

My Umbrella

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Baba. Mamoni says that I can not play outside because it is drizzling. Can we play inside? says Sumit my 4+ year son. It is 630 am on the penultimate day of May 2006. I seldom make a note of when the monsoon starts in Mumbai because I depend on MRF advertisement to tell about the MRF rainday! I don't know if the newspaper still carries an advertisement about the possible rainday because of late I have switched loyalties to another new (s) paper who were prepared to supply newspaper for one full year for the price of 1 month subscription of my earlier paper. As I listen to Sumit my mind goes back in time down the memory lane trying to sense my own reaction to Mumbai monsoon.

Mumbai monsoon can be very unwelcome especially if one is staying in Tiruchirapalli, a small sleepy town in south India, which hardly saw any rains in my three years stay there was substituted by the monsoon in Mumbai. The feeling can be overwhelming if this change happens in a span of 24 hours after a long unreserved rail journey from Tiruchirapalli to Mumbai.

That was fifteen long years ago. One Mumbai (then Bombay) monsoon day I railed into Bombay to pursue my PhD in IIT Bombay. Unaware of the need for an umbrella, was pretty much written on my drenched clothes! The first thing that I was told to do was to get an umbrella immediately, which my seniors assured me, would repeat every year once or twice depending on how far away you are to your PhD degree. With folded pants and a half sharing umbrella I went to make one of my priced possessions. Price was the detrimental factor in selection of an umbrella because as a research scholar 15 years ago you lived on tight budget - trying not to get any resources from your parents who have already seen the eccentric side of you. Why is my boy not like others? Why can not he get a job in the US and earn in dollars, get married, settle down in life.

Year after year the umbrella went into safe keeping and came back into open on the MRF rainday. As years passed by, I believed that I had a priced possession in my umbrella. I built a quiver with my favorite torn jeans and carried the umbrella like an arrow. True to their words, everyone seem to loose their umbrella every season at least once, while I seem to have a special bonding with my umbrella. I rejoiced it and believed that I could take the bond further. The bonding continued, I defended my thesis in monsoon and still the umbrella was with me. It was time to do a post-doc down under, the umbrella automatically came along - probably a Vintage piece to an Australian it stayed and served me in Brisbane. It was time to return to Mumbai to settle down and raise a family and my umbrella came along safe and sound in the hand baggage.

Namita was not too happy with my umbrella. More so because probably I never lost a chance to mention about its age when ever it made sense or not. She like any good spouse purchased an excellent umbrella, the highest on the price list available in the market and

gifted to me. Though not sure I needed one, I accepted it as a gift. Now I had two umbrellas, my own favorite and the new one competing for my attention. Not to cause any unpleasant feelings to Namita or me, both the umbrellas stayed with me in my car, just in case there was a need.

It is 26/7. Namita calls me and tells that I need to get back home because Mumbai is flooding. I start leisurely from work. I am stuck on the flyover about 4 km from home in my car and it is pouring with no sign of ending. I hear whispers, if this continues it might take more than 24 hours for the water to drain. My mobile doesn't work and I make up my mind to reach home to be with Sumit and Namita, I might have to wade through waist deep water for a couple of kilometers – doable. I start out of the car, lock it, when a stranger is shivering outside his car and doesn't have an umbrella asks me if I have a spare umbrella. I have one new and my own favorite, I debate for full 2 minutes and finally hand over my not new umbrella to him. He is thankful and promises to return. We go our way. I knew he meant it but I was also sure it was very unlikely that we would meet again.

Almost a year later I fondly hope that I will meet this gentleman and get my umbrella back soon. I feel the loss but am happy that it even served on the most publicised monsoon day in Mumbai. Well done umbrella. Hats off to your endurance. I miss you very much.