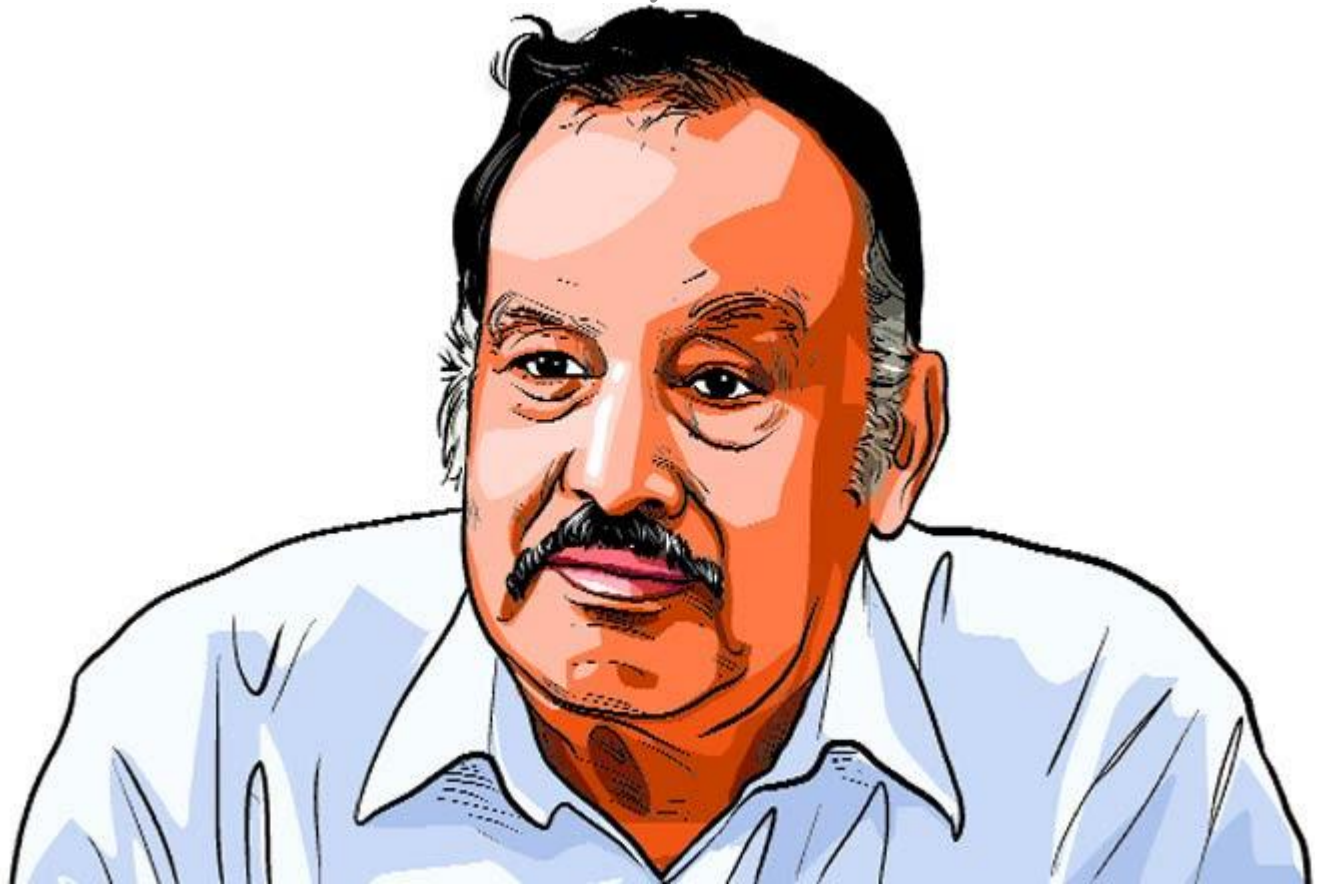


# **Food caFe: My network is my networth, says Bala V Balachandran**

The founder & dean of Great Lakes Institute of Management, Chennai, tells Sushila Ravindranath how the school, in a short span of a decade, has evolved into one of the best in the country



Great Lakes' flagship PGPM is now among the top-ranked one-year executive programmes in the country. Its faculty includes many management professors from top American universities who, in fact, are Prof Bala's friends.

Dr Bala V Balachandran, the JL Kellogg Distinguished Professor (Emeritus in Service) of Accounting and Information Management, is about to receive an award at the ITC Grand Chola, Chennai. He has lost count of the awards he has received in a career spanning over five decades. I suggest we meet at Cafe Mercara Express, the coffee shop at the hotel, before he leaves for the function. Prof Bala, as he is known, is the founder, chairman and dean of the Great Lakes Institute of Management in Chennai. In a matter of 11 years, under his stewardship, the school has grown into one of the top management institutions in the country. Great Lakes received global accreditation from the Association of MBAs (AMBA, UK) in June 2014 for its postgraduate programmes, becoming the youngest business school in India to receive this top international accreditation and one of the youngest to globally too.

The professor orders good strong South Indian coffee. I go by the waiter's recommendation and settle for hot chocolate. We ask for the tempting tiny pizzas. The coffee arrives and the professor tells me about his journey as a teacher and an academic entrepreneur, which began in 1960. "I have been with the Kellogg School of Management for 42 years," he says.

Prof Bala began his teaching career in 1960 at the Annamalai University in Tamil Nadu. In 1967, he moved to the University of Dayton. In 1971, to the Carnegie Mellon University, where he taught management courses while working on his doctorate. In 1973, he joined the Kellogg School of Management faculty. His work has earned numerous scholastic honours, awards and fellowships. He has provided consultancy and executive education for various companies and governments in the US and across the world.

Prof Bala's association with setting up business schools in India began in earnest after the economic liberalisation in early 1990s. He wanted to present India's new economic policies to the American corporate world. "I planned on organising an

India business conference through the Northwestern University and create a platform for government officials, entrepreneurs and trade associations in India to showcase their potential.”

The conference was conducted in 1992, supported by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). One of the key participants was Dr Manmohan Singh, the then finance minister. “Dr Singh wanted IAS officers to be trained by management professors from leading American universities, to deal with foreign investments and MNCs.”

Prof Bala was chosen for the assignment. “I was given the responsibility of creating and executing the national management programme at the Management Development Institute (MDI), Gurgaon. As a first step, 20 professors were trained at the Kellogg School of Management. In India, the training sessions were conducted under my direct supervision. I was able to pull \$1 million funding for this project from the UN.”

Prof Bala was instrumental in designing MBA programmes at MDI. At the same time, he started toying with the idea of captains of Indian industry joining hands to create a world-class business school in India. This was his dream and it came true in the early part of the 20th century. He started discussing his ideas with Rajat Gupta, who was his neighbour in Chicago. “Gupta thought it was a great idea and started working on the project immediately. He was confident that he could get the support of the Indian government and investments from American and Indian corporations. I was given the task of crafting the business school programme.” Prof Bala is generous in his praise for Gupta. “Without him, there could not have been an Indian School of Business. Gupta created a fund of \$35 million.”

Now we are served almond croissants. I am washing down all these delicious, but high-calorie snacks, with lemon tea. Prof Bala, while having some more coffee, tells me how the ISB—which was established in 2000—was set up in

Hyderabad. Initially, it was supposed to come up in Mumbai, the commercial capital of the country. Most of the senior industrialists committing to the business school came from Mumbai. However, when a senior politician demanded that 39% seats must be reserved for Maharashtrians, the project got shelved. At that point, Tamil Nadu government did not show sufficient interest.

On the other hand, the then chief minister of Andhra Pradesh, N Chandrababu Naidu, saw the potential and offered land and facilities to set up the ISB near Hyderabad. Prof Balakrishna Naidu quite well as he had been consulting with his government. When the ISB became functional, Prof Bala took the first class on the first day. The institution had to raise additional funds, which did not happen because of the economic slowdown and the [dot.com](#) burst. The tuition fees had to be raised steeply within three years of inception, which was not acceptable to Prof Bala.

In 2002, he had to undergo quintuple bypass surgery when he was thinking of ending his association with the ISB. “My wife wanted me to slow down. I couldn’t. My good friend, A Mahendran—the former CEO and managing director of Godrej Sara Lee—who was attending a management programme at Kellogg, had sowed a seed in my head. He had suggested that I start a management school in my home town in Tamil Nadu. He called me brand Bala and said I could attract talent and students to make a success out of it.”

In spite of his family’s misgivings, Prof Bala went ahead. Although J Jayalalithaa—who was the chief minister of Tamil Nadu then—was most supportive of the project and offered government land at subsidised rates, there were delays in clearing the land. Prof Bala sold the huge house he owned at the upmarket East Coast Road (ECR) in Chennai and raised funds for the institution. Great Lakes was set up in 2004. “Everyone was worried about the placement prospects of the new school. As it happened, companies such as [Infosys](#) and TCS recruited our students on par with their other hires from IIMs and the ISB.

The 100% placement record in the very first year attracted even more students.” Great Lakes’ flagship PGPM is now among the top-ranked one-year executive programmes in the country. Its faculty includes many management professors from top American universities who, in fact, are Prof Bala’s friends.

The institute’s Business Advisory Council consists of 46 Indian business leaders, including Ratan Tata, Jamshyd Godrej, NR Narayana Murthy, Rahul Bajaj, Indra Nooyi, S Ramadorai, Kumar Mangalam Birla and Deepak Parekh. “I have worked with all of them at one time or the other. My network is my networth.”

It is time for him to go receive the award. I ask him for how long can Great Lakes remain a one-man show. “I am 78-years old and have been seriously working on succession planning. I am taking in two partners but will retain 51%,” says the professor.

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