

# **MS20 Farewell Series: Chiranjib Mahanta**

**-interviewed by Argha Patra**

**April 9, 2025**

## **How did you get to know about IISERs?**

IISER was not my first preference, though. I was mainly preparing for NEET. Though I belong to Assam, I was doing my eleventh and twelfth in Delhi. I got selected for some exams. Agriculture is one of them. Then my teachers suggested that if you want some coursework that will be exciting apart from the boring lectures and new with time, then IISERs are the ones. I also explored the agricultural side, in which I was selected. Though it was a pretty good option, I found it to be more routine work. But here in IISERs, as you know, you get a lot of hands-on experience and get to work on different domains if you wish. So, I chose IISER.

## **Why did you decide to complete your +2 in Delhi?**

It contains a story too. When I completed my tenth level, I wanted to go out of my house and experience hostel life. The school I was in before class tenth, many teachers got transferred from there. So, I needed to shift schools. My father said that he would allow it if he could afford it. So, I did a Google search like “Schools in India”. As I was from DPS, I also wanted to move to another DPS. Schools in Delhi were well known at that time, so I applied there. I got a good hostel life experience for 2 years that helped me a lot when I came here to IISER Mohali.

## **What is your Major and why did you choose it?**

I am a biology major. So, the thing is, my goal was to go into the medical field or to pursue biomedical research. And here at IISER Mohali, you get the best Biology department and labs. I liked Chemical sciences too. My interest from the very beginning was towards studying cancer cell biology. Sadly, IISER does not have a professor actively working on this field. As you know, we are a COVID batch, so everything was online for us, and although I found some professors doing collaborative work on my field of interest, it was only in my fourth year that I could finally get a taste of the subject, which was being offered as part of coursework. It was a wonderful semester.

## **Where did you do your internships?**

Again, as we were a COVID batch, we spent our first two years sitting at home and studying. When I came back to campus, I joined Kaushik Sir’s lab and stayed for more than a year there. As I could not get into the Cancer Biology lab, I thought to join a Biochemistry lab to practice routine bio lab work. It came out to me as very helpful. It gave me the grounds on which it was easy to get into the environment where I did my

thesis. I did my 3-month internship at ACTREC, TATA Memorial Centre, Navi Mumbai, in cancer research. This institute works only on cancer with different aspects of it, like breast cancer, lung cancer, etc. In my Master's, I went back to the same lab. As I had been there before, my second stint went really well.

**As I have heard that due to COVID, the MS20 batch came to IISER very late. SO, what was that experience after coming?**

Due to COVID, our classes were conducted online for one and a half years. We first came to campus to give the end semester exams of second year. As I am a person who loves to talk, I was pretty excited to come to campus. I heard the voices of different people during online classes. After coming to campus, I found the difference between the voices and the owners of the voices. That is bad. As we technically joined in our third year, we never got to know all the people of our batch, as everyone came here and joined in their own fields of interest. Even during the batch photo session this year, I saw some faces that I never knew existed. After COVID, when we came to campus, it was an easy-going. So, yeah, it has affected us a lot.

**Technically, you spent two years on campus as the fifth year was in ACTREC, how was your experience here?**

For me, it was a very good experience. Especially, it is the location of the campus where you can go around to the "Himalayas", which is my favourite part in India. In my third year, I along with my two friends went to Spiti Valley. We went to my friends house in Kullu first from where we got his Dad's car and my friend drove us all the way to the hills. It was a very fun trip as we were on our own, nobody overlooking us, having the time of our lives. So, taking complete responsibility for ourselves, we went on the trip. Although it was a risky business, but he was a local. So, he knew where to go and how to go. It was only three of us. Later on, we continued to go on treks. In the third year, I heard about Sukhna Lake and went there. As per Chandigarh, I never visited it properly. My boundaries touched the Bestech mall, Momo 66, House of Garden, Dominos, etc, in Sector 81. I visited the Rock Garden last year. As for Hostel life, we had bunk beds. I just got a single room one month ago. We were supposed to get single rooms in our third year. But due to a lack of sufficient room, we were given double occupancy, only the fifth

years got single rooms. Now that the new hostels have been made, we are given single rooms. If you look at the map of IISERM, you will find a lot of structures that do not exist, like a whole Academic block, a swimming pool, etc. So, yeah, surprises are there. But overall, it was a fun experience.

## **How active were you in sports and cultural activities?**

Yeah, culturally I was into Music. I am a vocalist. I performed with my friends in many cultural nights, enjoyed the company of seniors, specially from MS18 with whom I shared stage time performing in the Battle of Bands. We could not perform in Insomnia, the college fest, due to some issues. The event itself got cancelled. Usually, we would play in the Music room. It was fun. I was not much active in sports. Though I used to play Badminton sometimes in the CC and the Academic Block.

## **Why did you choose Kaushik Sir's lab only?**

I focused on one lab only because since the beginning, I had a very specific interest. I was not jumping around from one topic to another. As I got to study other topics from courses anyway, I wanted to have a Hands-on experience only on this particular aspect. I stayed in Kaushik Sir's lab for more than a year.

## **Where are you planning to do your PhD now?**

It is not fixed yet. I am still trying. I am planning to get it outside India, but I am still trying it in India as well. I have given the exams and cleared some of them. Where I did my thesis in ACTREC, they have a PhD programme through the exam. I have cleared that exam as well as JGEEBILS and GATE. I have a decent rank in all of them after giving the exams without any proper preparation, though. I took them on the flow. During this course of events, I realised one very important thing that your surroundings play a very important role in defining you. The people or the group you are with are very important to you and your life. For example, if a group of people I am with here in IISERM has an idea or a specific approach to certain problems, the same problems are introduced in a different way when I am with my ACTREC peers and friends. With constant labwork and problem solving, when it comes in the exam, I am very confident about my choices of answers. If the group is motivating, you will feel the productivity in yourself and can see the results being more satisfactory.

## **How did you secure your position at ACTREC?**

I came to know about ACTREC through my friend. She applied there in her second year. Then she let me know that there is an institute like ACTREC in Navi Mumbai which focuses on cancer biology. I looked it up on the website and emailed the PI I wanted to work under. The thing is, in India, researchers avoid taking interns for a small duration of time. They prefer someone to work for a longer period of time. I mailed them to work for three months there. I guess that they prefer to have someone for three, six, or twelve months.

## **What advice would you give to the newcomers?**

You have to balance between your work and your personal life. It is more up to you. In the case of CPI, you cannot be perfect. The distribution contains extreme highs and extreme lows. The majority of the people would fall on the lower side of the graph. The other side is the toppers. The more you try to go to the other side, the more miserable your life will become. So, don't do that. Comparing yourself with the next person should be stopped. Your life is different, his/her life is different. Your story and motivation are also different than the person. If you are getting a CPI in one semester, try to maintain that or better it in the next semester. If you know that you are not good at one subject, no matter how much you try, you cannot be the best at it. Rather, shift your focus to a subject that you are good at or that you have the scope to be good at. Let's say, for example, I am bad at Physics. No matter what I do, I shall get a B or C but not an A. But for another subject, if I am getting a B due to some reasons, and I know I can make that better, I will focus on that and try to get an A. Leave what you think is not for you. Ignore the one with C. Who is going to ask you after 20 years about the grade of that one particular subject? You don't have to take everything so seriously. There are so many things to do. There was a science fest recently on campus. You can take part in the seminars, debates, cultural activities, organization of events, etc. If you take part in them, the success or failure of that event lies with you. It becomes your responsibility. These kinds of activities help you develop a sense of responsibility that will help you in the future. I guess these are the things that nobody teaches you, but you have to develop yourself.