to the bottom of India's top business school



The winding staircase in the magnificent five-storeyed library.



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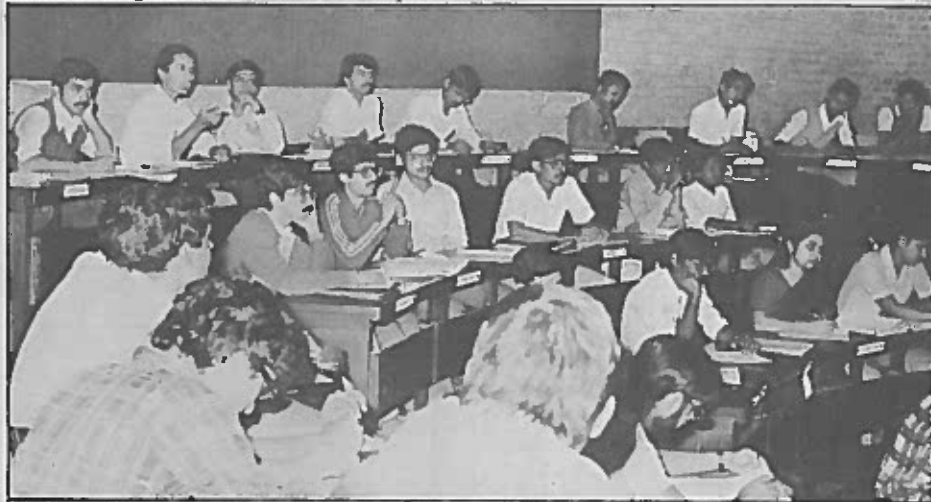
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tion signs popping up at regular intervals — the amazement persists. Thought cannot flower here — that is too disorganised a mode of growth — it can only be poured into pre-determined moulds and baked rigid on the furnace of ambition. But we are getting carried away — it is merely a very modern, very well managed management school.

Also a very private world. Visitors are given precise instructions at the car park, allowed to gape at the computer centre, civilly smiled at and generally tolerated, but they never 'belong'. Physical and infra-structural reasons could be advanced for this. The distance from Ahmedabad city make trips to town rare, the curriculum requires that students spend

placements are on. "They just piled onto me about the stipulus generalisation theory, ya," complains someone who's just finished being interviewed. A sweet young thing who looks as if she couldn't manage even the folds of her saree is told that she's landed a job with an American bank. "Oh, no," she cribs, "Now I won't be able to refuse and I want that other job so badly." Students are not allowed to turn down more than two job offers, she explains. "Are you discriminated against because you are a woman," we ask. "Well, I didn't even feel I was a woman until these blessed job interviews came up. At the institute there is absolutely no discrimination, but in industry... there is," she concludes thoughtfully.



Class-Participation Culture : The swivel-chairs help.

a major part of the day in classes or in the library and thus with each other, the institute is self-sufficient in that it has its own post office, bank, stores. But the isolation complex runs deeper than that. To the casual visitor, the IIMA is a private world of 'in-jokes' and un-understandable technical jargon, of first names and acronyms. And it can faze you.

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Standing at the Louis Khan Plaza sipping coffee (it's the thing to do between classes) we talk to a group of students before they rush off for a WAC class. ("Written analysis and communication," we get a laggard to

"The really good jobs are few," volunteers another student, whisking away an imaginary speck of dust from his dark suit, "We IIMA people are basically competing among ourselves." The levels of smugness, self satisfaction and ambition in this kind of 'placement talk' are uniformly high. "The big thing at the institute is to get into one of the multinational firms or foreign banks, because they pay the best salaries," remembers an ex-IIMA man. "Later, after you start working, the goal shifts to more increments and faster promotions than anybody else. The whole thing is so bloody competitive, it's sickening."

Competition is in fact endemic in a meritocracy of the kind the institute seeks to promote, and begins early in student life. Every one of the 180 students selected for the Post Graduate Programme (PGP) have been toppers at their respective universities and often go through a traumatic time adjusting to a classroom full of people with the

Every year, they tell us in hushed tones, about five students drop out at the end of the first gruelling month — nervous wrecks all. For those who survive, the curriculum chalks out a 12-hour working day and as many as 72 exams in the space of two years. "It's hard work, but then, I realise that what I'm doing now will directly influence the rest of my life," rationalises a student poring over one of the many forbidding-looking books that the five storeyed library is crammed with. It is this kind of motivation that the institute relies on to keep its classrooms full, because attendance is not compulsory. "It is a good institute, but ultimately it depends on you — if you work hard, you can gain a lot" says Nandini Thirumalai, a



The Louis Khan Plaza : Between mouthfuls of coffee and gossip ...

final year student who is showing us with the proprietorial air that many around IIMA students use to describe "Our library," "Our bank," even "Our cobbler." In the spartan dormitories hang blackboards with urgent messages scribbled across. "Please wake me up at 4 am," is one anguished plea. To study, naturally. Nandini's views are obviously commonplace around here.

The students by and large seem to have clear working goals. They have swotted and sweated to get into IIMA and they will swot and sweat to get through it. "Learn to earn" is their motto and even through early morning bleary eyes they see the coveted jobs dangling at the end of the grind. Not surprisingly then their reasons for choosing a career in management sound simplistic. "It seemed the natural thing to do," and "It leads to good jobs" are the standard responses. They are even surprised that we ask — to many it was the best, the only thing to do. A cartoon

this lack of viable alternatives in a charming distortion of the Descartian phrase—"I think, therefore IIM" it read.

"Sure, jargon is part of management culture and MBA graduates tend to be aggressive, but that's what's needed isn't it?"

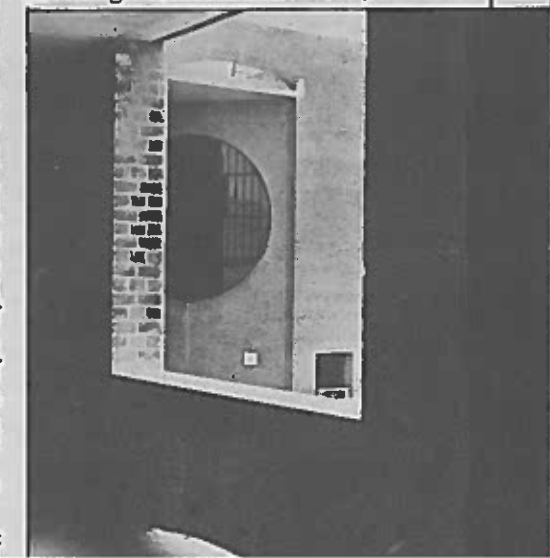
After 12-hour study days, relaxation necessarily centres around the "Nothing heavy" theme. For most students it consists of light reading (James Hadley Chase is easily the most popular author), listening to music or playing carrom. "There's none of that pseud talk about Camus

pleads, "But, it's so internalised!" then laughs at his involuntary use of 'internalised' — a pet term in management jargon. At a more serious level he painstakingly explains that jargon can be used as an effective aid to communication. If both people understand the terminology, jargon helps to minimise effort by substituting one word for a long string of descriptive terms. Not much later we encounter a final year student called Bharat Puri who tells us that "A career in management gives me latitude in my functional area." Ah, for that long string of descriptive terms!

The image of the management graduate as a smooth-talking guy is partly due to the excessive use of jargon. The older, more conservative managers in industry are still wary of this growing breed of aggressive young men. A senior executive with Ciba Geigy objects to the case study method of teaching at the institute. "In the make-believe problem situations given to them, the students behave and take decisions like general managers, whereas in real life especially at the beginning of their careers, they don't have the authority to take those decisions. Their perspective is all wrong." But Banga, an IIMA student working with Hindustan Lever objects. "Most MBA's are doing very well in their jobs. Sure, jargon is part of management culture and MBA graduates tend to be aggressive but that is what is needed, isn't it?" Banga who is a topper from IIMA feels that the aggressive personality is a direct result of the group discussion method employed at the institute. "You have to be aggressive or you won't be heard above the din," he shrugs. Labdhi Bhandari, an IIMA

etc. that goes on in other universities," says a student proudly. (The institute obviously prides itself on its pragmatic culture). Then there are the 'Harvard' dinners to look forward to — western style, Saturday night affairs named after the Institute's grand obsession — The Harvard Business School. The impressive flight of stairs leading into the main building is called 'The Harvard Staircase' and the poor man being over wornout Bata shoes is nick-named 'The Harvard Cobbler'. The students talk about this in a good humoured self-mocking tone, but the complex shows up nevertheless. Harvard is the last word — and by the by-word in these parts! Organised forms of relaxation include Inter-Combo meets (Combo is the equivalent of 'House' in school) and the combos are intriguingly named Micros, Nanos and Picos. "Negative indices of 10," we are told. A typical in-house, jargon-loaded joke.

When we petulantly take up the



student who is now a professor at the institute defends the teaching methods on a higher plane. "We are not a vocational training institute, we are an educational institution and let's be clear about that. We don't teach our students how to handle letters of credit, we teach them how to think. And our students do very well in their jobs."

The response from industrial circles is not a serious problem for the institute. Whatever the initial misgivings, the MBA culture is here to stay. In fact in its 20th year the IIMA finds itself riddled with a strange moral dilemma that is a direct result of its success with private industry. This is the question of managerial inputs in the government sector. In India there are certain social obligations that no institution can ignore, especially those that deal in valuable human resources. It is a painfully evident fact that the government's administrative ranks have been starved of talent since the IIMA came up. Bright young boys and girls who would have otherwise opted for the civil services have been diverted to the IIMA and similar institutions. The result is a serious shortage of managerial talent in the government cadres.

At the IIMA we discern faint stirrings of conscience over this issue but most people, at least on the surface are very defensive about it. Labdhi Bhandari, when asked whether he is satisfied with training clerical staff for foreign banks (in reality those 'fantastic' jobs are no more than that — Indians rarely rise to any positions of eminence in multinational concerns), says aggrievedly, "You are imputing the blame for the students' job choices to an institution in which they spend only two years. Surely the earlier 20 odd years of their life must also shape their motivation?" He is right in a sense. Most students confess that the institute does not influence their choice of a job, they consciously avoid the civil services because of the increasing politicisation and the hopelessly outdated pay-scales. Professor Arun Monappa points out that public sector units like BHEL are now attracting some of their students. He can think of at least 18 IIMA students who are working for BHEL. Another faculty member, Mohan Kaul, gives us a resumé of the various management development programmes the institute conducts. These are short (six-eight week) courses to which participants from the government and



public sectors are invited. "We are branching out into public-oriented programmes such as health management," he says pompously. But how much importance is given to these programmes, we'd like to know. How much of the total budget of the institute for instance, is allocated to these activities? Professor Kaul regrets that he cannot give the exact figures. He admits however that the PGP is the largest and most important activity. "We get very good students," he offers by way of a somewhat vague explanation.

The paramount importance given to the PGP, it turns out is a major cause of dissent within the campus. **Ajay Chauhan**, a Ph.D student under the institute's Fellow Programme in Management (FPM), seeks us out to air his grievances. Chauhan's woes range from lack of residential facilities (most research students are married and cannot live in the hostels) to the lack of a placement service. "We can hardly go and teach at Kolphapur university after this, but that's the only kind of job available to us." Moreover, the fellowship is a meagre Rs. 1,000 a month. "I've given up a possible Rs. 1,500 a month job and I'm spending a further Rs. 1,500 a month here (he's rented a flat in the city) which makes the opportunity cost of my Ph.D, Rs. 3,000 a month." Even in terms of scheduling courses and faculty the Ph.D students get least priority. In fact the courses are so badly scheduled that most students get less than a year in which to do their thesis. "I wanted to do a cost-benefit analysis of space technology in India, but there was no time." Chauhan is now working on the relatively tame, 'Simulation model of the paper industry'.

Resentment runs deep among the institute's stepchildren. Even the architecture comes in for scathing criticism. "You think it's an aesthetic marvel, do you?" one says bitterly, "Well, let me tell you, it's most ill-suited to Indian conditions." In the summer it gets so hot that it is impossible to study in the library during the day. And it's the Ph.D students who have to brave it — the pampered PGP fellows are enjoying their summer vacation at that time."

We discover other whirlpools of dissent under the apparently placid surface. **K.S. Joy**, the secretary of

the IIM employees association says, "The industrial relations course was dropped from the syllabus after the union became active and struck work in support of their demands for better residential facilities and pay-scales." He adds wryly, "What management can they teach, when they can't manage their own institute?"

The rapid growth of the institute over the last 20 years has introduced other sources of tension. For one thing, student-faculty inter-action has been considerably reduced as the number of students has climbed from 80 in 1962 to 500 in 1982. Old timers recall the days when faculty members used to come to the dorms for chats. **Rajgopal** an elderly man in the Publications Division nods his head sadly and says "It's become so impersonal now."

On February 15 this year, a group of second year PGP students organised a seminar on 'What ails IIMA?' Among the topics that were debated were fundamental questions like the social relevance of an institute like the IIMA in a country like India; whether the class participation method employed at the institute could not be replaced, as the vocal seemed to reap an unfair benefit from it; and whether the faculty members were getting too interested in the money offered by consultancies and neglecting their teaching. Most grievances at the seminar cohered around the central fact that "the institute is not what it used to be." The faculty, once the best in the country has been sadly depleted. The turn over is also very rapid as faculty members go off in pursuit of lucrative consultancy offers. Even among the students there's a growing sense of cynicism. "They don't think the way they used to," said one disgruntled professor, and fondly recalled the earlier bright-eyed bunch of students. "There was a general feeling of smugness and complacency about the place," explains **Seshadri**, a PGP student and one of the organisers of the seminar, "and we wanted to shake that off."

These are about the most encouraging words, we've heard on the campus. A school that stresses the value of self-examination can't be all that bad. But a niggling doubt remains: Perhaps the idea of the seminar was imported? Another part of the great Harvard legacy. And we walk down the 'Harvard' staircase, past the 'Harvard' cobbler, and out into the world, still wondering.