

The Messes They Are a-Changin'

A good evening to all GBM members. This is not a full-fledged press club issue, but is an interim publication to bring to your notice the imminent changes in the mess system of BITS-Pilani and the reasons for the same. As things stand, **catering giant Sodexo Group** will set up services on campus from next semester in a complete overhaul of the current system. This is an attempt to move forward and eliminate the shortcomings in the present scheme.

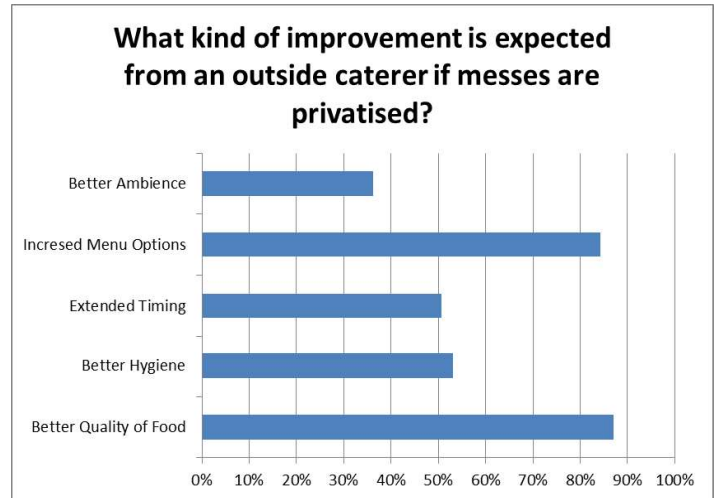
As you will all be aware, the present structure of the BITS messes is **coordinated by the Students' Mess Council** and **overseen by the Advisory and Monitoring Committee**. These two bodies collaborate to cater to all culinary needs of students and are the reporting authority for close to 200 mess workers. While the system appears to be running in a hitch-free manner at first glance, there are a fair number of cracks which have widened in recent years. As the SMC is not a legal entity, tax complications have arisen and circumvented with difficulty two years running.

Moreover, there is a very thin line between responsibility and burden, and the supervision of the messes falls on the wrong side of that line for students. Unlike management of fests, running a Rs. 12 crore enterprise which feeds 3600 students daily is a very strenuous task; and students have often been found either deviating from their priorities to give time to the messes, or rightly focusing on studies and ignoring some of their constitutional mess duties in the process. In addition to these difficulties, we wanted to know the opinion of the general student populace as to the present messes. **A written survey was taken** consisting of over 700 samples, and the results from this survey precipitated the change.

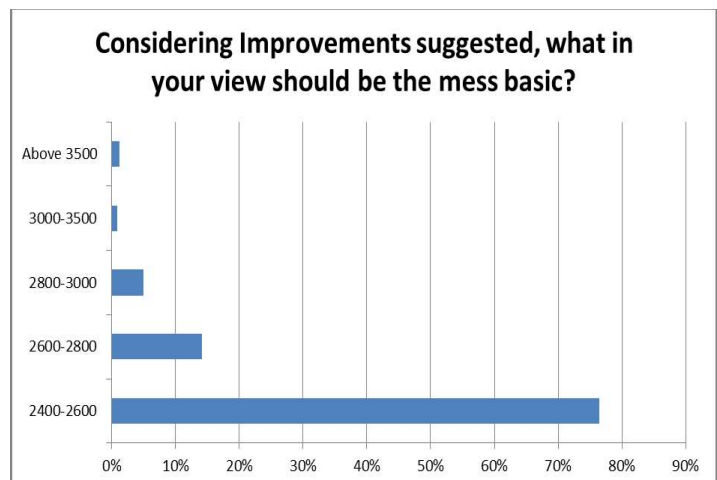
When asked to grade the mess system (a scale of 1-10 was chosen, with 6 representing a number that met expectations), students gave the **food quality an average rating of 4.26/10**, with menu options also receiving a poor 4.12 on the same scale. Hygiene and Ambience fared better but only marginally so, **as they got 5.6 and 5.72 respectively**. The only parameter which saved grace was that of mess employee behaviour, which got an impressive 8/10 and emerged as the clear winner among the categories present.

Students were also asked to quantify areas of improvement they'd like to see in messes. This being a multiple choice question, all factors got a decent weightage of votes, but the two clear frontrunners were **food quality and an increase in menu options**, with **students in excess of 85% clamouring for both**. Hygiene scored a fairly high 53% here as well, with ambience

being the last thing the students were concerned about at 36%.



Changes as fundamental as these will understandably beget an increase in prices; so students were asked to set an approximate ceiling on the price they'd expect to pay should all aforementioned improvements take place. An overwhelming 76% of the sample space said that they'd be willing to pay within a range of Rs. 2400-2600 for these enhancements, with a tuppence of the remaining percentages going into higher price ranges.



Taking all these things into account, it was evident that a change was needed. Consequently, a student-run committee was set up to conduct negotiations with Sodexo in an effort to provide for student and mess worker needs. After months of rigorous talks, the deal has finally been closed and we would like to furnish you with the results along with clarifications.

The mess basic being touted by Sodexo was **Rs. 117 per day during the initial stages**, but the committee engaged in long and protracted talks in a bid to bring it down to more acceptable levels. After multiple meetings in this regard, the committee relayed the GBM's view to the company, and made them aware of operational constraints that had to be respected.

Hence, the revised mess basic per student per day under the new system will be Rs. 92.

The breakup of this is as follows-

- The **average current mess bill is Rs. 65 per student per day**. This excludes the educational allowances, medical allowances and special medical bills that the mess employees avail. This figure amounts to a total of Rs. 40 lakh per year, which translates to Rs. 4 per student per day. So the mess basic which one ends up paying is closer to Rs. 69 per day.
- **Statutory taxation rates of 11.46% percentage** have to be adhered to, which they are not being at present. This brings the cost up to Rs. 79.074 per day.
- **The SMC, being a non-cooperative society, gets gas cylinders at domestic rates of Rs. 385 per cylinder**. This facility will cease to exist with the arrival of Sodexo, and commercial cylinders will have to be procured, **resulting in more than a fourfold increase in pricing (Rs. 1900 per cylinder)**. While the capacity of these cylinders is greater, the increase in cost still dominates. The raises the cost to somewhere in the vicinity of Rs. 87.
- The new mess system will have **two centralized kitchens, located in Ram-Budh and Malviya mess, with food being transported to each mess via a Hub-and-Spoke delivery model**. There will be an infrastructural refurbishment of all messes to bring them up to minimum operating standard; with additional branding and aestheticizing done as well. Adding all these external costs brings the total up to Rs. 92 per day.

Most of the privileges that students enjoy in the current mess system have been retained after further talks with Sodexo. **There will be 25 grubs annually**, priced-in to the mess basic. The extra counters at each mess will still be operational at revised rates and with increased options; as will the MRP sales counter. **ANC will also be renovated** and run under Sodexo, with juice bar and *chaat* counter appendages being added. An option of keeping ANC open till 4 am is also being discussed. **Paid grubs by cultural associations** will be present as well, as Sodexo will work with the cultural assoc heads in an attempt to make it a holistic experience. Evening canteen will function as usual.

A sample menu for one day is given below-

Traditions	Streat
Break fast Cornflakes Milk Steamed Idli Sambar Chutney Coffee/ Tea	Eggs to order Bread/ butter/ jam
Lunch Cabbage Mutter Moong Dal Tadka Steamed Rice Chapati Sambar Pickle Papad Dessert twice a week Egg Curry - on payment Eggs to Order - on payment Curd - on payment	Tawa Subzi Parathas (Portioned Menu)
Dinner Aloo Jeera Rajmah Masala Onion Pulao Chapati Pickle Papad Rasam Dessert thrice a week Milk - on payment Curd - on payment Eggs to Order - on payment Chicken Chettinad - on payment	Pasta Counter (Portioned Menu)

The student voice has not been squashed with the advent of this new system. There will be a **committee which will meet with Sodexo every fortnight** to discuss menu changes, potential additions and other feedback or issues of pertinence. The name, make-up and method of selection for this committee are still under review.

Though the SMC will cease to exist as a body, it and entire student population owe the 198 mess workers here currently, who have been working here through the generations. In a virtually unprecedented move, negotiations were sought to retain the employees under Sodexo and the talks bore fruit; **all mess employees will be retained under the Sodexo roster**. Care has been taken to see that **no mess employee receives a lesser gross salary than he does at present**. In addition, the committee was adamant in its view that mess employees get the medical and educational allowances as before. After talks spanning a month, Sodexo relented and changed their salary structure to accommodate these allowances.

That covers all the details of importance regarding this system-shift. This decision has been made with the hope that it brings the mess to a higher level of quality, hygiene and variety; which is more in-tune with the demands of the student body. An online portal will be set up in a few days to gauge student reaction. Any feedback or queries you might have, feel more than free to contact any of the members of the privatization committee.

Thank you for reading. Relay feedback to:

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