

# Joyful in Joka: IIM-C Alumnus reminisces about campus life

April 18, 2011, 10:42 PM IST Vikram Doctor in [On My Plate](#), [Lifestyle](#), ET



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When I was a student at IIM-Calcutta in the early '90s, we often had to deal with unfavourable comparisons to IIM Ahmedabad. IIM-A had the higher reputation, its students got more prestigious placements, the faculty was more esteemed, being in Western India allowed for closer interaction with industry than the corporate desert of the East and their case study method was widely regarded as being superior to our lectures. Even their campus buildings were better designed than IIM-C's concrete blocks at Joka, at the very end of the tramlines from the city.

To all of which allegations the appropriate response was to roll one's eyes, shrug one's shoulders, take a deeper drag on your cigarette (or whatever else you were smoking) and say, while making an all-encompassing gesture with one hand: "yeeeeesss, but they don't have all this...." By 'this' was meant the green and lovely campus, around which at that time there were still rice fields over which you could watch the mist rolling. The main campus buildings were surrounded by lakes which gave them a calm and pleasing air, compensating for their indifferent design.

'This' was Calcutta, as it was then, which we were just far away from to be spared the worst chaos (the campus also had its own generators, so we didn't suffer blackouts), but to which we could easily go for the best sweets in the world and the most fun quizzing – who cared if the city had hardly any large corporate other than ITC. If we couldn't interact with companies in the way one could in Mumbai and Ahmedabad, well the rest of one's careers would be spent in companies, so one might as well enjoy campus life for now.

'This' was our faculty who, while admittedly sometimes odd for a management institute (all the economics staff were rumoured to be Marxists, except for one, who was a Maoist), also tended to be on friendly terms with students. They were, after all, as isolated as we were, so interaction was easy, and they seemed to be split between mellow older professors, who were happy taking tutorials over chai and cigarettes at the canteen, and much younger ones, usually there to do

their own academic research rather than teach, who weren't much older than most of the students, so again could get on with them well.

'This' was our computer facilities, which were probably unmatched for any educational institute in eastern India at that time. 'This' was the outstanding library, which had books in all sorts of academic areas, not just management, so you could pursue interests in history or sociology or psychology. 'This' was the hostels, which while hardly palaces of comfort, were admirably unsupervised, so there was nothing stopping any of the girls moving in with the boyfriends. 'This', above all, was the student body which, while certainly containing many swots and over-achievers, refused to let itself be defined by them. Other management institutes might resemble the insanely stressed and competitive places pictured in books with titles like Snapshots from Hell, but not, it was made clear, IIM-C.

This doesn't mean it was a slackers' school, though undoubtedly some liked that idea. The fact is that at the end of the two years we knew there was an excellent job waiting for us, and at placement time, people went nuts in the usual way. But you did have the choice during those two years of taking time to do things that interested you, form relationships, take Organisational Behaviour courses where you could reflect on your own life – some students could get alarmingly confessional – play bridge and drink a lot of rum (a lot of IIM-A's advantages were neatly negated by its location in a prohibition state). It was an ideal balance: two years of unsupervised student life, to discover yourself as an adult, with the restraining effect of a good job at the end to stop you going off the rails.

In the way of alumni, one always imagines things have gone down since you left, and I had heard of changes at IIM-C (not least to the name, with the C now a K, confusingly shared with another IIM in Kozhikode, so I'm sticking to C). And the city has crept up to it now, swallowing those rice fields and negating some of the advantages of its campus. Yet it came as a pleasant surprise to read, in this IMRB survey, that in an essential way things don't seem to have changed. Because in the section where students have been asked to score their institute, IIM-C easily tops – the only institute to cross 90 points, while IIM-A at 85 ties for third with MDI Gurgaon, after NITIE at 87.

Even more remarkably, on the specific issue of campus life, IIM-C hits a full 100, followed by 100 for levels of satisfaction with salary and placements. The students seem to be both happy to be there and happy with what they get from it. At IIM-A, by comparison, the poor students just score campus life at 77, with the same for salary and just 60 for placements, even though there's no way these would be worse than what IIM-C gets. This difference is also fleshed out in a table (not reproduced) that looks at more specific parameters on which students have made up their minds. IIM-A leads IIM-C in student perception about quality of faculty (38 to IIM-C's 20), about their peer group (62, while IIM-C students seem to have forgotten they had a peer group at all) and a number of other factors like interaction with industry leaders and delivering quality of education, although they admit the schedule is hectic.

At IIM-C, students don't rate the schedule hectic at all, but they value the diversity of the student

body, the atmosphere of college life and, amusingly, rate the value of extra-curricular activities at 27 points, while IIM-A doesn't seem to know what the concept means. Yet on criteria like values and work culture, and encouraging innovation, the two places score almost the same, which shows that they are just alternative ways of achieving the same end. (The other are the students at both places are agreed on is infrastructure – they rate both places at zero, a sign perhaps how these oldest among major institutes are in need of some reinvestment and rejuvenation now).

IIM-C's offbeat ways have not gone unnoticed. Its bohemian reputation was always rather frowned on by students from other management institutes (with the possible exception of XLRI, where an amicable relationship with IIM-C students was sustained by both proximity, relatively close by at Jamshedpur, and a shared ability to put away huge amounts of Old Monk). Accordingly, I'm not surprised that when the IMRB survey asked management school alumni to rate schools other than their own, IIM-A expectedly topped the scale at 67, but IIM-C came way below at 44, trailing schools like IIM-B (48) and NMIMS (50).

This might be a matter of concern for IIM-C students if their rankings didn't still hold up with recruiters, among who it still just features in the top five. Perhaps this indicates a long term decline, but for now recruiters can still see value in IIM-C's laidback ways – or there are a number of IIM-C alumni among the recruiters! Seriously though, I hope some value remains attached to the IIM-C approach. Contrary to what other alumni might feel, it didn't really represent goofing off, but a mature way to letting young people figure themselves out as people, which in the long run, rather than academic grades, is more likely to make a difference to themselves as managers.

It is all the more important given the basic difference between management school in India and abroad – the fact that students abroad usually have work experience, whereas here, despite some change, it remains largely a finishing school for college students. Work experience abroad means that students have had some time to figure themselves out, and are coming to management school to round themselves out and get specific skills. In India though, coming straight from college, which itself tends to be an extension of school, management school often must serve as the time for growing up.

That makes the approach taken by IIMC all the more important (and, to be fair, parts of it are replicated in other places, even IIM-A – the lack of supervision in hostels, for example). Management students may need to ace their accounting and analytical skills, but it's not a bad thing if they also know how to be happy.

Source: <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/blogs/onmyplate/joyful-in-joka-iim-c/?source=app&frmapp=yes>