

KAUN BANEGA CROREPATI

Kaun Banega Crorepati (KBC) has lit up the imaginations of millions in this country in ways that no Hollywood movie could ever depict. To the Indian middle class, which has valued education and dreamt of knowledge as the highway to success, this take on the UK based game show '*Who wants to be a millionaire?*' is no less than a fairy tale.

I am no different. When the show is aired, I sit glued to the television and am often able to answer obscure questions; the ones they ask when the participants have crossed the twenty-five lakh level. Family and friends have often suggested that I should give it a try; who knows when you get lucky, they say. I have won many prizes in quiz competitions and I read a lot. My memory also serves me well and I can analyse stuff quickly.

Whether I would ever be lucky enough to reach the coveted hot seat is another matter, but I have *never* applied. I am a little superstitious and I bear a curse, a curse

from a venerable teacher, which forbids me from trying my luck in KBC.

The curse is not very ancient, but it is at least eleven years old. I was appearing for my fourth semester exams in forensic medicine and toxicology. Now forensic medicine might appear to be a very glamorous subject, thanks to the million crime and investigation shows that are beamed on various English entertainment channels. One might imagine doctors rushing to the crime scene in cars with sirens; working in fancy labs with high tech equipment and romancing the most beautiful people.

But the story of the subject in India is very different; forensic medicine experts are not given access to the crime scene. They usually work with antiquated tools in sordid conditions and are tremendously overworked. Practitioners of this subject are often termed 'doctors of the dead'. Forensic medicine is equated to the gruesome task of conducting post mortem examinations and attending courts as expert witnesses. The charms and privileges of being a doctor that heals are missing and replaced by acquaintance with unscrupulous people on both sides of the law. As a result of this perception, the subject is unpopular and does not receive the seriousness it deserves amongst Indian medical students.

We had two faculty members in the department and they were extremely busy souls. In addition to catering to the load generated by the fifteen hundred-bedded medical college, they also served as the referral authority for all medico-legal problems for the neighbouring six districts. To top it all, one of them was the Medical Superintendent of the largest hospital under the medical college. As a direct consequence of their work load, a lot of what they did was a formality. Medico-legal formalities formed a large chunk and teaching formalities a small nugget.

So, on the appointed day, the parties met to complete the formality of semester exams. The senior faculty member, Professor and Head of the department, was our examiner and he already looked edgy. He was receiving calls after calls on his mobile, and those days you had to pay for incoming calls on mobile. It seemed he would have to leave early. Under such circumstances, it was an open secret that the chance of copies being checked was slim. The grading would probably depend on the performance in the oral examination only.

We also wanted to leave early, so that we could prepare for the more important exams, conducted by stricter and more demanding professors.

The first part of the exams consisted of writing fictitious medico-legal reports. Case scenarios of drowning, burns, rape and grievous injury were randomly allotted and students were expected to write an authentic looking report describing findings that may be expected in such case scenarios. The tricky part in writing such reports was not the delineating of findings that might distinguish between ante and post mortem burns or simple injury and grievous injury, but the attention to details of formality. There were umpteen columns to be filled from application number to belt number of the policeman who brought the case to X-ray requisition number to X-ray report number... The list of such numbers just went on and on.

My imagination was running dry when it came to dreaming up new numbers for each column. I wanted to finish the examination fast and I came up with a number that I would use on each column. 420 was that number..... a number with a striking significance in the Indian legal system and used colloquially to express fraud. Somehow, the number seemed to embody the days' proceedings. With the confidence that the reports were unlikely to be corrected, I humoured myself and stifled a chuckle as I went on to engrave 420s all over the report.

Then I was directed to the specimen spotting round. There were the usual suspects; dhatura seeds, raw opium, a blunt weapon etc. I had no difficulty in identifying them and quickly moved over to the room where the viva- voce examination was being conducted.

Imagine my horror there when I saw that our fictitious reports were being checked and discussed during the oral exams. When my turn came, I was nervous about 420. Sure enough as my teacher turned the pages of my reports, he noticed 420 all over it; he mumbled, "*char sau bees*, hmmm... here also *char sau bees*..." Suddenly he shifted his threatening gaze from the papers to me.

"*Char sau bees ka gaana suna*," he thundered.

I was stunned. I could not believe that he had asked me to sing a song from the movie '*Char sau bees*' in the middle of an exam. It was an iconic movie, but my mind had blanked. I was in a state of panic, I could not think or analyse or remember anything.

He wanted to have more fun and he fired another salvo, "Who has acted in *char sau bees*?"

Comforted by the twinkle in his eye, I regained some composure. "Raj Kapur," I answered confidently.

"When a boy is asked such a question, he should name the girl. Do you go to movies to see the hero? I go to see the heroine only. Name the heroine."

I noticed that the hall was now full of my classmates. They were exploding in laughter and my courage deserted me.

"Nargis," he bellowed. And followed it up with a lusty, tuneless... *"tum na rahoge, hum na rahenge, reh jayengi nishaniyaa..."*

"Don't ever send a postcard for Kaun Banega Crorepati. Whether they call you or not, you will lose three rupees either way," was his prophetic verdict after my test.

There was another TV show based on Mahabharata that was very popular with the Indian middle class. The legend depicts a hero losing his entire prowess in the middle of the battle due to a curse from his teacher. I hope that battle never comes for you... But can you name the father of the teacher I am alluding to?