



Trivia time

The Heritage Centre has a road named after it—just check on Google Maps! The road in question runs from HSB (from the entrance close to the workshops) to the Heritage Centre and leads away from Administration Building, also known as Ad Block, to the Central Library and Gajendra Circle. There are no street name plates or signs bearing the legend ‘Heritage Centre Road’ anywhere along it though. This is not surprising actually—there is nothing official about the name. It has obviously been coined by the app for providing directions.

INDIAN INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY,
28TH AUGUST 1959



The earliest IIT Madras photograph

28 | 8 | 1959



Alumni have contributed photographs to the Heritage Centre that show life at IIT Madras over the years. N.S. Vinodh (1986 batch) contributed literally hundreds of pictures—he had been the Secretary of the Photography Club, you see. A.P. Gladston and Joseph Joy, of my B.Tech. batch (1985) are among the others who have contributed their collections.

Early this year, we received from an alumna a single photograph, a black-and-white print on a cardboard mount. This is the photo you see reproduced here. The alumna is Dr. Poornima Balasubramanyam, of the 1984 B.Tech. (Metallurgy) batch. She had discovered this picture among her late mother's possessions. It turned out to be, quite simply, the earliest IIT Madras photograph we had seen.

The photo is about the size of a tablet (*sensu* mobile device). On the mount are printed the words 'Indian Institute of Technology, Madras' and the date '28th August 1959'. Thus the photograph had been shot when the institute was exactly four weeks old, having been inaugurated on 31 July. I should mention here that we have not come across any earlier IIT Madras photos, not even any inauguration pictures. That there should be no pictures available of that occasion seems rather strange, coming to think of it.

Putting together evidence from various sources, we infer that this picture shows most of the entire staff—teaching and non-teaching—of the newborn IIT.

We do not know yet what the occasion was. But it was obviously something special, considering the bouquets and the formal suits.

We are fairly certain that the photograph was shot in the Central Leather Research Institute. IIT Madras had its administrative office there in the early days and specifically in 1959.

We recognise various persons in the photograph. There is Prof. B. Sengupto, in a tie and suit, garlanded, in the front row. He had assumed office as the first Director on 17 August, and he had been accorded a welcome on 26 August. Seated next to him is first Registrar R. Natarajan, also in a tie. Next to Mr. Natarajan is Prof. Koch,

German professor who had joined the Physics Department. Others we see in the front row are Mr. Ebert, head of the workshop (wearing glasses), Dr. D. Venkateswarlu, of the Chemical Engineering Department (in tie and suit, holding a bouquet) and Prof. Scheer (second from the right), of the Mechanical Engineering Department. From our 'metadata work' on our photographic collections, we recognise Mr. R.M. Dubey, who worked in the IIT Madras office.

However, we are yet to name most of the people in the photo. To begin with, who is the gentleman in a bow tie, in the front row?

Dr. Poornima's mother, Kumari R.G. Lalitha Devi, is seen in the picture. She is seated second from left in the front row.

Piranha on campus

You may have heard about non-native fish species being found in various water bodies in India. There was even a report of red-bellied piranha being found in the Godavari in 2015. This fish has a fearsome reputation, possibly undeserved, of stripping to the bones even large animals that enter the water.

It may be of interest to know that a red-bellied piranha may be seen in IIT Madras. Do not worry. It is a dead specimen, a unique contribution of an alumnus to the IIT Madras Alumni Association. The piranha is now on display at the Heritage Centre.



Kumaran Sathasivam

Your response to Letter from Heritage Centre is welcome. Please send mail to heritage@iitm.ac.in. The Heritage Centre is located in the ground floor of the Administration Building, IIT Madras. It is open on weekdays from 9.30 am to 7.00 pm heritage.iitm.ac.in