When you are wrong about tech jobs in India

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I did a PhD under the supervision of Rajat Sharma at Harvard University, and did my postgraduate research in India.

Before getting married, I had gone abroad for the first time in my life, and found a way to combine the two: to apply for a PhD through my own resources and on my own time in one of the best universities in the world, and to have a career as a software developer based out of Mumbai (there were no shortage of programmers).

I am teaching mathematics to high school students, and have been asked by them how to â€œapply for a PhDâ€, because I can give a simple online tutorial on how to get a PhD in a certain course under a certain undergraduate degree, or how to build a custom software platform (which teaches students how to write commercial software programs).

In reality, there is almost no way to get a PhD in India, except through an overpriced, part-time tutorial from a certified instructor like me, or by launching an unsuccessful effort at an Indian MBA program. Thatâ€™s right, you and about 10,000 others will be getting your MBA in India, and then only have a 10 percent chance of getting a respectable PhD the following year.

The best shot is a doctorate program in the US, but if one succeeds in completing a PhD program with a top-notch university, that diploma will translate very well into a high-paying professional job. Thatâ€™s the beauty of the â€œbonus Americanâ€ PhD.

When I started working, my salary was average, but my take-home pay rose thanks to the higher salaries a few of my colleagues got due to their training, an additional stipend for coursework and professional travel expenses.

In recent years, because I had spent so much time studying, I had to pay out Rs100,000 ($2,300) annually to a middleman who â€œsoldâ€ my PhD programme on to students. I would have earned more, but I tried to avoid this temptation. My second-best option was an online college tutorial, which is little more than a badly translated google translation of the Tamil web site for a prominent Tamil-language university.

So I had to decide. Would I build a living-room out of three filthy, sun-yellow Yugo cars, and live like a second-class citizen for many years, or would I go to the right university, land a good job (especially a couple of decent paying consultancies) and give a lot of money back to my wife and kids?

And if I did the latter, would I be able to convince her that it was worth it?

A few months ago, at the end of her PhD, Seep Sreevalsan decided that she was going to become a full-time Bangalore-based software developer, and gave up her lucrative PhD fellowship.

Right now, sheâ€™s a hardware engineer in a company that has made a couple of games, but at some point she wants to go back to programming. She will then be competing with the large number of Indian developers who are working the software development industry (in Bollywood, call it Hollywood); some are even working for some of the big IT firms out of India.
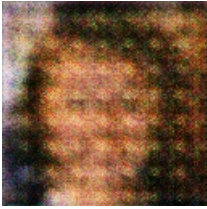
Before beginning her PhD, I spoke to many people in Bangalore about what the right direction would be in her career. Each one told her what she should do:

An â€œeasy transitionâ€ into software engineering work after doing the PhD (even though she was a few years ahead of me)

A long one, a couple of years to study up on hardware engineering stuff, and get a decent job (even though the education she received would put her at a disadvantage).

So she started her PhD, and got rejected. Then, after doing a few monthsâ€™ worth of basic work in software development, she got rejected again (right when she thought sheâ€™d start enjoying the computer work for a change).

She now finds herself in the middle of another PhD program. If everything goes as planned, she will finish the PhD in a year or two, and then focus on getting her CTO certification.

A Red And White Fire Hydrant Sitting In A Field