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The Early and Free Days of IIM Calcutta

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'The IIMC students were ... among the best in the country…having come through several sieving processes and the horrors of entrance examinations at different levels from which only the best and the most enduring emerge with success to claim the final IIM prize'.

Despite good reports about my work, and pressure exerted by AM Khusro, I stagnated at the Institute of Economic Growth (IEG), Delhi, PN Dhar the director making no moves to promote me . He was, on the other hand, upset when I decided to move on and told me that big things were in store for me, that it was all a matter of time and for patience on my part. Among my admirers at the IEG was Arjun Sengupta - a fresh recruit to the IEG - who introduced me to T.N. Krishnan, a member of the faculty at IIM Calcutta, then on a visit to Delhi. TNK was at that time engaged in preparing a brief for K.T. Chandy, director of IIM Calcutta, who was about to assume charge as the first chairman of the Food Corporation of India (FCI). Learning about my familiarity with the food economy and the relevant statistics, TNK offered me a job at the IIM, initially to help him write a detailed note on a plan of functions and modus operandi for the proposed FCI - covering procurement/buying options, pricing and inventory policies, etc.

(A curious fact about that note we wrote after I joined the IIM: Many years later, in 1996, Krishnan and I edited a volume of studies on the public distribution system in India and while writing the introduction to it we, perhaps unconsciously, used ideas we originally put forward in the Chandy brief for the efficient working of the FCI and other public agencies. We did that just a week before Krishnan's passing away.)

Calcutta

I joined IIMC in February 1965 as a research fellow, equivalent in rank to a university lecturer and was promoted within two years to the rank of an Assistant Professor, or Reader in university terminology. The story is worth telling.

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After working with Krishnan on the projected FCI operations, I began working on some problems in probability distribution theory. I had the good fortune of having J.K. Sengupta (JK, who in the mid 1970s became Director of IIMC) as a senior colleague who along with Krishnan helped me a lot in my professional advancement. TNK asked me to share with him the teaching of a course on Demand Analysis (requiring a fair dose of quantitative methods) in the post-graduate programme. And JK left the teaching of econometrics almost wholly to me.

> … [T]hey [the students at IIMC) were the brightest and the best in the country and could absorb all that came their way in a classroom and the library.

I enjoyed teaching; the students were of course among the best in the country, many of them IIT (Indian Institute of Technology) graduates, having come through several sieving processes and the horrors of entrance examinations at different levels from which only the best and the most enduring emerge with success to claim the final IIM prize. They enjoyed the classes taken jointly by JK and me, with JK holding forth on intricate theory and me trying to translate some of it into somewhat plainer language. JK simply forgot the audience in front and would suddenly veer to something like the Pontryagin Principle or Bang-Bang Control - sounds the students loved to hear without having a clue to what they are all about. I was left with the task of teaching them how to invert matrices (of orders three or even four) on hand-operated Facit calculating machines of those days. Amazingly, the students were up to the task: they did regressions using data they collected for their individual project work - such as the demand for fertilisers in India, and produced good reports that inevitably earned them A grades. The student who did the classroom exercise on demand for fertilisers later became a top executive in the Fertiliser Corporation of India. As I said before they were the brightest and the best in the country and could absorb all that came their way in a classroom and the library.

To conclude the story about my promotion: In 1967, I had no publication to my credit or a PhD under my belt. Going up the ladder was solely based on my demonstrated ability to teach courses independently, not as an assistant. Indeed, the IIM system of those days

allowed for this - something unimaginable these days with rigid rules for recruitment and promotion monitored by bodies totally ignorant of the worth of teaching or research and how it has to be assessed.

KT Chandy's vision

IIMC of those days was undoubtedly the best place I ever worked in, in terms of the environment for the pursuit of one's own research agenda. We had to do about a hundred hours of teaching in a year covering about two courses over two terms over a period of roughly six months. This meant that we earned our salaries by doing just that and were free to do what we liked in the remaining six months; nobody ever asked us questions about what we were doing with the free time, although career advancement did depend on its use. The freedom did not of course fall from the sky. It was partly due to the extraordinary vision of K.T. Chandy for institutions for higher education, and his adroit ways of getting the right scholars for faculty positions. How he developed these remarkable attributes is a mystery, given that all his professional life he was a 'boxwala' with Hindustan Lever.

Chandy once asked me to spend some time with an applicant for a senior position in sociology and later asked me whether in my opinion the applicant was a good prospect - although I was then in a lowly lecturer rank. Can you imagine such a thing happening in any academic institution then or now? I must tell you the applicant didn't get the job after 'interviews' by a few other senior and junior colleagues as well; I remember the vote against him was unanimous.

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I learnt later that as a student in London, Chandy rubbed shoulders with Alice and Daniel Thorner, P.N. Haksar and a number of other left-leaning intellectuals associated with V.K. Krishna Menon's India League, including Jyoti Basu. He must somehow have cultivated later in Bombay his admirable social values progressing from those London days even while devising ways to exist as a top executive in the Levers shop. Chandy was for a brief period, many years later, the Vice Chairman of the State Planning Board in Kerala, but he was already in a fading phase, the best part of his professional life behind him and not having much political leverage for doing things his own way in Kerala. But the man held his poise and self-assurance in dealing with politicians, including Achutha Menon, the Chief Minister, and the bureaucrats ruling the roost.

I had the good fortune of spending some time with him in Hyderabad when he came to preside over a Daniel Thorner memorial lecture that I gave in 1992. A wonderful mentor of mine, he lived a full and eventful life crossing the ninety mark in age.

IIMC colleagues

Academic freedom at the IIMC was fostered by senior professors like Ashok Mitra, a distinguished economist, who later moved on to Delhi as the Chairman of the Agricultural Prices Commission, and further on become the Chief Economic Adviser to the central government, and Surajit Sinha, a reputed anthropologist, later to preside over the Anthropological Survey of India, and to head Viswa Bharati (Santiniketan) as a Vice Chancellor, and still later to head the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, in Calcutta, where once again I became his colleague.

Interestingly, the IIMC faculty was divided on many issues but united in zealously guarding their freedom to do things without outside interference. Let me explain: broadly there were two factions, one of scholars doing research in their own disciplines regardless of the utility or relevance of such work for management education; and in the other faction colleagues who did consultancy and other types of work they thought was most appropriate for such institutes. There were serious factional fights on many matters, for example on the syllabi for courses, but on issues involving faculty freedom and rights there was always total unity. At one time the united faculty successfully removed a director (Krishna Mohan, Chandy's unworthy successor, another boxwala from the Lever house) and replaced him with someone they chose, M.Krishna Murty, from their own ranks.

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In the economics group that I was formally associated with, I had Ranjit Sau, Nirmal Chandra and Paresh Chattopadhyay as colleagues. The three of them joined the Institute soon after I did and a few months before Krishnan left to join the UN in the Economic Policy Division. They all had interests mostly in the Indian political economy, although they were keen also on studies of other economies

like that of the Soviet Union or China. I began working on some distribution problems in probability. In doing that I was lucky to have had Manish Bhattacharjee in the quantitative group of the IIMC as a collaborator, and with whom I published a couple of papers on 'fat-tailed' distributions (such as those of assets and income characterised by extreme inequality).

My interest in the Indian economy arose from an unexpected request by some friends linked to some trade unions, looking for some sense in the vast data on agricultural wages in the different parts of the country. I did that and it was a very significant moment in my own future as an academic, with well-defined interests for study. A paper on agricultural wages in the *Economic and Political Weekly* (EPW) started me off on work on the Indian economy.

That paper, "Wages of Agricultural Labour", was published in the EPW in 1971 and I remember it for two reasons. One, I established in the following months and years a lasting friendly relationship with Krishna Raj (editor of EPW). Second, a paper using the methodology suggested in my original paper, but not covered adequately, written by A.V. Jose in 1973 at the Centre for Development Studies (CDS), Trivandrum, became a standard reference to the subject for many years. Jose has continued pursuing agricultural wages to this day. I have a special alternative name for him: Agricultural Vages Jose.

> My interest in the Indian economy arose from an unexpected request by some friends linked to some trade unions, looking for some sense in the vast data on agricultural wages in the different parts of the country.

I followed up the wages paper with one on wheat prices. In writing that I was influenced by a note that Ashok Mitra had written, which later he expanded into his celebrated book entitled *Terms of Trade and Class Relations*. In the main, he argued there that there was an alliance

between the bourgeoisie and rural oligarchs at work in India at that time, that is the late 1960s and the 1970s, through which the bourgeois classes got the electoral support of landlords who then commanded many aspects of rural life in exchange for high agricultural prices (secured in part through high procurement prices). I examined wheat price trends within a framework derived from Ashok Mitra's work. The paper, "Wheat Price Movements-An Analysis" finished in 1972, was published in the EPW only in June 1973, after I joined CDS) in Trivandrum. Krishna Raj, editor of EPW was impressed enough by it to cite it in some editorials published later on questions relating to procurement policies, and whether they mainly benefit consumers or producers. Since the 1980s the terms of trade have moved adversely for agriculture and the Ashok Mitra thesis was no longer valid. Indeed, the power of rural oligarchs has been curtailed to some extent. But not wholly so, as they still control votes.

At IIM Calcutta I was on very friendly terms with not only academic colleagues but also with the administrative staff and those working in the library. Indeed, I played a significant role in building up the library collection of published material relating to the Indian economy.

I must conclude my IIM story on a somewhat sad note. During my stint at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta - 1979-89 - I felt the need for a change in the work environment and opted to go back to IIM for a year. This was in 1986. I found then that I no longer felt the sense of belonging that I used to experience earlier during my first spell (1965-73). For one thing, I now had to lecture to 200 students, wired suitably with a mike. Earlier I never needed a mike, addressing, as I used to, some 70-80 students out of a possible maximum of 100. Another loss was my good links with the non-academic staff, the composition of which had changed during the thirteen years I was away from the Institute.

The memoirs can be read in full here.

N. Krishnaji was a statistician and Marxian political economist who was professor in a number of institutions between the 1970s and 1990s.