Making a Difference

Featuring alumni who have chosen to make a difference in the lives of others

A Monk Who Didn't Care for Ferrari: Teaching to Serve Society

With 2nd All India Rank in JEE and his almost 10 CPI in BTech (he got only one "B" grade), he could have had anything that he wanted. He was all set to make a materialistically enriching life, which millions aspire. With three sisters, he was the only son of his parents, and the entire family along with many of his batch mates, begged him to study abroad. A batch mate on a blog wrote, "I occasionally mocked his convictions and told his parents that he would eventually succumb to the lure of dollars, just like several of his batch mates." But, he couldn't be deterred from his single-minded pursuit of serving humanity. He would explain, "Just like Silicon Valley, social sectors too desperately need intelligent people." He declined all offers of admissions and scholarships from prestigious universities and continued his Ph.D. at IITK. His goal: Service to Society.

After his B. Tech and Ph.D. from IITK in 1989 and 1995, Dr. Shreesh Jadhav, now Swami Sarvottamananda or popularly known as Shreesh Maharaj, chose to become a monk and teach in the Computer Science Department of the Ramakrishna Mission Vivekananda University at Belur Math. Unmarried, he has dedicated his entire life towards a social cause – education for the masses. He continues to positively impact the lives of the poorest of the poor. Recently, he helped save the life of 12-year-old Sarita, who developed a hole in her heart. Shreesh helped raise funds for her operation. Though many were doubtful of meeting the goal of raising Rs. 3Lakhs, Sarita was back home after a successful surgery, making his IITK classmate and next door neighbor in the hostel, Rahul Awasthi put his faith in Shreesh's words that , "there are a lot of good people in the world, we just need to reach out to them."

> With deep concern I share with you the news of the deteriorating health of Sh. Shreesh Jadhav.
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> He has been diagnosed with CKD (Chronic Kidney Disease) and his kidney function is slowly retarding. He needs urgent medical treatment at a specialist hospital such as Christian Medical College, Vellore.
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> Please write to him at shreesh@rkmvu.ac.in and extend him any help that you can offer.

As a student at IITK, through Vivekananda Samiti, he taught several of the mess workers' children, besides other poor employees. He also stood for the cause of mess workers for their rights which irked the administration that wanted to take disciplinary action against him. However, the support for Shreesh from Computer Science department was too much to take

any action. It is believed that as a revenge for his actions he received the only B-grade of his student life in Sociology course, thus denying him a chance to win President's Gold Medal. Once again in 1993 at IITK, a construction workers' cooperative was fighting for the right of full minimum wages to workers and against the contractor system. Workers had decided to organize a fast since the administration was reluctant to take any action. Prof. Sandeep Pandey of Computer Science Department and Shreesh joined the fast in solidarity.

Shreesh is 24 Karat pure brilliant gold! This is how Amitabh Thakur, his batch mate and now an IPS Officer recollects, "In IIT Kanpur and later on in the police service as an IPS officer, I had the privilege of meeting many sharp and intelligent people. But no one ever came anywhere near the pure brilliance this unassuming and simple boy (this is the way I last saw him in 1989 when we graduated from Kanpur) had. To give an example, those of us from Engineering stream know what kind of problems in Physics by I.E. Iredov has. Very few of those who make it to the IIT and other Engineering colleges are able to solve more than 30-40% of these problems on their own without the guidebook. Shreesh could do them all at the time he entered IIT." Another batch mate, Sandeep Kumar wrote, "I consider myself lucky to have been Shreesh's batch mate at IIT-Kanpur. Personally I have never met a more gifted person, intellectually and spiritually, in my life. He was able to produce outputs with minimum input and was able to solve problems from all the engineering disciplines (not just computer science). His approach to problem solving is very refreshing and he makes even difficult problems look absurdly simple. If he explains, everyone understands faster and better than what our professors could do." This is what one GSV, who was an MTech student when Shreesh was doing his PhD wrote, "Shreesh lived above my room at IITK. I was amazed by the flock of PhD students from all departments standing in line outside his room waiting to see him and solve their thesis problems. He would get up after a long sleep and when asked, he would answer that he was busy teaching and playing with children in the neighboring village previous night. What an outstanding selfless humble personality! Then some students would take him to the Hall 5 mess buy him food and meantime he would crack the students thesis problem (including Mech. Engg.). We all looked at him like a superhuman above every other living student at that time. I knew that time that he could get any job in any country that any other student would desire (including me) but he would not have got the satisfaction that he had right now. We will never understand the bliss and satisfaction that he has right now, because to understand we need to elevate ourselves to that level which is rare to happen. I am proud that a highly intelligent fellow Indian is using his skills to improve the quality of education and future of India's children."

Shreesh never cared for any award or recognition. He did not get upset when he was denied President's Gold Medal at IITK due to one B-grade in a course which everyone thought was due to no fault of his. He did not get up in arms when his B.Tech project work became a paper in ACM journal (ACM is the highest research society for computer science the EE equivalent is IEEE) but the reviewer of the paper, a renowned professor in computational geometry in Canada, without any contribution to the paper added his name as the first author and his student's as the third author, putting Shreesh's name in the middle. Nor he complained when his project partner was showered with accolades for best project in which Shreesh did all the work. In recognition of his outstanding contributions to the society at large, Shreesh was

conferred with the Distinguished Alumnus Award by IITK in 2009 and is among the top 50 most influential alumni.

Shreesh's father was GM at the Bhilai Steel Plant and mother a professor of Electrical Engineering. Shreesh grew up with three sisters – all engineers. Shreesh was not only clear of what he wanted to do in life; he wanted to do it in the most inexpensive way. This is how a classmate of Shreesh from NIT Raipur where Shreesh did his 1st year BE after 10+1 before joining IITK remembers him, "He had only two pairs of *payjamas* and *kurta*. With a cotton hand bag on the shoulder, he used to go to the slum behind our college to teach students. Her mother used to request us to persuade Sheersh to buy some pants and shirts or at least few more *payjamas* and *kurtas*. But he wouldn't listen." He remained austere at IITK as well. A batch mate from IITK wrote that he managed to pass four years with just a pair of white *kurta-pyjama*. His child like simplicity still continues. On one occasion, a fellow monk Monitosh Maharaj's computer was having some problems and he knew that Shreesh Maharaj could fix it. He called Shreesh Maharaj. Shreesh Maharaj replied that he was quite busy. Monitosh Maharaj then told that he will give him a bottle of Thumbs-Up if he comes. Shreesh Maharaj was excited like a child to hear that and quickly turned up. The computer got fixed but, he forgot to drink the Thumbs-Up. "Shreesh is like a kid" - he told.

Many of us wonder but Anupam point blanked asked Shreesh, "Did you know what you have done? How on the earth could you abandon all that and take up a monastic life?" He laughed. Throughout our discussion he maintained that it was not a sudden decision. It just grew over him. At the end of my direct question, he told me, "You know, I did not make much of renunciation. It is actually you, who did it. I left lesser stuff for something better and you left the better things to dwell over the mundane matters. Now tell me, who actually renounced?"

"Shreesh's story is beyond inspiration, recalls his IITK class-mate and next door neighbor in the hostel Rahul Awasthi. When I look around at my batch-mates, many of whom head companies, I consider Shreesh the biggest success story of IIT. His story should be a catalyst for all those who want to bridge the social abyss created by market forces and government inaction." Another visitor, Sunny Gohil, after meeting Shreesh, reflecting during his journey back home wrote, "Looking outside the bus window I could not help but reflect that Shreesh Maharaj is a wonderful example of an indomitable spirit, undaunted courage of conviction and above all, loftiness of character. In a world where much of our activity these days is nothing more than a cheap anesthetic to deaden the pain of an empty life, Shreesh Maharaj stands tall with his head held high. Shreeshs' example is a testimony that while there might not be anything wrong inherently, in pursuing our goals, whether materialistic or not, at least some of our life needs to be spent for the upliftment of others who might not be that well-endowed or fortunate. Perhaps it need not always be with money but maybe some of our time, or maybe partially if not in full measure, no matter how small or insignificant the effort might be. I am reminded of Rabindranath Tagore's quote - Life is given to us, we earn it by giving a part of it to others. It leads me to conclude that the opposite of love isn't hate. It's apathy."

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