

A Memoir

“Closure is a made up thing invented by Steven Spielberg to sell movie tickets.”



Some of Bojack’s quips have stayed with me. Does he, really, not believe in the notion of closures, or is he trying to hide his insecurities with a charade of bleak, epigrammatic humor, like always? May be he is just pissed at Spielberg for saying that Netflix films should not win Oscars. I could never make up my mind about the notion either.

Writing memoirs much like seeking closure always entails a degree of retrospection. Reviewing my own life is a difficult task; especially so for an experience like that of the undergraduate life which has moulded my character and temperament. Unwittingly, and to my dislike, memoirs also have the tendency to become didactic and moralizing. Thus, I am not really sure of the purpose of this text.

Around the time when I was about to leave the campus, I had not fully come to terms with the gravity of the change that was about to occur in my life. The last few days were blurry. In everything I did there was a sense of haste which precluded any attempt at consciously processing what was actually occurring. Once beyond the point of no return (Muzzafarnagar?), it felt as if just another protracted activity had come to an end. As if I had just picked up my things and left. I was oblivious to the emotional baggage then. In that rush I did not feel an anxious longing for the congenial environment of the campus. For a moment there was no sense of vacancy. But that is what it was -- momentary. As the days have passed by, and as I’ve been left alone to brood at home, it has been coming back -- moments of passion & regret, of indulgence & despair, of euphoric highs & helpless lows -- all of them. So, yes, maybe the purpose is for me to seek some kind of subconscious closure through this note. The plethora of social, belief and behavioral cognitive biases that shape me have also steered the laborious hours I have spent retrospecting my college life in its entirety, while also trying to decide what to watch on Netflix. What has come out of it is one hundred percent indie, organic, biased, and uncontroversial, with a slight undertone of honesty. Afterall, “Be brutally honest with yourself” is nothing more than a Shiv Khera marketing gimmick.

In 2015, I earned the unique honour of being the first kid to enter a national university for B.Tech, let alone an IIT, from my extended family. Armed with one copy each of Feynman's Lectures and Lord of The Rings, I was ready to tackle this giant of an institute into submission. But as I entered the ring, I realised that the JEE ritual had given rise to a deep-seated sense of indignation inside me. A 4 digit tag that would intermittently poke my ego because I felt that I could have done better. That is who I was -- an insecure freshie who was disoriented, confused, and intimidated by everything he saw and everyone he met, and let pride do all the talking. I was yet to take a beating at life, and yet to discover the pleasures of beta-blockers in anxiety heaven. Fortunately for me, this bubble of bloated sense of self-worth burst soon, and I knew better than to dwell on the bygones.

What I have always genuinely liked is to know, simply the act of knowing something new. That is a part of why I quiz, browse Reddit for hours on end, read an assortment of blogs, lecture about anything new I have learnt, and even why I do research to earn a living. Finding answers to questions, about anything really, helps me regulate my daily dopamine level. This is also how I spent my initial years at Roorkee: walking the tightrope of curiosity -- bad timing or one wrong step, and I could fall into a ditch of worthlessness and bad grades. But this curiosity has taken me places, literally at times. In the first 8 months in campus I had tried everything from drama and quizzing to software and infosec. Thusly, I met people who were passionate about what they did, brilliant minds who were amused by daunting technical challenges, and students who had the audacity to bring about administrative changes. Although, with my average intellect, I could never really figure out the idea behind passion. I have always loved to dabble in a lot of things, which often made correlating passion with livelihood difficult for me during my time at R. However, along the way I did pick up a thing or two about sticking to what I enjoyed -- even if it was short lived -- and leaving a dent in the system. Over time my penchant for curiosity has persisted. It is only that the tightrope walker in me has gained some composure and confidence after enduring numerous falls. He is more thoughtful and cautious, and is better accustomed to deal with the fear of walking alone over an unknown abyss.

To me it is nothing short of amazing how these 4 years of college life that are but a speck in our lives bring about such long lasting changes in our personality. But if you ask me, it is more of a race to stay relevant than just being a journey of self-discovery. Everyone at one point of time joins this race lest they risk getting lost in a sea of anonymity. This article is a part of that quest. It is my measly attempt at staying relevant after having left the place. It is for the editors, and for the magazine itself -- a bid at relevance. With an administration that likes to think of itself as a bunch of bureaucrats, Roorkee's ecosystem seems unforgiving for people who drop out of this race. Until recently, one could see this in the rigid academic system, low accountability of professors and non-teaching staff to students, lack of off-paper, interpersonal respect from the administration for students' diverse co-curricular activities, and the number of self-harm cases.

My own highly non-linear life makes me think that it is okay to run at our own pace. I chronicled some of my third year experience in the 2018 intern diary. What I left out of it is how during that wearying uphill journey, I was also involved in several plays and inter IIT tournaments. These expeditions came with their own share of stress and disappointments, but what I was involved in also became an endless source of comfort for me. Theatre comes closest to what I could call a passion in an elevator smalltalk. Semester after semester, I served the Dramatics section till my very last ounce of energy allowed me to, regardless of what the larger race of maintaining personal relevance demanded. And through this I met a handful of people who could make me feel at home. There are people who I came to know as my seniors, and juniors, but who went on to become an integral part of my life, and to this day I am thankful for having met them. Unlike many activities that I indulged in during my 4 years, Dramatics was not a means to an end.

Such was also the case with my branch. We had entered Roorkee, in essence, as lab rats for the Department of Physics' latest experiment of B.Tech in Engineering Physics. This well-nigh meant that we had to chart our own course through the years without any fixed structure in place. Beginning of a brand new branch came with an impractical course structure, choice of electives akin to fairy dust,

committees that would be formed and dissolved on the fly, and a syllabus which was more like unnecessary guidelines. So, during my second year, I spent a considerable amount of time lobbying and petitioning the Main Building overlords for introducing the essential changes in the branch structure. To this day, it lifts up my spirits when I think that batch of 2021 and later would be studying an updated course, a boat considerably less rocky than ours. It is not trivial for me to be able to pinpoint the sources of motivation behind all of this. Come to think of it, as long as I'm earning an honest living, there will always be a Main Building, and the race to stay relevant will very much go on. Right now, the memories are fresh, but as the years go by and Roorkee does turn into a speck, I shall have these affairs to remember it by.

The Inter-IIT Cultural Meet consumed me in what would be my last year at Roorkee. It hurts my fingers to write about it because the carnage inside me as its result is still very fresh. I had always been a very vocal advocate for Roorkee's art & culture fraternity, trying to inch it closer to the level of our sister IITs. So, when I signed up for organising this meet, it was an emotional decision. At the time, I had been to 3 Inter-IIT Meets, and it outraged me to see these Meets being treated and held as second-hand events. The question of why winning among a score of IITs should be any less prestigious for non-sport meets was what propelled me towards my decision. I was fully aware that this would mean sacrificing many plans, reorienting my life, and essentially shifting the timeline of my career goals. But at the time I figured Roorkee's Cultural Society could definitely use some quality external exposure, and so can Roorkee itself. This would be the first inter IIT event since 2012, a time when JEE-Advanced was still known as IIT-JEE, and 7 present-day IITs only existed on paper. It would all be worth the effort was the idea. Although much has been said and discussed about the Meet (across IITs), I am very proud of what we -- a core team of 20 odd people who were all unknown to me in the beginning, and many more who joined later -- could achieve. Looking back at it, I am still amazed at the scale of the event. Not only did it bring representative IITs from 21 states under a single roof, it also became one of the largest cultural tournaments in the country, which got it covered by Prasar Bharati (Doordarshan and All India Radio). My satisfaction is only punctured by the fact that throughout this year of struggle that we undertook, there was not one bit of moral support from the administration. Not a pinch of enthusiasm for all the "scale" I kept chirping about. It was akin to a sour arranged marriage which is devoid of affection, brimming with apathy and aversion, and where one party is ever-ready for a divorce. Till the day before I left, I still went to the office trying to clean up the leftovers (in the figurative sense, mostly). Now that all is said and done, I don't know if it was worth it, but I have not come to regret it. Even if all it did was to teach me something about an unexplored sphere of my temperament, and add a bit of fervour or passion to Roorkee's cultural community, I will find a way to patch my punctured satisfaction.

The final year had begun with heavy indulgence in depravities, feeling like it was hard-earned after the pre-final year labour. However, by the end of it I was spent -- depleted of strength, health, motivation, and money. I have always felt that we, in our own micro social spheres within the campus, are comfortably unaware of others' struggles. I feared this ignorance for I did not want to lose my empathy, and become too self-centered during the process. I do not know what it is like to bear the burden of placements, but this is also true vice versa. There were weeks in Spring where I would wake up to sugar-coated rejections from professors around the globe every single day, and then embark on an 18-19 hour work day. It meant a day of shuffling between having to deal with the conceit and inefficiency of the administration, convincing lawyers of a disgruntled vendor, preparing for GRE, and crunching equations on a paper for my BTP, locked up in a room somewhere in the Department of Physics. By the end of most days, a curious cocktail of nicotine, caffeine, and paracetamol would be formed in my body which would quickly put me to bed. On some of the other, more anxious nights a 10mg propranolol would do the trick. What kept me sane, though, is that I had people in front of whom I could vent out, and who were sympathetic. This is what I shall be eternally thankful to Roorkee for, irrespective of all the ups and downs that we all have had.



I am not a huge believer of “takeaway-s”, for experiences are not supposed to be summarised. They are supposed to be imbibed. There are lessons, ideas, and conversations that don’t just persist in our memory, but become a part of us. So, I have no key-takeaway to offer, if you’ve made it this far. What I will say is that, more than anything, this journey has taught me to consciously think about self-improvement, to be able to focus on personal growth and break the monotony.

I have had my share of good fortune in life, and have met people who were far too kind and generous, and patient with me. At the end of it all, I have nothing but an overwhelming sense of gratitude.

Afterword

I come from a household of primarily Hindi build, and have grown up with Hindi literature. Lord of the Rings was the first English novel that my parents allowed me to buy firsthand, which is why that had a mention. Anyhow, Premchand was a prominent literary figure in my childhood, and I shall end this note with an apt quote that I have remembered over the years. So long.

अतीत चाहे जैसा हो, उसकी स्मृतियाँ प्रायः सुखद होती हैं।

fin.

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