

INNER VOICE OF
INDIA
FOR ALL INDIANS...

INNER VOICE OF
INDIA
FOR ALL INDIANS...

MANORANJAN RAJ



www.whitefalconpublishing.com

Inner Voice of India
Manoranjan Raj



www.whitefalconpublishing.com

All rights reserved

First Edition, 2018

Copyright © 2018 Manoranjan Raj

Cover design © 2018 by White Falcon Publishing

Cover image © to shutterstock.com

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored
in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by
means electronic, mechanical, photocopying, or otherwise,
without prior written permission of the Author.

Requests for permission should be addressed to
manoranjan287@yahoo.com

ISBN - xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

Acknowledgement and Some Thoughts

Hi all,

I would like to thank everyone who helped me directly or indirectly in writing this book. The satisfaction that accompanies the success of any task would be incomplete without the mention of the people who made it possible, whose constant guidance and encouragement crowned my efforts with success.

A hearty thanks to my parents for giving me this wonderful life and my friends, relatives who supported me throughout this journey.

My friends who helped me to stay focussed to maintain my composure and concentrate on my work by being with me in bad times. My relatives whose support was commendable and my well-wishers who supported me in this venture.

Last but not the least, a whole heartedly thanks to my editor Amit Sareen, who helped me immensely with his editing work to bring my book back on track.

All characters portrayed in this book are fictitious, although partially inspired by true incidents; this book

Inner Voice of India

is otherwise entirely fictional and does not depict any real person or event. All resemblance or similarity to persons (living or dead) or entities whether existing or otherwise, is purely coincidental. Any depiction of persons, names, marks, works or any other information portrayed in this book is merely coincidental.

Thank you, dear reader and friends, for picking up
INNER VOICE OF INDIA.

Prologue

The kind of incidents taking place around us is greatly not thought of. It seems that there is no end to these mishaps. Sadly, the condition remains the same without any prevention of such heinous incidents. As a responsible citizen we all must join hands to inhibit such scenarios to make our country free from anti-social elements to create a tranquil atmosphere in this sacred land.

Well, what is the solution? A million dollar question to be pondered over. Day passes, time elapses and these incidents are forgotten in a fortnight after the media coverage is diminished. But, their sacrifices shouldn't go in vain and their determination to be noted forever.

This is the story of a Common, Intelligent and Talented man who wants to serve his nation to make a better INDIA.

WELCOME TO,

INNER VOICE OF INDIA...

For My Mother INDIA,
For all the Civil Servants,
For all the Parents.

Contents

| | |
|--------------------------------------------------------|------------|
| Acknowledgement and Some Thoughts..... | v |
| Prologue..... | vii |
| Act I: New Delhi..... | 1 |
| 1. Early Days Of My Life..... | 3 |
| 2. Naming Ceremony | 9 |
| 3. School Life and Our Struggles..... | 13 |
| 4. Out Of Reach and My Mother's Determination | 17 |
| 5. Time to Rejoice | 23 |
| 6. Childhood mischiefs..... | 28 |
| 7. My father's venture | 33 |
| 8. Transfer and Re-location..... | 37 |
| Act II: Bangalore..... | 41 |
| 9. New School, New Life | 43 |
| 10. Walking Encyclopaedia | 47 |
| 11. Class Leader..... | 52 |
| 12. First Love and Your Girls' Lecture | 56 |
| 13. Goal Orientation..... | 63 |
| 14. Board Exams and Results..... | 66 |

| | |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|------------|
| 15. College Days and Uninvited Habits..... | 70 |
| 16. My First Date..... | 76 |
| 17. Plus Two and Entrance Exams | 81 |
| 18. First Day at IIT | 87 |
| 19. Life at IIT; Exams and Results | 94 |
| 20. Intimacy Call..... | 108 |
| 21. College fest and Outings | 117 |
| 22. Final Year and Graduation..... | 125 |
| 23. UPSC Exams | 131 |
| 24. Final Interview | 139 |
| 25. Training at National Academy of Administration | 145 |
| Act III: Mysore..... | 151 |
| 26. Posting as Assistant Commissioner..... | 153 |
| 27. Reunion and Marriage | 159 |
| 28. Deputy Commissioner of Mysore..... | 170 |
| 29. Operation Black Money | 175 |
| 30. Fence Eating the Crops | 180 |
| 31. Operation Black Money – II..... | 187 |
| 32. Unexpected Day of My Life | 192 |
| 33. Dharapakad | 198 |
| 34. My Dream India..... | 203 |
| Epilogue | 207 |

Act I
New Delhi

1. Early Days Of My Life

It was 8:36 in the morning; time had little presence over climate. A cool breeze made the city even more romantic, but later, as the wind picked up strongly at the rate of knots, it blew the leaves and twigs up in the air leaving a blustering sound around.

The timing was propitious as the black clouds began to roll up the city and gathered above, making the clouded sky look like a massive storm at a distance. The morning sky appeared to be as dark as early evening.

It was colder than usual, with the sun obscured by clouds, determining the accuracy of the forecast of rain, probably indicating the first showers of the season.

As Veena Agnihotri showed the first signs of urgency, the delivery was at the hindsight and she was feeling the labour pain at that instant. Rajiv Agnihotri called for an ambulance without squandering any time, but couldn't find one. He immediately contacted the neighbour who owned a white ambassador, which was the need of the moment.

The latter affirmed and Veena was taken to Sri Ganga Hospital, which is located in outskirts of Delhi. As soon as they reached the hospital, Veena was rushed to the operation theatre with a lot of tension glooming around.

Meanwhile, Rajiv called the in-laws and all relatives, informing about the time crunch of the day.

Act I New Delhi

The Agnihotri's and Trivedi's rushed into the hospital exchanging warm regards and enquiring the condition of Veena Agnihotri to ensure everything was under control.

The hospital had led to the meeting of the Agnihotri and Trivedi family after a long time. Everyone present there anticipated whether it would be a baby boy or a baby girl, with a typical Indian mindset, hoping for a baby boy and praying for the best to come, which was inevitable.

All of a sudden, a sobbing sound made the whole environment silent for a moment. It was the arrival of a new life; a ray of hope and the future of the Agnihotri's. Everyone's eyes were set on the door of the operation theatre to open, to have the first glimpse of the newly born. It would be any moment now. Finally, the wait was over. The instant arrived when a nurse opened the door.

"Congratulations! It's a baby boy, both mother and the baby are healthy and active," announced the nurse. There was an ambience of blissfulness all around. There was joy and jubilation, more so because it was a baby boy.

Rajiv Agnihotri had no words. Tears of joy started flowing from his eyes. All he did was noted with a timestamp, in his diary. It was 10:21 AM. Both the Agnihotri and Trivedi families were extremely happy; the euphoria on everyone's face indicated all the happiness in them.

The baby boy was born on the fourth day after the full moon, in the Hindu calendar month of Karthika. The day had its own significance; it was the day of Karva Chauth when the married women fast from sunrise to moonrise for the safety and longevity of their husbands. The fast is traditionally celebrated in the northern states of India.

1. Early Days Of My Life

Similarly, In South India, it is celebrated as Bheemana Amavasya; the new moon day of the Ashadha month of the Hindu calendar. They believe that during this period, the offerings they make, reach their late forefathers and in return, they are showered with blessings.

It is believed that on this day, Shiva was impressed by Parvathi's devotion towards him and accepted her as his wife. It is also believed that if a woman abstains from consuming food on this day and offers prayers to Lord Shiva and Parvathi chastely, the unmarried would be blessed with a good virtuous husband and the married pray for their husband's long life, success and happiness.

The baby boy was very active and weighed 3.8Kgs, measuring 1.6 feet in height. The relentless cry of the baby was a bit too much, after all, there's no getting around it. Babies cry, it's how they communicate hunger, pain, fear, the need to sleep and much more.

How can you know why exactly the baby is crying? Well, it can be tricky to interpret a child's cries, especially at the very beginning.



The next seven days were spent in the hospital, the delivery being caesarean, the pain was much more. After taking some rest and recovering from the pregnancy pains, the time for discharge from the hospital had come after a week's hardship for Veena.

The tradition usually followed is that the child's delivery expense is borne by the maternal side, and so, the hospital bill was paid by Ganesh Trivedi father of Veena.

For the post-pregnancy phase, she went to her father's house. The initial days were tough for her to handle all the baby's work so looking after and taking care of the

baby was done by her mother Bharathi Trivedi, while Veena took care of feeding the baby timely and making sure everything was fine.

Veena had to face a lot of problems initially; she was not able to work much for her daily needs but she was accustomed to carrying out the daily routine chores, which she continued even post-pregnancy as she had no other options.

“What are you doing here, always sitting on the bed?” her mother asked.

“Nothing, have to look after the baby and not feeling well since many days,” Veena replied.

“You are not supposed to sit in a place always, it is not good for you. Indulge yourself in some activities, do some work which you can. Sitting idle is not good,” she said.

Veena didn’t have any other choice but to accept the guidelines of her mother for her own good, and for baby.

After three months...

The baby had grown up with good stability and strength. He now looked around and awaited the things that were to come his way. Veena hadn’t let a penny go waste. She had fed him with all the food which could make him stronger.

She fed him like anything so that he becomes strong and healthy. By the way, he turned out chubby and a little fat for his age. After all, in that age you cannot call a baby fat, the only words are cute and bubbly.



At eight months he started crawling on the floor - the first signs of happiness for the parents as their child

1. Early Days Of My Life

begins to crawl and Veena would not have left anything undone. In those days there were no walkers or other stuff which could help a child to walk, the lone support was mother's help and her.

Apart from looking after the baby, Veena let no opportunity go waste, whenever and wherever she could capture a still; she would never miss a photo opportunity in which the baby was looking adorable and bubbly.

After borrowing a camera from a relative, taking stills became her daily task, as she thought the stills could be a physical memory for years to come. She would take them wisely because it was not a mobile camera, where she could delete the pictures which were not good. It was an ordinary camera with a reel which would be used to make prints.

Meanwhile, all these days, Rajiv was in Delhi working as an ordinary peon in one of the largest banks of the country. Those initial days were really difficult for both Rajiv and Veena as they needed to stabilise and support their family, starting from the scratch, which could have been difficult for anybody.

Rajiv had taken credits from relatives, which he was unable to repay in time leaving him in debt; and also the people around him now were not in a position to offer him anything further before a repayment. He had to face a lot of problems initially, which he overcame after going through a rough patch in life. From there he literally grew up to that phase when he could lead a respectable life.



The day for which the family members were waiting had finally come; the baby spoke partially and started

Act I New Delhi

walking with the help of a wall, latching on to it, holding it for support, the moment which makes the babies scared, from where they could fall and hurt themselves.

All these days, Veena was at her father's house where the baby boy spent all his early days. It was worthwhile and good for the nurturing baby to be in such a wonderful atmosphere.

2. Naming Ceremony

It was quite an auspicious day for the infant, as it was the day when a name would be given to the child. Naming a baby is considered to be a sacred event in the Hindu culture and tradition. It involves the immediate families and also the close relatives and friends blessing the child for the best to come.

The naming ceremony brought both the Agnihotri and Trivedi families together with a blissful time. The onus was on the maternal side to celebrate the naming ceremony with all the traditional rituals. Primarily, the event unfolded with calling all the relatives, friends and all the near and dear ones with humbleness and extreme pleasure.

By eight in the morning, the relatives and family members had started arriving, which spread a mood of happiness and serenity all around. The day marked the gathering of several hundred people who came to bless the baby with happiness, health, education and wealth. As per the schedule, the priest's arrival was expected at 9:00 AM and the time given for the naming ceremony was between 9:00 AM to 10:00 AM.

Early in the morning, the baby was given a bath, which is considered to be holy, as when the drops of water flow, it is marked as a symbol of purification. Once this purifying ritual for the baby was complete,

he was dressed in new clothes to embark the occasion of the naming ceremony. The arrival of the priest led to the moment of urgency, as everyone started to make preparations for the occasion, complete any pending tasks and be ready to play their part.

As per the family tradition, the sacred fire was lit and the priest started chanting sacred hymns to invoke the Gods in the heaven to bless the child. According to the date and time of birth of the baby, a particular letter of the Sanskrit alphabet is associated with the solar birth sign, which would prove lucky for the baby. In this case, it came out to be 'M'.

After all discussions and arguments, an affirmation was given by all the family members to Veena to keep the baby's name as "MANISH AGNIHOTRI".



After chanting the sacred hymns for a certain time, performing all the holy rituals and traditions followed. Finally, the priest called the name in baby's ears for a rightful and enlightened future.

At 9:46 in the morning the priest whispered the name "MANISH AGNIHOTRI" three times and then the same was repeated in the other ear. All the people gathered there blessed the child with a long and healthy life and a bright future.

Then the parents of the baby, Rajiv and Veena Agnihotri, performed a certain set of rituals as directed by the priest. They wrote the baby's name in Hindi in a plate filled with dry uncooked rice grains.

The moment witnessed several people blessing the child wholeheartedly, as well as the family with good

2. Naming Ceremony

fortune. At the same time, a famous saint paid a visit to their house unexpectedly.

The saint wished the baby with all possible goodies' and said that this child would grow into a great person and serve his nation to his best. He said the child would make his nation proud.

Everyone present there was sceptical about the saint's words and couldn't believe their ears. But the baby's parents envisioned and treasured the saint's words and vowed to nourish and nurture the baby in a way that he could follow the prophecy.

All the people present there saw the bubbly and adorable "MANISH", who lay in a cradle sleeping happily, enjoying the moment. Time elapsed and all of a sudden, they all blessed him and quoted the only thing they had come here to say, "This child has a bright future."

Seeing the child sleep in the cradle, all the people gathered there started talking amongst themselves, deriding that the baby had occupied the complete cradle, literally leaving no space. Thereafter, they had a mid-day lunch and returned to bless the child once again before they left.

The day not only marked the naming ceremony but also gave an idea to Veena of dressing up the child in Lord Krishna's attire.

The cameraman had plenty of work as he had the onus of taking good stills for numerous expressions of the baby. He had waited for the baby patiently for the right moments in which the baby would look more beautiful and joyous.

The pictures he captured had lots of emotions of the child. Yes, that would express the time of joy and

Act I New Delhi

happiness for years to come. Apart from these photos, pictures were also taken with all the people holding the baby in their arms, one by one; numerous stills were captured by the photographer.

All the people blessed the baby one last time before they returned to their homes.

The naming ceremony day was quite remarkable for the parents as well as the child; the saint's foretelling was icing on the cake for perfect happiness.

3. School Life and Our Struggles

The first day of school was a bit awful as I and all other fellow mates started crying to the core because it was difficult for us to leave our mothers, and to start spending time in school after leaving home was a great misery.

Every one of us, including me, started crying. The clamour in the room was at its peak; but later, as time elapsed, everything was back to normal as it became necessary to stay alone. The adverse condition made us adapt to tormenting situations.

Some of my friends were totally startled and perplexed; probably not knowing how to react to such an unimagined situation. After all the chaos in the class, my admission to the kindergarten in the New Public School, located on the outskirts of New Delhi, was confirmed.

As the day passed by, we all became friends and each other's company made us comfortable as we spent some splendid time accompanying each other, which would be remembered for years to come.

The teacher who taught us was simply terrific. We must compliment her work, which was remarkable; showing that kind of patience and friendly behaviour towards kids made us adapt to the surrounding environment quickly. For the time being, she used to keep ranting on us as the situation demanded.

Our teacher used to foster our every move, which would be fruitful for days to come. Succinctly, she used to teach us to study in a better way. As time elapsed,

we grew into much more mature children and were promoted to the next standard.

The subservience in us probably made us grow much stronger; we would listen to those words only which we felt were good and interesting, and not to the subjugated persons.

Away from home, I was a kind of a student who would listen to his teacher or any elder whose words were acceptable to me, and in reciprocation, all the teachers started seeing me in a different way and would rest all their faith in me, to be a good student. The candid nature in me let me grow in a way to reach new heights.

Amidst all the time we passed in school, I became friends with those guys who were close to me and shared the same idea as I did. The time we spent in school was totally euphoric and the reverence towards each other made the bond of friendship even stronger and it would last for a very long time.

I used to plunge to the cemented model car during the sports activity and the kind of games we played was so much fun; it was the happiest time for all of us.

Imminent were our fights; the never-ending quarrels, and at the end of the day, we would promise never to quarrel again by stating to be friends forever, which would ease the situation.

When our teacher's used to scold one of us for silly reasons, the rest would chuckle with heads down. It would be the best time one could remember in class.

When we tease a friend with his/her nickname in front of the whole class, the grinning faces of all makes him/her emphatic, and the latter would chase you and scramble in the corridor. Those memorable times can be remembered when you grow older and enjoy every bit of it.

3. School Life and Our Struggles

That endless bickering over a subject which sees no end to our arguments; all these incidents would definitely make our childhood days much cherished for days to come.

Amidst all this, we all grow up day by day; showing the signs of maturity as each day passed and there were days when people around us, neighbours and teachers were always thinking about our marks.

Among all the friends I had, we had a competition between us. Yes, it was a healthy competition and not by pulling the leg of others. As they say ‘Your marks should speak volumes for you’, I always pondered whether marks are the only criteria to judge a student.

The marks decide what we get and what we don’t? The marks decide for how long we are roasted at the dinner table. Good marks earn us what we want and bad marks earn us the tag of ‘unworthy’ and nothing else. But we all knew that getting marks is entirely different from gaining knowledge; both aspects are totally different.

Luckily, by God’s grace and my parents’ prayers, I have not been left behind in any aspect. I used to get good grades in all my annual exams and got promoted to the next standard successfully. But, I have seen many of my friends struggle academically for numerous reasons, yet they can overcome their struggles when parents and teachers work with them efficiently, by trying to make them understand the concepts rather than ‘Ratta Maarke’ (mugging up).

I have also noticed in my friends, apart from learning disabilities, they also lack life skills, which has a great impact on their behaviour and choices.

The world changes constantly and their ability to adjust and adapt is decisive in their ability to succeed. Acquiring life skills equips us with the ability to

thrive in the classroom and helps us to gain focus and control, which will help us avoid distractions and gain knowledge without information overload.

Apart from this, communication skills helped me excel in both, my classes and socially. I used to adapt to those things which would elevate my thinking beyond memorization and use analysis and logic to build knowledge.

The stereotypical style of teaching has also led to the downfall of our thinking capacity and boredom in school. Most of us experience a certain level of boredom in the classroom because we lack engagement. This causes us to become inattentive and leaves us demotivated.

Brilliant minds need constant stimulation. High achievers become bored in the classroom or lack motivation because they think ‘outside the box’.

This boredom can lead to frustration, bad behaviour or even depression. At times, there are also some social problems which hinder them to succeed academically.

Being accepted socially is an important part of a student’s learning experience, but most of my friends struggle socially at some point or the other in our school.

My friends with learning or writing disabilities find it especially difficult to adjust socially, experiencing peer rejection more often than those without a disability.

Relationship problems amongst parents, outside the school, can also carry over to the school. Parents can be a source of support as well as stress. While family problems may add to a student’s struggle in the classroom, the children of cohesive families are generally dynamic and thrive in school.

4. Out Of Reach and My Mother's Determination

People often say, being a middle-class child is hard. Well, it was true in my case.

We lived on the outskirts of New Delhi. My father Rajiv Agnihotri was a peon in one of the country's largest bank and my mother Veena Agnihotri was a typical housewife.

The struggle for livelihood was immense and the main reason for this was 'The wages did not keep pace with the rising cost of living'. To add insult to the misery, health costs were rising too. The same happened with Education, and please remember, these are necessities and not luxuries.

The middle-class struggles are real and increasingly hard. My father worked hard to live a respectable life in the society and what was imminent was the lifestyle that we had was about to continue further.

There was no space or money to get rich or to lead a better life than this. One thing that God made sure you don't ask for more is the uncountable relatives you already have.

Well, they are not that important, but they will make sure their presence is felt in your life. Call it a harsh reality but some of those unbearable creatures never fail to show

their love for you by gently screwing up an already fucked up life you have, and you still have to admit that even those relatives are so important in your life.

The questions they ask, make you go crazy and mad. They will be knowing the answer already but they want to hear the same from your mouth, no matter how hard you try ignoring them, to save yourself from embarrassment.

You literally have to live on pennies at the end of the month. Money is much-needed in a middle-class family, to fulfil basic necessities.

As you grow up, your needs increase, but your pocket money doesn't. Your family needs can be maintained only if you had saved money for the month end.

So yes, you have a tough time figuring out how to make plans with that much money in your hand and if you don't have anything, you are literally screwed.

All my father had was his bicycle and his job as a peon. He used to pedal extra miles to travel to the wholesale centre from where he would bring groceries and other cooking essentials, rather than purchasing from the nearby stores just to save a few pennies, for the welfare of his family.

Unlike the high-class chaps, our weekends are never happening. Either we are dragged out of the house to fetch groceries or made to do things which have been put off for an entire week. The only party that you get to attend is a boring family function.



At the age of ten, I used to be tempted to those fancy things and electrical gadgets which my friends used for entertainment.

4. Out Of Reach and My Mother's Determination

I wished I would own one of those. It is that kind of an age when you don't regret being tempted for things. All these things I wished were put into dad's ears with great tactics by my mom, Veena Agnihotri, to try and convince him.

That dinner at night was crucial because it was the lecture time, as a rule. It was basically filled with harsh and cruel words instead of food for dinner.

Dinner was the official time to discuss all our bad deeds. You were roasted till they reminded you of all the wrongdoings you have to credit since the time you were born.

The time after school hours was meant to play cricket and other games; by the time we reached the ground, it would be 4:30 PM.

I was bought up in such an environment where it was impossible to stay out late. I had a definite time limit after which I couldn't technically stay out and if I cross that warning, it would be inferred that I was definitely into some bad company. Strange thought, but one must reckon it was true.

My mom, wouldn't let me go out late and straightaway the answer would be NO. I had no options rather than to accept my mother's words.

Being in a city, the people from our native came to visit us even more and so we had guests visiting our house very frequently, which meant I had to compromise everything for them.

When guests volunteer to stay back, I knew I had to leave my bed for them; strange again, but true. We used to share our room and in worse conditions, the entire room was left for them and the worst part was when

Act I New Delhi

I saw them using or playing with my things. But I was too small to oppose or shout at them.



The love for food, especially snacks and sweets in childhood is huge and I could do anything to get sweets. Probably this is the case with most children.

I used to steal, not exactly from somewhere, but search for food in my own house for snacks and sweets, in our kitchen. There are always some snacks and sweets kept exclusively for guests, which my mom would do anything to hide from me. But I knew that even if she says there's nothing for me to eat, I could always sneak into the kitchen and steal those snacks behind her back.

The irony though was, I had to steal and eat because my mom didn't leave me with another option.

The paucity of food or any other edible things such as fruits, sweets and snacks etc. had made me feel very sad, in spite of that my mom had something for me.

My mom used to sacrifice her piece of bread for me whether any guests were there or not. This shows the unconditional love of my mom towards me. These were not only her blessings, but most mothers in this country would show such unconditional love towards their children.

The family functions would leave my mom exhausted. The relatives used to call her for help for any kind of functions and we were supposed to reach there early to give our hand.

My mom used to do all the work in the functions, helping others. To some extent, even I used to lend a supporting hand. It didn't matter whose marriage or birthday it was, we were made to work hard. Otherwise,

4. Out Of Reach and My Mother's Determination

we would only invite more unwelcome taunts and judgements from those relatives of ours.



Indian families and drama go hand-in-hand. Maybe now you can see from where all the inspiration for the Hindi TV serials comes, which works so well, and if you have grown up in a middle-class home, you know how eventful your life can be. If you have not been exceptionally lucky, you know exactly how many times the struggle got real.

Those were the times when people were addicted to some desperate TV soaps, which had no head or tail in them.

The Hindi serials which were telecasted in the prime time were all the topics of discussion in a usual middle-class house, and the characters were the household names on which people would comment for all the days of the week.

People used to see these soaps just to see the kind of accessories the actors wore, the costumes they had and all the materialistic things they talked about. All this would be the only talking-point in corridors of houses.

These serials had no end to them, neither did any story they told; all they had were tantrums and fights between 'bahu' and 'saas' who had no empathy for each other.

Amidst all these soaps, which my mom never watched; all she would see were the quiz programs and news channels.

For God's sake, I don't know what the exact reason for this was; not only had she watched the quiz programs

but she noted down all the questions and answers from them too.

I used to ask her, “Maa, iska kya fayada hai?” (Mom, what is the use of this?)

With all the calmness in the world she would just reply, “Beta, yeh sab sirf aap ke liye, aapka gyaan badhaane ke liye hai”

(All of these are only for you, to improve your knowledge.)

I was amused by her words; I didn't understand what she was telling. Yes, it was not the age for me to understand the moment which was in front of me or whatever.

She wanted me to access all those questions and acquire knowledge in a better way. If there was anybody, who supported me in understanding my subjects and to improve my I.Q., it was my mom.

All these days I thought, studying the chapters taught in school would help me become an educated man, but later, I understood - to become an intelligent man you have to acquire knowledge from all sides and think out of the box.

The quest to acquire knowledge was seeded in me by my mom.

5. Time to Rejoice

The hectic schedule and daily routine of getting up early, going to school, attending all the classes and coming back late in the evening had now finished as the classes came to end and we were heading for summer vacations.

The exams brought its flavours to me, of being a bookworm glued to a seat and reading a book for a long period of time. It had now come to an end. The results were good, as I got a good grade. What was satisfactory was, getting grades in school better than your friends. It matters a lot. Getting good marks help you in one way - you can freely declare them to your friends and neighbours and you will not become a talking point for a whole week.

After a fruitful result and productive year by passing the fifth standard, it was the time for summer vacations. A much-needed break to get into the groove and enjoy the typical vacation was the best I could get.

The summer vacations had arrived and I was finding a way how to make them useful in my own way. But the school teachers had other ideas. From reading lists to summer assignments and projects, what not? They wanted it to be a productive summer.

While the first few days of the vacation always began with excitement and anticipation, nearly all parents

eventually began to worry about their child's summer time and their only means of entertainment - video games, television and computer gaming habits.

Many parents want to find ways to help their children to find an appropriate balance between leisure and study time.

There is no change in teachers' mentality too, as they are striving to boost students' educational interests over the summers, as a large proportion of teachers argue that engaging in summertime learning activities helps students progress throughout their formative years.

Summer vacations meant the time to rejoice. The summertime fun for me began with the ringing of the last bell in school on the last day in the examination hall.

Summer vacations bring the happiest moments for me and my friends as we get a long break from the daily hectic school life and work.

It was the time to get entertained by getting away from the homework and a nice trip to a hill station, some destination trips and other cool places to beat the summer heat. These very easily and happily the choice of most of my friends, but that was not the case with me.

Apart from destination trips, my friends used to join summer camps, swimming or dancing classes to spend their vacation happily. However, I have not been to any of those fancy camps or classes due to financial problems. But I made through those times by finding other things to do, which bring me happiness and keep me enthusiastic.

We had a group of friends who liked to hang out with me and spread happiness by playing our innovative games. These were quite entertaining to play.

5. Time to Rejoice

We played all day long in bright sunlight. We generally liked to play cricket in the nearest playground with all our friends. It would run for countless hours; such was the interest of the game in us, which would never end.

Apart from games, another good thing I liked and which gave me a chance to enhance my skills and knowledge in the areas other than studies was by reading General Knowledge and other puzzle books; which I tried to solve, though it was tough for me.



Summer vacations are a two-month affair in most schools including our school. With working parents becoming a practice and nuclear families becoming the trend, children got lesser and lesser time with their family. Though ours was a nuclear family, my mother was a housewife, so I was lucky that way. Spending some quality with my mom was always my priority.

Every day was well spent by the narration of some mythological stories by my mom, which I found interesting and wanted to listen to any time of the day; unlike my friends who spent most of quality time of those two months of summer vacation in front of the television and watching cartoons while their parents remained relaxed thinking their kids were safe.

These two months can be well spent by kids to learn new activities and explore what is unknown to them. But for this to happen, parents must show a special concern in building up of their children's future.

The hectic and busy schedule during the school days had not allowed me to spend time with Mother Nature. So, during the vacations, my mom taught me

how to plant a tree or grow a flower in the open spaces available to us.

While this helped me plant and grow trees and plants, it also added to my knowledge, which developed in a positive direction to care about these living things too and follow the 'GO GREEN' moto from which the environment would be benefited and I would gain inner happiness.

Seeing the plants grow was my daily habit. As soon as I got up, I was accustomed to seeing my plants and how much they had grown, as well as watching the flowers bloom day by day was simply amazing.



My mom wanted me to stay at home during the noon time as the scorching heat would probably bring about a nasty time. While indoors, she wanted me to do some art and craft things for engaging me.

I liked to boost up my summer vacations by reading books. Fixing time bound schedules to study and learn General Knowledge seemed boring, so I liked to innovate methods to make it interesting.

I used to play video games based on quizzing. My mother strongly recommended me to check out different learning programs and I wanted to see those badly because I desired to participate in the school GK competition, to take part in the Quiz and win prizes.

I tried to help my mom by doing some household chores, which would relieve her somewhat and lessen her work. Also, I wanted to do it because to become self-reliable, one necessarily needs to learn to do things required to be done at home.



5. Time to Rejoice

The best part of these vacations was travelling to granny's home, the exciting native days which nobody wants to miss.

Living in a busy city life had not let me enjoy the life in a village or native. So, I wanted to go to my native badly during the summer time and enjoy the vacations to the core.

The time I spent with my cousins and elders was quite amazing. I would not leave any opportunity to enjoy the things I missed in the city - swimming in the pond, playing games in the fields, etc.

Amidst all this rejoicing, we had endless fights for bizarre reasons, which was truly remarkable. We even played with the animals, looking after the kitten, puppies or birds was a time well spent.

The search for food in the house, finding something after a lot of exploration and eating it in hidden places with quick gulps was truly a skill possessed by all my cousins.

Having the potential to drive a bicycle or bike was definitely important in anybody's life. The first step to that is to know cycling. I was keen to learn cycling well during the vacation in the native and you all know that without falling from the cycle, no one had learnt to ride a bicycle.

The unlimited falls from the cycle, the numerous wounds and scars on your skin genuinely lead to being the best rider.

After the emphatic vacations, finally, the time had arrived for the school's re-opening. All good things must come to an end; the ultimate two months were coming to an end.

I wanted to rest and have ample sleep in the remaining days to boost my energy back. Finally, everything was set in readiness for me to go to school after a fantastic time of rejoicing.

6. Childhood mischiefs

Being naughty is not dangerous, being adamant is bad. You can't expect children to be quiet and well behaved at all times. In fact, parents of the shy, quiet children often complain that their children are too boring and wished they would show a bit of life.

In general, people expect children to be the life of the house - a little mischievous, quite noisy and full of questions and ideas. But some children cross the line and are wild, destructive and disruptive. They're just not cute anymore and people find them a little hard to deal with.

Overactive children just don't fade into the background. They are loud, demanding and indifferent to control. They soon discover that when they misbehave, they get noticed and are given the attention they seek even if it is of the negative kind.

Their bad behaviour enables them to have their own way very often and this reinforces their tantrums and overturns discipline. As a result, hyperactive children often get labelled as 'bad' children and this affects the way they are treated by the family, peers and teachers.

This is unfortunate because if their excess energy was nurtured and channelized in the right direction, it could be an asset. The obnoxious behaviour then may only be a cry for help.

6. Childhood mischiefs

You have to work with them to help them develop self-control, be considerate to others and direct their energies towards constructive work; but being a little mischievous is acceptable.



The best time we have in our class is when you pull your friend's leg by various unpleasant moves.

One of the best friends I had in school was Amogh Vidyadhar. We had a modest and sincere friendship, no matter what. Be it our little fights or the numerous quarrels we had, at the end of the day, we would go back home happily in each other's company.

Our class had a strength of thirty-six students, with boys and girls sitting on the right and left-hand sides respectively. We had long benches and individual chairs for each one of us.

It was a Monday, the first day of the week. Early in the morning, we all had gathered for the school assembly. After the assembly, we all marched towards our respective classes and waited for the teacher to come.

To my right was Amogh and the left seat was occupied by Anil Mishra.

It was the English class. Priyanka mam came into the class and we all stood up to wish her a Good Morning.

In no time, I pulled Amogh's chair swiftly back, not expecting him to sit impulsively. Unfortunately, he did and fell on the floor.

With a hawked-eye, the teacher hollered at me, "What did you do?"

Pin drop silence persisted all around the classroom.

I was intimidated, I didn't open my mouth. I stood there with my head bowed. I was ashamed of myself.

The whole class was grinning at each other.

“Open your mouthhhh,” she shouted at me.

Amogh stood up keeping his hand on his ass.

I sensed, standing silently would not work. “Mam, I did it by mistake,” I muttered.

“What by mistake? Get out of the class?” she yelled.

Amogh came to my rescue, “Mam, It’s ok, he must have done it by mistake; please forgive him.”

I didn’t know Amogh was so big-hearted fellow. I was overwhelmed by his maturity. A million thanks were less to acknowledge what he did for me.

“Sorry Amogh,” I said.

He didn’t utter a word; intermittently he stared at me.

Finally, he broke the silence and said, “Come, let’s go for lunch.”

We had our lunch and walked through the corridors proactively; this time Amogh being cheeky, he let his right leg in the way of Anoop who fell down on his knees. Luckily, nothing happened to him.

The Physical Training Teacher was seeing all this from a distance and called, “Amogh Vidyadhar,” in loud voice.

Amogh and I paused and then we turned towards him.

“From, where are you coming? Don’t you have manners?” he shouted at us.

I being modest didn’t utter a word.

“Sir, I didn’t realise Anoop was in my way,” Amogh said.

Bitterly, with a red face, he was in no mood to listen and said to Amogh, “Kneel down on the floor.”

“Sorry Sir,” Amogh said.

“I said Kneel down,” he yelled.

Amogh kept looking at me as he went on his knees. I laughed at him awkwardly; you know when your

6. Childhood mischiefs

best friend gets punishment, you can't hold on to your emotions.

“Why are you laughing? You also kneel down,” P.T sir said.

WTF!! What the hell did I do in the world? I questioned myself and as I was left with no other option, I conformed to his words.

We both were on our knees in the middle of the corridor. As the girls of our class passed by, we felt embarrassed and awful.

“Both of you be here for another thirty minutes, then go to your class,” he ordered.

The mischiefs we did in school were immense. We would not leave a single instance where we could have fun.

The number of punishments we took in our class was comparatively less as compared to others. Being the toppers, we couldn't afford it any moment.



The all-important Parents-Teachers Assessment or meeting, whatever you call it, was scheduled on Monday.

I requested my mom to come and attend the meeting. She agreed to it.

She came at 11:40 AM. As I saw my mom, I was a bit nervous, not knowing what the hell the teacher will say.

Generally, the students who get Good marks, the teacher has no problems with them.

My mom came to talk to our class teacher, Radhika mam.

Mam called my name, “Manish Agnihotri”

Thoughtfully, with all the focus in the world, I went out to meet my mom.

I smiled at her; she was happy and pleasant seeing my grades.

I was thinking now, what my mam would want to say about me to my mom?

In a firm voice mam said, “Well, he gets good marks, in fact, he is the topper. But...”

What but, what else you need? I’m getting good marks still you want to screw me, I thought.

She continued from where she left, “But he talks too much in the class and doesn’t allow other students to concentrate. He is the topper, it is ok for him, but others don’t have the same capacity as him. They take time to understand the lecture.”

My mom added fuel to the fire, “Mam, he does the same thing at home. He has become too talkative these days.”

“Other than this, there is no problem with him. Occasionally he does some mischiefs, but guess, all children are naughty. Just can’t really help,” she said.

“Ok mam,” my mom said and smiled at her.

Coming back from school, I really wanted to keep it simple and fun-filled in my life. I was a typical naughty child as all others at home. I would do anything that came to my mind.

Back at home, I was quite naughty and wanted to enjoy the moment by seeing the humorous side of any matter. I used to ring the neighbours’ doorbells and run through the corridor.

At home, that naughtiness had not ended at all. I used to try and balance the electrical switches between ON and OFF by placing my finger at the middle of the switch.

I always tried to be happy and make my surroundings happier by having some or the other kind of fun.

7. My father's venture

My father, Rajiv Agnihotri was an easy-going, result-oriented person. He would always think in a way that should help his family. He was a complete family man.

He always wanted to complete his degree in Commerce. Finally, the time had arrived for his dream to come true; he completed his B.Com from Anshuman Open University, New Delhi.

The timing of pursuing the degree was a sensible and sensitive move. He wanted to make it big in his life. At the age of 28, he completed his degree. Being honoured with a degree at this age shows that if a man has courage and determination, he can achieve anything in his life. Everyone is liable to achieve something in life, but it should be in a rightful manner.

With the completion of his degree, he proved that there was no age barrier for Education. Anybody who is a keen seeker and a consistent performer can come out in flying colours and gain knowledge to reach the heights he/she desires.

There was no end to our happiness, back at home, we all celebrated the moment with great joy and jubilation.

My mom, herself being a degree holder, felt this time of her life as blissful time.

Being a degree holder, she was an ordinary housewife, who kept looking after me and securing my future by

being there for me always, helping me build a good character. She never thought about her dreams. She sacrificed all her ambitions and dreams just to look after me.

My father continued to work as a peon, which was tough for him after completing the degree. He wanted to get a better position and designation in life.

He worked for his nominal salary which was not ample to accomplish our needs.

Meanwhile, the Institute Of Banking Personnel Selection had put up a new notification. Yes, IBPS PO Preliminary Exams notification was announced for recruiting bank officers.



He read the eligibility criteria, Syllabus and Exam requirement. The one thing that haunted him was his Age. Though the Age was not on his side, he applied for the Prelims by Age relaxation, which made him eligible to take up the exam.

Time passed by and he started to prepare for the exams, after the bank hours, the subjugated work which he was currently doing. He would come back home and prepare for the exams.

The prelims were very important. They were the make or break for my father. He worked on Quantitative Aptitude, Logical Thinking and English Comprehension to have any sought of hope to make it to Mains.

Finally, the exam dates were out and with all the focus in the world, he was confident of his capabilities and strengths and knew his weaknesses too, which would make a person crack the exam in better way.

7. My father's venture

He wrote the Prelims to the best of his capacity and the results were awaited by the next month, which would eventually decide his fate.

The results were out late at night; and as everyone expected, he had made it into the much-needed Mains.

Now, the competition was tougher. The stage was set for the preparations for the Mains.

He was thinking of Mains all the time and ways to crack it. He made a note of the subjects and topics which were needed for the exams and to become a better candidate for the exam by upgrading himself. Accordingly, he performed all the drastic moves to be up to date.

This time around he had to look at all the main sections which were supposed to be asked in the Mains. He wanted to prepare in such a way that the preparation was aligned completely with the pattern of the exam.

He knew what was required to be studied and how much effort was required to be made for each section, according to his strengths and weaknesses.

He also put a valiant effort and preparation for his interview and General Discussion.

For a common man from Delhi, it would be difficult to talk and speak fluently in English. But somehow, he managed with his communication skills too.



Two months later...

The days of preparation were quite tough and hectic as he has to complete his job as well as study, in addition to belonging to a weaker financial background. He couldn't afford to sit back at home and give up his job.

The exam day eventually came and he performed to his full capacity and capability. Much similar to his exams, he performed well in the General Discussion and Personal Interview too.

Now the all-important results were awaited, which could prove handy for him and our family.

Nothing much was expected on the result day and the results were announced. To everyone's surprise, he had made it and got selected as Probationary Officer.

It was the happiest day of our lives and we all celebrated his success, which couldn't have come at a better time than this.

We didn't have any calling facility at our home. My parents went to the neighbour's house to make a few calls from their landline, and inform the relatives and friends about the success.

All were happy with my dad's effort and wished loads of congratulations to him. Hearty wishes poured in from all around.

Probably no words from my dad and mom could explain those moments. It was a time of pure emotions.

Now, the posting and an official confirmation letter were yet to come. All prayers were done by mom to get the hometown posting.

Nobody had speculated that my dad, Rajiv Agnihotri would come to this level and what was imminent was, he had a bright future.

He was always a good and humble person, which had helped him to become what he was now. He considered himself a common man and gave his 100 percent to everything, for what he had achieved and was ready for his new successful venture.

8. Transfer and Re-location

Much to the acrimony of our family and my dad, the posting did not turn out to be in Delhi; instead, it was far south in Bangalore.

It was a time for a thoughtful process, whether to move out of New Delhi and to go to the new city, Bangalore or to give up the job.

The fuss was primarily whether to accept the posting in Bangalore or to continue the job he had got after a long hardship.

Secondly, whether to move or migrate to Bangalore along with family or to go alone.

It was a crunch time for both my dad and our family.

A big dilemma lay in front of my dad and mom to make a decisive decision, which could be a life changer for the whole family. With lots of oscillations in thoughts, finally, the competitive move was made by my parents to move out of the city and to accept the new posting with millions of dreams in mind.

The migration to Bangalore was imminent along with the family in a short span of time. The posting was done to the branch, located in the heart of the city in Bangalore, in one of the country's largest lending bank.

My dad had a friend in Bangalore who helped us a lot with everything, right from housing to all the basic

Act I New Delhi

necessities and needs. He did his best to find a good and suitable home for our family.

My dad's friend Shankar Prasad had arranged for everything, whatever was required for our survival in the new city.

He booked a single room home for us, a little far from the bank's branch because the rent in the prime areas was too much. So instead, he found a good house with all the necessary things, for which he also paid an advance and eagerly waited for us to come.



Back in Delhi, all was set to move to the new city with new hope and curiosity. The only hurdle in our way to move out was my final school exams.

I was in the sixth standard when my dad got the posting in Bangalore as a Probationary Officer.

The exam period was at its peak and two papers were still left to be written.

I wrote the remaining two papers successfully with an intent to get good grades; in fact, I wrote all the exams with the same intent. The exam results of the sixth standard were out and I got 9.6 CGPA or A+ grade, whichever way you put it. Again I had topped the exams and was the topper of the class. I was personally happy with my results and my parents were also happy too.

Eventually, the time had come for us to move to the new city, with all the hurdles cleared. All the relatives and friends gathered to bid their send-off to our family.

The household appliances, utensils and all the items, which could be transferred were packed with all precautionary measures so that the delicate items will

8. Transfer and Re-location

not be damaged. The remaining items which could not be transferred were sent back to the native.

I bid my final thanks to friends who had stood with me during the difficult times and unconditional apologies to those whom I might have hurt without my knowledge.

Literally, they made my childhood memorable and a couple of grievances for whom I made their life difficult with my mischiefs.

It was an emotional moment for me and my friends; the bond of friendship was set for the years to come.

Similarly, we met all our neighbours who had helped us through the difficult times and who were part of our joys and happy time.

Finally, the house was vacated with all the belongings packed and the remaining transferred to the native. The railway ticket was booked a week ago in the sleeper class and the train was scheduled to depart at 5:00 PM from the New Delhi railway station. It was 39 hours journey from New Delhi to the Bangalore city junction.



All family members and relatives were present at the railway station to bid the goodbye to us. The time for departure was near.

Everyone's face turned sombre and there was no eye contact with each other; knowing the sensitivity of the time and situation.

The forthcoming detachment had filled all eyes with tears and all were short of words, not knowing what to speak at that moment. The need of the hour was to keep calm and hold on to one's emotions.

Act I New Delhi

I took blessings of elders and hugged them for one last time as their eyes were left in tears.

It was time for the train to depart. An announcement was made in Hindi that ‘the train is about to depart from platform #6’. The guard waved the green flag. The engine whistled and the train began to move.

There was waving of hands for one last time. The train gained speed and left the station. My mom and dad were placed in lower berth and I was sleeping comfortably in the middle berth with a lot of memories running through my mind.

The train was scheduled to reach Bangalore at 8:00 AM, but it reached at 8:14 AM. We landed at the Bangalore City Junction with all our luggage.

We landed in Bangalore with mixed emotions. There was excitement about the new city and also, our mind was tense, looking forward to the turn of events on that day.

In a span of about ten days, everything was back on track; with all involved in their work and knowing how to deal with the situation ahead of us.

It didn’t take much time to resurrect in the beautiful garden city, Bangalore.

Act II
Bangalore

9. New School, New Life

As part of the admission process, the school requires certain documents to assist in the selection of students.

My parents were interested to get me into Kendra Vidyalaya, which is one of the largest school chains in the world. KV cannot make decisions until all the documents are verified and the authenticity of the documents is also checked. If everything is in order, then the selection process begins by testing the knowledge of the student and his calibre.

The written test was held to check my capabilities and an interview was conducted along with my parents. Numerous questions were shot one by one.

After seeing my marks' card of the previous standard and the transfer certificate, the application was an issue for the admission. Applications are considered once all documents have been received and scrutinized in the order they were issued.

After a thorough scrutiny, the application was approved and the requisite fee slip was given to fill and pay the fees. The fees were paid with a new ray of hope. My admission was done in the seventh standard, blissfully.



The school timings were 9:00 AM to 4:00 PM, similar to what I had in my previous school in Delhi. As the school was far from my house, it was difficult for me to reach school on time. A yearly student pass was facilitated by my dad for transport activities; I used to travel by bus like most other students.

The first day of my new school had arrived with anxiety speculation about the kind of facilities we have. It's never easy to switch to a new school and it can be scary for a newcomer. There are few things which could smoothen my bumps; these were to be patient and have someone to share my views with. It helped me to just start my new school more enthusiastically.

I have to get used to my new school all from the scratch. It's normal to feel weird and different in a new place and to miss old friends. Other things which bothered me were having to learn a different school layout, feeling shy or nervous about talking to new people and being drained from adjusting to all this new stuff.

Much to my curiosity about the new school, I reached the school at 8:45 AM; it was the time for assembly in the school playground, where all the students from all standards had assembled. We were done with our prayers, pledge, daily news, thought for the day and national anthem; at the end, all students started marching towards their respective classes.



The strength of my class was about forty and I was sitting on the third bench from the front, next to a boy who was tall and fit in stature. I was looking at him for any response, but I didn't move my lips.

I being the initiator introduced myself, “Hi, I’m Manish Agnihotri from New Delhi.” I smiled and looked at him for a response.

“Hi, I’m Ranjith Hegde from Mangalore, but we are settled in Bangalore for the last fifteen years as my father works in an MNC here,” he said in a confident voice.

We all anticipated for the teacher to come in a proactive manner. The teacher came much to the expectation, she was wearing a Reddish-black cotton sari and was carrying a couple of Mathematics books in her left hand.

We all got up from our respective seats said in unison, “Good Morning.”

“Good Morning to all, this being my first class; I welcome you all to the seventh standard after summer vacations,” she said.

We all in replied in unison again, “Thank you, mam.”

“Any newcomers this year?” she asked.

A couple of hands raised and I was one amongst them.

“Introduce yourself,” she said with a broad smile.

I didn’t wait for another guy to respond.

I got up in excitement and said, “Mam, my name is MANISH AGNIHOTRI from New Delhi. We migrated to Bangalore recently as my dad was posted as the PO in one of the banks’ branches”.

She smiled and asked the other guy, “What about yourself?”

He introduced himself and his name was Veerendra Kumar.

Well, the day saw the similar sought of classes with all introductions. Being a newcomer, it helped me get to know the others.



Act II Bangalore

I made plenty of friends and introduced myself with each of them and got to know about them in a broader and informal way.

I made sure that I made some new friends who shared similar views and thoughts as I do.

I started to deal with the change of friends, teachers and environment to the best of my capacity.

The first few weeks at my new school were a phase to adapt and adhere to the new surroundings. I kept talking to new people and liked the things to do, which made me happy; and I started learning the new language, which was necessary for me to communicate with others.

I nearly adapted to all the changes and I needed someone to talk to about the adverse conditions and problems I faced.

I found a friendly boy who was there with me throughout my may was “Ranjith Hegde”.

I had a good beginning in the new school as it brought me new friends, new teachers and some other drastic but welcome curriculum changes. Whatever said and done, all my new friends had embraced me with open arms.

10. Walking Encyclopaedia

Two months later...

The completion of the first few weeks had given me lots of satisfaction and confidence as I was able to adapt to the new conditions and talk to friends and teachers more comfortably, with the passage of time without any hesitancy.

It was Wednesday. All were wearing the white colour uniform and the march past was held as per the curriculum.

The first hour of the afternoon session was General Knowledge and it was my favourite subject. I liked every bit of it whether it was politics, science facts, puzzles or sports.

The G.K teacher, Geetha Patel was on time for the class to commence, while she was walking along the aisle between the benches, she saw my G.K book in which the answers were already written, even before that topic was discussed by her, much to her astonishment.

That page was about the flags of sixteen nations across the world. She asked, “How do you know about the flags of all these countries?”

Being modest and humble I got up from my seat.

“Mam, I know all these since a long time; in fact, I can recognise many more country flags,” I replied.

Act II Bangalore

Instantly, a boy from the back bench got up and said, "Mam, he has copied it from the Atlas."

In every school, college or any place for that matter, you will find such people who will be jealous of others' talents and recognition.

"How do you know?" mam asked him.

"Mam, how will he know? When the rest of us don't anything about it," he replied.

The whole class burst into laughter at this.

I remained silent all this time.

She took a book from my friend Ranjith Hegde, and in his book this page was blank. She said looking into the book, "Ok, identify all these flags".

I identified the names of all those sixteen flags one by one within a minute or so. She was very happy with me and said, "GOOD, I did not know that you knew all this."

"THANK YOU, MAM," I said.

The words of compliment made me feel much better and I didn't want anybody to doubt my knowledge.

"Ok, take your seat," she said with a pleasant smile.

I didn't want to stop the quest there, I intended to continue.

"Mam, I can even tell the capitals of most of the countries and all the states of India," I said.

"Oh really! Shall I ask some?" she asked.

With all the confidence in the world, I said, "Yes, mam you can ask."

"Ok, Australia"

Canberra, I said.

"Nigeria"

Abuja, I said.

"United Kingdom"

London, I said.

And it continued for some time.

“Ok, let us do this the other way round; I will tell you the capital city, you tell me the country’s name,” she said.

“Buenos Aires”

Argentina, I said.

“Riyadh”

Saudi Arabia, I said.

And again it went on for some time.

“Hmmm, ok you know all this; very good, keep it up! Now, you only tell all the states and their capitals,” she said.

I felt like, why can’t somebody ask me the states name.

“Ok mam”, I said.

I said all of the twenty-five state names along with their capitals one by one.

“Hmm Good! What else do you know?” she asked.

“Mam, I can tell most of the states’ chief ministers and Union minister too. I can tell the largest, highest and longest of anything in any field, all the firsts whether it was in a state or a country, discoveries and inventions etc.” I replied humbly.

Probably, she wanted to explain all these things through me to the students and wanted to motivate them to seek all these things.

She asked CM names of six states and a few Union minister and some State ministers. I answered all those questions confidently.

Mam and all my friends present there were spellbound and looked at me in amazement.

After a couple of minutes of silence, she said, “Look, all of you learn from him. Whenever you are free, ask

him and try to get an answer; analyse it and keep it in your mind.”

She praised me wholeheartedly in front of all students; I felt amused by her words.

The whole period was consumed in all these kinds of question and answers and was a test of my knowledge. Five minutes were left for the bell to ring for the completion of this class.

Mam was looking at her watch when she asked me, “What do you want to become in life? What are your ambitions?”

Without any hesitation in my mind, I said, “Mam, I want to take the UPSC exam and become an IAS officer”.

“Hmm, that’s nice. What will you do by becoming an IAS officer? Want to have a lavish lifestyle and earn more money huh?” she said.

“No mam... I want to become an honest and sincere officer to serve my people and my country until my last breath,” I said.

Pin drop silence persisted in the whole class.

“Ok, what are your dreams?” she said.

“Mam, I want to see my country as a developed nation and I want an all-around development in every field before I die,” I replied.

All the students started laughing vigorously at me.

I don’t know what was wrong with it? I questioned myself whether it was my stupidity to have such kind of dreams.

“Maintain silence, what’s wrong with it? Every one of you should start thinking like him and be constructive in life,” she said.

10. Walking Encyclopaedia

Her words led to a new dimension in my life. All these days I was thinking, “Jeevan main kuch toh karna hai, lekin pata nahi kya” (I wanted to do something in life, but didn’t know what). But from that day on, I made it clear, I wanted to become a successful man and serve my nation.

Bell rang and the period concluded.

Well, after this, most of the students liked me a lot and wanted to spend ample time with me, sharing their thoughts and seeking something in their life.

I remained a hot topic in the whole staffroom as well as various classes for the next couple of weeks.

All the teachers saying to me, “You are very intelligent it seems.”

I didn’t have any words for their compliments. I just smiled as a mark of acknowledgement.

I started gaining a lot of respect both from teachers and my classmates; an opportunity was given to me in every quiz competition held in the city, despite I being from a lower class.

For my knowledge and intelligence, my friends started calling me ‘Walking Encyclopaedia’. The tag sounds a bit unnatural but it has a lot of sense in it.

Frankly, I didn’t know whether I was a capable man for that tag, but I liked it when my friends called me by that name.

11. Class Leader

The time spent in school was pleasant. As the days passed by, I gained respect from every corner of the school and from everybody.

Eventually, it had permeated as a forest fire after I did well in a Quiz program conducted by a local TV channel.

I could not believe my luck for weeks. I was sceptical about my development but not about my knowledge for sure. The moment made me feel enthusiastic and it was a pleasant time in my life.

I never showed excessive pride in my intelligence or talent and never smirked at anybody in an uneven manner; ‘mujhe patha tha, yeh toh kuch nahi hai, zindagi mein bahut kuch karna hai’ (I knew this is nothing and I want to do many things in my life).



Our class teacher was Aparna Rao and she handled the subject of science for us. Mam was impressed by my profound intelligence and would always ask me questions in class, about all the facts and matters that would arise from the subject.

It was Monday, the first day of the week and the first class was Science. She arrived on time for the class.

We all greeted her Good Morning and a gentle wish from her made us take our respective seats.

11. Class Leader

“Well, as you all know, we have completed three months and now it’s time to change the leader. Anybody wants to become the class leader?” she asked.

It was a decree maintained in the school that every three months there would be a change in class leader.

We all remained silent with our heads down, probably none of us wanted to take the onus on ourselves to maintain the troop and to lead from the front.

Silence persisted in the room for a long time as all of us remained mum. I was always of the opinion that if she gives me some job, I’ll accept it and I was more than capable of handling it. But I was not making the first move, by asking for it.

“If none of you comes out voluntarily, I will have to pick someone to be the class leader,” she said in a firm voice.

Still there was no sign of any valiant movement from anyone.

“Oh my God! Nobody wants to become a leader, great!” she yelled.

There was silence all around the room for a couple of minutes.

“Hmm ok, who secured more marks in the recently concluded test?” she asked.

All in unison said, “MANISH AGNIHOTRI.”

“Ok, and in girls?” she asked.

Again, all in unison said, “SUSHMA PURANIK.”

She was the same girl I had seen the first day of my school and sensibly, I had some feelings on her the day I met.

“Manish, Sushma, can you maintain the class and keep the decorum of the class?” she asked.

I just looked at Sushma on the other side, waiting for her response. She just smiled, filled with positivity.

“Yes mam, Sushma and I are capable enough to maintain this class to our best,” I assured.

“You talk about yourself. Why are peeping into Sushma’s decision?” she said.

“No mam, we share a good understanding with each other, which made me make that statement,” I replied.

Even she affirmed with a nod stating, “Yes mam we both can lead the class.”

“Hmm... ok, these two will be new class leaders for the next three months then,” she said in a high pitched voice.

The nameplate printed ‘CLASS PUPIL LEADER’ ‘VII STD’ was handed over to me and Sushma by the previous leaders Prashanth and Vidya Muralidhar respectively.

Being a class leader made me feel proud and I was given a certain set of duties to perform. I vowed to bring justice to my post.

I always wanted to be a good leader, as I was chosen to be a leader, it was an honour for me.

To become a good leader, I had to take a leadership position, to lead the group from the front lines, to be a role model for all and to practice good leadership qualities.

I knew my strengths and I intended to be in the group to perform any work more efficiently. This helped me build my leadership qualities and to become a good listener, by listening to various problems of my classmates. To handle the situation, when my friends were in a bitter quarrel was a big headache for me, as they used to fight for petty reasons.

11. Class Leader

The class leader phase was a splendid one as it brought Sushma and me closer to each other, which lead to our togetherness reach new heights. We became the best friends and in a few days and started recognizing the needs of each other in a better way.

12. First Love and Your Girls' Lecture

Our school days continued with much more vigour and togetherness; the kind of bonding that led to eternity.

I was just thirteen years old when I fell in love with a girl of our class. It was an ecstatic feeling and I still cannot get over it. As they say, “when a man falls in love, he can never fall in love again.” Although at that time I was just a teenager, I still have vivid memories of her till date, and how I felt for her.

I had set my eyes on her the very first time I met her in class while she was chatting with her friends. I found her so beautiful and gorgeous that I was floored instantaneously. Though when I think about it now, I laugh at myself as mere infatuation. But I don't know why I felt a prompt connection with her.

When she would look into my eyes, my heart fluttered and I used to feel so nervous and excited at the same time.

I never knew whether it was love, crush, affection, infatuation, adoration, amorousness, strong liking or a feeling of togetherness with her; although it was not the age to think about where I was heading for.

Some things are hard to believe, well, I never spoke to her before we became the class leaders. I still had a strong connection with her.

12. First Love and Your Girls' Lecture

I used to look at her, I could not stop myself from staring at her and I think there was some sought of feeling in her for me too.

Every day she used to be so engrossed in chatting with her friends and she would stare at me continuously without even blinking.

As days passed, things remained the same but there was a hint of admiration and tender love kindled in both of us. She was fair, her eyes adorable and she had the loveliest hair. Whenever I looked at her, I felt weak in my knees. I used to dream of her being there with me and talking to me, spending valuable time with me. But I could never muster enough courage to ever stand in front of her and talk to her about my feeling; I was too young and too naïve to think of it.

First love is like a fresh blooming flower in the morning sunlight. It is like the most memorable fragrance you might have smelt in your entire life.

It is the most wonderful thing anyone can ever have and those who know what love is would know how I felt when I was around her and when she looked into my eyes. It was the most amazing feeling I have ever had in my life. It is unforgettable and I experienced some cherishable moments for a lifetime.

The first time I talked to her was only after we became the class leaders. The quest to talk to her never saw a success until we became the leaders.

“Congrats on becoming the girl’s CPL!” I said with a smile.

“Thank you very much, and congrats to you too for becoming the class leader,” she said and sighed.

Talking to her made me feel much better and comfortable.

The time literally flew as our days of togetherness got deeper and deeper. Tension arose in me, as I wasn't able to convey my feelings to her.

Yes, I never confessed my feelings, but I didn't think I needed to. Neither did she ever let me know what she felt, but it was apparent in a way we clicked when we were together and in a way she kept looking for me in the class, which was awesome.

My friends kept on probing and I denied harbouring any feelings for her, but I speculated they always knew something was going on between us. Apparently, we spent more time talking to each other in the class.

I felt I was stuck in my own make-believe world where one day I would get a chance to confess how much I loved her. Probably she would reciprocate wholeheartedly and we would live 'happily ever after' like they show in movies. I never fell out of love for her.



Our classes continued as usual and it was the third hour of the day when we had a free period as the teacher was on leave. Sushma and I had an uphill task of looking after the class and to maintain silence so that it doesn't disturb the other classes.

We both were monitoring the class to our best, looking after the class in a co-operative manner as the students were keen on doing their jobs silently and we would do ours.

The students were absorbed in their own thoughts and enjoying to the fullest to keep themselves happy and calm.

Meanwhile, Sushma and I were busy indulging to know the likes and dislikes of each other. Our game

12. First Love and Your Girls' Lecture

was simple and crazy, as we were supposed to ask our favourites. We were entitled to write down our favourites on the board shrouding with our hand and to unshroud on a go.

It was her turn to ask and she asked, "Your favourite animal."

We both started writing together on the board and we unshrouded, it read Tiger and Deer.

Similarly, it was now my turn and I asked, "Your favourite colour."

I wrote Black and she wrote Red.

The numerous questions continued and we got to know each other in a better way. The last turn was mine.

"I will write my girlfriend's name and simultaneously you write your boyfriend's name," I said.

She chuckled for a while before she started to write.

I was thinking, did I ask something wrong or what.

We both started to write together and it was the time to reveal what it was. A big time was in front of us; all kind of thoughts were running through my mind.

She opposed revealing it and even I didn't move my left hand to show what I had written. It was totally a frightening move from both of us.

We saw no end to this. Finally, we came to a solution that both of us will remove our hands together from the board.

"Hmm... ok," she said, as we both agreed to it.

We both disclosed simultaneously, I had written 'NONE' and she had written 'MANISH AH'.

OMG! I was literally floored, I was jumping in joy and it seemed like there was no end to my happiness. I was in a state of euphoria.

Act II Bangalore

She had hidden her face in her hands. I don't exactly know what happened to her.

The class ended with a bell and the next class was about to begin. As the teacher entered the class, I wiped the board and made it clean.

I had eventually lost in my own thoughts and the feeling of love started to ripen much more. My dreams got one step closer, after that magnificent day.



The next day began with lots of fond memories. When I reached the school, the assembly had already begun, so I rushed to the assembly. The principal sir was welcoming all and he wished a happy time for all the students.

When I entered the classroom, I could feel a new atmosphere, which was not common all these days. After a while, as the teacher entered the classroom, the class settled. The daily, routine classes began as usual and came to an end as we all headed for the lunch break.

I finished my lunch and was waiting for Sushma to come to the class. Much to my expectation, she arrived early. I gathered my thoughts and went to talk to her.

"Can you come outside, I need to talk to you," I said a bit shakily.

"Ya, sure," she said.

As I went out, I looked at my watch, twenty minutes were left for the next class to commence.

I was sitting in the amphitheatre and she came with a lot of vigour, walking briskly, but looking calm.

Only we both were present in the amphitheatre.

"Tell me, what do you want to talk to me about? She exclaimed.

12. First Love and Your Girls' Lecture

My legs were trembling with fear and my heartbeats were surging, faster than Michael Schumacher in the race and I was prepared with some love words to tell her; all premature moves.

"Sometimes I can't see myself when I'm with you. I can just see you..." I said stammering.

"Huh, what? I didn't get it," she said, a bit confused.

I was completely off, not knowing what to tell. I mustered my thoughts and wanted to tell her those three magical words very badly, sooner than later.

With all courage and determination in the world, I stood firmly to speak my heart out.

"If I did anything right in my life, it was when I... I started loving you, from the bottom of my heart. I'm telling you... I... I lovve youu," I stuttered.

At that instant, she was amicably settled and I was shaky all the time.

"See, you must learn in life, what we have come here for. This is not the age for what you feel and the so-called love to happen," she said peacefully.

In the hindsight, all kind of thoughts were running through my mind about what would be her response and how to react for that cynical moment.

I didn't utter a word and remained silent.

"We both share a good bonding and I have the deepest respect for you. But you must understand the purpose of our lives, we have to achieve something in our lives and try to reach our goals. When we are headed for something, our aim should be to achieve that. Achievement only brings you the name and fame in society," she said continuously for a couple of minutes.

I was sitting on the concrete blocks, probably lost in thoughts and soaked in love.

Act II Bangalore

I regained my senses and probably, not probably, actually I didn't have any words to reply to her, for her words of maturity. The kind of maturity shown by her was great and I was amused by it.

The reason to love her was not her beauty, although she was beautiful and gorgeous. Her simplicity and decision making were her other attributes and she would help anybody, who was in distress. Her helping nature was the greatest asset she had in her armoury, which made me love her.

It was not just a mere eye-opener, it was a turning point in my life, which embarked a new 'MANISH AGNIHOTRI' in me with all the confidence to achieve something in my life.

13. Goal Orientation

Well, much to the despair of my love not being fruitful, I couldn't sit back to put my million dreams at bay, which I dreamt off.

The elusive time of love didn't make wonders in my life. But definitely, it made a path for a new horizon. It paved the way for a new man, who always searched for result-oriented work to embrace new sparks of success in his life.

Amidst all these developments in my life, only one thing made way for a new beginning, and that was a MAHABHARATHA VERSE which I read.

‘KARMANYE VADHIKARASTE MA PHALESU
KADACHANA,

MA KARMAPHALA HETURBHURMA TE
SANGOSTVA KARMINI’.

The Meaning of the Verse is ‘YOU HAVE THE RIGHT TO WORK ONLY, BUT NEVER TO ITS FRUITS. LET NOT THE FRUITS OF ACTION BE YOUR MOTIVE, NOR LET YOUR ATTACHMENT BE THE CAUSE OF INACTION’.

Exactly, the words which I needed to follow, to find a mark of success in my life.



Act II Bangalore

Our school days continued and we both promised to remain friends forever, to help each other and to be part of each other's success for a lifetime.

Sushma Puranik was the driving force which led me to become a better person, to understand myself in a better way and to achieve something in my life.

She exhorted a new colour in me, to become a successful man in life. She became a motivator and energy booster to bring out my talents.

I knew it was not a cake-walk to attain some status in society, but I remained focussed and calm to bring out the better side of my life.

Every now and then, particularly to achieve certain milestones, it's good to take

a little timeout, to think about my aim, to set my goals, to reach them and to ensure sticking to them in order to become prosperous.

The two main factors which I looked upon were my personality and realistic goals. When we go wrong, we assume that what works for one successful person will work for everybody. But, I found often that in some cases that it wasn't enough.

Looking at my goals, I didn't see myself going far too ahead. I just set short-term and long-term goals to achieve something over a period of time.

All the requirements which are needed to attain goals, I empathized on them and looked forward to achieving them by breaking all tasks into manageable chunks which could be accomplished.

After setting a goal, I prioritized my responsibilities and had a clear vision of my goal as well as the outline plan to achieve it over a certain period of time.

All the time I stayed motivated and focussed with a probable end result in my mind. Though it was not easy, I knew there would be unforeseen challenges and

13. Goal Orientation

circumstances. I moved on without getting discouraged by obstacles with great determination.

I didn't bother about distractions that prevented timely completion of my work. All I made sure was to work to the best of my capabilities and achieve my goal.

As Henry Ford quoted, "Obstacles are those frightful things you see when you take your eyes off your goal." These words had a great impact on me and never led any obstacles block my way.

I wanted to be a better person and to improve myself by gaining more knowledge and upgrading myself with whatever sources available to me.

The quest to gain knowledge never drained, which made me stay way ahead of others.

I started reading the newspaper thoroughly. Earlier I just used to see the headlines, now by reading the essential columns thoroughly had made me more proactive and I was able to understand the language much better.

My eagerness to acquire knowledge was always on the pinnacle, whether it was from books or a person; I was always a keen learner.

Watching Quiz programs regularly became my habit and I didn't miss any opportunity to seek knowledge, in fact, I saw it as a golden opportunity to acquire it. Apart from this, I watched lots of news and interesting debates, where a person would defend himself or his stand, by hue and cry.

The beauty of these debates lay in the topics which were so mesmerizing to watch as a teenager and to adopt something myself, and gain some knowledge.

After that unimaginable mishap, the next best thing which I focussed on was my mastery of goals which I set and the path to achieve those by facing challenges to see an unprecedented success.

14. Board Exams and Results

Two years later...

My school life was almost nearing its end as final exams were just around the corner. Whoever said high school is the best time of one's life is right. Friends, teachers, first love, first crush, cultural and sports activities, there is so much to cherish about for the years to follow.

Yeah, you read that right! School life with a lot of memories gives one the best days of his/her life. Even if there are bad memories, you cannot forget school in your lifetime. But, before we have the luxury of mourning the separation from friends, there remains the task of taming that bull, euphemistically called the 'Class 10 Board Exams', one of the most important examinations in life for a high school student.

You will realise that fear also has priorities. So, while we are scared of stepping out of school, we are even more scared of the idea of having to stay back.

I, like hundreds of my friends out there, was not suffering from sleepless nights, even after having successfully tackled those two or more sets of pre-board exams that were set in front of us as preparatory hurdles.

Most of the Grade10 friends I met, my classmates, my friends and acquaintances suffered from anxiety.

Board exams are just like any other exams that we have been appearing all during our school days. If we were not afraid back then, then why now? A million dollar question that struck my mind.

14. Board Exams and Results

Well, I think it is the way our parents put their point across stating that, if you don't do well in these exams, your whole life will be ruined. My dad and mom kept reminding me that the percentage I score in this exam will define my future and life ahead.

While students like to take these emphatic statements from their parents with a slight pinch of the salt, it doesn't help to know that the rest of the world agrees with them. So, it's a mean thought, but one can't really help.

Our school emphasises the fact that just getting good marks might not be a good enough score to secure the much-coveted seat in one those renowned colleges.

Whatever said and done, in a nutshell, this is one of the few issues where I just have to agree with my parents. Yes, I cannot ignore the importance of a good college and course.

I never started freaking out like most of my friends. I stayed calm and never lost my concentration, while most of my friends were freaking out and sweating profusely. Take a note, I'm not boasting about myself.

For most of us, board exams were a nightmare. I just kept a cool head and thrived towards it because, at the end of the day, it is nobody's cup of tea; you will get only for what you work.

We had just a couple of days left for our exams to begin. I put in my best for the preparation and was up to it by all means. One of those days I asked my dad about my results and his expectations.

He said, he would be happy with whatever I score. But after me insisting him a lot, he said, "Jaise padhe ho waise, lekin kamse kam 90 percent upar tak aa jayega". (How you have studied, correspondingly you will get

your marks, but I think you will get above 90 percent at least).

I kept quiet and looked forward to make it big and to get the best possible results.

If I don't put my best efforts, then my parents have to shell out their savings to get me admitted to some top college.

We had our time cut-off, I had taken the hall ticket a week prior to the exams and gave my best to prepare in the best possible way, as I was waiting for the exams.

Finally, the exam day arrived and I wrote all the six papers to my best, by giving my 100 percent. I had a good shot at the exams like most of my friends had given their best and were expecting good results.

The day of the result had come and from the beginning, I was not panicking about it. I reached my school at 9:45 AM to be precise and our results were displayed on the notice board.

My name 'MANISH AGNIHOTRI' was the sixth name from the top and I had secured 92.6 percent.

You may secure whatever marks in exams, but that excitement will remain at about the same level as your friend's; in fact, it matters a lot. I just glanced at marks of my friends and all had secured reasonably good marks.

There was no end to wishes and congratulations from friends and teachers. All of them wished for better days and a great future to each other.

Soon, I reached home and told mom I had got 92.6 percent. She had tears of joy in her eyes. She hugged me and said, "I always knew you will make us proud." I felt on top of the world by her words.

My dad was busy with his bank work and he reached home late in the evening. As I opened the door,

14. Board Exams and Results

he hugged me. He had got to know about my marks from some of his friends. He was very happy and just said, “Thank you beta, this is just a beginning and I am sure there is much more to come.”

“Yes, for sure, papa,” I said as I got my first taste of success in my life.

15. College Days and Uninvited Habits

After completion of the school days and getting good results, much to my expectation, I got admission in the MS Juniors College, which is rated as one of the top colleges in the city. It was a co-ed college and not too far from our house.

The transition from school to college was inevitable. It's a funny relationship that we share with our schools.

When we are studying, most of us hate the very mention of school, but once we pass out, nostalgia hits us in throes at the mere mention of the word.

The night before the first day of college, as a newcomer, it was nerve-racking. On the other hand, having to expose myself to a new environment and having to make new friends was something that I dreamt off.

The first day of college, yeah starting a new college without all my friends was something that was worrying me. But, it was finally here, the day I started my college life. I didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

I felt scared, excited, worried and nervous all at the same time. It was a new place where everything was unfamiliar to me, but my parents were there to reassure me.

I felt like I needed more than just reassurances. It was down to me to find out how to manage.

15. College Days and Uninvited Habits

Yes, it was the Fresher's day. I, along with my mom, Veena Agnihotri and dad, Rajiv Agnihotri left our home precisely at 8:40 AM.

Our journey to the college was a short one and lasted only about ten minutes. We reached college at 8:50 AM. The college was decorated traditionally, with the shades of green which were simply picturesque.

As we went inside the college, one of the staff enquired, "Are you a newcomer?"

"Yes sir," I replied.

"You can move to the auditorium along with your parents," he said.

We walked to the auditorium and were seated comfortably with the AC's working to their best in maintaining an optimal temperature.

As the clock struck nine, the auditorium was jam packed and all the dignitaries along with the Principal settled on the dais.

"GOOD MORNING to one and all present here. Now let us listen to an invocation song," said a lady anchor, perhaps she was a senior.

An invocation song was sung devotionally, as all with wondering eyes sat in their respective seats.

The ancient tradition of lighting oil lamps was done by Principal 'Prabhakar Rao' on the auspicious occasion as all recited the shloka 'Shubham karoti kalyaanam aarogyam dhanasampadaha; Shatru buddhi Vinashaya, deepajyotih namostute' which means, "I salute the Supreme who is the light in the lamp that brings auspiciousness, prosperity, good health, abundance of wealth and the destruction of intellect's enemy."

Act II Bangalore

A welcome speech was given by the Principal followed by all other dignitaries', specifying certain guidelines to the new students.

As the event came to an end, we all were insisted to move to our respective classes for a two-hour introduction session.



All dispersed from the auditorium in no time and I said bye to my parents to move towards the class.

I walked towards the class where there were groups of people, all just walking together, in fact, I didn't know any of them. I felt so lonely and scared, all on my own, but I realised that there were others in my situation too, so I waited patiently. Suddenly out of nowhere, a girl asked me, "where is the science class?"

I was spellbound as I just kept gazing at her, not knowing what to say. She had all the grace in the world, she was looked remarkably beautiful.

I just nodded my head and said, "Probably this way," gesturing towards one side. Slowly, the groups of people started to move towards a door.

Meanwhile, she introduced herself, "My name is Deepti Sharma from Bangalore." She said in a sweet voice.

Trying to continue our conversation, as we were moving into the class, I said swiftly, "My name is Manish Agnihotri from New Delhi, but are now settled in Bangalore."

Both of us followed the group and ended up in the allocated classroom. We all entered the classroom and sat down in anticipation of the teacher.

I was nervous by now and a little happy that I talked to Deepti Sharma, a huge sigh of relief; something was running through my mind about her.

15. College Days and Uninvited Habits

I envisioned Sushma for a minute or so and thought, probably this girl could fill her shoes. Omg! Such immature thoughts in my mind, finding a way to sought it out.

Yes, Deepti Sharma was my first new friend. As we talked to each other, I was relaxed and my fears began to gradually disappear. I felt, the college was not bad after all. The two introductory classes came to an end as we all started marching towards the canteen. Deepti came up to me and our conversation continued from where we left.

We both sat together in the canteen in search of some food.

“What does your Dad do?” I asked.

“My Dad is an IFS Officer,” she said.

“IFS? Foreign or Forest Service?” I asked.

“Indian Forest Service Officer, Maharashtra Cadre. Basically we are from Maharashtra. Our ancestral roots are in Nagpur, but my dad got transferred to Bangalore. What does your Dad do?” she asked.

“Oh great! My father’s name is Rajiv Agnihotri. He works as an assistant manager in one of the bank branches in Bangalore,” I said.

She bought two Sundae ice-creams and passed one to me. She started gulping down the ice-cream.

It seems a bit awkward when you eat something from a girl’s money.

Slowly, I started to unwrap the cover and was having a scoop of it.

I noticed that she was in hurry, as she was taking scoops of it and trying to eat swiftly.

“Do you want to go somewhere urgently?” I questioned.

Act II Bangalore

“Not exactly, but my dad’s car will be here soon and the driver will come in search of me if I don’t go out in time,” she answered.

Our conversation entered other areas and soon I was taking all the time, as I sat beside her to eat the ice-cream.

She finished the ice-cream in a couple of minutes and said, “I need to go now. Bye, let us meet tomorrow.”

“Bye, take care,” I said with a broad smile.

It was a fantastic moment as I was able to meet a girl who was so friendly and humble in nature.

As the days passed by, I made plenty of new friends. When lunch and other break times came, I met Deepti, who introduced me to her friends. Her friends were all really friendly and welcoming.

I felt so calm and relaxed; it was like I had been there before. Initially I felt weird, but gradually I fitted in and got good friends for the time to come.



Coming back to college, one of the first things that happen is sprouting of a moustache. It is that age in our lives, where we fall prey to uninvited habits.

College is a time when the transition to adulthood occurs, with many living indecently and making behavioural and health decisions without direct parental oversight.

‘Substance use’ constitutes to be one of the most serious public health issues for people like us, the teenagers, causing negative health, social and economic consequences for adolescents, communities and for the nation as a whole.

15. College Days and Uninvited Habits

I noticed, one very bizarre thing that happens in our college days is, we are prone to activities like smoking, drinking, use of the illicit drugs like marijuana, heroin and what not, the lists goes on and on.

Many of these uninvited habits come to our lives, not because we like to do that but because of the presence of other guys who smoke or drink and who make you get addicted to these habits.

The lunch break was meant for smoking for most of the students, once you were addicted to it. Smoking was stigmatized during the content of one's everyday life as a student at parties while consuming alcohol. Smoking was viewed as normative and socially acceptable.

Preventive interventions are needed on college campuses that target co-substance use and address widespread misperceptions about the harm of tobacco use and addiction.

I have never indulged in all these activities and always remained far from any such things which I would not like.

In fact, most of my friends didn't like to smoke or drink, but their company was making them vulnerable and falling prey to this, even if they didn't like it.

I've been with people who smoke but never fallen prey to it. It is the mindset of the students that has to change so that they don't get into such activities by others' influence.

16. My First Date

After three months...

The relationship between Deepti and me grew stronger with the passage of time, as the bond of friendship started seeing a new dimension, although we both didn't admit it openly.

We used to meet near the corridor during lunch break, nicely.

“Shall we go out for a movie tomorrow?” I asked.

“Oh, Ok! Which one?” She asked.

“Let us see, tomorrow, you will come or not,” I said.

“Ok, after the driver drops me to the college, I'll be waiting in a park. Come over there,” she said.

“Ya, for sure,” I said feeling pleased.

I was at home thinking about the next day as a lot of questions were troubling me. Everyone gets nervous on the first date.

There were a lot of questions I asked myself, well in advance. “Will the two of us get along? Will we hook up? Will I do or say something so stupid and embarrassing that I will be haunted by shame for the rest of my life?”

This internal questioning creates a kind of uptight mental state guaranteed to kibosh any fun before it happens. I knew that awesome dates aren't usually the result of perfect planning.



16. My First Date

I was thinking about the upcoming romantic rendezvous day. Sometimes, everything really does work out for the best.

In these days, dates can almost seem like an anachronism and yet, good first dates live so strongly in our romantic imaginations. Blame it on the ubiquity if I'm cynical or on that fluttery feeling you get in your belly if you're romantic, but there's just something so awesome about first dates.

Personally, I love the slightly old-fashioned nature of actually going out on a date, although as I've learned, not all first dates are so old-fashioned.

It was Saturday and the day dawned full of promise. I wanted the date to be formal, instead, I was in a very romantic mood, which lately had been very frequent.

At 8:31 AM, I drove to the park anticipating Deepti to come. Well, the time of waiting hurts anybody, in fact, it hurts more when you are waiting for a girl.

Eventually, she came at five past nine. We both were equally happy seeing each other. She was looking beautiful as usual.

"Where shall we go now?" she said in anxiety.

"Wait and watch; come let us go for a ride," I said.

As she agreed, she sat on the pillion of my bike and I ignited the engine and drove past the college.

We drove from the park to the nearby local theatre. As it was Saturday, the theatre was very crowded.

I parked my bike in the parking area and walked towards the theatre, as Deepti was waiting for me near the entrance.

"For which movie are we going?" she asked.

"Kaho na pyaar hai, a romantic movie I think," I said.

Act II Bangalore

“Oh, quite nice, CAST?” she asked.

“It’s a debut movie for Hrithik Roshan as the hero and Amisha Patel the heroine,” I said.

“Oh great, we will have a pleasant time then” she said.

I was wondering how would be that a pleasant time.

I marched towards the ticket counter but much to my despair, it was houseful and we didn’t get any tickets.

As we were looking to buy the black tickets, a man came up to us with two of these. I didn’t have the extra bucks for that. Deepti took out a fifty rupee note and handed it over to me.

I took those two tickets paying the extra fifty bucks and obviously we couldn’t have missed out on this movie.

As the morning show was about to commence, we both went inside the theatre and sat in our respective seats.

She looked even more beautiful than ever, although the house was jam-packed and the dim light of the theatre couldn’t let me admire her sparkling eyes and a wonderful smile.

The movie started with a huge buzz all around, with audiences shouting ‘ROHITHH... ROHITHH...’ both on screen and off the screen in the theatre.

The roaring whistles set the theatre on fire and incredible euphoria audiences created a sense of a quintessential moment in the theatre. As the film continued, the gushing sound soothed and the dialogues were audible this time around.

Deepti sat on my right, enjoying each dialogue to the core, living each and every moment. The film continued, I sensed the moment and took advantage of the time and

16. My First Date

place. I held her hand in mine and our fingers entwined. A sense of serenity surrounded me.

All of a sudden, fifty minutes into the movie, the title track was at its helm and the people shouted like hell, enjoying to the core, but the rush of blood overtook me.

I don't exactly know what happened, all I knew was, I landed two kisses on her cheeks in succession.

To my surprise, there was no protest or reaction from her.

Hundreds of questions were running through my mind.

As the song came to an end, the people started shouting 'once more, once more'.

The theatre manager denied the request of the audience, as the movie streamed into Intermission.

I had no work during the interval; neither did I want to pee nor did I want to buy snacks, money being the constraint here, so literally, I was glued to the seat.

Deepti went out, I don't know the precise reason, but while returning, she brought a pack of pop-corns and two cold drinks in her soft cute-hands, which she was holding with great difficulty.

The film reached the anti-climax and as it came to an end, everyone around had good reviews and all praise for the protagonist. In fact, we both liked it a lot too.

We came out of the theatre and had a quick lunch at the hotel. We moved to the nearby park as we were looking for a vacant, quiet place.

She looked absolutely ravishing. Her black hair was wavy and flounced about her head as she walked. Her makeup was a little drained as she was sweating in the theatre but it was light and perfect.

Act II Bangalore

Her lips had bright red on them and she looked beautiful. I was just admiring her. It could not have been a better day for me.

She looked astounding and elegant. Our date was quite by chance and it happened at a good time for both of us. We chatted for the longest time, spending the happiest time together. There was a bond there that was forged instantly.

We had developed a strong friendship over the months. There had never been any intent on our parts for anything more than friendship and someone to talk to share our feelings. It had remained that way for the whole time. But after this day, we sensed that there was much more than friendship between us.

We went back to the college. As the clock struck 1:30 PM, she headed towards the car, as the car driver was waiting over there for a long time.

“Bye, take care, let us meet on Monday,” I said.

“Ok then, see you on Monday. Bye,” she said in a sweet tone.

As I was driving home in the noon, I was feeling so warm with the love of this girl who was a complete stranger three months ago. It made me feel even happier and a sense of peace overtook my mind.

On our first date, we both sensed there is a lot of understanding between us and a thought ‘this relationship has a long way to go’.

17. Plus Two and Entrance Exams

It was the beginning of a new head start with the plus one exams over and their results out. I'd managed to get 87.6 percent. By any means, it was not the result which could satisfy my family. As usual, much more was expected of me, but unfortunately, I couldn't cling on to it due to various reasons, which I can't admit to my parents.

Although I never thought about it, I always wanted to make it big, whenever it mattered the most. I knew that plus two was the time to do well and put all my efforts wholeheartedly to perform to my best.

Initially, I was made to join the private tuition centre, but I didn't like it. I always wanted to study by myself to gain some valuable knowledge, which I thought it would be a spoon feeding in these centres.

Much to the recommendation of my parents and friends; I couldn't opt out on this tuition centre and paved a way for it.

The curriculum in the college had begun with the chapters taught more succinctly, which could help the students to understand the topic much better.

Our college days continued as I and Deepti had a great time with our outings. The first day, first show

movie which we saw, the numerous Friday bunks literally meant that we had been to a movie.



Six months later...

Back in college, the endless lectures would never end, from which we were all bored, as the same topics were repeated in our tuition centre and college.

The hectic schedule of listening to lectures in college as well as tuition saw no end, as we were bound to this; the time being a constraint.

There was lack of time for everything, and I was not able to spend more time with Deepti. We were not able to share our emotions, the feelings were constricted in ourselves. However, we did manage to go out together at least twice a week.

The time literally flew, as we didn't recognise that we were heading towards the end. The exams would be held in no time.

We both were sitting in the library and I was glancing through the various topics in Physics, which I liked the most as I wanted to become an engineer, although the chance of getting an IIT seat was not very bright.

"Do you know what?" she questioned sourly.

"What?" I asked in anxiety.

"The exam timetable has been released," she announced.

"Oh, when? I asked.

"Yesterday, I think," she said in a low tone.

The time had become serious to look forward to success.



17. Plus Two and Entrance Exams

The exams were just around the corner and we had only five weeks' time to pull up our socks, to start working for our best. It was a time to awaken from our day-dreaming and to start working seriously on what was needed to be done.

While most of my friends remained glued to their books in the last four weeks before the exams, I continued to pursue my hobbies. Unlike others, I did not discontinue my hobbies even during the exams. In fact, watching news debate, listening to songs helped me de-stress after studies.

I made some own strategies and worked on that to do well in exams. I was never overconfident, but I always considered myself who I really was.

I didn't pretend, I could do this or that, which brought me more respect amongst people. I always tried to work smart, in fact, people say working hard makes you smaller, but I applied smart-work in my commitments to complete my job. Most important thing is, I didn't depend on luck and I wished the luck would be on my side.

Deepti and I were not much in touch all these days. The only way I could have contacted her was by calling her on her landline number at her home, which I was very scared to do.

I just wanted to ask her how her preparations for the exams were and I made a brave move by calling her home.

I called her from my home telephone. As the fourth ring rang, somebody picked up the phone.

"HELLO, this is Manish Agnihotri. Can I talk to Deepti Sharma?" I asked softly.

The lady maid in her house had picked the call and she didn't utter a word, she just shouted Deeptiji... Deeptiji....

After a minute or so, Deepti picked up the call, "Hello, kaise ho? (How are you?) What are you doing these days? How is your preparation for exams?" All of a sudden she shot three questions in a single breath and gasped in anxiety. I tried to answer all.

"Ya I'm fine, the preparations are going on well. Hope you are preparing well too," I said.

"Yes, not bad, I'm giving my best," she said.

"Ok, let us not think about anything else, let us do well in exams," I said as I wanted to cheer her up.

"Yeah ok, anyways, ALL THE BEST for the exams," she said.

"Thanks a lot dear, and wish you the same," I said.

"Ok. Bye, take care," she said.

"Bye, take care," I said and hung up the phone.

Though we had exchanged plenty of words, we were not able to express much over a phone.



I just looked at the things to cover up for my exams. Apart from exams, I also concentrated on the topics which could prove important in the entrance exams by taking a note of the important subjects and points, which made me go through the subject very well. I made short notes on every topic which could help me for the IIT-JEE entrance exams.

I had faith in my coaching institutes, as I gathered all the materials from the classes and followed them by solving countless papers.

17. Plus Two and Entrance Exams

Simultaneously, I prepared for IIT-JEE too, along with the plus two board exams. The exams were near and I started reading all day. The sleepless nights had taken a whole lot of me.

I tried to maintain my cool and stayed calm throughout the exams. The exam day had eventually come and the exams were held in the morning session. I wrote the first paper, Physics very well and looked forward to do well in all the remaining subjects.

In fact, I did well in all the remaining subjects except Mathematics, which was a bit shaky to some extent. The rest, I had completed all my papers to my potential.

There were exactly three weeks for JEE, which gave me the much-needed breathing time to fortify my strengths and prepare in a better way for it.

All my family members were expecting me to do well in the JEE prelims and to advance into the mains. This made me feel a little pressurized but I was high on confidence. My neighbourhood too was taking notice of me. About a week was left for the IIT-JEE exam. I stayed calm and had ample sleep to stay focussed. I remained quite relieved and began preparing again.

The prelims had come; believe me, it was not easy to crack like other exams, but I did my best to solve all the questions. The prelims had come within a week and I wrote my mains to the best of my capabilities.

After a lot of tension and fear, I completed all my exams; now the only thing all were waiting for was the results.

Finally, the results were announced. Plus two results have always been a yardstick with which most Indian families measure a person's success.

Act II Bangalore

Most people want to be engineers or doctors. As I had secured 91.4 percent against all odds, the next thing I checked was the percentage of Deepti. She had secured 89.6 percent.

My parents were happy with my results. My dad just said, “You are my hero and you will always be my hero,” and my mom too was all praise for me.

Well, this was an overwhelming moment for me as I couldn’t keep my emotions within and tears of joys just flowed to the serenity of the moment.

Amidst all this happiness, there was a bit of sorrow inside me, as Deepti’s father had arranged the engagement of his daughter with his friend’s son, who was an entrepreneur and had a lavish lifestyle with a settled life. At the age of 19, Deepti had no clue about where she was headed, as she had no say in the decision and she had to accept it.

The time had its effect, the happiness was overridden by Deepti’s engagement. I remained cool as she invited me to the engagement.

18. First Day at IIT

After getting good results in the exams, the next big thing was the result of entrance exam. The waiting period for the result of JEE mains was about two weeks.

Finally, the entrance exam results were out and I secured an All India Rank (AIR) of 684. I was personally pleased and my parents were very happy with my results.

The IIT-JEE AIR was considered for counselling of the seats in various IIT's. At the counselling, I got a seat in IIT-Bombay for the Bachelor of Engineering in Mechanical Engineering, much to my surprise because it was difficult for a guy of the 'general' category to get a seat in the top IIT's.

All my family members were happy with my results and I too felt elated. Exactly two weeks were left for the classes to commence.

I regrouped myself to look at what are the things I needed for four long years and I was worried about leaving my family and staying at the hostel.

My bag was packed, everything was in readiness for my departure. The train ticket for the Bombay terminal in AC class was booked two weeks prior to my departure, by my dad. The date of the journey had eventually come. My parents were at the Railway Station to bid a farewell to me for my next destination.

They both hugged me and wished the best of luck for my studies.

An announcement was made in both Hindi and Kannada that the train would depart from platform #4. I was on the train as the train whistled and left the station swiftly. My mom was waving her hand at me, as her eyes filled with tears.

It was 18 hours long journey from Bangalore and it was scheduled to reach the Bombay terminal at 6:30 AM. But, due to some delay, it reached the station at 6:45 AM.

I took an auto with my two gigantic bags and reached the college at 7:10 AM. The first impression of IIT on my mind was ‘huge’, like every other IIT aspirant.

Like every other IIT aspirant, I was one of the thousand-odd kids who had been lucky enough to get into IIT-Bombay, by cracking the toughest entrance exam in India. Needless to say, you are in awe seeing the college, the huge campus sprawling over 550 acres and everyone who studies in it. This is where it all kicks off.

I had a lot of inhibitions, dreams, expectations and a pretty gigantic imaginary picture of what IIT and its life would look like. That thought made me relentlessly conscious.

However, at first sight, it was very large and I could only behold the IIT campus till where I could see. The campus was even bigger than I imagined.

The first thing I liked was the climate. It has its extremities but trust me, it makes you feel like you are the only one in this world. It was breezy and that chilling breeze with moisture in the air was really fantastic.



18. First Day at IIT

My registration was done at the reception of the hostel; I was allotted a room in the B-block and it was called Laxman Rao Block, in short, LR block. Later I came to know, all the freshers were given room in this block.

I settled for a while and checked everything was alright in the room. I had no issues, all was perfect, right from bathroom and toilets to the bed and study table.

I relaxed for an hour or so with many thoughts running through my mind. It was a great sense of achievement, getting into IIT B.

After seeing the campus, I felt a sense of pride, being a part of it. A feeling that, now that I have got into an elite institution, ‘my future is set’ which need not necessarily be true. I also felt a sense of freedom, being able to stay away from the immediate supervision of my parents.

If these were the Pros Cons of being here, a sense of apprehension about the pressure that I would be under for the next four years sprang up, apprehensions about the quality of food in the hostel and the unexpected ragging from the seniors was inevitable.



Amidst all these vague thoughts, I took out my diary and started writing in it. If anyone can predict what I wrote; they are extremely brilliant. Yeah, I started writing some advice and set of goals for myself to accomplish in the next four years.

I knew that there will be ups and downs in my journey, and there would be useless seniors who will give me unsolicited advice on ‘why focusing on academics is meaningless’.

Act II Bangalore

So, I just wrote some advice, it was like personal ethics and I used to refer that page occasionally and didn't let anyone dictate my goals. After I finished writing, I took a quick shower and was ready to attend the classes.

As I stepped out of the hostel, I saw a group of seniors ragging a newcomer who was asked to tuck his shirt in front of everyone.

WTF! I was literally scared of ragging. Obviously, who will not be scared of it?

I cold-shouldered them and turned a blind eye to evade them while passing them swiftly.

Suddenly, I heard a high pitched scream, "Come here you moron!"

Initially, I ignored and was anguished by the word moron, but later I turned towards him.

"I?" I asked hesitantly.

"Yes, you. Can't you see a morning session is going here and can't you wish a Good Morning when you see your seniors?" he scolded.

He was looking like a demon from the mythological stories, with a huge body, hoarse voice and bushed beard.

"Good Morning to you all. Did you call me, sir?" I said.

"Kholo," he said.

I didn't understand what he was up to. Maybe he wanted me to rip off all my clothes and stand in the inners.

"Sir, I didn't get it," I said modestly.

"Koi toh explain karo insai," he said. (Somebody explain him.)

One of the juniors there explained me 'kholna' means not taking off your clothes, but to introduce yourself.

"Oh, Ok," I said.

Thank God, this is something that I could do without hurting my dignity.

I turned towards the senior and said, “My name is MANISH AGNIHOTRI from New Delhi, but from last five years we are staying in Bangalore”.

“What about your father and mother? Where did you study before?” he said.

I was thinking, why the hell, he wants to know all this.

“What happened? You can’t even introduce yourself?” he said.

“Sir, my father’s name is Rajiv Agnihotri and he works in a bank,” I said.

“What, bank manager huh?” he said.

“No sir, assistant manager”, I stammered.

“Then who will add that and what about your mother; now start it again and this time properly, without any break or I will make you do it again,” he said.

“Ok,” I said and went all over again to tell everything.

“Hmm, Ok, What are your hobbies?” he asked.

“Sir, reading newspaper, watching cricket, English debates, listening to songs,” I replied.

“Ok, go and propose that girl using a filmy dialogue,” one of the seniors in the group said pointing towards a girl and he insisted to take a flower.

A junior plucked a flower and handed over to me.

I was wondering what I would say. And how will I propose her?

I took the flower from him and started walking towards the girl.

As I went to her, she thought something was fishy.

I was just staring at her as my lips were zipped.

“What do you want?” she said.

My legs were trembling with fear.

“Ek ladki thi dewani si, Ek ladke pe woh marti thi; nazren jhuka ke, sharma ke, galion se guzarti thi; chori chori chupke chupke chitthiyan likha karti thi; kuch kehna tha shayad usko, jaane kisse darti thi; jab bhi milti thi mujh se, mujh se poocha karti thi, yeh pyar kaise hota hai, yeh pyar kaise hota hai. Aur main, sirf yeh ke pata tha, I LOVE YOU,” I recited in a go and handed a flower to her.

Some of the juniors started clapping at the dialogue.

She just smiled, took the flower and walked straight away without any anguish.

I was shocked by her move; I was thinking either she will slap me or will complain to the principal.

“Hmm, good. SRK fan huh?” the other senior said.

“Yes sir, I like him very much and watch his movies a lot,” I said.

“Ok, do you know the golden rules of our college?” he asked.

“No sir,” I replied.

“Somebody tell him,” he said pointing to the juniors.

Someone in the group walked me through the three golden rules that every junior must follow:

Golden Rule 1: Don't argue with your seniors.

Golden Rule 2: Seniors are always right.

Golden Rule 3: If any doubt in Rule 1, then refer Rule 2.

“Did you understand?” he asked.

Being sincere, I nodded my head and said, “Yes sir, I will follow these.”

“You all should get to know about your seniors soon as that would help you afterwards,” he said.

18. First Day at IIT

“Ok, morning session ends now. You all can attend your classes now,” one of the seniors said.

I felt bad at the very moment he called me a moron, but later on, I cherished what followed.



I rushed to the class and was seated in the front row on the very first day, thinking about IIT days and the outcome of it.

The first day, we had just three classes, which were mostly formal introductions and getting to know each other.

After the completion of classes, I just walked around the campus to explore all the facilities such as buildings, labs, cafes, courts, the sports facilities and some nice places where I could find peace.

After a long walk across the campus, I was tramping towards the LR hostel when I was flabbergasted to see that girl again.

I paused for a while to look at her; she saw me and ignored, as she was with her friends. I went to her audaciously and said, “Hi, I’m Manish Agnihotri from the Mechanical branch, AIR-684”.

She was surprised by my bold move to talk to her after what happened this morning.

“I’m Ritika Srivastava, Computer Science branch, studying in the second year,” she said.

“Nice to meet you Ritika,” I said.

She didn’t utter a word, instead just smiled and stared at me.

Probably she liked it when I call her by name.

“Bye, see you tomorrow,” I said.

“Bye, take care,” she said.

I trod towards the hostel, thinking about her.

19. Life at IIT; Exams and Results

After arriving at the college as starry-eyed freshers, dazed by the beauty of my Dream College and living as grown-up seniors, wisecracking our life was the golden period of IIT-B.

The initial days at IIT-B were a new world. The people, the enormous campus and the city were all so amazing. It was an opportunity to follow my passion, learn new things.

In a span of about one or two months, it had easily become my home and I never felt homesick. The campus gave me what I asked for –a liberal space for thoughts to flourish.

The monsoon made its presence felt with rain and experiencing the Bombay monsoon, I evolved as a human being pioneering different ambitions and dimensions of my life with emotional, intellectual and ideological maturity, nurturing my hobbies and passions.

On the outset, the campus had given me everything. All this was propelling me to take up my studies seriously and to look forward in the right direction.

Meanwhile, back in Bangalore, it had been impossible for my parents to stay isolated and I used to call them only once in fifteen days, as I needed to spend extra bucks by calling from the STD booth.

One thing which was new to all of us was the 'MOBILE PHONE' - the electrical gadget of the decade.

Everyone on the campus wanted to have it, it was a dream of all students to own one. Owning a mobile was equivalent to being a multi-millionaire on our campus.

The same week, I called my home in the evening, luckily my dad picked the call.

I had so many demands for my dad to fulfil.

The conversation was effectual for me as my dad agreed to meet my demand of having my own mobile phone. He promised to courier it to me.

It was a time for my dream to come true.

I waited keenly for the arrival of my new mobile phone. The courier was supposed to reach the college within five days from the date of posting. One week elapsed but there was no sign of any courier.

It was the first day of the week, I got up with a lot of expectations. My daily routine continued with classes till 4:00 PM. I strolled to the reception to check for any courier in my name.

Usually, any courier or post for the students is handed over to the reception, from where we are allowed to pick it up by showing our identity proof.

"Sir, is there any courier in my name," I enquired.

"What is your name?" the receptionist asked.

"Sir, Manish Agnihotri," I replied.

He checked all the couriers and posts received and couldn't find any in my name.

"What was the courier?" he asked.

"Sir, it's a mobile," I replied.

Finally, he found one which was placed on the rack next to the table and the box had label 'FRAGILE' on it and 'HANDLE WITH CARE' printed in bold under

it. By looking at the box I came to know that it was my mobile.

He carried the box and asked me to show my identity card for reference.

I gave my ID card to him.

“OK, sign here,” he ordered as he handed me the box and my ID card.

“Thank You Sir,” I said and darted to my hostel in curiosity.

I unleashed the courier; the box had a brand new mobile box of ‘NOKIA 6610’ and a sim card in a cover.

I opened the box to find the handset. It really looked good and lightweight with amazing features.

It had a coloured display, GPRS enabled with a WAP Browser, stereo FM Radio. I put the sim in sim slot and battery in its place. The sim was already activated with a lifetime incoming free.

Prior to this, I had never seen a coloured display mobile phone as most people around used ‘NOKIA 1100’.

Well, I was happy with my mobile. I called back home to speak about the new arrival and talked a lot about the situations over there and my mom asked about my daily routine in the college.

The first thing I did was to create an e-mail Id. Having an e-mail Id was seen as owning a BMW. People would create an e-mail Id and keep weird passwords. But I created a mail id with password ‘myloveissushma’.

I still believed that Sushma will come back to my life, some day, as an angel that all of us dream for and this time not just as a lover, but as my life partner. Strange thought, but I meant it and there were still some feelings for her in me.

Two months later...

While I was in Bangalore, I used to get up at six in the morning with my daily jogging, workouts, going to college and attending coaching classes.

Those days were generally busier than usually what I had in IIT. But of course, that phase doesn't last forever and is not an end, it is actually the beginning of a four-year period of potentially tremendous growth and a solid education at IIT. My room-partners were Vipin Ballal from Bhopal and Samarath Mishra from Rohtak.

I was not an early riser, as I used to be awake till late in the night until 1:00 AM with my brain cracking things.

My day started with an alarm at 8:00 AM, maybe snoozing every two minutes and breaking my relationship with one of the best things in life 'Sleep' and sometimes, I used to get up before the alarm.

My eyes were barely open, thinking it was my nice room back in Bangalore, but when I realised that it's a hostel by seeing that typical Godrej Almirah, the God's photo and praying for a good day to unfold, books on the study table or looking at Vipin who was still sleeping; it's a bad feeling for not being yourself in bed.

The next thing is to see the time and think what all can be done - brush, toilet, shower and breakfast being the highest priority.

Taking a brush and bathing essentials with a bucket in hand; walking out of the room when I can barely see and walk as I search for my bathroom slippers. When I can finally see things, there is a long queue in the bathroom for everything. People running around for

Act II Bangalore

urgent things, banging doors asking whoever inside to come out.

Those cursing replies from inside and ‘daya karo yaar’ from outside were inevitable.

Wishing Good Morning/NAMASKAR or typical ram-ram and asking what our first class is?

These were the most common things that happen in the bathroom.

Thinking whether we can bunk the first hour was the hot topic on everyone’s mind.

After taking a shower, I fill my bag with the necessary books and go to the mess, where I can hear only curses like this is bad, that is bad and all. But I found most of the food items to be good.

Now comes the best part of the day, when all of us run to our respective classes or to catch the bus from the hostel at 8:50 AM for the 9:00 AM class. When I used to walk around the hostel area, it felt awesome. Big trees, greenery everywhere with breezing winds, dim sunlight. All this was just really cool.

I always felt that the bus ride should continue for ages or at least it should directly stop in front of my home, where I can see my family, my room and some of my friends too. But in the next five minutes, the bus stops in front of the institute building.

With all the morning hardships, we reach our class, but some professors, actively present on the campus by 8:30 AM for the 9:00 AM class in the Bombay monsoons or a cold winter morning, is a testimony of how wonderful professors we have. Sadly and unfortunately, they form a very tiny part of the professor community and some challenging professors expect students to be regular in class.

19. Life at IIT; Exams and Results

Entering the classroom, when I found a bunch of students discussing a subject and debating over it. If I found it interesting, I used to join them else, just sit on the side.

As soon as the class would start, some of my friends used to be in their own world. One thing I noticed was, you are most likely to meet the most centred people in your life on this campus.

They can literally do anything to just get a bit ahead of you. This has accounted for me not having more friends, I had a friendship with only a few guys. My besties were Vipin and Samarath as we shared a good time at the campus with the best possible way having unlimited fun.

If a class was interesting, then we would listen to it, otherwise, we read books of some other subjects, a novel or a storybook. I never slept in the class because I needed a proper bed to sleep and I can't just sleep while I'm sitting. But it was just the opposite for most of the students. An afternoon nap was necessary for them, no matter where they were.

After the class, it was time for the canteen. Going there, we would find people asking for money or a year old treat. They would find some or the other bizarre reason for a treat. In the canteen, I usually used to have a chocolate drink, veg puff or ice-cream.

Coming back from the canteen/mess, if there was still time for next class, we would go to the library to read some newspaper or magazine, or go to the computer lab to check mails or browse some stuff.

Daily, there would be at least three classes (come on, there can't be more than 3 classes in the morning session). Almost all people would be hungry by the third

class and as soon as the class ended, most of us would rush to grab the first seat in the bus or grab a cycle to reach the hostel mess, as early as possible to avoid a long queue. I personally liked lunch in the mess but even there, I would find people complaining. Thank God, I am not the mess secretary. After lunch, we go to the water cooler and the first thing everyone does is check if Aqua guard is working, and if it is not, we go to the next cooler while cursing gymkhana or the hostel officers.

If we were not feeling sleepy or a Prof was very strict, we went to the next class. So, indirectly we have to go to the class. In class, we again listened to the advice from Professors, their explanations and thinking of how dumb we students are, our exam scores, our assignments and almost everything in life. But here we can't complain or do anything about it because most of the professors are just perfect in their subjects and they know their students very well.

Mostly we would be free from everything by 3:30 or 4:00 PM. Now, this is the time when we start working and enjoying life. Mostly, I would be completing any club work I have with Professors. Now here also we would be listening to lectures and some good "personal advice" by the Professors.

At 6:00 PM most of the people would go to the gym or play some sport. Hostels have gyms, Ping-Pong rooms and common rooms (with a huge TV) available for students. I also used to go to the gym and used to play a game of Cricket, TT or Badminton and then return back to LR hostel after the play time.

After that, it's dinner time, which I suppose is not that good, in fact, not good at all. But magically, I got a habit of eating without complaining. Food at IIT-B

19. Life at IIT; Exams and Results

hostels is great. IIT-B has a very good system in place to ensure that the food is decent in quality and tastes great. The hostel and mess councils keep a good check and ensure everything is in place in the mess. Then it's time for phone calls to home and friends.

After 8:30 PM, there will be either a club activity of science & technological by its respective council or some event/quiz by a club. If nothing is there, it means we have an assignment to submit within a deadline, or an exam the next day. Most of the branches' students were really jealous of M.E. guys because they hardly see us doing night outs for assignments. Nightlife here is really mind-blowing. Club activities, people enjoying watching Cricket/Football in the TV room.

Discussions till late in the night on politics, India, economics, astronomy, sometimes physics and sometimes very random topics, teasing anyone about their girlfriends or some girl, sharing interesting stories of life, calling some people randomly by their nicknames or inventing new nicknames, reading novels/storybooks, sometimes planning to study and sometimes actually studying, sometimes fighting with some friend and then again saying sorry to them, are the most common scenes that happen in our college.

The days come and go. I really enjoyed what I did and I was passionate about what I enjoy doing. The day would end by texting Good Night messages to my parents and best buddies. Everyday life continued in the same way, with joy and sorrow. But still, at the end of the day, we all would have been happy.

Weekends meant outings. Sunday was the time for that movie released that Friday, which we would watch at any cost.

Act II Bangalore

Staying in the college hostel meant mess was the only option to have food during the weekdays, from which we were fed up with the daily routine menu.

One thing was sure, Sunday afternoon meal was outside the routine menu and there would be your favourite food on your plate, apart from what we had in the mess.

Girls here are on a different level altogether. You are allowed to be friends with them only if you are a super stud at something.

Well, as all of you know, the paucity of girls in the mechanical branch made us be friends with the girls from other branches. These girls were high in attitude, as they kept thinking a lot about unrealistic things, and about themselves. It was really difficult to talk to them. But, my senior Ritika Srivastava was from another planet for that matter. She used to be so friendly with me, as we became friends after that blessing in disguise proposal.



Her house was not so far from the college and she used to come early by 8:30 AM. We both talked in the college corridor before heading towards our respective classes.

It was Wednesday afternoon when I was talking to my mom about the upcoming exams and my preparation. Ritika saw me from far and she came up to me. By seeing her, I concluded my conversation and ended the call by bidding a goodbye and take care to my mom.

I was flaunting my mobile as I encircled it between my thumb and index finger. I wanted to show off my new mobile.

“Hi, how were your classes?” I asked.

“Yeah, as usual, most were boring and some were better. Is it a new mobile?” She asked.

“Yes, recently my dad sent it to me from Bangalore,” I said.

She had a look at my mobile, as she explored various options and features in it.

“Hmm, nice one. Give me your number let us chat late in the evening,” she said.

I was pleased with her words; it was like, “The patient wanted milk and rice and the doctor prescribed milk and rice,” for me.

I gave my number to her, as she gave a quick missed call. I saved her number on my mobile as ‘SRS’, and SRS meant Senior Ritika Srivastava. Our chat began the very first day after the exchange of numbers.

She went to her class and I marched towards the LR hostel in delight as I had got her number and a chance of chatting with a girl.

The friendship with the senior jumped to another level. Yes, Ritika and I had a better understanding amongst us, and she liked my company.



The schedule for the exams was announced but our preparation was minimal. It was altogether a different feeling from what it was in my childhood days because for every exam there would have been a lot of preparation done by me for every exam I faced and there was a tentative feeling towards this exam.

The grading system was a bit different here and unnecessarily tough, with all the CGPA on one side and teacher’s assessment, assignment, which had taken the shit out of me. We have around 6-8 subjects in a

semester including the labs for some of them. Each subject has some credit (weightage) attached to it and it ranges from 1-4, usually. It means that a subject of 4 credits has more importance (while calculating CGPA) and will have more hours of classes as compared to a subject of 2 credits. We had two exams in each semester: mid-semester and end semester. Apart from that, we had class tests, tutorials, and assignments etc. which fall under teacher's assessment. This is the weightage given to these three things and a final score out of 100 is calculated for each subject. There was a different weightage for all these three things - teacher's assessment, mid and end semester. Frankly, it was tough to understand and calculate CGPA for us.

The drastic change is that we can now do things we like, we can prioritize stuff on our own. People with technical interests can really work on their own and also there were platforms to perform and showcase their talents. While people with sporting and cultural interests also have great mentoring; it's not always about academics here, like it used to be in school. While academics still are of primary importance, we find where our interests lie and get proper platforms to develop them further.

Vipin, Samarath and I actively involved in technology clubs and some other extra-curricular activities. Well, it was a decent friend circle for me.

The rigorous academic curriculum put quite a toil on us and it needed to be reviewed to make sure that a wider diversity is allowed to be opted for by the students. And, the most important treatment for the malaise is disincentives; all the coaching institutions which are nothing but factories churning out 'to-be engineer' producing centres.

Our simple funda in college which we followed and taught others was, “Work hard and achieve it, nothing is impossible,” and we followed certain strategies to achieve success.

The internal exams were the other big nuisance for us. These were the exams which we all wrote with zero preparation and the need for writing was only to attend them rather than to remain absent. The only aim of writing the internals is to make us eligible for the main exams.

There is a perception that clearing internal examinations here is difficult. This was not true. If we are well prepared, we can perform well. The only thing that lacked in us from achieving this was, we all were completely lazy to study for internals.

If this was the case amongst us, there were other kinds of students who were opting for ‘around the table’ move, pleasing teachers to get good marks in internal examinations. We always hated these guys, who were involved in such kind of stuff and we distanced ourselves from them.

Needless to say, at IIT’s, one faces competition from some of the brightest students from the country. So obviously, maintaining a great consistency and coming out with stellar results is definitely not a cakewalk for us and the people who achieve the same, I feel, are righteously valued! The race towards that ambiguous exam had begun with the preparation for exams a week before.

We tried to locate the source of the teacher’s notes and had a copy of them. These could be from a book, some classic text or any other source. At least we had some source to study from, which we badly relayed on.

But we made sure that we understood the concepts. We all knew that mugging up can get us only decent scores but it can't get us department ranks or institute ranks.

We found some previous year's question papers and solved some of them. The important thing we kept in our minds was to do well in all the examinations related to all the courses and doing badly in even one major subject will greatly reduce our marks.

We made sure that we were regular in our studies at least at the crunch time of exams because there'll be many other 'interesting' things going on in the campus to distract our focus. We just ensured that, amidst all the chaos, we find time for ourselves, not only for studying but also for self-improvement.

All of us tried constantly to be consistent. As consistency is very important for the last minute preparations which rarely work out, we planned out our semester wisely. With all the plans and strategies for the exams, we were ready for them.

The exam had finally begun and all were busy preparing. We just studied what was important and not studying much while others were glued to their books. During exams, when most of the people were pulling out all nights busy in studies so that they could complete the syllabus, we used to be fast asleep by 10:00 PM. By any means, it wasn't our sleep time, but we were fresh and focused but early to bed.

After a tough time of two weeks, we all finished our exams, awaiting the results to be out. It usually takes around twenty-five days for the results to be announced. The results were finally out and I got 8.62 with a backlog, and Vipin and Samarth secured 7.8 and 7.1 respectively with some backlogs.

19. Life at IIT; Exams and Results

No matter how good a student we are, those backlogs are inevitable in our engineering days as they say without backs, good engineers are never made. And those absurd promises we make to ourselves ‘Let this semester go, from the next semester I will study hard’ will not end semester after semester.

20. Intimacy Call

Two months later...

After the end of the exams and typical vacations, we were headed towards the second year, with same compassion and eagerness.

It was Sunday morning, with alarms kept off. The relationship with bed lasts longer than weekdays as we all are tempted to sleep for long hours. I was sleeping in my bed.

Ritika tried calling me at 8:45 AM to be precise. As my mobile was placed on the table, I was not in a position to reach out to it; ignoring it to be a vague call.

‘SRS calling’ was displayed on my mobile screen for the second time, as she was waiting eagerly for me to pick the call. Being lazy I didn’t pick the call, as I was far from the table.

Vipin came to my rescue, as he shouted, “dekho yar, koi SRS ka call ha raha hai. Shayad courier delivery ya dhobi ka call hoga.” (See buddy, you are getting a call from some ‘SRS’. It might be a courier delivery or the washerman).

“Shut up! You Dumbo,” I said in anger, as I picked up my cell.

“Hello... kya kar raha hai, abhi tak so raha kya?” she said in a charming voice. (What are you doing? Still sleeping or what?)

“Not really, woke up just now with your call,” I said, half-awake.

“Ok, what are plans today?” she asked appealingly.

“Nothing really, just an outing, maybe,” I said as I yawned.

“Thik hai, mere ghar aaja,” she said delightfully. (Alright, come to my house).

“Lekin, kyu?” I asked surprisingly. (But, why?).

“Ladkiyon se ‘kyun’ nahi poochte, just come,” she said.

(Never ask a girl ‘why’?)

“Ok, I will come,” I said and hung up the call.

I took a quick shower. As it was Sunday, the bathrooms were totally free and there was no bang on the doors.

I came to the room gathering my breath got ready. I chose to wear a black round-neck t-shirt with the wordings ‘NEVER GIVE UP’ and a ‘thumbs up’ sign, had my morning breakfast in the mess and came out of the college swiftly.

I ran towards the bus-stop, but couldn’t find one for fifteen minutes. By that time I could have reached her house walking.

Eventually, the bus came and I reached her house at 9:40 AM. I rang the doorbell and waited eagerly for someone to open.

From the outside, it looked like there was no one except Ritika, at home.

A delighted Ritika had been waiting for me as she came and opened the door.

“Welcome to our house,” she said.

“Are you alone, where are your parents?” I interrogated.

“Yeah, they all have gone to attend a distant relative’s family function,” she said charmingly.

Lots of thoughts crossed my mind; why a girl will call me when nobody is there at her house. But, I really never bothered.

“OK, what’s special today? Why did you call me?” I said.

“Just felt like spending time with you, what will you have, any cool drinks or beverage?” she asked.

“A cool drink will do,” I said.

After a couple of minutes, she brought a two cups filled with orange juice.

We both started drinking and were looking all around the house, as she sat next to me. We looked at each other and smiled. I don’t know why, whether it is a girl’s way or whatever. I felt like something was going to happen. I could have moved away and seated far from her, but I didn’t. Being a boy and moving away looked lame.

She went to the room to pick up her cell. She looked refreshing in her light red half-sleeve top. It had an amusing message on the front which read ‘What are you staring at?’ with a big question mark, in a large, dark font, and below it, in a light-coloured smaller font it said ‘My eyes are above’.

I couldn’t stop laughing, thinking from where do girls get such clothes from and who designs them?

“What is with this hilarious phrase on your top, “‘What are you staring at? My eyes are above’,” I said and giggled.

“Hey! What are you reading?” she said and slapped my hand as she caught me staring at the text on her chest.

“What? Can’t I read it?” I asked, smiling.

“Har likhi hui cheez padhna zaroori nahi hota,” she said and averted.

(It is not necessary to read all the things that are written).

“Toh phir likha kyu hai?” I asked back. (Then why is it written).

“I don’t know,” she said.

I laughed and teased her further and said, “Do you have a problem with me reading it or me staring at the wrong place?”

As soon as I said this, she opened her mouth in an oval shape, letting out a ‘Haawww!’ as a sign of embarrassment.

“No, nothing like that, only you can stare there,” she said intensely.

Only you can stare, what does that mean? My head wobbled by her words.

“You are looking very beautiful wearing this top with some weird wordings,” I said.

Hearing this she looked back at me and couldn’t help smiling. I saw her twinkling eyes. She was calm and cool as always.

She took the empty glass from the table and locked the door from inside and asked me to follow her.

As soon as she locked the door from the inside, a shiver ran down my spine. Not that I was scared but did not know, what the outcome of this would be? I had almost started getting the vibes of apprehension in the next few minutes as she unlocked the door and walked in, insisting me to follow, as I was not sure of what was on her mind. What was going to happen was going to be pleasant but I wasn’t sure if it was all good to let those pleasant things happen.

Ritika went to all nooks and corner to show me her house and took me to her room. A chill ran down my spine as she insisted me to sit on her bed. Like a primary class student, I obeyed.

She came and sat next to me, as she played a song from her recorder ‘koyi nahin hai kamre mein, kya haseen mila hai pal, aaj sharaarat karne do, kaam baaki karenge kal’ and gave me a threatening look.

“Yeh kya hai?” (What is this?) I asked in anxiety.

“Accha song hai na sunnene ke liye,” (A nice song to listen to) she said and looked around.

I said a few words to myself, all of them needless. I was tracing the ground beneath my feet even though it was not a war. She kept watching me and it was as if she was allowing me to get comfortable in her own house by the mood of the song. I appeared almost like a loser, being in her house and unable to cope with a situation of being with a girl, alone, who had something running on her mind.

She kept her hands on my thighs. I could feel something was imminent, as nobody had touched me so passionately. She was smiling naughtily with her little fingertip stuck at the corner of her lips. She didn’t say anything further, and neither allowed me to speak. As I sat on the bed she ran her fingers on my nose pinching the softness of my face with the tips of her nails and dragged her fingers from the top of my forehead till my chin via my nose and lips. Tingles of pleasure ran up my body. Her fingers danced tantalizingly over my face.

She became bolder with each passing minute. We didn’t exchange a word. Then all of a sudden, she wanted to sit on my lap. I was not too eager to fulfil her

wish. She kept looking at me and honestly I was seized. I was dependent on her and I had surrendered myself.

She sat on my lap and leaned forward. Our lips met, as she placed her lips on mine. *I kissed for the first time in my life. In that very second, I experienced adrenaline rush surging through me. It was as if litres of blood were rushing up and down my veins, choking them and inflating my nerves.*

She silenced me with a kiss from nowhere. Her lips felt like warm honey. She kissed me, holding my face in her hands. I was a mere spectator. I could feel she bottled up her desire, her lips refused to leave mine. Our tongues touched. I lost track of time and place. I had seen kisses in the movies. I had imagined what my first one would be like, but this was far better than what I had expected. Better than anything I had ever seen or imagined.

Sometimes you are not sure how happiness can come into your life. That was one such moment.

She kissed me harder and sealed my lips with hers. My hands moved halfway to stop her but lost the resolve to do so as the kiss felt amazing. She confidently blew a puff of air on to my eyes and sat on the bed.

I was a split-second away from witnessing something beautiful; she held me tight and rested her face on my left shoulder. She gripped me tight and whispered in my ears, "You are a sweetheart and you are so handsome." I closed my eyes and rested my head for a while on her shoulder. When I opened my eyes she moved her face back and looked right into my eyes. I smiled back and I hugged. I was happy, though something within me was not ready to accept that whatever was happening was right.

Act II Bangalore

She was smiling and touching me, as she lifted her arms to draw me closer. I didn't protest. Maybe I should have, but when something feels so right, it is so hard to do so. She placed her palm on my face, acknowledging the scratchiness of my beard. I felt connected to her as she continued to kiss me, the intensity increasing with every passing second. Her fingers passing down my neck. Goosebumps broke out all over my body. My heart started to thump louder.

Should I stop her? I wondered for a long time. But, I couldn't as she caressed me. We sat up on the bed. She removed her top and night pant, keeping her inners on. She pulled up my t-shirt and wriggled, as she shooed away. We lay down on her cosy bed. I was mesmerized seeing a girl half-naked for the first time. She kissed me all over; she touched my hard chest and circled her forefinger around my right nipple. She bit my lower lip in excitement.

Is this all moving too fast? I asked myself. Then she held my hand and did something that I had never imagined. She put it on her breast. I pressed it for the first time, the smoothness of her breast made me go wild. *OMG! Will it be so soft and smooth I questioned myself.* Then my hand slid clumsily under her black bra and pressed gently for some more time. My hand went behind her and unhooked her bra in one snap, as she was left only with her panty and me with my trousers. Wow, my head went into a tizzy. What happened to this girl, she is doing all this without feeling shy?

I paused to look at them as I took a breast in my hand. I could feel myself melting over. For the first time in my life, I was seeing a girl's breast.

I touched her nipple with my fingertip; caressed it between my thumb and forefinger and finally, my mouth was on her breasts. Her hand brushed against my blue denim trousers. Never a girl had touched me, so passionately and compactly over there. She was sure of how she wanted to live that moment. Her hair smelled amazing. *Wondering which shampoo she used, a mini-me screwed me. Is it a time to think about this?* I was turned on as I was, if not more. She sealed her lips with my lips again and then pushed me back to unhook the button of my denim. I regained my consciousness, as I stopped her and protested.

“I can’t continue further,” I said.

“What’s wrong with it? I’m ready now, nothing will happen,” she said.

“No, I can’t. I follow certain principles and personal ethics in my life,” I said as I searched for my t-shirt.

I thought no boy in our college would have missed a golden opportunity like this probably, cursing myself. Did I overreact or it is self-consciousness, I questioned myself?

“Oh, what ethics??? Just enjoy it and go with the moment,” she said.

“Sorry, don’t take me wrong or feel bad, I’m vowed to certain principles; I can’t negotiate them,” I said as I wore back my T-shirt.

I said bye and dispersed from her house to reach the LR hostel at 1:35 PM. I had my food in the mess and went back to the hostel.

Should I have let her complete her desire? Or is it wrong to indulge in this, I pondered for a long time. A million dollar question that struck my mind. I kept cool and went forward with the college routines.

Something was bothering me for the past few days. After days of soul searching and lonely walks across the dim-lit roads of the institute across the big lake, it wasn't difficult for me to understand what this abstract thing is that has been so unsettling. There has been a reason for the whole storm to start in my brain. I started thinking, had I already cheated on my wife, yet to come? *My rational mind asked me one last time. Oh! What a bizarre thought? I laughed at myself.*

According to the Bhagavad-Gita verse,

“Kamam asritya duspuram dambha-mana-madavitah
Mohad grhitvasad-graham pravartante suci-vratah”.

“Addicted to insatiable lusts, the demoniac, irrational due to arrogance, vanity and conceit, out of illusion endeavour for impermanent things engaging in impure acts by premeditated vows”.

“Balam balavatam caham kama-raga-vivarijitam

Dharmaviruddho bhutesu kano suci bharatasabha”.

“I am the strength of the strong, devoid of attachment and passion and the energy of procreation in all beings which is contrary to righteousness”.

Exactly, these verses have a lot of meaning to them and one should follow them. With my personal ethics and principles, I firmly believed that one should not indulge in any affairs or indulge themselves in illegal relationships.

21. College fest and Outings

One year later...

Our college days continued with the same schedule of attending classes, studying, playing games, working on projects and enjoying our college days to the core, amidst the rigorous academic activities.

It was the beginning of the rainy season, the season of romance and happiness. People in the college were in euphoria as the college had to host the College Fest ‘Mood of Joy’, which was scheduled to be held this month, with less than two weeks to go. Everyone was happy and so were Vipin, Samarth, I and all my friends.

When you are a college student, you always have one event of the year to look forward to. An event that makes your birthday look secondary, and you save all your money to spend on this particular event. Yes, it is our college fest ‘Mood of Joy’.

College festivals are a big part of the college life. They are the days of carnival when you can just party and think of nothing else in the otherwise severe academic pressure. The ‘Mood of Joy’ started way back by a group of college students and currently claims to be the biggest fest in the country and Asia. That was the interest created by ‘Mood of Joy’.

With a huge amount of sponsorship being raised from everywhere, our organizers organize a number of competitions and events. There are a plethora of competitions that rock the college during this time, ranging from literary, dramatics to films and photography. Apart from that, the competition for drama, music, dance and other such events that are the core of the fest in which people from all over the country perform at the various events slated for the four action-packed days at the sprawling lake-side campus.

‘MOOD OF JOY’ is also able to draw a crowd of approximately one lakh students from all over India. What is also special about this, other than the star night, are the ‘pro shows’ that feature well-known national and international artists from all genres of music. The variety of competitions here are huge, and it takes pride in being the only fest that features everything in the country. It also attracts the biggest names in the world of arts, culture, dance, singing and music.

Students come over here and showcase their talents in the country’s most awaited fest that brings people together to not just compete but also to lose themselves in the atmosphere of the fest.

Our fest holds four main attractions, the dancing competition which brings together all the dancers across colleges and pits them against each other, the fashion show which sees a huge turnover every year, the rock band competition and the Indian musical performance by renowned artists. Along with this, a colourful combination of various literary, music, dance and dramatics competitions are organized which make the fest one of the most looked forward to events of the year.

‘Mood of Joy’ also works in collaboration with various institutions working for a social cause. The grandeur of the event, along with its participation is what makes it so different, so mighty.

With a well-defined motto of the festival, ‘Mood of Joy’ is an attempt to present the festival on an international platform. The idea of an international cultural festival is to create young minds that transcend borders and prejudices.

‘Mood of Joy’ is a World fest and a meeting point where hundreds of young talented individuals from many countries converge to perform and compete at the highest level. The main objectives are to intermingle, have fun and exhibit each country’s unique culture and lifestyle, as the participants become ambassadors of peace and friendship.

‘What makes ‘Mood of Joy’ the greatest festival in the country? A million-dollar question on everyone’s mind, which can only be answered by experiencing it yourself, when you see the euphoria and leverage for the fest.

Not every college festival can accommodate so many students. The sheer size of ‘Mood of Joy’, the IIT campus makes it possible to have something for everyone.

The artists and performances are of high class. A good stage to showcase, which values their talents with enormous competition and great prizes. This is what ‘Mood of Joy’ is all about.

Twelve days passed in a wink, with just two days remaining for the fest to begin. Everyone in the college was in a party mood and the campus was at its best, with a kind of environment that is suited at best for the fest.

The four-day fest began with a bang on the first day, with all the prelims and auditions selecting participants; apart from an elimination round that had taken place much before the fest. The students of all the colleges were entering the campus of IIT-B. The auditorium had set to host the singing and mime competitions, while a big stage was set for dance, fashion show and other events. The other competitions like debate, technical quiz were also in some of the halls. Vipin and I were the event managers for the tech Quiz and we took part in some of the events which we liked the most as Quiz, debate and solo singing.

It was evening and the stage was set for some mind-blowing performances with a girl's group dance on top of the schedule. As soon as the announcement was made that the next performance was from IIT-B, there was a huge applause and screaming from the crowd full of boys whose testosterone levels were high.

All of a sudden, seven girls from our college with similar creamy white tops, loose hair and different coloured long skirts entered the stage with their backs facing the crowd. The girls started dancing in well-synchronized moves.

Vipin was shocked to see the petite, curvy figures dancing in skirts in front of him. One by one, every girl in the group of seven started to turn back for a Bollywood fusion item number. Then the girl in the middle turned back. Samarth knew her. He was shouting and cheering 'Deepikaa' 'Deepikaaa' like hell. Finally, the song ended, as the audience witnessed one of the best group dance.

After four performances, it was time for the singing competition. It's the time for the singers to perform and luckily it was Nitin Vidyadhar, a student from the

electrical branch, second year from our college. He, at first was reluctant to sing but after Manvi Jadhav's appearance, he decided to dedicate a song to her. *Everyone spoke that they were lovers. No matter what, people will spread it like a 'Forest Fire' when they know that there is something in between them.*

He didn't prepare, he didn't rehearse and he had no idea what to do there, on the stage. He was introduced onto the stage by the host as if he's a celebrity. The crowd applauded as they screamed 'NITIN MANVI', but his eyes searched for one pair of eyes, the eyes of Manvi. He was standing with no expression on his face. His team members were staring at him with disgust. He took the mic from the host and started singing.

The crowd started applauding wildly. Everyone was roaring loudly, the crowd became restless, Nitin found Manvi casting a glance at him in awe. His purpose was served so he started singing with more excitement as he knew everyone will like this super hit song from Dhadkan - a romantic track, which all of them loved to hear. As he concluded, people started shouting, "Once more... once more..." The anchor also provoked him to sing so he sang the whole song again and the first day events came to end.

The second day was filled with musical performances by renowned music artists and a lot of hype was created around the first-ever concert by a famous music director, who was set to arrive for the concert. The celebrity came late in the evening, as the students had gone crazy with their screams in the air. It was a complete euphoria all around. The celebrity sang nearly half a dozen songs, the tracks were simply magnificent one after the other on the Bollywood Night. It was time for his departure

and the students were in no mood to let him go. We could see the immense pressure on the Core Group Members in-charge of the event put in valiant efforts to pave for the celebrity to leave. Finally, with a lot of tension in the air, the celebrity was escorted to his car and the days' event came to an end.

The next day saw the turnaround of a film team, which made it to 'Mood of Joy' as the guests for the day's event and the film promotion was done along with the event. As the cast was on the stage, the people went berserk. The crowd wanted the heroine to sing a song from the movie, for which she agreed and sang two lines of the romantic track. It was electrifying as students were senseless, insane and some were in a hysterical state. Overall, it was a magnificent day and finally, the coordinator of the festival managed to play out the trailer of the movie, as the movie crew asked the students to turn up in large numbers to the theatre to make it a big hit. The guys screamed at the top of their voice and no words could explain their delight, and soon, the cast departed from the stage.

The much awaited day of the fest had come as the Fashion Show was being taken to new heights by the girls from St. Ann College and other colleges all across the country. The students set the stage on fire with their daring costumes and aggressive ramp walks much to the eye-popping joy of the students and organizers. However, in an unfortunate turn of events, the Dean walked into the fashion show and was shocked and shaken to see the skin fest going on, on his campus, right under his nose.

The show concluded with the final songs, as the students shook their legs on Bollywood songs. The

21. College fest and Outings

students witnessed the best day of the fest with great joy and jubilation in the air. All said and done, IIT fests are kick-ass.

After one month, the college witnessed the arrival of a technical fest hosted by the Metallurgy department. The annual tech fest of the college is celebrating the festival of talent and fun, shining bright and centred, as it is the most awaited event in autumn.

Well, the history sounds great, in fact, every flagship event of any reputed college has got one. But, for the first time, we are going to talk about the souls that created magic, the Organisers of the Tech Fest, and the story behind its success with the hard work of our Professors, guides and lecturers. The team ensured to have a purpose. This year was all about awareness towards technology. The team had been sweating it out day and night to make the fest more of an infotainment than just an old-school tech fest. The brain-child of this desire to fuse information and entertainment was a series of shows and screenings.

The team-work started way back, as we were involved in presenting a model with an innovation to improve the performance and efficiency of a machine. The paper presentation was done by the team. A well-set hierarchy of the team gave comfortable space and opportunity to the individual team members. The involvement and dedication of each organiser was commendable. The team's first success was when they got the whole process planned and organised. They split themselves into various teams: Marketing, Technical, Hospitality, Stage Crew and so on. Every team had a clear idea of their roles and responsibilities and how to execute the plan.

The visiting guest said, “Just for the sake of putting up events you end up learning a lot about the technicality involved.” Crazyness ignites creative ideas in young minds, especially when they’re working as a team. We had events that kept people engaged. The idea was simple, and it was to get the fest to a wider audience. Addition of the new adventure hunts and mind cracking games gained a lot of attention from the crowd. There were a series of physical games and PC games that were fun to watch. The event was also sparkled by comedy shows, bands, music and food. It felt like everybody who walked in were never unengaged.

The event had its signature paper presentations and guest lectures to feed the desire of the young and curious engineers. With technically excelled people interacting with the students and opening new doors to the innovative ideas for them, Tech Fest happened to be a centre of exposure. It was the time of complete enjoyment and euphoria, which was much-needed after a hectic schedule of the curriculum.

We were engaged in some kind of extra-curricular activities over the weekends. We were entitled to move out on a long drive to the nearby hill station. The four hours journey on the bike was the greatest time, the trekking in the mountains was simply awesome with the campfire at night. Vipin with a musical drum, singing in his own world, as the rest of us danced around the fire. It was an awesome experience to cherish for days to come. The late night outs in the pub saw an extra exultation and jubilation by being away from the hostel, which was a terrific time, ecstasy.

22. Final Year and Graduation

Four months later...

After completion of three successful years in IIT, it was time for the final year to begin, as we were in nostalgia about the past three years. The word ‘happiness’ would lose its meaning if it were not balanced by sadness. Yes, it was the time of happiness filled with sadness; happiness was that at the end of the year we will be graduates and the special poignancy was, we would miss our college days, Professors, LR hostel and the enormous campus.

The first day of our final year felt as special as the first day of classes in the institute. As we all got up early at 7:00 AM, although hard to believe, for the 9:00 AM class, and took shower in that engaged bathroom as always. We were ready as ‘Samarth’ put on some hair gel and had some different hairstyle than the usual. It looked bizarre, but he liked it. We completed our routine Monday morning breakfast and headed towards the class ten minutes prior, for the first time in the entire college life.

The class began with the arrival of Prof Pramod Dixit and the topic was ‘Manufacturing Processes’. He was a senior prof and touted to be the next in line HOD. He was surprised to see the strength of the class, as class was almost full on the first day. Who would have

thought the fourth year students would attend classes on the first day and that to reach early for the class?

“Welcome to the final year,” Prof Pramod Dixit said. “Thank you, sir,” We said in unison; as some of them in back whispered, “Hope you will give full attendance this year and be lenient towards us,” which was inaudible to the Prof, but all of them laughed, as Prof. Pramod Dixit was not aware what was happening in the class. Frankly, he didn’t expect that many students on the first day, as all would be busy in their placements, HR interview, annual package and what not? All were thinking about that unseen job to secure their life and to have a well-settled life with those lucrative offers. He began with the introduction and started a topic on metal casting processes, as all were in bored of the theory-oriented subject.

The final year project was an opportunity to showcase our talents and to dedicate our technical ideas into our projects and develop creative projects with new innovation. We were done with many small projects through the previous years, now it was high time to present one which would be of use to mankind. Our project group comprised Vipin, Samarth and myself. Yes, the same old team of roommates and best friends for the time to come.

Most of the groups were busy creating some or the other kind of automobile with the use of many kinds of sources to improve performance or energy efficiency for the advancement of the vehicle.

We dedicated ourselves to the ‘sliding chair project’- the conversion of mechanical into electrical energy by using rack and pinion mechanism for the production of electrical energy and to store it in batteries for later use. The project involved a unique technic, with the

involvement of the user. As the user rotates, slides or moves, the power would be generated by the chair. Well, it was a different project from the rest of them, but it was at a micro level as the output produced was less and required an up-gradation.

We worked on this project by giving our best and we met success as we were able to produce considerable power. Our project was approved and recommended to upgrade for production in large quantities.

As they say ‘Fate doesn’t care about your plans’, in the final semester, the day before the final presentation, our project crashed. We tried a lot but couldn’t fix it.

We informed our project guide and one of the most powerful faculties of our branch and asked for an extension. But the faculty showed us doors of the HOD. Luckily, he granted us the extension to complete our project. I, with my group members, went to almost every faculty of our branch seeking their help. But nobody was in a position to give an ear to our problems, as they were busy with their own commitment and work.

Later we realised that we would fail in the final semester project and will have to stay for one more month after the exams to clear it during the summer.

We, with barely 7-8 CGPA, got an internship in a well-established start-up in the city and at the end of our internship we got the offer letter from them, so technically we were the first guys to have a job.

A lot of companies had come to the campus for recruiting us, including many software giants, recruiting from all branches. It was just like getting a ‘flock of sheep’ and training them to chew the cud.

It was similar to that, as the students from various branches were recruited to the software companies

because the students didn't know much about the subject. But, given an ample training, they offered a job which could get work out of them. We firmly insisted on getting into core companies, no matter what the annual package or the job location was.

With the extension given for the completion of our project, we worked a lot but couldn't find a solution. I tried to find out what the problem was and the solution for it. The use of filters and some electrical components were required for the required output from the project. I put it together and installed with a perception that it will work smoothly and effectively. It worked very well as we completed our project as well as the much required timely completion of our graduation.

If somebody asked to define intelligence, they were telling my name. I couldn't even imagine the reason for it. I'm just a normal guy like the rest of them. I worked to the best of my capabilities to get success and nothing more than that. It is easy to give up and surrender in the face of hardships, but those who tackle the hardships head-on are the real heroes.

After completion of four successful years in one of the top IIT's of the country, it was time for the much awaited Convocation Ceremony, as it was one of the happiest days of our lives. The feeling of becoming a graduate is complete a delight in ones' life.

We were ready for the day with our grand suits, like the bridegroom waiting for his bride to come for the marriage. We were given the graduation robe and a square academic cap with a black tassel. It was an overwhelming moment for all of us to wear it, as a sense of feeling of being a proud Engineer arose within us.

The convocation began with a lighting ceremony by the Chief Guest. An oil lamp was lit on this auspicious occasion as a sign of removal of darkness to move towards brightness.

A commencement speech was given by the senior faculty and one of the amazing lines were,

“Many of us are in a rat race, some will win and some will lose, but in the end, YOU are still a RAT.” This clearly speaks volumes of what kind of person we want to be. One should not lose all hopes when one loses out in achieving any goals.

It was followed by the speech of the HOD, Chief Guest and Dean; as all of them emphasised on statistics or number of graduates passing out every year and how it would help improve our nation’s economy through employment with some startling piece of advice.

Now, it was the turn of the students to share their views, experiences about the college and their association with the campus. Vipin headed first on the stage, as he made his speech briefing about all his memories in the college, starting from the initial days of ragging in which he was a victim to some ragging in which he was involved.

“The association we had with the Professors, the lab technicians and all the other staff was really great; helping us in difficult times by being there with us,” he said. He continued further and thanked everyone for his journey and association with them.

It was my turn to move to the stage. I gathered my thoughts. I hadn’t written my speech as it was an informal one but still, it required some matters to talk about. A huge round of applause was heard as I moved to stage and held the mike to spike. “It gives me immense

pleasure to talk in front of you all, respected dignitaries on the dais and off the dais, Professors, teachers from all departments and my dear friends. I don't know where to start. I stepped into the campus four years ago as a complete stranger, and now, we all are degree holders, graduates. It sounds great and proud to be an Engineer. I don't know where I will end up with the lump sum annual package or where I will head to, but one thing for sure, I will make my country proud and hope you all do something or the other for the welfare of the nation," I said.

The whole auditorium stood up and applauded for my words, including the chief guest and the dean. I don't know what made them do that, all I knew was, I had to make my nation proud.

The numerous heart touching speeches were given by most of the students and the ceremony was heading to its conclusion with a group photo. A photo with a million expressions, a complete euphoria all around with numerous stills. The photo had captured the flawless moment with all jollity, a still to be cherished for days to come.

23. UPSC Exams

It was four years of successful journey in one of the top IIT's in the country before I headed back to Bangalore with a graduation to my name and a fame of being an IITian.

Well, all don't get an opportunity to study in the top-most intuition of the nation, I feel fortunate to complete my graduation in IIT and I'm proud to be an IITian.

After getting ample rest and time to regroup my thoughts, I gathered all the concentration for the much-needed task ahead, of clearing my most important exam. I was set to begin my journey of clearing the UPSC exam. I had already filled in the application for the CSE Prelims at the lag end of my college days and preparations were on much before.

Cracking the UPSC Exam in the very first attempt is the dream of many UPSC aspirants, so it was for me. It is possible with a judicious mix of hard work and dedication. CSE is an exam of colossal magnitude and a "logistical challenge" in itself. I knew that clearing this exam in the very first attempt depends on a lot of factors, many of which are not in control of every aspirant.

In the CSE exam, it is very important to know what not to read even more than what to read. I needed to get things which improve my chances of clearing the exam and one of those is my writing skills.

Good writing skills miraculously step up ones' chances to get through the Civil Services Examination. It has been observed that besides having exceptional knowledge and command over the subject, candidates could not crack the examination owing to poor writing skills. Good writing skills not only help in Mains but also enable the candidate form opinions on various issues which would help me during the personality test.

All the same, UPSC does not expect candidates to acquire exceptional writing skills in English. They just want the candidates who are able to put across their ideas and knowledge in a simple way so that everybody understands the message explicitly.

It is also prudent to understand that a candidate should not have an ornamental style to write answers or vast vocabulary as marks are allotted to answers which are clear, straightforward and simple. But, writing skills are always required in your armoury to be a good civil servant.

Most of the aspirants like me think that reading a good newspaper is sufficient. After going through an editorial or an opinion piece, they form an opinion of their own and don't understand the importance of it.

Writing answers to the previous year questions is a potent tool not only to better the writing skills but also to discern the pattern of questions asked in the previous years' examinations. I took a question bank and started answering every question. As most of them suggest, it is recommended to solve at least the last 10 years' questions as it will improve your answer writing ability and help in time management.

It is a long established fact that we cannot write well if we don't read well. Reading several leading

newspapers will broaden our outlook towards various issues and augment our awareness.

Writing a passage every day can help us express our opinions explicitly without any restrictions. When we start writing, it helps us to improve our vocabulary and writing on our own terms helps a lot. All these things helped me to improve my overall skills and added to my knowledge base endowing my critical thinking abilities.

Mains exam calls for speed, consistency and clarity of thought and these can be acquired easily through writing practice. I always emphasized on self-study and had not joined any coaching class for CSE.

With just over a month left to prepare for the Civil Services Prelims, it was important for me not only to work hard but also to work smart. Thorough understanding of the pattern and syllabus of the prelims is the first step in preparing for the exam.

The preliminary examination consists of two papers consisting of the objective or multiple choice questions: General Studies - Paper 1 and Aptitude or Civil Services Aptitude Test (CSAT) - Paper 2. The GS paper has 100 questions carrying two marks each while the CSAT has 80 questions carrying 2.5 marks each. There is a penalty of 33% marks out of the allocated marks for every wrong answer. The CSAT paper (paper 2) is evaluated first and the GS Paper or Paper 1 is evaluated only for those candidates who have qualified in Paper 2 or got at least 33% or 66 marks in CSAT. The candidates are shortlisted for the mains on the basis of their scores in Paper 1. These were the set of criteria framed to clear the Prelims. I needed to go through the syllabus and prepare accordingly.

As everyone knows, the knowledge of current affairs has become very important for cracking the prelims examination, but as it is a vast topic I tried to understand the areas from which questions are expected to be asked.

Most of the seniors prescribed to have an overall knowledge in all the fields and they said, “Half the battle is won if you can decide what to study. Developments in the field of environment, latest legislations, Politics and Governance, History, knowledge of Constitution of the country etc. are some of the important topics from which questions can be expected.”

Once this is done, I tried to practice answering questions in an exam environment. I also revised notes and tried to shorten them as far as possible. This helped me revise for the exams during the last few days.

I looked to collect the appropriate books for various topics such as History of Modern India, India’s Struggle for Independence, India’s Ancient Past, History of Medieval India, The Wonder that was India, Art and Culture, Geography of India, Oxford School Atlas, Certificate Physical and Human Geography, Indian Economy and Survey, Science and Technology, Environmental Studies, Analytical Reasoning, Verbal & Non-Verbal Reasoning. Well, that is a vast topic to cover, but I intended to solve anyhow, which is useful from the exam point of view and read a good newspaper daily. I emphasised on analysing the exam and subdividing it into ‘areas to prepare’ as far as possible, and allocate time and decide books/notes or any other resources for these areas. As aptitude exam has been made qualifying, I focussed on the GS paper but I made sure that I gave ample time for aptitude basics to qualify the CSAT paper.

GS consists of Static GK and Dynamic GK. Static GK comprises of subjects like History, Geography, Economics, and Polity, the bulk of which does not change in the short-run. Dynamic GK is what is commonly called ‘current affairs’ and what we read in the newspapers. So I tried to read the newspaper and magazines in such a way that both Static and Dynamic GK are covered. Well, amidst all these preparations the exam had eventually come and it was scheduled for Sunday.

I got up as early as 5:30 AM, took a shower and got ready. I was relaxed, stayed calm and focussed to maintain composure for rest of the day.

I had received the admit card and the venue for examination was one of the local schools situated near our house. I reached the centre thirty minutes early and was placed comfortably in my place after certain scrutiny, checks for the validation of the candidate by school officials.

The morning session was General Studies paper. I attended to it well and did my best. It looked like I might have made into it. Still, the CSAT paper was yet to attend and was scheduled for the afternoon session. I took a nice lunch in a nearby hotel and my dad was there along with me. I was a bit scared and he eased the situation, “don’t worry, everything will be alright. You just give your best and the rest unfolds.” These were words of rejuvenation for me, as I cooled my nerves.

The afternoon session saw a much difficult paper than the one in the morning and I just crossed my fingers, as I tried to do my best, waiting for the results to tell about my performance.

The results had come after four weeks and luckily, by God’s grace, I had made into the much-needed Mains.

“And suddenly, you know, it’s time to start something new and trust the magic of beginnings,” this was very much true as I wanted to begin all over again. It was now or never for me.

“If you want to be more productive, you need to become a master of your minutes.” These words define the importance of time. Yes, the time was big and I needed to perform well with all my capacities at stake.

Much to the suggestion of my friends who took up the CSE, my well-wishers, I joined a coaching centre in the city for the preparation of the upcoming Mains Exam. The classes were scheduled for the next three months.

From then onwards, my daily routine became attending coaching classes and an endless preparation for the all-important exam. I had opted for Public Administration as the Optional subject, much to my dreams of becoming what I intended to. I prepared in the best possible way, gearing up for that Mains.

I knew that all my efforts will go in vain if I lose cool on the exam day. It’s pertinent to read questions carefully and make sure that I do not make silly mistakes. In a relaxed state of mind, I was able to answer questions accurately and that too in less time. I relied on my abilities and was confident that I can clear the Mains. My parents asked me about my preparations and they were confident that I would clear the exam, by seeing my preparations for it. This boosted my confidence and made me believe that I can achieve it.

After Three months...

It was the day of the MAINS. It was a hefty week in front of me. The week that was scheduled with so many papers to attend and perform exceptionally well, to have any chance to make my dreams come true.

The first day started with two essays, which I wrote extraordinarily, as I felt the cause and need of the topic. I wrote in an orderly way - what it requires, what can be done to provide complete justice and a perfect conclusion to seek out the problem. I think I had written really well and was expecting a good result in this.

The second paper saw topics which we dealt with and the topics were Indian History, Culture, Geography and Sociology. The questions were tough but I wrote up to the mark.

The next paper saw much wider topics which consisted of Constitution, Governance, Polity, Social Justice and International Relations. I performed decently where I could expect to have comfortable results.

The fourth paper had the topics of technology, economic development, biodiversity and disaster management. To be frank, I didn't perform well in this. I was hoping to get average marks with fingers crossed.

The final paper saw the Ethics Integrity Aptitude. Well, this was paper which depends on one's thinking capacity, of what a person thinks at that instant and his/her mindset about a topic or the decision making abilities.

I had picked Public Administration as my optional and been through the syllabus of it. The first paper was easy as I wrote well. The next day was also the optional paper which turned out to be much easier than first paper, and I did my best. I had performed exceptionally well and was awaiting a good result.

I wrote the qualifying test of the English language along with all these papers and this paper was really good as it turned out to be easy. The other paper was the language test and in this, I opted for Hindi, which seemed much easier than the English paper and I had

Act II Bangalore

full confidence that I would clear both these qualifying papers.

A week that saw the completion of my MAINS had come to an end. I had completed all my papers to the best of my potential by giving everything I had. Now I was awaiting the results with even greater anticipation which could probably fulfil my dreams.

24. Final Interview

Two months later...

After the completion of the MAINS exam, I was waiting eagerly for the results to come. The result had finally come, which was extremely kind to me, as I had cleared the Mains. There was happiness in the house and amongst friends and relatives that I had cleared the Mains, much to the expectation of them all.

I began my preparation much early, within a month of completion of the Mains examination. I didn't wait for the results of the Mains. The first phase of preparation started with a more purposive reading of the newspapers and magazines. The issues of national and international importance and even those of regional or local significance often form the nucleus around which the interviews revolve. It was important to have knowledge about these and getting a good grasp of such issues is of the essence.

Now, the only hurdle in my way was the Personality test. I got a call and a mail from the board that my interview was scheduled in New Delhi and I was supposed to turn up for it on the following given date.

I knew that the UPSC gives an interview call to several candidates and organises several boards, each headed by a UPSC member, comprising four to five other members,

usually experts from different fields. The board conducts the interview by asking questions, seeking views and assessing the objective appreciation of a candidate regarding different issues of national and international significance. It also tests the candidates in areas related to their personal profile as disclosed in their 'Detailed Application Form' (DAF) submitted to the UPSC. But, I didn't expect that I would get a call so early.

The tenor of the interview is that of a purposeful conversation. The objective is the assessment of thoughts and overall personality of the candidate and not merely bookish knowledge or even theoretical concepts, with the latter already being an area of evaluation in the Mains examination.

What the board usually endeavours to assess in the aspirants is his/her sincerity of purpose, clarity of thoughts and expression, balance of judgement, ability to reason, to think critically, analytically in a holistic way, costiveness of approach which they don't prefer, awareness and concern for socio-economic issues and problems, and other attributes. But what is of utmost importance is the ability to think with an honest approach, sincerity of purpose and willingness to toil hard. With knowing all the whereabouts of the Personality Test, I began my journey to New Delhi. I took an early morning flight from Bangalore and reached the destination at 8:30 AM. I settled in a hotel situated near the board.

It was a feeling of coming back home after a long time. I came back to Delhi after five long years and I met some school friends and relatives back at the hotel.

The biggest day of my life was on my way, the day that could prove to be decisive. The day unfolded, as

I got up early and got ready. I was fully prepared for the personality test and headed towards the board with full confidence and valiant belief.

I was placed comfortably early in the designated place, as all other candidates geared up to their respective seats with millions of dreams in their eyes. A couple of candidates had finished the interview as they departed from the cabin with pretty much happier faces. Now, it was my turn to face the music. I submitted all my documents and DAF with full confidence and entered the room. The panel comprised of a Chairperson and other four members to assist him.

“May I come in, sir?” I asked.

“Yes, please come in,” I heard the voice from inside.

“Good morning to you all,” I said contentedly.

“Good morning,” the chairperson said as the rest of them acknowledged.

“Please take your seat,” he said.

“Thank you sir,” I said as I adjusted the chair a bit.

“Please make sure you are comfortable,” he said.

“Thank you sir for your kind words, I am comfortable”, I said.

The expression was flawless from him as I said ‘for your kind words’.

“Ok, introduce yourself,” the chairperson said.

I introduced myself along with my parents’ name and their occupation as well as gave a brief about my educational background, hobbies, and short-term and long-term goals.

“Oh, That’s good, (paused for a while) tell us something about the partition of Russia or collapse of USSR,” the chairperson asked.

“Politically, USSR was divided from 1940 to 1991 into 15 constituent or union republics into Kazakhstan, Georgia, Ukraine, Belarus, Estonia, Lithuania Uzbekistan, Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, and Tajikistan but until the final year or so of the USSR’s existence, the republics had little real power. In 1992, Russia was the first country to declare itself socialist and build towards a communist society and this led to the collapse of USSR. I can’t remember the names of other three nations, sir,” I said.

“Ok, what about the encroachment of Jammu and Kashmir?” Another member asked.

“Sir, in the 1948 war, Pakistan encroached Jammu and Kashmir and they have that land now. It is called as Pakistan occupied Kashmir (POK). Some part still remains free, but the administration is under Pakistan and it consists of the provinces of Azad Kashmir with the capital Muzaffarabad and Gilgit-Baltistan. Both these are separated by the Ceasefire Line called the LoC after the 1971 war,” I said and paused to look at their reaction. But, then I continued, “After the Indo-china war in 1962, China encroached some parts and it is Aksai Chin or China occupied Kashmir (COK) and the line that separates is the Actual line of control (LAC) and is concurrent with the Chinese Aksai Chin claim line,” I concluded and sighed.

“Ok, then why these regions are part of India’s political Map?” he asked.

“Sir, we claim that it is an illegal encroachment by both the countries and we reckon that these placed are an integral part of India. These regions remain as disputed territories and we have passed a resolution that India’s Map should not be without these regions and any violation in this, would be a criminal offence,” I said.

“Ok, what about a special article that is formulated?” another member asked.

“Yes sir, it is an article that grants special status to the state, some of the provisions were the state can have its own flag, the election term is of six years and it would be difficult for a non-resident of the state to set up any commercial land or house there,” I answered.

“Ok, what do you feel about this?” a lady member asked.

“Mam, this is a complicated matter, but my personal opinion is, it should be quashed.”

“Hmm, what made you, make that statement?” she interrogated.

“Mam, I personally feel all the states are the same and all of us should have equal rights. Example: if a mother has five sons and if she shares more food, land, property or anything for that matter with one, normally, the rest four will feel worse as they don’t receive the right proportion of love from their mother and it is a discrimination by her,” I said.

“Wow, we never thought of such a brave answer. There is some truth in what you tell and it should be introspected,” she said.

“According to you, what is the solution for the J&K issue, internationally?” another member asked.

“Sir, this is completely my view. I reckon a referendum by the people, which should be considered in the disputed areas of PoK, CoK and Azad Kashmir. Then, if it is our part, we must build a Great Wall along the International borders,” I suggested.

“Do you think it is flat land to build a wall on?” and they all laughed.

“Yes sir, I know it is a hilly area and some valleys will be there. It is difficult to build but at least a rigorous plan can be made. And also, a serious effort can be made to find a permanent solution,” I said.

“Ok, what do you know about the Liberation Day?”

“Sir, after independence, there were 565 princely states and one among those was Hyderabad which stayed independent. In 1948, Operation Polo was carried out by the Armed forces, who invaded the Nizam ruled princely state and it is on 17th of September 1948 when Hyderabad became part of the Indian union,” I said.

Then they asked numerous tricky questions, which were a test of my character and thinking capabilities. With that, the interview was over as I thanked them and left the room.

The interview board was very cordial. Everybody was smiling the whole time. Now the wait for the result began again and I hoped it would be good.

After one month...

The results were out and I had secured AIR 68. It was the happiest day of my life as I was over the moon. It was the day which made my dream come true. My parents were very happy and there was euphoria at home. All our neighbours and friends congratulated and probably, this was the day which completed my millions of dreams. All were proud of me; my parents didn't have any words and the tears of joy just flowed. It was a day filled with complete love and happiness, as I headed towards my passion.

25. Training at National Academy of Administration

My next destination was the National Academy of Administration, where candidates from all over the country get together for training. I scraped through and found my name in the coveted ‘list of UPSC-CSE’ successful candidates.

National Academy of Administration is a research and training institute on public policy and public administration in India. The academy’s main purpose is to train civil service officers of Indian Administrative Service, Indian Police Service, and Indian Forest Service; and also for Group-A Central Services such as Indian Foreign Service among others. In India, most officers of the premier civil services of the country are selected through competitive civil service exams administered by the UPSC.

I had about three weeks’ time to go for the training. This is the period when I felt like a local celebrity with lots of media attention and pampering from the entire family. Neighbours, teachers, relatives and friends started treating me very differently, now that I’ll be an IAS officer. This is a valuable lesson in opportunism and flattery helps set your priorities straight.

After a lot of speculation about the training, about the food given there, the accommodation and the kind of people I would meet there, I landed in the National Academy of Administration. This was the beginning of the foundation course, the first part of the two-year probationary period. The foundation course is common for all civil servants from various disciplines.

One of the most important lessons we learnt was that we are not 'the elite group of people'. It's vital for bureaucrats and other power-wielding authorities to understand that others, no matter what their stature in the government hierarchy, are human and are to be treated with dignity and respect. I met so many young candidates like me. One is geared up for the training with full enthusiasm and determination to be a part of it. All our eyes were filled with millions of dreams and with a self-belief that we will definitely achieve it in the coming days. There were a lot of members out there, but my friendship persisted with Ashish Trivedi, Karn Malhotra, Prathiksha Dubey and Roshini Sanghvi.

My room partners were Ashish and Karn. Sharing rooms in FC came with its own share of problems but I must give credit to my roommates as they were too early to bed. My room-mates being early-sleepers, many a night when it got late, I had to tip-toe back into my room hoping not to wake them up. My efforts though always went in vain. The room itself was strategically placed and offered a scenic view to the playground below and the horizon ahead.

The course included lessons in law, management, accounting, history, polity and economics. We also had guest speakers who were professors from top colleges,

retired army generals, working or retired civil servants, even authors and media persons.

A typical day for an Officer Trainee (OT) at the Academy starts at 6:00 AM with morning exercise and drill on the ground for 60 minutes or a 6-10 km jog. The riding schedule operates simultaneously. The training programme did not neglect our physical fitness and we had a mandatory session at 6:00 AM every morning. Every Saturday, we were taken on a trek which typically involved walking and climbing a total of 18-22 km from 8:00 AM to 3:00 pm.

The early morning whistle broke many sweet dreams and it used to take some effort to throw off the blanket and come down in the biting cold for the morning exercises. One of our batchmates who had had enough wrote a self-confessed letter to the Course Director on his absence at P.T. He accepted that he had lost the battle between 'waking up' and 'sleeping more' in favour of the latter!

Back from P.T, we had about an hour to get ready, have breakfast and report for our classroom sessions, which commence at 9:00 AM.

There are 5-6 academic sessions of 55 minutes each on all working days as per a pre-determined session plan. Some of our batchmates have even earned the sobriquet of 'serial sleepers' and one has to stop and wonder how they still wake up at the end of the lecture and ask pertinent questions.

Evening hours from 5:00 PM till 7:30 PM are slotted for sports and riding. Most cultural performances and programmes are also scheduled in the evening before dinner at 8:00 AM. We used the post-dinner time to interact with each other and also to review the day's

learning and prepare for the sessions for the next day. Notified holidays and weekends are usually reserved for extra-curricular activities such as community services, adventure sports like rock climbing, paragliding, river rafting, shorts treks etc.

We visited falls, hills and we also had a week-long Himalayan trek. Our group went to mountains, we walked and climbed 90 KMs in one week, ate food that we got in the forest, slept on the ground, including tents, stayed for 2 days at a height of 4500 m. We really cursed ourselves while we were climbing the hills. But the scenic beauty and the sense of achievement one feels on reaching the top is really worth the effort. It is both, literally and metaphorically, the high point of our course.

The most profound part of the training came after the exams. All trainees were sent for a village visit, where we were supposed to stay and have a taste of real-life practical problems faced by the villagers on a day-to-day basis.

Our group went to a nearby village. It was relatively well-developed but was quite a sensitive area. We were all sceptical about how we would manage without modern amenities. But, the stay was an eye-opener for all of us.

We visited and gauged the functioning of primary healthcare centres, village schools, Panchayat functioning. We went to the farms and observed the cropping patterns. Every piece of land was covered by sugarcane and rice.

Living among the poorest of the poor, observing their daily struggle for the basic amenities, was an experience that made us realize what we are here to do. That's where I realized the problems of the poor are solved not by mere words but by providing them with proper

civic amenities and nutrition. That experience pushed me towards IAS in a better way. Life became a full circle of challenges and a solution that is thrown at you.

A course usually demands 14-16 hours of activity per day, which is about 80 hours of academic and other engagements per week.

The importance of physical and mental fitness in leading a life of health, vitality and peace needs no reiteration. It is all the more critical for those who have hectic and often tension-filled careers. Officers under training are strongly encouraged to lead a rich, varied and vibrant campus-life extending much beyond the confines of lecture halls.

The Academy places a strong emphasis on outdoor events as part of its dynamic training curriculum. The Sports Complex has been expanded to meet the growing physical training needs of various course participants. It boasts of a state-of-the-art gymnasium and physical fitness centre, badminton, lawn tennis courts, football, hockey ground, etc. as well as services to assist officers under training to improve their proficiency in sports and games. The Academy also has a full-fledged horse-riding infrastructure with instructors drawn from the best in the elite Army unit, the President's Body Guards.

As part of the induction level training curriculum, officer trainees are sent on treks to the greater Himalayas where they learn to cope with conditions of adversity, bad weather, insufficient accommodation and limited access to food items. Visit and stay in backward villages to understand and appreciate the realities of rural life is integral to induction level programmes. Trainees are encouraged to take up extra-curricular modules and cultivate in-depth interest and proficiency in any

hobby of choice. To achieve this, we were encouraged to participate in the activities of various clubs and societies in order to express our creative potential.

The various clubs and societies in the Academy include: Adventure Sports, Alumni Association, Computer Society, Film Society, Fine Arts Association, Hobbies Club, House Journal Society, Management Circle, Nature Lovers' Club, Officers' Club, Officers' Mess, Rifle & Archery Club, Society for Contemporary Affairs and Society for Social Service.

The sense of pride we get when we realize that all the senior civil servants who took all the major decisions, made policies marking paradigm shifts and that influenced the very fabric of Indian society, economy and polity and in-turn, laid the founding stone of the present day Modern India. The training provided an opportunity to meet bureaucrats, stalwarts in their profession who guided us by their wisdom.

If this was not enough, the fact that we have to fill their shoes, carry forward and improve upon their work further fills us with the feeling of tremendous responsibility and patriotism.

Act III
Mysore

26. Posting as Assistant Commissioner

After Three months...

Returning from the National Academy of Administration after a probation period of two years, I was allotted home state cadre of Karnataka.

My first posting as a civil servant was as the Assistant Commissioner in Mysore, which I accepted with all humility, as I was looking forward to developing my workplace into a better destination.

The Assistant Commissioner of Land Revenue is an official appointed/posted at the sub-district level responsible for managing land records, revenue receipts related to land transfer, water cess and crop cess etc. He is also given magisterial powers in the capacity of sub-divisional magistrate (SDM) to settle disputes.

Assistant Commissioners are placed in charge of specified taluks in a district in the Revenue Department. We are also called as Sub-Divisional Magistrates. In regard to the revenue matters, the Tahsildars are subject to the control and supervision of the Assistant Commissioner.

The Assistant Commissioners in charge of the sub-divisions have been vested with powers of the D.C. under many of the Sections of the Karnataka Land

Revenue Act and also other state laws. The AC is the first appellate authority in revenue matters handled by our subordinates and he is also the lowest level at which powers of revision is vested.

The Assistant Commissioner normally handles the land acquisition work relating to his sub-division and is also the Chairman of the Tribunals constituted under the Karnataka Land Reforms Act for the Taluks in his sub-division.

Special Land Acquisition Officers are to be handled by the Assistant Commissioner along with his normal work. We are the Electoral registration officers of our respective sub-divisions. An Assistant Commissioner is also the Returning Officer for one or more of the Assembly Constituencies in his sub-division. Well, these were the areas where I was required to discharge my duties.

Meanwhile, back in Bangalore, there was some news in consideration about my Father's job. There was some chance that he might get transferred to some other place which he was looking for and probably, a hometown posting this time around, as they were fingers crossed to know what is up for grab.

It was early morning. As I woke up and got out of the bed, I got a call on mobile displaying 'Papa'. It was my dad, I was delighted to get a call from him, hoping some kind of news which might be fruitful for my parents. Hoping for the best I took the call.

"Hello, Kaise ho beta?" He questioned. (How are you my son?)

"Yaa, Papa, main toh ekdum thik hoon, aap kaise ho?" I said. (I'm fine. How are you?)

"Main bhi tik hoon beta, aur aap se ek kush kabhari share karni hai," my dad said. (I'm all right my son and I have to share a happy news with you.)

“Yes dad, tell me?” I said.

“Mera transfer Mysore ke local branch par hua hai, aur woh bhi Bank Manager Beta,” he said as he was over the moon. (I have been transferred to Mysore and that too as a Bank Manager.) *It was the sweetest news that I had heard from my dad about his career and as a Bank Manager was the icing on the cake for our family.*

“Thik hai Papa, Jaldi se aajaaye. Main aapka intazaar karoonga,” I said as I hung up the call. (Ok dad, come soon. I’ll be waiting for you).

It couldn’t get better for our family and it was a Double Dhamaka for my dad. He got transferred to Mysore and that too with a promotion as a Bank Manager. Omg! What a day it was? It couldn’t get better.

My parents came to Mysore and they were looking for a new flat in the city, as they didn’t want to disturb me in my job and daily routine. But I insisted them to come and join me in the flat which was given to me by the government for accommodation.

Initially, my parents declined my proposal. But later, agreed to it, as I was staying alone in a nice government flat. Though the flat was not a lavish one as senior officers get, it was just ample for my parents to come and join me and have the basic needs fulfilled.

The flat had all the basic amenities though it was not developed and digitalised. It had all the elements of a traditional look, which made my parents settle down here with ease. As I was trying to adjust in this new city, to resurrect my life, my parents came as my dream to accomplish my wishes and to keep my loneliness at bay. Within a fortnight, my parents settled in this new city to restore our new life.

My day in office began at 8:30 AM with the usual checks and periodic scrutiny of important files, which

were been sent by different departments. Most people believe that civil servants have a cosy 9:00 AM to 5:00 PM job.

There couldn't be a bigger myth than this. Most of us start our day as early as seven in the morning and sometimes it could go beyond one in the night, so to say, 1:00 AM. The meetings with various Govt. officials are held at various times. Meetings with various ministry officials at vague times become part of our work too.



I returned home in the evening and was relaxed, as I was having a cup of coffee in my backyard. A neighbour boy came up to me and interrogated, why do they call officers as civil servants? Being a civil servant, all I could say was that we are servants to millions of people who come to us to seek solutions to their problems. William Shakespeare has said so beautifully that, "A rose by any other name would smell as sweet." A master would remain a master even if you start calling him a servant. If the civil (public) servants in India behave like masters, it is so because they are the real masters in the 'Government System' of India.

Most people in India, unfortunately, don't know the real powers of a civil servant. They think that politicians are the ones who do all the business of governance since they are the ones who are in limelight. Little do they know that politicians have no power to perform any function of the government, as the Parliament has given complete authority to the AC and the senior officers of the department.

The head of the Govt. can transfer the officers, but they can't perform the functions of the officers.

If the officers use their power honestly and legally, no politician can do anything against the officer.

Civil servants are thus the real masters of India because even the Parliament has given them more power than what they have given to themselves (politicians).

We are in the false mindset that having authority and power is the same as being a master. We see more power and less responsibility in our jobs. But this has to change in those who think they are everything and they can do any kind of stuff without any limitation.

This is a remnant of British imperial time when the British were actually the rulers and masters. The UPSC system didn't undergo much change and the attitudes of the older times are still lingering on. That is why the 'civil servants' behave as if they are above the common people and act like masters who are not answerable to anyone. This has to change and every one of us needs to think that we are here to serve people, no matter what kind of situation we are in.

If there was more accountability introduced in this system after independence, the civil servants and other officers would not behave like they are the 'masters'. Because of this, today a member of society hardly believes police will help him or her. People in India feel scared of Police. As a civil servant, I have noticed that people have to feel secure at the glimpse of cops, we can see this in any other nation. But, the situation out here is quite different, people reckon themselves as guilty or accused of no wrong done; as they try to evade the Police and the whole country perpetually continues to be in the developing state and does not get developed because the so-called administrative servants are not

Act III Mysore

serving their country as per their job description. As they find no reason, they quickly blame the politicians.

This has to be stopped and every Govt. official should be accountable for the post they hold and discharge their duties sincerely to serve the people of their nation and provide justice to their own jobs.

Being an Assistant Commissioner, I always reckoned that I'm here to serve the people as best as I can, no matter what the situation in front of me. I didn't bow down to recommendations or pressures from any authority, as I always went by the book of my ethics and discharged my duties for the welfare of the people.

27. Reunion and Marriage

One year later...

My life as the Assistant Commissioner of Mysore continued in full swing. I was busy with my routine life, a helping hand for those who in miserable conditions with their own share of problems.

The hectic schedule with the kind of workload is immense, and I had no option but to cope up with it. My office hours saw numerous people turning up at the office with their immediate problems, for which the solution should be done sooner than later.

The endless meetings with various department officials had taken a toll on me. At the end of the day, it was my duty which I should furnish to complete my job satisfactorily.

The uphill task was part of my daily curriculum and I tried to maintain all of my work patiently enough to achieve the given goals within the deadline. I always looked for the overall development of my area and to achieve this, I remained a listening ear to numerous problems, which came up to me.

Amidst all this work, I had little time for myself. I was a workaholic from the day I was in office and some of my friends in the city were from college days. They were keen to have meetings even on the weekends.

Act III Mysore

I have seen a number of my friends in the corporate world yearn for 6:00 PM on Friday, as they get to their much awaited weekends, which they believe to be so sacred. These are the days which make them enthusiastic as never before, where they tend to relax and indulge in some or other activities.

I being an officer, it was not easy for me, as the elected representatives in the government have scheduled meetings on Saturdays, for which we have to make all the required preparations.

Pradeep Das had called me for a meeting with all the others turning up for the day. As this was on cards since so many days, for which they had been waiting, he said we will be meeting tomorrow in a mall to watch a movie. The seven of us agreed to come and without any reason, you must turn up for the event.

His words made me commit to the event. I requested him to postpone this to Sunday as I would be free on the day to some extent, to which he agreed and so, our get together was scheduled for Sunday.

The day saw the arrival of my friends in a grand fashion for the get together. The meet embarked the togetherness of old friends with euphoria, as the day tuned out to be exciting with lots to offer.

Everyone was shocked to see others after so long, as the looks now differed from what they had before. We all chatted for about an hour at the mall, getting to know each other's work profiles and what each one was up to in his/her own life. Finally, we all marched up to the cinema hall in a Multiplex for a Hindi Movie.

The film reached its climax and we all were left in tears. The movie was a terrific one, with a moral value for the society attached to it. As we were returning,

I saw a girl from far, amidst all the crowd out here. From outset, I presumed that she might be Sushma. But, I was not sure, much to my anxiety.

I surpassed the audience to reach out to her and finally, when we came out of the mall, I saw her. Yes, it was Sushma Puranik. I didn't have any words in me as I stood before her. Just emotions flowed, as her eyes were filled with tears and without my consent, my eyes became wet too.

I was seeing her for the first time, after eight long years. That one moment was as if... as if life had suddenly been fuelled back into me, as if it had rained again after a decade of drought. It felt like the first sunrise after thousands of dark nights, like a tiger's hunt after so many days of starvation, like the first bite of food after a hundred days of hunger. I felt satisfied, if not more, by the glimpse of her. My heart was overfilled with emotions, as I never thought I would meet her again in my life.

Tears ran down my face as I hugged and rested my face on her shoulder. She sensed that but didn't say anything; instead, she held me tight and whispered in my ears, "Where were you all these years?" *She felt a bit uneasy, as she was with her friends.*

I opened my eyes, she moved her face back and looked right into my eyes. She wiped away the tears from my face. I smiled back and I hugged her again. I was happy, if not more. *Sometimes you are not sure how happiness can again slip into your life. That was one such moment. Something within me accepted that whatever was happening was right—and or the first time, I was sure of it. I felt relaxed after a long time.*

Meanwhile, all my friends came out, not knowing what was happening and didn't know the importance of the situation. I bid a bye to my friends, as I insisted I'll meet them again soon. She did the same to her friends and only we both were left in front of the mall, looking forward to some good things to happen.

I was forced to see her neck, to check for mangalsutra; luckily, nothing was found and there were no signs of marriage. Omg! What a bizarre thought, as mini-me asked upon.

We both sat in my car, as we both moved to a five-star hotel, hoping that there will be no trouble for our privacy. We sat in a five-star hotel and didn't speak for the first ten minutes, as I was mesmerised gazing at her, she being lost in her own thoughts. The situation continued until it was curtailed by a waiter, as he came up to us enquiring about our order.

I ordered Gazpacho soup and Spaghetti with Florentine; she opted for Corn Fritters and Macaroni with Arabiata.

After the order was placed, I being the initiator, asked her, "How come you are here? Since when are you staying in this city?"

"I'm working as a Senior Tech support in an MNC, for the past three years. I have completed my Bachelor of Engineering in Electronics and Communication. I was selected on a campus drive and now I'm residing in a PG located on the outskirts of the city, which is near to my Company," she said and sighed.

"Hmm... Ok, do you know at what post I am?" I asked.

"Yup. Seen you on TV and in Newspaper doing some good stuff for the poor," she said.

“Then why didn’t you come me to meet?” I asked.

“Why? On what basis should I have come up to you?” she said a bit shaky.

“Oh, Ok great, shall I ask you something? If yes, you have to answer frankly and speak out the truth,” I said confidently.

“Yup, for sure,” she replied.

“Have you ever loved me?” I said stammering a bit.

“Well, to be frank, not sure. But I liked you whenever I saw you and I liked your intelligence a lot,” she said.

“Hmm, that means you love me,” I said.

“If I say no, it would be like cheating myself; I liked you in the school days. But, I wanted to achieve something in my life and my ambition was to become a scientist,” she said bitterly.

“Ok, now that you are not married, will you give me a chance to marry you?” I asked waiting for her big response.

“No, I haven’t thought about it, I’ll totally rely on my parents on that topic. I can’t cross my limits,” she said.

She was pretty much a homely girl who would follow all the instructions of her parents and at any cost, she wouldn’t have crossed their limits.

“Shall I come and talk to your family, if you are ready?” I said.

“I have no issues if my parents give their assent,” she said.

By that, the first line of defence was cleared and a green signal from the girl meant I was a step closer to it and the only obstacle was to get an affirmation from her parents.

“Ok, we will go to your house tomorrow, don’t inform your parents. We can go and give them a surprise,” I said.

“Ok, then tomorrow I will take a sabbatical from work,” she said, as she agreed.

“We shall meet tomorrow at the Cafe and from there, we will drive to your home,” I said confidently.

She agreed to it, as we departed from there in my car. I dropped her to the PG on the way back to my home, agreeing to meet tomorrow at the Cafe. I was waiting eagerly for the next day’s sunrise, with fingers crossed.

As per the promise we made, we met at the Cafe and had a cup of Cappuccino, before we headed forward on our journey. She looked a bit fussy, probably in the anxiety of today’s meeting. We reached their home at 1:00 PM, much to their surprise. They were shocked to see me along with Sushma.

I introduced myself without any shyness, “Hello Uncle, I’m Manish Agnihotri, IAS officer and your daughter’s friend.”

“Ya, I have seen you in newspapers and TV, helping the poor and the needy. You’re doing a terrific job,” he said complementing me.

“Thank you uncle, all by God’s grace. I’m doing what I am capable of,” I said.

Her mother intervened to check the need of the hour, as she asked, “Beta kya lenge?” (What will you have?)

“Anything is perfect, your choice,” I said being modest.

I was eager to speak out what I had come here to say but waited and held on to my thoughts, waiting for the right time to come.

He asked about my daily work schedule and pressure from the work as he kept interrogating as the IO, enquiring every detail about my whereabouts. In

response, I was not in the mood to be on the receiving end, so I asked him about his work.

Meanwhile, Sushma came with a cup of coffee. If not mesmerised, I couldn't stop myself from staring at her, as I held on to my cup and saucer. And she informed that it has been prepared by her, which made the coffee much sweeter.

We had a cup of coffee and all were relaxed, sitting in their home.

I gathered my thoughts and with determination I spoke, "We both are in love with each other for many years and now we would like to marry with your assent."

They didn't expect this to happen when we came to their home. An awkward silence persisted for the next couple minutes. Sushma blushed as she went to her home.

Her father called Sushma and enquired about this. She said, "Yes, this is true."

"I agree I couldn't have found a better bridegroom than you, but I can't go against my caste and violating the rules by giving my daughter to you. Have your parents agreed to this marriage?" he asked.

"Yes, they will never say no to me, I have full confidence that they will agree with my words," I said confidently.

"I understand what you are trying to express, but this will be an inter-caste marriage, for which our family, relatives will not agree and Sushma is my only daughter. I have huge dreams for her," he said.

"I will ensure she remains happy for the rest of her life, I solemnly promise this to you," I said pleadingly.

"I agree with what you say, but... no one from our family would agree, as it is an inter-caste marriage," he said, defining his difficulties.

“I reckon there are only two castes, a good one and a bad one. People who do good things for others are from the good caste and those who indulge in bad activities are bad caste. You can see many of the elite people indulge themselves in every possible bad thing that happens and wear a tag that I’m from the top caste. Similarly, a person from a lower caste may do numerous good deeds to help others but will not come to limelight,” I tried to convince.

“This only fits in words and you can make many such statements like a philosopher, but it is hard to practice it in real life,” he said.

“I mean what I tell, it doesn’t depend upon their caste to check the kind of people. It is only human psychology, the mindset has to change. People should be recognised by their work and humanitarian values and not by their caste. I firmly believe that there are only two castes, good and bad and only one religion, INDIAN,” I stated.

“I know you are a sincere officer with lots of Patriotism and Nationalism. But, you must understand that the society is not like what you are thinking, it is totally different and people are living in their own entities,” he said.

“Yup, for sure, I agree with what you tell. But, we must try to irradiate all these social barriers and try to improve on this,” I said.

“Ok, give us some time,” he said.

He went to his room, Sushma and her mother followed him. I was sitting in the hall, envisioning what could happen. I had confidence that Sushma, at any cost, will not leave this and definitely, somehow she would latch on this to get their affirmation.

Sushma came out, as she smiled at me. So her parents came out and sat on the couch. We both talked to Sushma and she loves you and reckons that she can't live without you. So, our daughter's decision is our decision, we agree with this marriage proposal.

That very moment, I was overwhelmed and happiness was back in my life with serenity all around.

"What all are your marriage demands? I mean what you want for dowry?" he asked in a straightforward tone.

"Was this happening too soon?" mini-me asked. Nevertheless, everything happens for a purpose and a definite reason.

"No I don't need any of that," I said.

"Hmm, it's very rare to see these kinds of people nowadays," he said pointing to Sushma's mother.

"But uncle, you can give me any amount of money or your entire savings if you wish, I'll accept it," I said.

"I didn't understand," he said as a big question mark on his face.

"I will not indulge myself in a grand wedding where lots of people come and show off one's wealth as a matter of prestige. I don't like all this and we will be going in for a simple marriage. This is the wish of Sushma as well," I said.

She also agreed with me, as he forced her parents for a simple marriage.

"Then why you need all my savings?" he questioned.

"We will have a mass wedding in the temple and along with us, there will be another ten couples from poor financial backgrounds. So, I thought that we will be helping these poor couples for their marriage too," I said.

"I don't know whether this is your richness of the heart or you want to show off to the world that an IAS

officer is getting a simple marriage in a mass wedding,” he said.

“Nothing of that kind uncle, but I think I should help some people on the occasion of my marriage, which probably will make me happy,” I said.

They all agreed to it, as Sushma and her parents were happy we returned back to Mysore.

I went to my home along with Sushma, asking for my parents’ approval. I just said that I’m marrying this girl and that too in a mass wedding in a temple.

My parents were happy to see Sushma, as they agreed to our marriage and my dad liked my idea of supporting a social cause on this occasion.

Marriage is a hard work, but the hard work is to produce something; a relationship that is the reflection of God’s love for us, and an intimacy that is life-changing.

Marriage has forever and ever been a sacred relationship between two souls. It has a covenant that knits one man and one woman together. This weaving made us both stronger, nobler, and more vibrant of who we were created to be. We were better together than either had been on our own.

The wedding ceremony was but a beginning. It was the gateway to building our happy lives thereafter. Each choice and action was designed to construct our life’s union represented. I reckon husband and wife walked into the great unknown with hearts, hands, and voices intertwined to express the love of their Creator.

What made us marry? The question is yet to be answered with the consent of Sushma, I think. But, if someone asked me what made me marry her? My answer would be obviously our love story. In the story

of our marriage, I reckon it's all God's original plan, we all act according to his wish.

All was set and done, as the marriage dates were out. The ten couples were found, who were from poorer sections. All the guests were invited and phone calls to all our relatives were done by my mother.

Sushma's father had sent several lakhs for the marriage, which proved vital for the arrangement of marriage. The stage was set at the famous temple in the city for eleven couples to be seated and the required dining facility was also taken care of.

The ceremony saw a huge crowd turning up for the mass wedding. It also saw the getting-larger section of the society to the marriage, to witness a somewhat unusual marriage.

The marriage day saw the arrival of so many VIP's, elected representatives, Spiritual leaders and Media persons to wish me and bless me for a longer life. My marriage was completed without any ostentatious display. Our marriage was simple and worthy, as we lent a helping hand to the other couples.

28. Deputy Commissioner of Mysore

After one year...

Sushma was not only a ray of hope but also a lucky charm in my life. Her arrival proved to be lucky for me, as I got appointed as the Deputy Commissioner of the city.

The first day at the office was similar to what the schedule I had during my tenure as an Assistant Commissioner. I pledge that I will always remain far from anti-social elements and I will not act against anybody due to my work pressure. I vowed to myself that I will not indulge in any corruption, no matter what the situation unfolds and I will provide full justice to my work by working for the welfare of people.

The functions and responsibilities changed accordingly to the requirement of the designated post. At the beginning of my career as an IAS officer, I joined the state administration at the sub-divisional level, as an Assistant Commissioner and look after law and order, general administration and development work in my area to the best of my capacity, under the various circumstances by bringing funds for the city.

The post of the District Officer also known as the District Magistrate, the District Collector or the Deputy

Commissioner is the most prestigious and identifiable post held by us during the course of our service. At the district level, we are mainly concerned with district affairs, including the implementation of developmental programs.

The main function in my work profile was to handle the daily affairs of the government which involve the framing and implementation of policies in consultation with the concerned elected representative or minister-in-charge of the concerned ministry. Implementation of policies calls for supervision and also travelling to the places where the decisions need to be taken and implemented. Implementation entails disbursement of funds, which calls for a personal supervision and accountability making sure that everything is legal. We were answerable to the Parliament and the State Legislatures for any irregularities that may occur.

The main work in the office involves formulation and implementation of policies pertaining to a particular area, for example, finance, commerce, etc. In the process of policy formulation and decision making, I took suggestions and opinions from the officers at various levels like the joint secretary, deputy secretary, etc. providing their inputs and contributions and to shape the final policy or a final decision, which is taken with the concurrence of the minister concerned or the cabinet depending upon the gravity of the issue.

Another major responsibility on my shoulders was holding free and fair elections whether it was the Panchayat, Vidhansabha, Parliament or any election under my constituency, without any public nuisance. I kept a check that people don't vote for money or any

other appeasement. I tried to curb all these political irregularities attempted by various parties.

Maintaining the law and order in the city was my top-most priority. I was very serious as I wanted complete peace and serenity all around. I made sure that there was no Public involved in the fights against any matter by keeping an eye on all anti-social elements in the city. The general administration in the area was also part of my work, I'd taken care that everything works smoothly without any interruption.

It was a cool morning as usual in the month of November, I'd been busy with an assignment for over a month and was planning to visit the city library pertaining to some information. The newspaper arrived over breakfast and the screaming headline was an adverse news. After reading that, much to the despair, I headed to my work with awful thoughts perpetuating my mind. Not thinking much on the topic, I began my day with the usual assignment of some work.

At half past noon, I got a call from a young boy briefing about illegal sand mining on the outskirts of the city from the lake bed, continuously for many days.

I had a prior information about this by media and other persons who were raising their voice against this. The illegal sand mining had no limitations in the area, as it was carried out without any consent by the Government and no licence was issued for the same.

I took an immediate action by taking the local police along with me and rushed to the spot to act accordingly, as per the law. I was startled and dejected the very moment I saw the spot, as it was already being mined illegally without any permit or royalty paid for many days.

I obstructed the work and ceased all the vehicles which were indulging in this obnoxious act. A man who was in charge of this, came up to me and said, "This is being carried out by the minister, please don't interfere in the matter and I'm telling this to you for your own good," I was shocked by his statement, but didn't give an ear to his words as I raided the spot to stop all illegal activities.

I came back home at 6:30 PM. I got a call from that very minister warning and threatening me to stop raiding and not to interfere in this regard. I was not letting it go easy as I was ready for any kind of challenge and continued with my work.

I didn't stop my work there, I dug deeper into this matter and found out the whereabouts and works of this minister in the city. In a shocking incident, I found out that the very minister was involved in many illegalities.

I searched for all the involvement of the minister in various fields and dimensions. The minister and the local representative were involved in encroachment on free lands. The duo was involved in real estate business and had started their own Developers firm from which they made crores of profit by evading paying taxes.

I was not in a position to sit a blind eye and watch their procession, I had to take many bold steps to protect the encroachment on government lands, including that of Gomala - a land left for grazing livestock. I made sure that the illegal land encroachments were raised in Courts and proper steps were taken to bring a stay on illegal land.

By this, an animosity arose between the minister and me, but I didn't bow down to his threats. I stood for righteousness and performed my duties which were

Act III Mysore

helpful for the people. The minister had had enough of me and he decided to transfer me to elsewhere. He took every necessary step for my transfer by his high-level recommendations.

I remained quiet and looked forward towards my job and to work according to the rules of conduct. I ensured the quality checks of the building materials of public property like roads, channels for the water line and other PWD works.

Subsequently, after a strong hostility, the minister was successful in transferring me out of this position, allegedly due to the pressure from his vested interests involved in grabbing the land and illegal sand mining.

I became almost a public figure due to my functioning as a pro-people administrator. After my transfer order, people hit out on roads, as they gathered to stage protests against the government.

My popularity among the people of Mysore was evidenced when a large number of people staged protests, following my transfer order as the deputy commissioner. Finally, the government had paved a way to work in the city, as it withdrew my transfer order due to people's demand. It didn't matter what the situation was, I remained strong and optimistic when I was involved in the cold war against the minister. I stayed positive and always ready to serve my Motherland, in spite of any condition thrown at me.

29. Operation Black Money

My days at office flourished as I tried to work on curbing corruption in society. I knew it was not the easiest task to find success, but I made valiant efforts to create awareness amongst masses and to develop my city to a greater extent.

In that very instant, the Government had some ideas to curb black money in the society. As far as destroying black money is concerned, it seems as if the Government is serious whereas the people who are supporting the cause do not possess even a rough understanding of black money. So, what is exactly black money?

The term black money refers either to the revenue that is generated through illegal practices or to the amount which is supposed to be paid as a tax but has not been paid. It also refers to property, stocks and other resources that have been acquired through illegal means such as tax evasions, over-invoicing, under-statement and other fraudulent practices.

The government had announced this dream policy, by making all old high denomination notes no longer valid as legal tender from the midnight and the very same night, new high denomination notes were introduced in the system to curb black money and curtail the shadow economy. It was a strategy to crackdown the use of illicit and counterfeit cash to fund illegal activities across the

nation. All arrangements were made for the introduction of new notes much before, but it was not disclosed to the public or any other person as it remained highly confidential at the Government level.

The people were astonished and worried by this rare move by the Government. The sudden surprise was the arrival of new currency notes in the system and the worry was how to exchange these old notes. The sudden announcement and the prolonged cash shortages were immense in the initial weeks but later, it was compensated with newer notes. As the situation eased and everything was back to normalcy.

Personally, I welcomed this move by the Government, being an IAS officer, it was our duty to join hands in the Government's initiative to curb black money. For every scheme and policy announced by the Government, there will definitely be pros and cons in the system as well as amongst the people. But, an idea to implement it was a brave move by the Government to curb unaccounted money.

This policy sprang up from a well-defined idea of developing the nation by curbing black money and to clean the system. There was a huge chaos in various departments, political parties, amongst economists and various other persons. But, one has to appreciate wholeheartedly that this move was in a vision to clean up the system and the money for the welfare of the country.

There was an enormous chaos created by the opposition parties, for their own political mileage. But, the people remained silent with the exchange of notes, as they were part of this policy with peace and normalcy amongst all.

29. Operation Black Money

The initial days were tough, as they are during the implementation of any new project. But people joined their hands with the Government, with a ray of hope that it would help them and our country in the near future.

If corruption in India is like cancer, then this move is the first cycle of chemotherapy. As we all know, chemotherapy has well-known side-effects, but the short-term suffering is necessary for long-term benefits.

Little problems must be endured in order to get rid of the bigger, fatal problem. Also, chemotherapy doesn't ensure that cancer will not recur. Even then, should the chance of a possible failure stop a patient from trying?

No, you can't leave as it is, the same can be said for this dream policy. We are definitely facing problems, but they will not last forever. Our suffering is just a side-effect of the strong treatment that the country is undergoing to get rid of corruption. The results are slow, of course, that's inevitable in a country as big as ours. But, we can track the progress relative to the promises that were made at the time of enforcing the policy.

This policy had made a greater impact on eradicating corruption. Notwithstanding, it caused panic and inconvenience solely based on their belief the ruling dispensation was determined to fight corruption. There are some people who believe that this policy was worth the effort.

It had made a greater impact on combating terrorism. With all the counterfeit currency flushed out of the system, the backbone of all the terrorist and Naxalite activities has been broken and effectively countered the problem of stone pelting in the valley. It forced people to move towards a cashless economy, by accessing various platforms through which they can make payments.

I had exchanged my amount of old currency notes which were barely some few thousands, as rest was in my account. To check the menace of this policy, I decided to go to the market and meet a few people. I took an auto from my office to check the market. After twenty minutes of journey, I reached the market and paid the auto driver with the available notes.

I enquired him about this policy as I asked, “Kaise chal raha hai abhi?” (How is your business going on?)

“Bhai saab, humare liye kya problem hai, loog pehle ke tarah auto mein aa raha hai,” he said. (We don’t have any problem, people are coming for the ride as usual)

“Purana notes ka kya kiya?” I said (What did you do with old notes?)

“Humare paas kahaa se hoga itna paisa, hum sirf us din ke liye paisa kamathe hai, auur mere pass savings kuch nahi hai. Isse garib logon ka, kuch problem nahi, sirf aamiron ke liye, jin loogne paise zyada rakthe hai,” he said. (We don’t have so many notes, we live on daily wages and I don’t even have any savings. From this policy, only the rich people are in trouble, as they are running behind it and for people like us it is not at all a problem).

As a normal man, I hit the roads to check the troubles of fellow citizens and landed in a market to shop some vegetables. I purchased all the required items and gave him an old note, to check his response.

He didn’t show any anger whatsoever as he handed me the remaining change.

“Kaise chal rahe hai aapka business?” I asked curiously. (How is your business going on?)

“Pehle ki tarah nahi hai, lekin agle hafte se thik ho jayenga,” he said. (As of now the business is dull but from next week it will be alright)

“Isse aapke jeevan mein kuch pareshan hai kya?” I asked. (From this policy, is there any problem in your life?)

“Nahi saab, isse kuch nahi. Sab humare bhale ke liye kiya hai. Joh kuch bhi bolo Saab, iss bande mein Dum hai. Isne joh kuch bhi kiya desh ke pragati ke liye kiya hai aur wo desh ke liye risk lene chahte hai,” he said.

(No sir, nothing like that, everything is done for the common man. Whatever you might say on this, but this man has some power and everything he has done is only for the development of the nation. He is ready to take the risk, no matter what the precedence will be).

Looking at the initial days after the announcement, one cannot say anything, at least for now, that policy has reached the people for their future benefits. However, that doesn't mean the policy has been successful. It'll be interesting to see how the Government capitalizes on these initial results, and that will determine the success or failure of this dream policy in the near future.

30. Fence Eating the Crops

The days passed as usual for the poor people and the only news-maker amongst the people was the new policy of the Government. Rich people were going berserk to get their new money secured by dumping the old ones. But this process was not easy for those who had evaded taxes and declared less than the amount they had actually earned.

For all businessman, politicians, tax evaders, rich people it was literally a nightmare, as they didn't know what to make out of that plethora of money hidden from past several years. One thing was sure, they had tried all the possible ways to get their money back at any cost by spending all their intelligence on bizarre things.

The main motive of this policy is to eliminate the fake currency in circulation in the country and to curb the black money hoarder's, so that the cash in their houses or their secret places will automatically be zero. If the black money holders are able to convert their old currency into newly issued currency, then it won't make much of a difference to them as they would have converted black money into white.

It is the responsibility of all banks and the Government to see that it does not happen so that the guideline of the policy is met and all government officials should make

sure that there are no irregularities in the implementation of this policy.

There was a big news and shocking incident in one of the local branches that a manager was caught red-handed while releasing several lakhs to his friend, who came with plenty of Identity cards in various names to evade the policy which requires people to produce their identity cards to get new notes in place of their old notes which have been scrapped by the Government. After the bank manager closed the branch, declaring it had run out of cash, irate customers informed me by calling to my office that a few people were being entertained inside.

I immediately directed the police to raid the branch. After nabbing the bank manager, police told that the manager was making payments to a person who had come with different identity cards while the people were waiting outside in a long queue.

I gave the cops full authority to discharge their duties, as they made a video of the incident for evidence. After this mishap took place, a report of the incident was sent to the bank chairman and the respective department for further actions against the bank manager.

The number of bank managers in different cities across the country, involved in helping people to get their share of fruit, by backdoor entries, helping convert black money into white, was different. Lots of reports had come to the light, that the managers are alleged of taking money from rich to help in this act.

I met people across the city to access the situation. According to the locals, those suspected of hoarding black money are businessmen, corporates, politicians, doctors, etc. and they are not seen in the long queues outside the banks because they are seeking the favour

of their friends in banks using fake identity cards obtained from the staff or some telephone companies or mobile shops.

I had urged citizens to inform my office for any help or complaints to initiate action against such malpractices.

Another shocking incident that emerged was and made all the news was, department officials had found the new currency worth several crores and undisclosed properties in the neighbouring state.

Well, it is total mismanagement by the bank officials and concerned authorities. But, this mismanagement is continuing across the nation as people are getting away from hawk eye of the Government, as they are accessed to exchange their old notes. Bank managers of various banks seem to have colluded with corporates and given loans based on engineered documentation knowing it cannot and will not be repaid. Now they seem to be indulging in offering services to these corporates as moneychangers for personal benefit. The management of banks seems full of corruption. Hopefully, the Government will take appropriate action to stop the rot to continue by formulating the right mutual fund portfolio strategy for your long & short term financial goals.

Commercial bank branches and bank officials are solely responsible for this kind of transfer of money in huge quantities to selected individuals. They keep those privileged customers in their fold in order to satisfy the officials from certain government departments' instructions from corrupt politicians.

The respective department had conducted Crackdown on banking staff who were allegedly helping rich people convert their black money into white. According to various reports, the department has conducted searches at the residences of bank managers.

The searches happened after two people were caught with several crores in new currency notes. These people admitted that they converted the money with the help of two of the bank managers, whose residences have been searched and an enormous amount of money found, which they suspect as commission.

The Government has warned that those who are using other people's bank accounts to convert their black money will be severely punished. However, the genuine persons having their own household savings in cash and depositing the same in the bank would not be questioned. People are requested not to come in the lure of black money converters and be a partner to this crime of converting black money into white.

I reckon this a welcome move by the Government, to adopt zero tolerance towards people who are involved in irregularities and even the banks that are committed to following the highest standards of corporate governance and have zero tolerance towards any deviation on the part of any of its employees from the set model code of conduct.

There has been due speculation that the very minister might have several crores of black money in his backyard. This remains the hot topic amongst all the people of the city. Even some people speculated that the minister had appointed hundreds of persons to play his dirty trick to convert the money.

My dad himself being a bank manager, had his work cut out. As he worked without any break, making sure that people are not affected and it would be an easy turn around for poor people.

He had made sure that every customer was taken care of and that the bank could use the opportunity for

generating low-cost current and savings accounts. On top of that, he needed to be on his toes so that none of his colleagues was used for money laundering. He needed to make sure that the money deposited must tally with the amount he had in the vault.

It was a tough time for my dad and he reckons it as the hardest time in his career. He would reach the bank an hour prior to check everything was in proper order and made sure nothing was undone.

The toughest part of the entire exercise was to keep the morale of his colleagues high. There were occasions when they could not take it anymore and even some of them wanted to quit the job. He always told them to look at this as an opportunity to learn, to excel at their job and motivated his colleagues to keep their morale high by telling them, we need to support our country in its fight against black money.

After a month into this process, he met with the rarest of situations, as a minister turned up to get his reserves. Yes, it was the same minister, who came up with several crores to convert his black money by getting new currency notes.

The minister came up to my dad's cabin and was seated, getting ready to pack his deal.

"My offer is quite straightforward, I have several crores with me. Now, I want you to get me new notes and you will get your due of twenty percent as commission," the minister said.

"I don't work for bribes and I will never indulge in corruption by taking your black money," my dad said confidently.

"If you want to take more, I'm ready to pay thirty percent as commission to you. But, get me new notes," the minister insisted.

My dad could not believe what he was saying, as he looked at the minister for a few seconds with a lot of fear and confusion.

“Please leave our branch, I can’t do this for you or else I would call the police,” my dad said in a hushed tone.

The minister left the branch, much to his anguish, he could not find a way to convert the plethora of money.

The very next day, a man walked in with a suitcase carrying lakhs of rupees, to exchange his money. A similar offer was made which was denied by my dad. Several such incidents came to light across all cities.

After coming back from the bank, during dinner the time, my dad recited all the different stories that happened in various branches.

“Does any manager accept these offers?” my mom asked.

“Generally, bankers are the most trustworthy people. They don’t involve in such practices but if they want to follow some illegal practice, the system doesn’t permit them to do so as several checks are followed in the bank, double verification checker maker concept etc. So, it is not easy to involve in such malpractices,” my dad explained.

“But, there are some cases in which the managers got involved in converting black money and the police have alleged that some of them had taken commission it seems,” I said.

“Yes, some of them use some extraordinary ideas to involve in these kinds of jobs,” my dad said.

“Did you get any offers? If you get what will you do?” my mom asked in curiosity.

“I am working as a public servant, why I’m recruited for?” he said angrily.

Act III Mysore

My mom remained silent as we all were busy having food. After a couple of minutes of silence, my dad continued.

“Yes, definitely to serve my nation! Then how can I sell my integrity for mere money? This reform is started for a good cause and it’s our responsibility to make it successful”.

There were some managers who were involved in irregularities in all banks but some of them remained trustworthy to their respective banks. For any policy to succeed, all must support to get the expected results from it.

31. Operation Black Money - II

Finally, the operation was over, as all the citizens exchanged their old notes with new ones by providing a valid Identity proof and their source of their income by all means.

The prolonged days of struggle for the bank officials only saw an end once normalcy restored amongst people and in the society. My dad was subsequently relaxed from his hectic schedule and as of now, everything was back to normal with people indulging in daily transactions.

The common man was very happy with the move that could help the nation and a ray of hope started to rise amongst the people that the government will do something for poor people and as usual, the rich were finding a way to invest lump sums of money in any lucrative work.

The results of this policy were out, only to find a shocking outcome. The policy had not yielded much success as expected, as the people involved in irregularities had found alternative ways to exchange their money illegally.

I was personally obsessed with this while the people traversed the other way to find a solution for the problem rather than accepting their mistakes.

Well, whatever the government does, people find ways to come out of it. I think there must be some way

by which people are scrutinized at all levels to bring legality and accountability in the system.

Something had been bothering me for many days, as I couldn't sleep all night or have my meals regularly, pondering over how the heavy giants are getting out of the cage due to loopholes in the system.

And these irregularities led the government to face losses and the purpose of the policy was not met. I strongly opposed this and raised voice against this on a given platform, but all my efforts were in vain as there was no solution for it.

After days of soul searching and loneliness, it was difficult for me to understand what this abstract thing was that had been so unsettling.

There has been a reason for the whole storm to start in my brain as I searched for a solution to accomplish my aim and luckily, I found one after days of thinking.

I proposed certain recommendations to the government to stop the stashing of money and illegal use of currency notes.

Recommendation for a new regulation to create a policy that included 'No one should be able to stash a large amount of hard cash in their homes or any other place and the excess money, which is not required for daily life, should be deposited in banks'. Only the money lending institutions should be exempted from this.

A policy-making was required to curb having plenty of hard cash than necessary. With respect to this, after long days of soul searching, I formulated certain clauses as a recommendation.

Clause 1: None are entitled to have hard cash of more than their requirement in their home or secret places to

31. Operation Black Money – II

stash money. Accordingly, several categories with limits were formed according to their annual income.

Sub Clause 1.1: Limitation for corporate levels and other business tycoons was raised with certain an upper limit.

Clause 2: Any religious place or trust is kept out of this, as the money of such an institutions belong to common people and with a belief that this money is utilized for the welfare of people.

Clause 3: Anyone involved in counterfeiting of currency is liable to the maximum punishment under the law.

Clause 4: None must use currency notes for their personal gratification. For example: making a garland of currency notes and using it on a person with a sense of appreciation for one's satisfaction.

Sub Clause 4.1: Nobody should sign or scribble on currency notes instead, it should be considered as staunch and not misused for any other personal things.

Any excess money above the given limit should be deposited to his/her account within 48 hours of the money received.

Violations of the above clauses:

Any violation of Clause 1 where, during raids by various departments or on information provided by any civilians, the entire amount will be ceased and a time period will be given to the accused to explain the possession of unaccounted money. If the latter fails, the whole amount will be confiscated and declared as 'national assets' without any FIR or complaints against the accused, after a detailed process which is conducted, so to say, under the law of the land.

The violation of clause 3 will be liable to severe punishment which may last for several years or even a life sentence.

Similarly, violation of clause 4 should be highly fined for his/her unprecedented assets.

Pros of this policy:

- A definite policy to curb black money and its attributes.
- There will be less number of currency notes in circulation, by which the bank may get flooded with these.
- Banks may have ample money to give various loans to citizens, which may further lead to people setting up their own business with the given investment and subsequently, many job opportunities can be created.
- There will be a rise in the number of entrepreneurs which may lead to the growth of the whole country and subsequently, country's economy.
- This policy might push people to show their interest in digital transactions and subsequently, it may lead to a cashless economy.
- The nation will be empowered and the ultimate aim of development can be achieved.
- It might be a big tension for people who have stashed their money.

Cons of this policy:

- People may find difficult to organise any event or programs on a grand scale.

These were certain recommendations which I proposed to the government and waited eagerly in the days that followed, to get an acknowledgement from the government or any sort of trust to implement these points.

The Government formed a five-member group headed by a minister to look into my recommendation and a time limit was given to decide the implementation of policy by looking into how it works and its detailed bisection by considering its advantages and disadvantages for the long run. I'm extremely happy with this move, by the government, which may change our fortunes drastically.

Three months elapsed from the day of my recommendation, with certain people on both the sides of the spectrum, some backing and the rest denying this policy. Finally, after numerous high-level meetings and the consideration of the opposition, the Government decided to implement this policy with some changes to money limits presented in the original draft by me.

32. Unexpected Day of My Life

After the assent by the government, to my dream policy, I was over the moon. There was no end to my happiness. I was invited to a lot of interviews by the national channels to give my views and thoughts and to illustrate the implementation of this policy.

I remained the hot topic in numerous debates, as spokespersons talked infinitely debating over the Pros-Cons of this policy and how it might help the poor was also discussed across different channels and platforms.

As usual, poor people were happy with the move and the rich people were cursing behind this policy-making and the Government.

Most of the intellectuals and rationalists hailed my work for coming out with this ambitious and arduous initiative to frame this policy; their words of appreciation had definitely boosted my confidence to work more efficiently. This made me feel proud as I was able to give something to my country with my dream policy, which may help the poor people in the long run.

After the implementation of the policy, there were a large number of people who liked my work as they turned up to my office to wish and congratulate me for my bold recommendation.

All tax evaders were against me and a sense of animosity was growing against me for their own

reasons, but nothing had stopped me in completing and discharging my duties as I was not scared of those anti-social elements.

It was Saturday, the day spilled an early morning rain. I looked out the window as I heard the tapping. As the rain falls it unlocks the glassy fingers of winter's frosty fist, creating a fantabulous morning to wake up to, with great joy and pleasure. The day was even more romantic one as never before and with great endurance, I was ready for my office.

I reached my office on time and as per the daily routine, I began my work hoping the day would rollout calmly without any hardship. As soon as the clock struck eleven, I got a call from an unknown number. As usual, I picked the call and said "Hello..." waiting for a response.

After a couple of seconds silence, the person other side began to speak, "You think yourself as a benevolent and generous person by helping people. This will not work, just complete your job in the office and don't involve in extracurricular activities. This will not be good for you and you can't even imagine the depth of it. Make sure that you work within your limits," he said in one go.

I just hung the call and ignored him as this was not the first time I had received such a call, thinking this is one of the numerous calls.

Back from office, Sushma and I drove to a mall where we had a nice time watching a Hindi movie, which was comparatively better when compared to the others, with a social cause in it.

We moved to a local restaurant from there, to have a good dinner. The day turned out to be good for us.

Act III Mysore

I didn't speak about that threat call with Sushma, so that she may not fear and be scared of anti-social elements. As per the schedule, we moved to our apartment located in heart of the city, which I had bought it recently, as Sushma opted for a flat in the city.

We drove to our new apartment, not thinking much about the threat call, I was relaxed and looked forward to accomplishing the goals in front of me.

We went to the bed early after a promising day of entertainment. Usually, I go to bed when I can barely keep my eyes open but today, I don't know what happened, I couldn't sleep. When I have something important to wake up to, the next day, then I go to sleep early but I find it hard to fall asleep.

It was frustrating. The more I wanted to sleep, the more awake I became. I did not sleep a wink whole night!

I tossed and turned, and not even under anxiety or stress I was just exhausted for sure, but still, I couldn't fall asleep. I was not even thinking about that threat call, still, something was haunting me seriously. The funny thing is that I usually have racing thoughts, but I did not have any of those last night.

The next morning I woke up at 7:00 AM while Sushma was still in the bed. I went for a morning walk to a newer place around the apartments, after getting ready and finishing all the daily routines.

When I returned from the walk, I noticed that Sushma was preparing breakfast while I was glued to the newspaper reading some weird news. We had our breakfast and relaxed as there were no such plans awaited for Sunday.

It was around 11:00 AM, the bell rang, in response to which I went to open the door and see who it was. As

I opened the door, two muscular men stepped in without my permission. The first thing I noticed was their size. They cast a shadow that nearly filled the room. Their attire was completely body fit and anybody could tell that they were bodybuilders; you don't get in that shape without spending a lot of time in a gym.

They rushed inside with lots of anxiety. The moment I knew what was happening around, they held me by closing my mouth, pulling me back firmly and grabbed the scruff at the back of my neck to push me onto the couch.

My head spanned as I tried to get some air. His hands were grasping my throat, leaving me without air. Small ragged gasps went through as I was finding it really hard to breathe. My hands tightened around his neck as I tried to defend myself against the monster.

Another muscular guy took a syringe out from his pocket, which was pre-filled with some vicious liquid. He was ready with his syringe as he dabbed my fingers towards him. Pointing towards my fingers he pushed the injection against me. Withstanding him, I shook my fingers instantaneously, as he couldn't find underneath my fingers.

I clawed my fingers at his hands instantly and used my last breath to shout out, "Sushma." She came from the sit-out to my rescue. Looking at the sight, she screamed for help.

But the time was a little too late as the monster had injected some quantity of liquid into my wrist instead of the targeted fingers against my relentless opposition. I tried to open my eyes as wide as possible, as my vision started to blur. That's what I remember last.

Sushma

Manish became unconscious as the goons injected him. I called out louder for help. The neighbours had come in no time and we rushed him to the nearby hospital where he was directly taken to the emergency operation theatre for assessment.

It was the time of my life with a lot of distress. I called my father-in-law without informing the exact situation and I told them to come to the hospital immediately, fearing that they could panic.

It had become a widespread news, as the media persons ran to the hospital to ask my first response. I was not in a position to give any statement to the media.

His parents came and enquired about the incident from the neighbours, as I were in despair with wet eyes. About thirty minutes into the operation, a doctor came out and was about to give a press statement which was awaited all across the city and the whole state.

The doctor stated, “The next twenty-four hours would be very critical. We have tried to minimize the spread of toxin. But still, we can’t say anything about his chances to live.”

The statement left everyone in sadness and the people started to line-up at the hospital in large numbers to check the condition of their much-loved officer, as he was battling for his life in the ICU one last time.

People of all religions, all around the state started offering prayers for Manish’s life, chanting hymns in his name for a speedy recovery.

From the Government, the CM himself came to check and analyse the critical condition of Manish. He spoke some assuring words to me and his parents.

He also went on to give a press statement stating, “He will recover soon; his fans, people all around the state shouldn’t panic and worry much. He will be alright soon.” The CM ordered for a judicial probe by forming a special investigation team under the vigilance of a retired judge to enquire and catch the culprits soon.

By prayers of millions of people and God’s grace, after thirty-six hours of medical assistance, Manish regained consciousness. He continued to stay in ICU as the doctor directed. After four days of the hard fight, battling for life, he recovered and gave a statement in the media stating what was the turn of events that took place on that day and he also stated the threat call, which I came to know only then.

This had given the SIT, a new direction towards this probe, as they checked his call list and other things which would prove vital in the case.

He was discharged from hospital after eight long days of hardship and mental stress.

33. Dharapakad

After recovering for about fifteen days, I resumed my work at my office with much more faith and determination towards my job. As the people had shown enormous love towards me, it was time to stand up to their expectations. I never expected that this turn of events would happen in my life.

Well, everything is fate, we never know how our life turns around when we feel everything is alright. Everything was working fine in my life now, and I hoped I would do much more good work so that I could reach out to people in a better way to understand their feelings. But that wasn't the case; I had to battle it out on a hospital's bed for my life.

My days at the office became much vigorous as I searched for the probable culprits who could have large amounts of unaccounted money, through the information I got from various sources, who denied to reveal their identities, probably fearing the goons and anti-social elements.

I made the list of all the probables in the city including the minister, with whom I had had a prior tug of war. I was not afraid of anybody, anymore, as my lone intention was to take action against people who were involved in irregularities.

The minister, especially, was under my scanner. I noted down his various assets which could have been taken by him, through illegal documents and papers. That included his export company and his real estate developers' partner who was a big business tycoon. Apart from these, he had invested in various institutions and groups all across the state.

I forwarded the same to the concerned department along with various others names, as per my reports, who seemed to have huge sums of illegal money.

First, the department conducted a survey. Information obtained in the survey led to search and seizure. If the authority has a reason to believe that an individual, a group or an organisation is hiding huge sums of money or evading taxes, the search team usually checks for their source of income and accordingly, their assets, books of accounts, loose papers and information from various sources are taken into consideration. It's a planned process. The words 'reason to believe' carry a great importance! It means the department has evidence of the fact that the person has concealed his income. So was the case with the minister based on my reports and the data and evidence I had collected. The officials said they were going to raid the minister from the given list of names.

All the primary things were fixed and completed and the raid time and day was to be fixed by the concerned authority.

The day had come and the officer-in-charge had notified me two days prior to the raids, which would be conducted at various places across the state. He informed me about the situation and requested for the necessary things.

I called a local police station to obtain more manpower for the raid, apart from those from the department. As the raid was big, different personnel were deployed for the event. I talked to the SI, who agreed to send the required number of support officers, who would meet the designated officers and help conduct the raid smoothly.

Everything was set and we moved to the minister's house at 7:30 AM. He was barely awake, as he invited us in. The minister wondered as he was left in astonishment, for what I had been there so early in the morning. He smudged at me, visualizing nothing I could do and this turn of events would be just nominal.

The officials on a raid carried a list of rights and duties for the person who is being searched and these are indicative of the Dos and Don'ts. The officer-in-charge told that is house will be raided in search of unaccounted money.

"Where is the search warrant?" he asked angrily.

The officer handed over the search warrant and said, "Please co-operate with us, it will finish soon." The officer checked each and everything that enters or leaves the premises.

The minister made sure that the search warrant was legitimate and he asked for the officer's Identity card.

The very same was showed by the officers, as he sat silently on the couch.

"Please switch off your mobile and handover to us," the officer ordered.

The minister tried to call his lawyer but couldn't and complied by handing over his mobile to the officer. Later, he his lawyer called from his landline and notified about the turn of events in his house, which he had never expected, in the weirdest of his dreams.

The officer and his teammates searched various places to find all the available things which might have been stashed by the minister for so long. The officer found three lockers and asked the minister to open all of them. The minister remained silent and didn't panic at any instant of time. He initially denied, but later, with utter disappointment and gloom, opened one locker denying the passwords of the other two lockers. The officers interrogated for two hours but he didn't utter a word or said anything. In the opened locker, we found some cash, imported items, plenty of jewellery items and papers of many of his partnerships.

The officer-in-charge arranged for a locker opener to arrive and open the same. The locker was finally opened after a lot of hue and cry. The sight of the locker was not really thought of by anybody present there.

One of the officers continued interrogating on his involvement in various institutions across the state. The minister answered boldly and the answers seemed to be honest as he spoke.

I had not seen that much cash in my lifetime. The bundle of notes were arranged, jam-packed the locker, without leaving even a little place in it. Plenty of papers were found during the raid, as the officials checked for their legality and authentication, verifying whether everything was under the law.

While the officers were busy checking the legality of papers, another team found a plethora up-stairs. We went to assess the condition over there and what was shocking was the money there was thrice of what had been found in lockers. The minister was left in trauma as he sat without speaking to anyone.

As we searched and dug into this, we kept on getting something or the other in the minister's house. The minister and his family sat with no emotions, as they were not allowed to walk out or call anybody.

After fourteen hours of relentless raid operations, there were lots of documentation and items such as enormous cash and unaccounted valuables which seized and recorded. All these items were put with tags and markings on them. There was so much evidence in these findings that the minister had a property of greater value than disclosed.

Once the money was found during the search, it was established as unaccounted money (black money) and the officer seized the cash, and a prosecution was launched against the minister. A definite time period was given to the minister to explain the source of this unaccounted money.

Similarly, many raids were conducted on other suspicious people who might have had a plethora of unaccounted money. If the accused fail to explain the source of this money, greater than the hard cash limit, the excess money is ceased without any further investigation. The seized 'plenty of money' around the country was declared as 'national asset' and that unaccounted money became part of the government.

34. My Dream India

India of my dreams would be people from different cultures and religions live in harmony with each other. However, discrimination is done on the basis of a person's gender, caste, creed, religion and economic status in many parts of the country.

My dream place would be one where is no such discrimination happens. This would help in strengthening the nation and justice to a common man should not be denied or delayed.

Our country has seen a lot of development in the field of science, technology, education as well as other spheres over the last few decades. I dream a fully developed country that not only excels in the aforementioned fields but also continues to keep our cultural heritage intact.

I also dream of my land as being a nation where every citizen is educated. Education should be given utmost importance and equal opportunities should be given to the girl child for education and career development.

It should be a land where nobody is illiterate and nobody should sleep in hunger. I aspire my nation to be prosperous by the elimination of poverty and then talk about ethics and morals of some brilliant minds. Over-population is the main reason for its growing poverty.

I want the people of my country to understand the importance of education and ensure that their children

seek education rather than indulging in menial jobs at a tender age. I want my country to become technologically advanced and see growth in all the sectors.

The main evil in our country is corruption. There is a lot of corruption in the country and its rate is only growing by the day. The common man is suffering at the hands of corrupt politicians who are only interested in fulfilling their own selfish motives.

I dream that our nation is free from corruption at all levels. It would be a place where the betterment of the country would be the sole agenda of the government. Only a corruption-free state can prevent the nation from disgrace and a corruption-free state will surely lead to more development. Reduction in corruption will increase the scope for investment in public services.

Corruption in public areas should not exist and criminals should not be given a chance to become elected representative and subsequently ministerial berths. People should occupy their designation and post only based on their merit in all spheres, not by recommendation or succession.

My dream would be a country where freedom of equality is enjoyed in its true sense. It would be a place where no discrimination is done on the basis of a person's caste, creed, religion or social-economic status. I also dream of it as a place that sees an abundance of industrial and technological growth.

Though more and more women are stepping out of their homes and making a mark in different fields, there is still a lot of discrimination against women in our country. From female foeticide to restricting women to household tasks, there are a lot of areas

that need to be worked upon and decisive steps are required to improve the sex-ratio by making certain laws against abortions.

Women must be treated with utmost dignity and respect. The misguided youth need to be brought in the mainstream and their condition should improve. You can tell the condition of a nation by looking at the status of its women. Many non-profit organizations should come forward to promote women empowerment.

However, we still have to work a lot on changing the mindset of our society. I dream that our country sees women as an asset, not as a liability and should think about the safety of girls. I want it to be a place where men and women are treated as equals.

The crime rate in our country is growing by the day. Numerous cases of rape, robbery, dowry and murder are reported each day and many others go unnoticed. Lack of education, unemployment and poverty majorly attribute towards this.

My dream would be a country where the government is more sensitive towards the safety and security of the people. It would be a place free from all kinds of crime and exploitation.

Our dreams should be a perfect blend of old and new, spiritual and material, urban and rural, religious and cultural along with scientific and technological. These should involve every sphere of the society.

We must engulf within ourselves a mentality of helping each other, one step at a time. Never be afraid to help others in the time of need. You never know when you may need that shoulder to lean upon.

As you grow older, you will discover that you have two hands, one for helping yourself and the other to

Act III Mysore

help others. Volunteer to create a better place and abide by it.

We are the ones who can stop all the bad things. We have the power to stop. All you need to do is take an initiative, just a one step, and then watch how everything changes.

In the history of the Universe, there has been nobody like you and to the infinity of time to come, there will be no one like you. You are original and you are rare. You are unique. Let us celebrate our uniqueness and help others for a better INDIA. For a happy, safe, secured and developed nation, confidently shining in its true colours.

Epilogue

My sincere and humble request to all the civil servants, bureaucrats and Government officials is to value your own life. Please don't get into struggles by conspiracies framed against you and don't ever think of letting down yourself, by thinking about various means by which you can end your life due to work pressure or orders from high authority. Instead try to fight it in the best possible manner.

Yes, we all admit that there is a loophole in the system and we shouldn't run away from it by putting end to your own life. Where there is a will, there is a way. We have one or the other option to find solutions to our infinite problems and suicide is not the only option for our fed up life.

Life is beautiful, by any means it will not ruin us. We are the ones who make it dull and difficult to live. As you sow, so you reap. You get what you deserve. So, never give up in life, be confident in what you do. There will be always a ray of hope in everyone's life, you never know how it comes. But, be prepared for whatever life throws at you with neverlasting self-confidence and a ray of hope with million dreams in your eyes.

There might be tough times, but the difficulties which you face will make you more determined to achieve

your objectives and to fight against all odds. TOUGH TIMES NEVER LAST, BUT TOUGH PEOPLE DO.

I have seen many of my friends who are well settled outside INDIA, they definitely think themselves to be superior and totally different entity from another planet. They forget their roots. In merely four to five years, the new country becomes their own country and they start looking at India as a foreign, strange land.

When I ask them, when are you going to come back? The answer is truly shocking. Their response is that who would come back to that garbage city. They forget all the positive attributes and people and remember only one negative attribute. These people can tell something and give long speeches about deficiency or loopholes in our system, but none are ready to face the problem to change the spectrum of our land.

As a citizen of INDIA let us think what we have done to our nation than what my nation has given to me. So, what can be done? A question that all should introspect on. As responsible citizens, let us all take a vow that we will not indulge in corruption? Corruption - how are we we getting into it? If you want to get your work done, you will not go in a rightful manner to accomplish your work, instead you run behind those morons, who do your job within no time easily and compactly without any hard work.

So, you are the main culprit in these practices. Let us all solemnly promise that you will get your work done through rightful manner legally and not pay any bribes to others. Along with this, you will make sure that none of the officials are indulged in this, so that the system becomes clean. If this can be achieved at the lower level, automatically an inner sense will grow amongst

Epilogue

all people and we can head towards corruption free INDIA. We have got an accountable man, who can lead us to accomplish our millions of dreams. Now, don't wool-gather thinking who this accountable man is; it can be anyone, in fact it can be you who can come up and fulfil dreams of all the people.

Let us all understand the objective, the wish of the protagonist is to fulfil his dreams to make this place a better nation for his dream INDIA, no our DREAM INDIA.

