

Five Point Someone

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This book illustrates how students waste their opportunities in college years if they don't think straight. Through the story of three friends, the book describes various facets of IIT life – the academics, the professors, campus life and the rat race to get better grades.

Introduction

The author is more concerned about what to do after getting admission into an IIT than the admission process itself. He points out that getting into IIT is not all that difficult as is made out to be. As he puts it, “If you can lock yourself in a room with books for two years and throw away the key, you can probably make it here.”

Sheer brilliance

The book brings out the sheer brilliance of IIT students in a very subtle way. One professor mentions, “The definition of a machine is simple. It is anything that reduces human effort. Anything. So, see the world around you and it is full of machines.” A student, Ryan asks: “Sir, what about a gym machine, like a bench press or something? That doesn't reduce human effort. In fact, it increases it.” The professor does not know how to respond. People who have studied in IITs know how students can pose fairly challenging questions based on their common sense and without any prior knowledge and unsettle teachers in the class.

Again, when a professor asks students to design a car jack to lift the chassis in case of flat tires etc. Ryan draws a ‘modified screw-jack,’ in which one does not have to open manually and raise the jack. A flat tire does not mean the engine has failed. Hence once can attach a motor on the traditional jack and hook it up to the car battery. If one switches on the car ignition, the motor car derives power. Ryan is very happy with the design.

But the professor finds it difficult to accept this original thinking. The conversation proceeds as follows:

“What is this?”

“Sir, this modified screw-jack, It can be attached to the car's battery...”

“Is this an electrical engineering class?”

“No sir but the end need is the same...”

“Is this an internal combustion engines class?”

“Sir but...”

“If you don't want to be in my class or follow my course, you may leave.”

This example shows that many professors at the IITs are totally unequipped to handle the brilliant students who study there.

The Gaps

The limitations of IITs are brought out vividly in a get-together involving students. Ryan remarks, “You know guys, this whole IIT system is sick. Because, tell me, how many great engineers or scientists have come out of IIT? I mean that is supposed to be the best college in India, the best technology institute for a country of a billion. But has IIT ever invented anything? Or made any technical contribution to India? Over thirty years of IITs, yet, all it does is train some bring kids to work in multinationals. I mean look at MIT in the USA... What is wrong in the system... This system of relative grading and overburdening the students. I mean it kills the best fun years of your life. But it kills something else. Where is the room for original thought? Where is the time for creativity? It is not fair.”

The mice race

Competition is intense in the IITs. The pressures which the IIT grading system puts on students are captured in one professor’s remarks at the end of his class: “Best of luck once again for your stay here. Remember, as your head of department Prof Cherian says, the tough workload is by design, to keep you on your toes. And respect the grading system. You get bad grades, and I assure you – you get no job, no school and no future. If you do well, the world is your oyster. So, don’t slip, not even once, or there will be no oyster, just slush.”

At the same time, there are some professors who are different and whom students adore. The heroes of the book never miss the fluid mechanics class in the fourth semester and the reason is Prof. Veera, who is completely different. He is twenty years younger than other profs. No more than thirty, he comes dressed in jeans and T-shirts, which bears his US university logos. He holds five degrees from top universities – MIT, Cornell, Princeton etc. He carries his CD player with him, and after class, he plugs it into his ears before he leaves the classroom. Prof. Veera makes it clear that he likes students who can think creatively and put the principles taught in the class into practice. Ryan builds a special relationship with this professor.

Ryan comes up with the Mice Theory to explain the problems in the IITs: “This IIT system is nothing but a mice race. It is not a rat race, mind you, as rats sound somewhat shrewd and clever. So it is not about that. It is about mindlessly running a race for four years, in every class, every assignment and every test. It is about mindlessly running a race for four years, in every class, every assignment and every test. It is a race where profs judge you every ten steps, with a GPA stamped on you every semester.”

Ryan concludes that the IIT system is unfair because:

1. It suppresses talent and individual spirit.
2. It extracts the best years of one’s life from the country’s brightest minds.
3. It judges students with a draconian GPA system that destroys relationships.
4. The profs don’t care for the students.
5. IITs have hardly contributed to the country.

Real drama

It is in the last part, that the book really comes alive. The traumatic final year which includes disciplinary action against the heroes of the book, Rayan, Hari and Alok for trying to steal an examination paper. There is an attempted suicide by Alok. But all the problems fortunately get sorted out. Finally, the time has come to graduate. In a dream sequence, one professor accepts the limitations of the grading system while making his convocation address:

“Once upon a time there was a student in IIT. He was very bright, and this is true, his GPA was 10.00 after four years. He didn’t have a lot of friends, as to keep such a high GPA, you only have so much time for friends.”

“This bright boy thought his classmates were less smart than him, were selfish and wanted to make the most money or go to the USA with minimum effort. And many of his classmates did go to work for multinationals and some went abroad. Some of them opened their own companies in the USA – mostly in computers and software.”

The bright boy stayed behind. Because he had principles he did not want to use his education for selfish personal gain. He wanted to help the country. He wanted to do research and he stayed back at IIT. Of course, getting a research project approved in IIT was not easy. The boy still kept trying but apart from being a professor, there was not much he could achieve here. Ten years passed, when his friends from college visited home. One of them had a GPA of seven point something, and he had his own software company. The turnover had reached two hundred million dollars. Another friend was heading a toothpaste MNC, and came in a BMW. But even this did not bother the principled bright boy.

The professor mentioned: “As you guessed, that bright boy was me. And at that time I thought it didn't matter if others had achieved more personally.” He was still the one with the better GPA, the smarter one, the brighter one. Somehow, on that day, he decided my son must get into IIT. He wanted his son to carry on his family's strong intellectual tradition. But his son wanted to be a lawyer and hated maths. The professor hated him for hating maths. He pushed him hard just as he pushed students. He failed to get in the first time and the professor made life hell for him. His son failed a second time and the professor made his life an even bigger hell. Then the son failed to get in the third time. And this time, he killed himself.

The professor continues: "You all know that I have a daughter. But I also had a son, who died in a rail track accident five years ago. At that time, we thought it was an accident. But this is my son's letter I got only a few weeks ago. He wrote this to my daughter on the day he died. He killed himself because he did not get into IIT. He killed himself because of me."

"I am sorry everyone for bringing up this sad story on your special day. I told myself that if I admit to my mistake publicly, perhaps my son will forgive me. And I wanted to thank

the one student in this class because of who I found out the truth. It is my daughter's boyfriend – Hari (the author). And he is here sitting right in the front row."

Then the prof. points at the central figures of the book, "Let me tell you something about this boy Hari and his friends Alok and Ryan. They are the under-performers. That is what I used to call students with low GPAs. And they do have a low GPA - five point something is low, right?"

The professor's daughter had found it easier to trust Hari with the letter. She had defied the professor, lied to him and ignored him just to meet him. Somewhere down the line, the professor had gone really wrong.

The professor adds, "And that is when I realized that GPAs make a good student, but not a good person. We judge people here by their GPA. If you are a nine, you are the best. If you are a five, you are useless. I used to despise the low GPAs so much that when Ryan submitted a research proposal on lubricants, I judged it without even reading it. But these boys have something really promising. I saw the proposal the second time. I can tell you, any investor who invests in this will earn a rainbow."

Hari and Alok join software companies which ironically enough were underrated in the early 1990s. Alok makes enough money in a few months to pull his family out of the deep financial crisis they were going through. Ryan ends up becoming a businessman, thanks to the encouragement of Prof. Veera. A happy ending to a well written book.

Conclusion

The message for IIT students is captured in the professor's address: "One, believe in yourself, and don't let a GPA, performance review or promotion in a job define you. There is more to life than these things - your family, your friends, your internal desires and goals. And the grades you get in dealing with each of these areas will define you as a person."

"Two, don't judge others too quickly. I thought my son was useless because he didn't get into IIT. I tell you what, I was a useless father. It is great to get into IIT, but it is not the end of the world if you don't. All of you should be proud to have the IIT tag, but never ever judge anyone who is not from this institute - that alone can define the greatness of this institute."

The style of this book is quite different from the book "The IITians" by Sandipen Deb. But there is a common thread. IIT students should not be made after grades. They must spend as much time in pursuing extra curriculum activities as on their course work. Rayan, clearly, is the hero of this book.