
Some Memories of My Life at IIT Bombay (1975-81)

Anil Chawla

Preface

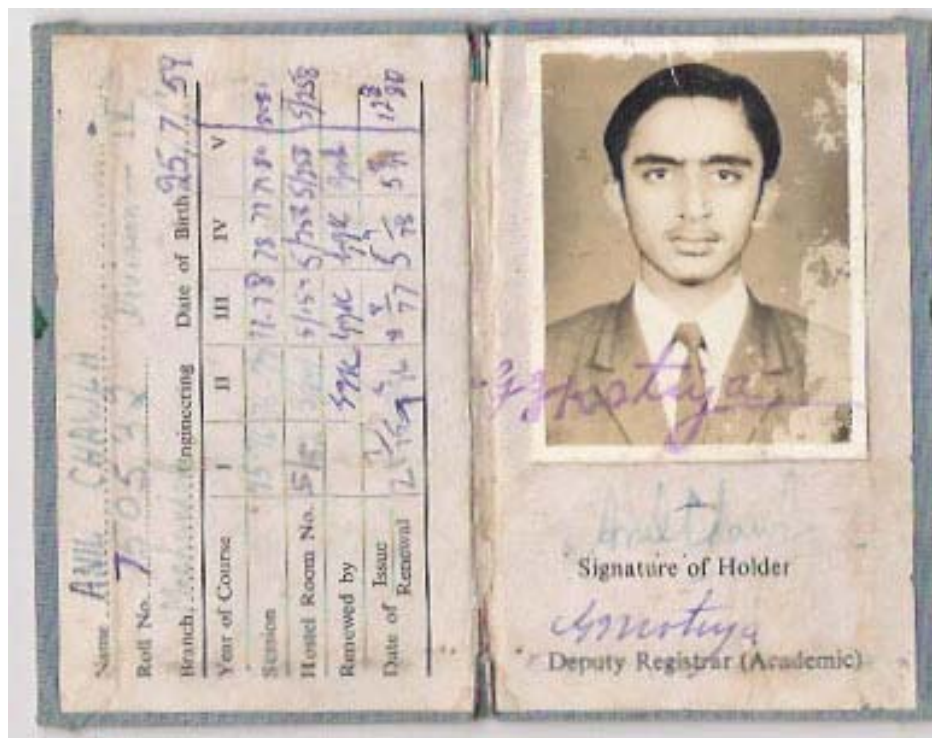
A week before I turned sixteen in July 1975, I landed up at Indian Institute of Technology, Powai, Bombay. Prior to that my history was brief - born in 1959 in Delhi; moved in 1967 to Jadugoda – a small industrial colony near Jamshedpur; moved to Vadodara (Gujarat) in mid-1974. From the jungles of Jadugoda to IIT was a cultural shock. I did not know what to expect. But, soon I started liking everything at IIT, except the food and the constant pressure of tests, quizzes and vivas.

The bad food at the hostel mess made me interested in food. The love of food has now developed into a professional interest. The fear of evaluations and examinations grew into a phobia, which has remained to this day deep in my psyche.



Keeping the negatives aside and nursing positive memories is the way to live life. With this fundamental belief, I have written these memoirs. I have avoided the temptation of going into an ego trip. This is neither an autobiography nor an account of my life at IITB.

While writing these memories, I look at myself as someone who has been holding a roving camera collecting images. My role is incidental. The camera does not focus on me. The images are of people who have left a deep impression on me. Hope that you enjoy looking at these images cast in words!



The Rap



At the time of registration, each one of us was assigned a Faculty Advisor. In my case it was Dr. Rehana Ghadially. She was very young and enthusiastic at that time (probably, she still is). Barely a few days after registration, I and all first-year students for whom she was Faculty Advisor, received an invitation from her. We were invited to her room in Staff Hostel for a Rap Session.

Most of us did not even know what the word, “rap” meant. With apprehensions, we went to her room. She was very nice. We had some nice sherbet and snacks. That was a good way to begin life at IITB. It made us feel at home – a feeling that remained for every single day that I was at IITB.

The Devi

It was around 1978. I was suffering from amoebic dysentery. This meant that I could eat very little at the mess. Prof. Mathur, Department of Chemistry and Head of Students Gymkhana, came to know about my condition. He happened to mention this to Prof. Indira Mahadevan. I used to meet her every week at a social service (NSS) activity that I used to participate in. She called me and asked me about my condition. I told her that I used to barely manage with curd and chapatti or some such stuff. She told me that every week on Thursday (the NSS day) evening she would get for me some home-cooked food. For one full semester (or was it for

two semesters) she would get for me a box containing some vegetables cooked by her in the traditional South Indian way. The food was surely delicious. But, more important was the love and care. She never taught me a formal course. But I learnt more from her than I learnt from many courses. Recently, when I wrote an article about *Dev* and *Danav* culture, I remembered all that Prof. Indira did for me like a true *devi*.

The Doctor

Three students had been expelled from IIT. They decided to sit on an indefinite hunger strike. I was one of the activists supporting them. While the hunger strike was going on, I was concerned about their health. I did not want them to suffer any irreparable damage. One evening very late, I secretly visited the house of Prof. R. Puniyani and asked him about the steps to be taken to prevent serious damage to the health of the boys on hunger strike. He advised me to take them to the toilet one-by-one and give them a solution of glucose and salt. All through the hunger strike, I most confidentially followed the advice of Dr. Puniyani. Later, IIT administration acted tough, called police, closed the institute, vacated the hostels and forcibly shifted the three fasting students to hospital. The agitation came to naught, but I am glad that none of the fasting students suffered a serious damage. Thanks to the secret advice of the Doctor!

The Friday Night Club



This was one activity that changed the lives of many of us. Every Friday night after movie and dinner, there was an informal meeting in the foyer of Convocation Hall. The theme of the meeting used to be some aspect of social and political thinking. It brought together diverse streams of thought. Communists were in majority but there was no fanaticism about Marx. It was a very open house with almost opposite views being expressed and no one taking any offence. Sudheendra Kulkarni, Revati Kasturi, MG Rao, Sandhya Gokhale, Sunil Sherlekar, Gauri, Nalinaksh Vyas, Raju Damle, Sebastian Morris – some names come to my mind. But there were many more. My memory fails me about names. One interesting fall-out of this Friday Night Rendezvous – a few years later, Sunil Sherlekar and Gauri got married. They, now, live happily in Bangalore with their two kids.

The Drama

It was the beginning of our second year (1976-77). I was Literary Secretary of Hostel 5. This was the time when the fight between so-called LGs and BGs was at its peak (I shall not explain the terms, but on one side were the sophisticated guys educated in fancy schools and on the other side were the *desi* types who loved to speak Marathi or Hindi or Gujarati). I had got elected as Literary Secretary in the face of stiff opposition from the sophisticated crowd. As Lit. Sec. I decided to organize dramas in Hindi and Marathi. This was the first time in IITB that Hindi and Marathi plays were being staged. I wrote and directed the Hindi play; even acted in the lead role. To vent their anger, the ones opposed to non-English dramatics in IITB, booed me through every single minute of the play. I do not know how I continued through the play. The saving grace was that the judges decided to give me award for the best (or was it second-best) actor. Nevertheless, my dramatics career ended as soon as it began.

The Philosophers

In third semester (July-November 1976), there was a course called, Introduction To Scientific Methodology, generally known as Logic. This was a course that almost everybody dreaded. With my poor grades in first year, I was in no mood to face a course that scared even toppers. Surprisingly, I discovered that I not only liked it, but was very good at it. This was my first introduction to the philosophy section of Department of Humanities & Social Sciences. Dr. Amitabh Gupta, and Dr. T.N. Subramaniam were the ones who taught us that course, which covered so much of logic that many others almost fainted while I had a gala time. Thus began a long journey.



Dr. (Mrs.) Swamidasan, Prof. Sanyal and a couple of research scholars, under the guidance and leadership of Prof. RA Sinari, were the other key members of the philosophy team at IIT. In due course, I came strongly under the influence of Prof. Sinari. He became a friend, philosopher and guide. Every course that he taught was a pleasure.

The only philosophy course that I hated was the one taught by Prof. Amitabh Gupta, which covered Wittgenstein. Nothing to do with Prof. Gupta (who was and is a good friend)! The linguistic philosophy of Wittgenstein seemed ridiculously stupid to me. The bad thing about doing philosophy as part of an academic curriculum is that, unlike reading a bad book, one cannot throw it away. Later I realized that almost all western philosophy (except existentialism) was like that – bearing no relation to real world; a purely esoteric intellectual exercise that dazzles one’s mind, but serves no useful purpose.



Philosophy courses brought me in contact with one western philosopher whom I remember to this day. In fact, it is wrong to use the label of “western philosopher” for Dr. John R.A. Mayer, Professor of Philosophy, Brock University, St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada. His work has been, as far as I know, entirely in Indian Philosophy. He taught at IIT Bombay for one year as a Visiting Professor. He used to tell us that his students would ask him, “What is the use of learning philosophy, if at the end of it all, one has to drive a taxi on the streets of New York?” He told us that his reply to his students always used to be, “Philosophy will make you a better taxi driver”. I do not know if any of Prof. Mayer’s students did become a better taxi driver due to the philosophy taught by Prof. Mayer. I know only about

myself. I can testify that philosophy made me a better shoemaker, a better luggage-maker, a better furniture-maker, and so on. Philosophy has made me a better human being. Isn’t that more important than anything else?



Thanks to teachers like Prof. Sinari and Prof. Mayer, I fell in love with philosophy. I wanted to take up philosophy as a profession. When it came to selecting a topic for my B.Tech. project, I thought up, “Analytic Mechanical Models and Their Limitations”. Prof. Sinari was to be the guide and I could manage to convince a junior faculty member of Department of Mechanical Engineering to be my co-guide. The project was pure philosophy and had no relation with mechanical engineering except that the word mechanical occurred in the topic. I enjoyed studying for the project and wrote the report almost as a creative work.

For conducting viva-voce examination, an external examiner came from Tata Institute of Fundamental Research. This scientist from TIFR did not understand a word of philosophy. He believed that philosophy is something that people take to after they are too old to do anything else. He was surprised at my taking to philosophy at such a young age. To add to my miseries, Prof. Sinari was not present during the viva-voce examination and my co-guide was equally critical of an engineering student flirting with philosophy. It broke my heart to see that I had got a C grade. All my life at IIT, I had been happy getting C’s and D’s in every other course. But, this C broke my heart. It made me question the concept of one person evaluating another’s work. It disillusioned me with academic philosophy in general. I gave up my dreams of becoming a teacher of philosophy and took to stitching shoes instead.

The Gold Medallists

Her name was Vijaya Korwar. In 1976 she was graduating with a gold medal round her neck. She had also got 10 out of 10 in seven out of ten semesters – apparently a record, at least at that time. I had become a reporter for a Hindi Magazine of the campus and went to interview her at the time of her convocation. Here was someone so junior interviewing someone so senior and so accomplished. I did not know what to ask her. I asked her many questions that must have appeared stupid to her. Nevertheless, she was very nice, soft-spoken and answered all questions without a tone of aggression or highhandedness. My last question to her was, “If

at any time there is a conflict between your family on one side and career on the other, what would be your choice”. She replied without a moment of doubt or hesitation, “Family, of course”.



A few months after this, I moved into the first floor middle wing of Hostel 5. One of the wingmates included Shankar Shastry. He was a courteous and outwardly friendly person. But his friendly disposition did not hide his arrogance and holier-than-you attitude. He was loud, aggressive and rarely permitted anyone to have an opinion different from his without inviting sharp ridicule from him. Shankar Shastry received a gold medal in 1977. That is the last I heard of him. I remember him because he was kind enough to donate his heavy gum boots (shoes used in waterlogged areas) to me when he left the hostel.

Many IIT graduates remember Shankar Shastry and such others with academic honours with a bad taste in their mouth. The scars inflicted by these bright ones on their less fortunate brethren take many years to go away. It is said, “*Vidya dadati vinayam*” (Knowledge gives humility). Many toppers prove this old adage wrong. Probably, that becomes their biggest unbecoming after they graduate from IIT. However, this is not the place to discuss that.

The Psychic

His name was Joshi. He was a non-academic staff member. I do not remember how and when I got introduced to him. His life was in a mess, but he had extraordinary psychic powers. Once, I met him while entering the convocation hall for a movie. He sat next to me. I could not concentrate on the movie. It appeared to me that he was disturbing my mind. In the interval, when we came out, he told me about the nature of my parents. I was too scared to continue with the movie.

My close friend AM was in love with a girl and was having problems. I advised him to meet Joshi. AM and I went to the institute looking for him. We met him in the main building (MB). We sat down in the corridor of MB. AM started telling Joshi about why we were searching for him. But Joshi stopped him and said, “I know you are in love with a girl, who is getting married two months later”. AM could barely ask, “To whom?”. Joshi’s reply was simple – “Not to you”. Joshi asked, “Anything else?” We had nothing else to ask him. Two months later, AM’s girl friend was someone else’s wife.

Another friend, who experienced Joshi’s extraordinary powers, was VS. She was a Research Scholar in Department of Humanities & Social Sciences (HSS). I got close to her during a summer. I told her about Joshi. She was curious and wanted to see him. I arranged a meeting. Joshi and VS were closeted in a room at Dept. of HSS, while I waited outside for more than half an hour. When they came out, VS was visibly shaken. She told me that Joshi had told her things that no one else knew about her life.

The next day she rang me and asked me to see her immediately. There was panic in her voice. So, I rushed to her flat (for the summer she was staying in the quarter of some faculty member who had gone on long leave). She told me that Joshi was tracking her mind. Every time she stepped out of the house for food or shopping, Joshi would reach wherever she went within no time. She had gone to staff canteen for lunch and Joshi was there in less than five

minutes. She had gone to a restaurant opposite the campus for dinner, and within no time he was there too. In less than thirty hours she had seen him at least five times. She could feel that Joshi was reading her mind even when she was alone. She wanted to stop this. She requested me to be with her for the next two or three days as much as possible. This was most welcome as far as I was concerned, since I knew that she would feed me well. And she did that. We were together from morning to evening and she picked up the bill each and every time. The interesting part was that while I was with her, she did not see Joshi even once. A couple of days later, she felt that Joshi was no longer tracking her mind. Sadly, that was the end of free food and snacks for me.

The Bread

IIT hostels (I believe even now) have toast for breakfast. This leads to a high consumption of bread. One pattern, we noticed, was that the end slices of bread were just thrown away. We decided to collect these end-slices and use them for feeding some poor people. An organization named “Anjali” was formed.



We located a slum – Phule Nagar – in Bhandup Hills area, which was more than 2 km away from Hostel 4 on the side of the pipeline. Initially, we experimented with making some sweet dishes using jaggery and end-slices. This used to involve collecting donations from various organizations across Mumbai. After some time, we used to distribute the uncooked end-slices. Even this involved cooperation from mess workers of all hostels. They would collect the end-slices through the week. We would pick them up on the weekend in wheelbarrows or bicycles. The slices would then be carted all the way to Phule Nagar.



As time passed, we came into close contact with the slum dwellers. We could motivate them to take up the education of their children. With our guidance, they formed an organization called Mahatma Jyotiba Phule Bal Vikas Mandal. Here is a photograph that was taken in

1981, a week before I said good-bye to them forever. Everyone in the photograph is a slum dweller except Ravi Shankar and me.



The Politics

The year 1975 is noted in Indian history as the year of imposition of emergency by Indira Gandhi. That was the time when I had just entered IIT. In spite of my young age, I was vehemently opposed to the stifling of democracy in the name of emergency. When elections were announced in 1977, many like me were enthused. We watched with interest the formation of Janata Party. Jaiprakash Narain (JP) was the new God for us.

IITB campus used to be a part of Bombay North East parliamentary constituency. Janata Party nominated Dr. Subramanian Swamy as their candidate from the constituency for 1977 Lok Sabha elections. I, along with some friends, actively campaigned for Dr. Swamy. This was my first brush with elections and campaigning. We went door-to-door asking for votes and distributing pamphlets and voter slips. It was hard work. Dr. Swamy won the election.

I suspect that the hard work and irregular hours during campaigning caused my health to deteriorate. I contacted amoebic dysentery, which troubled me all through my stay at IIT. Due to this sickness, I had to drop out of the July-November 1977 and return home. This, in turn, forced me to spend an extra year at IIT. That explains my staying in the campus till 1981, instead of 1980.



Before I move to year 1980, let me just recount one experience of a rainy afternoon when Janata Party was still in power and JP was still a God-like figure. JP used to stay on 24th (or was it 25th) floor of Express Towers at Nariman Point, Mumbai. I decided to take a chance and try to meet him. When I reached Express Towers, it was raining cats and dogs. I had no appointment with JP. I sat outside the flat where JP used to live, chatting with the watchman, whose name, as I remember, was Mithai Lal. During my long conversation with him, Mithai Lal disclosed a lot about himself. He was from Bihar. He had participated in JP's "*Sampoorn Kranti*" agitation as a college student in Patna. He was forced to give up studies due to his participation in the agitation. After dropping out from college, he migrated to Bombay (the city had not become Mumbai till then). In Bombay, he had been struggling to get a decent job, which was very difficult for a college dropout. Some acquaintance put him in touch with a security agency, which offered him the job as a watchman. I did not ask him what he got as salary. It was obvious that he received a pittance and was quite sad at the turn of events that led to his dropping out of college and landing up at this job on the doors of JP's residence.

How did Mithai Lal feel about serving the person whom he must have venerated not too long ago? He was bitter to say the least. From where we were sitting, we could see through a backdoor of JP's apartment's kitchen. A crate of aerated beverages was visible. He pointed to the crate and said that should explain everything. The crate, to him, symbolized luxury that leaders were enjoying, while he was toiling to meet both ends meet. The irony was not lost on

me. I could not meet JP, but the meeting with Mithai Lal taught me more of politics than a meeting with JP could have taught me.



From 1977 to 1980, a lot of water had flown down the rivers of India. In 1980, JP was dead. BJP was being born, while Janata Party was disintegrating. Dr. Swamy was originally from Jansangh. It was expected that he would join BJP and not remain in Janata Party, but signals were coming which indicated just the opposite. A delegation of students from IITB went to meet Dr. Swamy to press on him to shift to BJP. I was a part of the delegation. During discussions with Dr. Swamy, I was impressed with his arguments. I turned to members of the delegation and asked them to not be blinded and also consider what Dr. Swamy was saying. This shocked everyone. The delegation members saw in it a betrayal, while Dr. Swamy was thrilled. I was being an open-minded intellectual, always ready to listen to new ideas and to change mind in a discussion. But apparently, the political world sees an open-minded intellectual, at best, as an untrustworthy person and at worst, as guilty of treachery.

A few months later I graduated and joined first a shoe-upper factory and then a luggage company. While I was working for the luggage company, I met Dr. Swamy. He suggested that I join him on fulltime basis. He was kind enough to also offer me remuneration that would have been more than my salary at that time. I refused most politely. The reason, that remains valid till today, is my inability to come to terms with the ethical aspect of economics of politics. I did not know and still do not know the way of collecting funds without compromising one's morals.

May be some day, I shall learn the fine art of balancing economics of politics with ethics and philosophy! Till then I remain a bystander on the fringes of politics.



Anil Chawla
16 April 2006

Websites

www.samarthbharat.com
www.hindustanstudies.com
www.indialegalhelp.com

E-mail

anil@samarthbharat.com
hindustanstudies@rediffmail.com
hindustanstudies@yahoo.co.in