

Business Standard

How Bala swam across oceans to create Great Lakes

Bala V Balachandran's Great Lakes is a personal tribute to his country after escaping the clutches of death and a fulfilment of his promise to the Father of the Nation

Anjuli Bhargava Last Updated at March 23, 2018 15:34 IST



It was a few minutes after he was declared dead in 2002 that a new idea came alive in Bala V Balachandran's mind.

Bala was lying on a hospital bed for a quintuple bypass surgery to his heart. The surgery hadn't gone too well. 65% of his heart was no longer working. The doctors had almost given up hope when suddenly one doctor said he thought there was a slim chance of survival if they tried something new.

As the doctors worked to revive Bala, a gem of an idea took clearer shape in his mind. He would set up a new MBA institute in his mother country – something that wasn't enveloped in the politics and blame game that the institutes he had been associated in the past with in India were. It would be his big contribution to his country – as a three year old, Bala had met Mahatama Gandhi in 1940 in his village and told him he was willing to die for his country (he insists he recalls it even though he was only three). Now was his chance to prove as good as his word. “All these years when I studied and worked in the US, the Gandhi effect never went away. I wanted to do something serious for my mother country”.

Of course he had just lost 65% of his heart, very nearly died and yet here he was rearing to go. But Bala insists he was working “24 by 7” which meant he was working 24 days a month and 7 months in a year as a professor with full tenure at the Kellogg school of business. He spends a few minutes elaborating on how one's life gets easier – lower teaching load and more time for research - in the academic world once you get full tenure. “If I slowed down any further, I'd be dead”, he says.

In 2004, with his own savings and a vast network, Bala – egged on by many others who pointed out that Tamil Nadu had no serious MBA institute to speak of - hired a less than one acre space in Chennai to start the [Great Lakes](#) Institute – a one-year MBA that would give serious competition to ISB, Hyderabad and other MBA courses offered in India. The main idea was to offer a one-year MBA like [ISB](#) but at the IIM prices, not the [ISB](#) ones – which he saw spiraling soon after the institute was set up ([ISB](#) charges close to Rs 32 lakh for a year now).

Now [Great Lakes](#) has a over 27 acre green campus in Chennai. It uses recycled water, recycled bricks and solar power. He tells me its pollution and mosquito free. A second campus of 7 acres was added in Gurgaon – probably not mosquito or pollution free - in 2010. Since 2004, over 7000 students have graduated from the institute (Gurgaon and Chennai campus). Bala says 100 per cent of his students are placed post the course. There are over 900 students across both campuses in all the programmes. Average salary for students is around Rs 12 lakh at the Chennai campus and Rs 10.5 lakh for the Gurgaon campus.

We are meeting at the [Great Lakes](#) office in Gurgaon. Despite writing on education, I have not really heard much about the [Great Lakes](#) MBA programme or the institute. Maybe it's because I live in the North or maybe because almost every child I know leaves the country post schooling, I am skeptical about a meeting with Bala till other educationists and academicians advise me to go ahead saying “he is a character”. I tell him that clinched it for me. I like “characters”.

Bala insists that [Great Lakes](#) is very high up in the numerous and endless MBA rankings in India. He says Outlook magazine has ranked the institute as third. He says every poll has

rated the institute very high. “I admit A, B and C are fantastic and those are my benchmark” but he insists [Great Lakes](#) ranks higher than all others in India.

I look as skeptical as possible. First, despite writing on education for a few years now, I have barely heard of [Great Lakes](#). Second, who in their right mind takes these rankings seriously ? I tell him I don't give much credence to rankings; five years in Delhi university have disenchanted me of the whole ranking game; DU still ranks among the top and I found it dull as dishwater way back in the late 1980s. I have only one method of assessing educational institutes; it has to come from the parents and students : when they say they want admission in a particular college and try and use all tricks in the book to gain admission, the institute is worth writing about. By that yardstick, [Great Lakes](#) is not quite there yet.

We dwell a little on his rather dramatic personal history and life. Bala intersperses his story with interesting anecdotes – most unprintable - involving a whole host of known and diverse personalities – from Bal Thackeray to Manmohan Singh and Rajat Gupta to Mahatama Gandhi.

He tells me how the [ISB](#) came to be in Hyderabad and not in Mumbai or anywhere else. He tells me how the various deans for [ISB](#) were selected and who worked out and why – or rather who didn't work out and why. He tells me the politics of setting up a new private MBA institute in India where “so many cooks are there, that the broth is spoiled in the end”.

Unlike other places, he is the sole person responsible for Great Lakes, he tells me. “I am happy for others to take the credit but any blame lies with me”, he says rather nobly. Drama comes naturally to him and if he hadn't chosen academics, I think theater may have been his second calling.

He also holds forth on the stories of how [Great Lakes](#) came about. Who actually supported his [Great Lakes](#) initiative and who offered to but didn't when push came to shove. He's been on the board of various Indian companies and seems to know everyone in the corporate sector as well. As I listen to Bala and his anecdotes and snippets, I wonder : despite being away for 50 years, is there anyone in this country he doesn't know ?

Despite the fact that he has lived in the US for 50 years, Bala's involvement with India's education space has been quite insistent. When IIM Bangalore was being set up, Bala's friend [Bullockcart Ramaswamy](#) stayed with Bala for 8 days in the US and hired the first six faculty members for the new institute. Other than advise and support, Bala also made several trips and lectured as guest faculty at IIM-Bangalore in its early days. So, in some ways, he started his involvement in institution building in India in 1973.

In 1991, after India's economic liberalization, the government of India asked Bala to come to develop an MBA at the Management Development Institute (MDI) in Gurgaon. All the faculty of MDI was taken to Kellogg School of Management to be trained and taught how to teach for three months. As project director in 1993, Bala says he created and designed the MBA programme for MDI. The contract was for three years and it was Bala's first direct involvement in an Indian institution.

His next brush with Indian education was when the plan to set up ISB, Hyderabad came up. During his work with MDI and his growing association with India, Bala had even acted as advisor to both Manmohan Singh (when he was finance minister) and to Chandrababu Naidu (then CM of Andhra Pradesh). As a result, he got deeply involved in the setting up of [ISB](#). Bala was the chairman of the committee to select the dean.

I ask what happens to [Great Lakes](#) after Bala ? I point out he's 80 and not getting any younger. Who takes charge from him ? Bala says he has put in place a management and now has two lieutenants to steer the organisation in the future – both of whom now have a stake in the organisation.

As we draw towards the end of our chat, he tells me a lot of what he has achieved today he attributes to the guidance of his mother. A third grader, his mother, he says, was the “first university” he attended and the one from which he has learnt more than any of the others. The lady who is no more has created “three sons who are all gold medalists and at the top of their careers”. Two gold medalists, and a third gold medalist – and a real character – I think to myself.

The story can be read online [here](#).