



Kalpa 2021

IISER Pune

BELIEVE WHAT YOU SEE

STAY
SAFE
STAY
INSIDE

STAY
INSIDE

KALPA

LEARN ALL THE
WORDS THE TEACH

J.A.R
JAR

SYMPTOMS

COMMUNITY

SHELTER

HUMAN

SADNESS

PLEASANCE





IISER PUNE

KALPA 2021

Indian Institute of Science Education and Research
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Maharashtra, India

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Cover artwork credits Aharna Sarkar



| MARCH

Students vacate the campus



Campus under lockdown

Online classes begin



| MAY

IISER-P sets up the Covid Testing Centre



41,400 samples tested in 10 months

| NOVEMBER

Online valedictory Ceremony



Repopulation of campus begins



| APRIL

IISER-Pune contributes to Covid-19 research
Develops low cost Ventilator



| JANUARY

Online classes commence for Batch of 2025

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The preceding year will probably be remembered as the year of resilience. The IISER community has been navigating online teaching, significant disruption of research, uncertainty in career trajectories and reconfigured social engagement. Crises like the pandemic animate parochiality and divisiveness along the usual fault lines. The IISER community has also not been spared. Yet, there are several instances, within our small community, of resisting these tendencies. Kalpa 2021 has put together the stories of our pandemic year through the lived experience of the IISER community – its successes, failures and above all resilience.

This issue of Kalpa continues to document, provoke debate, celebrate creativity, and inspire introspection. Well done Team Kalpa 2021!

- Dr. Aurnab Ghose

Editorial

Kalpa was started as the annual student publication, giving a platform to students and faculty to express themselves through the written media. A humble beginning, like the first chief editor, Sisir C. Anand, had mentioned in his editorial. As the institute grew in strength and facilities, the student populace witnessed a bunch of students with a journalistic flair and a never-ending curiosity which gave rise to the bi-monthly newsletter, Sentience, in 2012. All these efforts and many more

small ventures had a greater implication of having an in-house communication body for the institute. Receiving an award for the same with the phenomenal edition of 2016 motivated the students associated with the club further to establish Kalpa as a formal in-house communication body. The idea for having a website for Kalpa came up and was brought to reality in January 2020. The website brought some significant changes to how the team functions and brought us a step closer to our goal of being an effective in-house communication body. Soon after the website's launch, IISER saw its first student council elections, giving rise to our election campaigning series - the Ganatantra series. The pandemic was a major setback for everyone. Still, the requirement for everything to be online pushed the team to new limits and tested the new platform's ability to engage its audience. Sentience was revived as the online newsletter and came up with three issues during the lockdown months. A conversation series popular in the academic circles globally during the pandemic, 'Growing up in Science' saw our director, Dr. Jayant Udgaonkar, and dean of academics, Dr. Bhas Bapat, talk about the hardships they faced during their academic careers. All these events helped us in expanding our vision of the Student Media House.

Community and communication have the same Latin root word, 'communis' -- common. Staying away from campus deprived us of this shared link; thus, it became imperative that we establish a good network within the community as we continued to stay in our homes. Communication for Kalpa is talking about the IISER community, its aspirations, its challenges, and most importantly, its people. The theme of this annual issue derives its inspiration from these newly found ideals and is all about connecting people with their stories. Every written piece provides us a glimpse of the writer's personality, worldview, and experiences unique to them.

Being at home, and interacting with people and content only through screens, has given us more time to think and process the information before acting on anything.

With no other stimulus in the surroundings, most of our day's work is dependent on our eyes and brain functioning together. This is the basic idea behind the cover. A person living in a vessel, navigating through a labyrinth of information, creating their version of the world outside based on the information they receive.

The cover is incidentally the only thing in the entire magazine that is handmade. Everything else in the magazine is made digitally from scratch to go along with the written content. Out of all the problems we faced, the lack of actual photographs of events on campus was most disheartening and posed the greatest creative challenge. It greatly impacted the aesthetics of the magazine. Our designers had to come up with unique ideas for illustrating the articles and balancing them out so that the magazine doesn't look like a comic book. Designing for 100 pages without the help of any pictures to fill space or provide a visual context to the designers, we ran the risk of repeating ourselves by making similar images for the covid-related articles as they all shared a common sentiment and mental condition. Our brilliant design head figured out the trick is sometimes to let the background colour do all the work and complement an article with strong emotions. The bright saturated colours, the attention to detail in the illustrations, the surreal compositions made using stock pictures go beyond being mere decoration. A new generation of designers was a refreshing surprise and made this mammoth task a smooth sail.

In the pursuit of covering the human aspect of our lives during Covid 19, this time, we tried a series of non-fiction articles based on different avenues of the pandemic. This inspired an experimental structure of the magazine. Unlike the previous editions, this issue doesn't have any rigid sections. It follows the natural course of events as depicted in the timeline, making these non-fiction pieces the backbone of the magazine—the literary contributions interspersed in between providing a break from talking about the pandemic.

Introducing non-fiction articles in the magazine brought out some good writers, especially among the freshers. We hope that these articles also encourage others to write about their experiences or tell their stories. In times when we as a community are scattered all over the country, writing about our not-so-shared experiences will prove key in keeping us connected.

Like all big projects, this magazine resulted from the continued efforts of 71 odd people over 3-4 months. From the conceptualization calls on Meet to multiple Discord meetings to discuss ideas, coordinating with several writers, illustrators, designers, reporters, and editors online, was cumbersome but enjoyable. It wouldn't have been possible without the perseverance of the team members and their infinite patience and empathy for each other. Our faculty coordinator's constant support and guidance were instrumental in keeping the team's morale and curating the magazine's content. We congratulate everyone on the team and all the contributors for making a successful issue of Kalpa. Our only hope is that the following pages inspire, remind, inform, and, most importantly, entertain you.

Aharna Sarkar

On behalf of the editorial board, 2021



Dr. Arjun Datta

Assistant Professor, ECS

Arjun joined IISER Pune in January of 2021 as a seismologist, whose research centres around understanding how seismic waves propagation can be used to study the deep internal structure of Earth. He was an academically bright student in school and interested in science, but he never looked towards science as a career option. It was in his college where he identified that active research is what he wants to pursue. After doing his bachelors in physics, he opted to do his masters in geophysics because of the applied nature of the subject. There he kindled his interest in seismology and progressed further with it. He was open to working in the industrial RnD sector, but he likes the freedom of research academia provides. His hobbies include playing tennis, cycling and running. In his college days, he used to sing and play drums. He tries to maintain a proper work-life balance. He believes that students should work for their research interests and not for improving CV or as a backup option. Motivation is essential, and lack of knowledge and not being the most intelligent student is secondary.



Dr. Devapriya Chattopadhyay

Associate Professor, Chair, ECS

Devapriya is an eminent paleobiologist who tries to understand how life and earth interact and shape each other. Since her school days, she was interested in science, and nature always fascinated her. She has childhood memories of going to a forest and collecting samples of rocks, seeds and plants. She was curious to understand how nature works. She went on to do a bachelors in geology, where she discovered her love for palaeontology and progressed further with it. To her, opting for a career in academia as an active researcher came as a natural choice. She enjoys doing independent thinking, coming up with new questions and quest for their answers. The idea of dedicated institutes for science education and research appealed to her a lot, and hence she joined IISER Kolkata in 2010. Further, due to family reasons, she moved to IISER Pune in 2019. Although she doesn't get much free time, she makes time for her hobbies, including paintings, listening to Hindustani classical music, and reading classical literature. Her advice to students is to try to have an independent mind, i.e. think on their own and follow strong work ethics.



Dr. Divyang Bhimani

Assistant Professor, Maths

Interested in mathematics from his childhood, Divyang Bhimani is a cheerful professor whose research includes Harmonic Analysis and Non-Linear Dispersive Equations. He appreciates the beauty and relevance of his subject. An INSPIRE faculty Fellow, he believes that the theorems mathematicians create today may find some unexpected, useful applications years, or even decades, down the line. Srinivasa Ramanujan is a hero of his, as is Dr. Terence Tao, the latter of whom he would love to meet someday. He misses in-person contact with his colleagues during the

pandemic and has to resort to online collaboration. He thinks that a positive aspect of research in mathematics during Covid-19 is that it doesn't require labs, like other sciences do. You can do it anywhere with a pen and paper! Aside from his work, he loves reading books, going on walks, and spending time with nature.

Dr. Mridula Nambiar

Assistant Professor, Biology

Research Interest: Meiosis, DNA recombination and chromosomal segregation using yeast as a model system with implications in understanding genomic instability in cancers and development disorders such as Down's syndrome.

Dr. Mridula joined IISER in January 2020 as an enthusiastic researcher. She believes that a genuine interest in one's work, coupled with sincerity, commitment and self-motivation are crucial to enjoying work without letting it be a burden. She was actively involved in the COVID testing facility at IISER Pune during the pandemic. In her free time, Dr. Mridula enjoys reading science fiction, and creative arts like painting and classical dance, that undoubtedly helped her cope with these unprecedented times. She considers her parents and mentors to be the pillars of strength in her life who supported and encouraged her from time to time. Her advice to students is to enjoy the process of learning and choose a career based on what gives them the most satisfaction. As a mentor, she holds that it is necessary to support students both academically and personally so that the student and mentor can move forward as a team and achieve more. She is excited to interact with the students in the coming years.



Dr. Ashna Bajpai

Associate Professor, Physics

Dr. Nishad Matange

Assistant Professor, Biology

Dr. Bejoy K. Thomas

Associate Professor, HSS

Dr. Pooja Sancheti

Assistant Professor, HSS

Dr. Chaitra Redkar

Associate Professor, Deputy
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Dr. Raghav Rajan

Assistant Professor, Biology

Dr. Haripada Sau

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Dr. Shalini Sharma

Associate Professor, HSS

Dr. Joy Merwin Monteiro

Assistant Professor, ECS

Dr. Sunish Kumar Radhakrishnan

Associate Professor, Biology

Dr. Moumanti Podder

Assistant Professor, Maths

Prof. Tarun Souradeep Ghosh

Professor and Chair, Physics

A Glimpse into the Testing Centre

- Divyansh Gupta, Likhith Chandragiri, and Vasudha Kulkarni

We would like to thank Dr. Krishanpal Karmodiya, Dr. Mridula Nambiar, and Avani Koparkar for sitting down with us for an online interview to answer our questions. And in particular, Dr. Nishad Matange for going through with us, in painstaking detail, over the entire testing process. We would also like to express our gratitude to all the volunteers who are working at the testing center.

It has been over 5 weeks since the testing center became functional. By the end of June, the center had tested more than 4400 samples employing the RT-PCR technique. The Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) says “Real-Time RT-PCR is the gold standard test for detecting cases of COVID-19.”

“Initially when we were setting up the facility we had reached [out to] a few testing centers like NCCS, NIV, and AFMC,” Dr. Krishanpal Karmodiya tells us. We have taken information from all these testing centers. We also contacted other institutes like CCMB and NCBS etc. It is an integration of information from multiple places and based on which we came up with the SOPs (Standard Operating Procedures), which we are now following, keeping the WHO and ICMR guidelines.”

In principle, the test is quite simple; in practice, not so much. Essentially, all you need to do is: collect a swab from a patient, amplify the genetic material present in the sample, and look for specific sequences that bear the hallmarks of the coronavirus. The difficulty lies in ensuring the safety of those involved from the contagion as well as tackling the nitty-gritty (or molecular, one might say) details of the procedure.

Swabs are taken by healthcare professionals by inserting a long swab into the nostril of a patient to collect nasal secretions at the back of the nasal cavity and throat. These swabs are placed in sterile tubes containing a saline viral transport media. The tubes are packed in zip lock bags and placed into sealed boxes known as ‘vaccine carriers’. The swabs arrive from the hospital to the testing center every morning in these vaccine carriers. In the event of a leak or spillage, the virus will be contained within the sealed box.

Room 1 volunteers face the real threat of handling live samples of the virus

Along with the samples, the hospitals provide patient data sheets that summarise patient information including a unique ICMR provided ID for each patient. Each sample is then given an alternate unique IISER Pune ID, which is the only information that links the sample to the patient in the testing process, without any names or other patient details.

Through a specifically designated entrance of the National Facility for Gene Function in Health & Disease (better known as the Animal House) where the testing center is housed, the samples are received into the first of the five rooms that make up the testing facility.

Room 1 volunteers, composed of faculty members and senior PhD students from the Biology Department, face the real threat of handling live samples of the virus and thus wear full-body PPE and N95 respirators. They take the samples out of the sealed boxes and transfer them to a lysis buffer, in order to break open the cells (along with any viral particles present), releasing their contents into the solution, including all genetic material. This lysis process keeps all genetic material intact, however, the protein coat of any virus present is ruptured, rendering it incapable of infecting humans. The riskiest part of the job is done. The lysed solution is then passed onto Room No. 2, through a passbox.

Passboxes are double-doored chambers in the walls that separate the rooms of the testing center. They enable the transport of items between rooms without people having to physically carry them. The door on only one side of the passbox can be opened at a time, which prevents cross-contamination across rooms.

In Room 2, the RNA is isolated from other cell contents in the solution. Until recently, the isolation process was manual and it restricted the number of samples that could be processed in a day. In order to overcome this bottleneck, they have adopted a semi-automatic process that involves minuscule paramagnetic beads that have a specific affinity for nucleic acids, which in turn binds to the beads. These beads can be separated from the suspension magnetically, separating the RNA along with it.

SARS CoV 2, the virus responsible for COVID 19, has RNA as its genetic material. The amount of genetic material available in a sample is inadequate for testing and so it must first be amplified, however, amplification is only possible for DNA, so prior to amplification the RNA genome must be converted to DNA.

RT-PCR, which stands for reverse transcriptase/real-time Polymerase Chain Reaction, accomplishes this in one go. It confirms the presence of the virus by converting the viral RNA to its complementary DNA (known as reverse transcription), repeatedly producing millions of copies of the complementary DNA (through PCR), and then recognizing specific sequences in this DNA.

Meanwhile, the mastermix which contains all the essential ingredients to run the RT-PCR test is prepared in Room 5. All the supplies required for preparing the mastermix and the controls are present in the testing kits provided to the institute by ICMR.

The mastermix contains all the goodness of molecular biology. It includes free nucleotides, the building blocks of DNA; Reverse Transcriptase, the enzyme which converts viral RNA to complementary DNA; DNA Polymerase, the enzyme that replicates DNA, along with other ions and molecules that the two enzymes need to function; and very importantly Primers, which are small DNA strands which allow you to tell the Polymerase where to begin replication from, hence specifically amplifying the genes you wish to detect.

The mastermix also contains fluorophore probes which are compounds having nucleotide sequences that specifically bind to their complementary sequence on a gene. When these probes bind to the genes you are looking for, they emit light of a particular colour which is read on a graph. The light emitted by these allows us to quantify the progress of the PCR reaction as it proceeds in real time.

The protocol laid out by ICMR looks for four genes in total, two genes at a time. Thus we need to run the PCR twice.

Room 3 receives the isolated RNA samples from Room 2 and the mastermix from Room 5. The mastermix and the isolated RNA samples are pipetted together into a 96-well plate, two of which are reserved for controls while the remaining 94 wells contain the test samples. All 96 wells receive the mastermix. This plate is then passed on to Room 4 where it is loaded onto a PCR machine.



Photo source: SMC, IISER Pune

The PCR machine is essentially a thermal mixer in which reverse transcription of RNA to DNA occurs using the enzyme Reverse Transcriptase; the DNA thus produced is replicated or amplified to produce millions of copies of itself.

The principle behind PCR is straightforward, all you need to do is add free nucleotides, Polymerase, and primers to the sample; heat it, to separate the two DNA strands; cool, for the primers to attach, and heat again for the Polymerase to do its magic, and voila! You just doubled your DNA. Do it repeatedly to double the amount each time.

The protocol laid out by ICMR looks for four genes in total, two genes at a time. Thus we need to run the PCR twice. In each round, we look for two genes simultaneously, this is known as multiplexing.

While multiplexing two genes, if the first gene is present in the sample, then the primers specific to the gene will allow it to be amplified and the probe specific to it will emit a signal of a particular colour, say, green. Similarly, if the second gene is present in the sample, it will be amplified and will emit a signal of a different colour, say, red. If we do not detect the signal specific to the gene, then amplification has not occurred and the gene in question is not present.

The first round of PCR is the screening stage where we look for a human gene, RNase P, and a viral E gene. If the viral E gene is absent in the screening stage then the sample is deemed negative.

If they are both present, we move to the second round of PCR or the confirmatory stage, where we look for two viral genes: ORF-1a and RdRP. If either of these is present then the sample is deemed positive for the virus, if neither is present then it is deemed negative.

As Dr. Nishad Matange explains, “The reason we check for a human gene [in the screening stage] is to have a sort of quality control for the RNA preparation itself. Because whether the sample had coronavirus or not, it should always have some human cells.” If it isn’t detected, then the sample result is deemed inconclusive as there must have been something wrong with either the swab collected or the RNA isolation process. Thus, such samples are tested once again by fresh RNA extraction

followed by RT-PCR and if the human gene still isn’t detected, then such samples are reported as invalid and would require new swabs to be collected from the patient.

The results of the test for each sample are matched to the details provided on the patient data sheets given by the hospital and entered to the ICMR portal by members of the data center. The results are summarised in a report that is sent to the concerned hospital which is in contact with the Nodal Officer, Dr. Anjan Banerjee.

The data handling is done by the data center team, mainly composed of staff from the Registrar’s Office, Academic Office, etc., as well as a few student volunteers. Their work is overseen by some faculty members.

“You might think of pipetting as something mechanical but there’s a lot at stake with each sampling. You can’t risk it..”

Each room of the testing facility typically has about 2-3 volunteers at a time in order to maintain social distancing guidelines and the volunteers usually work in shifts of 3-4 hours. There may be upto three shifts a day depending on the number of samples needed to be tested that day. Currently, they are following a 2 person, 3 shift module.

Dr. Sudha Rajamani and Dr. Mridula Nambiar coordinate the volunteers’ schedules aside from working in the testing facility themselves. A roster for each room is prepared and circulated among all volunteers. If anyone has something pre-planned for a particular day, they can swap with another person based on mutual agreement.

The testing center has about 15-20 volunteers working at a time. In total, around 50 volunteers are engaged in wet lab work while the data center has 10-15 volunteers. At the time of writing this, Avani Koparkar, a fifth-year BS-MS student was the only student volunteer engaged in wet lab work and she tells us that a couple of more BS-MS students have joined the data center team. Some PhD students who had stayed back on campus during lockdown have joined testing efforts as well.

“...third-year onward students should be able to help at the center...”

According to Dr. Karmodiya, IISER Pune incurred the costs of setting up the testing centre and purchasing the earlier testing kits from a private biotech company, MyLab. Now the institute receives testing kits from ICMR via the National Institute of Virology, free of cost.

With regard to involving younger BS-MS students in the testing process, people we interviewed expressed their reservations. Avani says, “You might think of pipetting as something mechanical but there’s a lot at stake with each sampling. You can’t risk it with people who don’t really know how to pipette lots of samples together or might lose concentration on that kind of thing. It might be possible with training, but not right away.”

“...we get about an average of 15% to 20% samples positive ... so it is definitely worrying.”

Dr. Karmodiya says that since the first and second year BS-MS students don’t have much pipetting experience, it might be difficult for them, but third-year onward students should be able to help at the center. He also adds that people are assigned roles only according to their skills and interests.

About initiating people into the testing center, Avani tells us, “They made sure we either had a chance to shadow a person for a day, before our actual jobs started, to see how they were doing things, or we always had somebody guiding us for the first two days at least.”

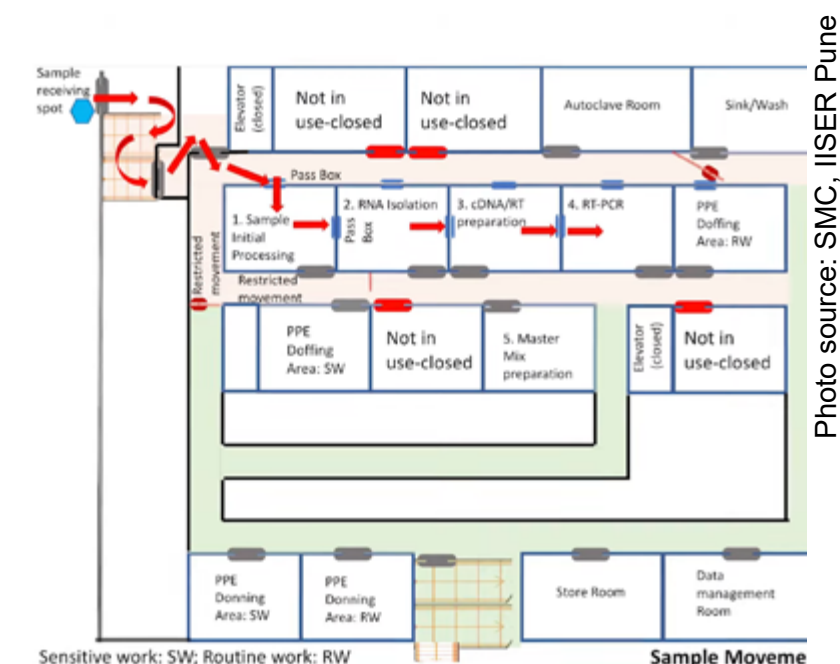
Proper social distancing and sanitization measures are being followed at the center. Avani says, “They check for your temperature and give you hand sanitizer [at the IISER gates], but when you enter the building you’re supposed to sanitize your hands [again] and wear the entire kit that they give you, there’s a lab coat, head cover, gloves, masks, shoe covers and all of that. And obviously, standard lab rules apply: closed shoes, long pants, etc. And while coming out also you sanitize and wash your hands. For Rooms 1 and 2, they make them take a shower in the guest house after their work is done.”

Initially, the test load was about 20-50 per day, Dr. Mridula Nambiar tells us. But now it has gone up to 150-200 a day. “Once we get an automated RNA isolation system and introduce it to the pipeline, we should be able to ramp it up. Even maybe [upto] 300 or so.” When we had interviewed Avani, the testing center had completed testing for 1000 samples. The testing center has received two new PCR machines (on top of the existing two PCR machines belonging to IISER) as well as volunteers from Savitribai Phule Pune University, allowing them to increase their testing numbers.

Regarding the number of samples that test positive, Dr. Mridula Nambiar says, “It sort of varies from day to day but we get about an average of 15% to 20%.”

When asked if it was worrying that the positive percentage is so high, she replied, “Of course, it is. And especially, some of these hospitals from where it’s coming from are from areas that have been designated as hot spots so it is definitely worrying.”

“This is an unprecedented time and it’s the first time we can actually use our expertise for direct application. We have been trained all these years and whatever we have learned now can directly be of actual use for the society,” says Dr. Karmodiya. “I have thoroughly enjoyed it and it has been a nice experience. Testing is the need of the hour. We need as much testing as possible so that we could flatten the curve.”



(This article was first published in Sentience Volume:1 Issue:2 on June 2020)

Prof. Anjan Banerjee, Chair, ICA and Professor in the Department of Biology, has been awarded the Tata Innovation Fellowship 2020-21, and Prof. Harinath Chakrapani, Dean IRO and Professor in the Department of Chemistry, has been awarded the S. Ramachandran-National Bioscience Award for Career development 2020-21.



Dr Siddhesh Kamat of the Department of Biology has received the CDRI 2021 award for Excellence in Drug Research, in the Life Sciences category. This award is given by the CSIR-Central Drug Research Institute.



A team of 14 students from IISER Pune who competed at the 2020 international Genetically Engineered Machines (iGEM) contest, have won a gold medal at the International Giant Jamboree



DBT/Wellcome Trust India Alliance has awarded an Intermediate Fellowship to Dr Nishad Matange and a Senior Fellowship to Dr Sunish Kumar Radhakrishnan (both in our Department of Biology) in the category of Basic Biomedical Research.



IISER Pune faculty members Dr. Umakant Rapol and Dr. Sunil Nair have developed a low-cost ventilator put together with readily available and easily source-able parts.

IISER in

Dr Sreejith G.J., Dept of Physics, is a recipient of the INSA Young Scientist Medal this year.



Dr Shabana Khan of the Department of Chemistry has received the POWER Fellowship of the SERB, DST.



Dr. Seema Sharma (Associate Professor, Physics), Dr. Thomas Pucadyil (Associate Professor, Biology) and Prof. Anjan Banerjee (Professor, Biology) are elected as Fellows of the Indian Academy of Sciences, Bengaluru

Lead lines

Prof. Harinath Chakrapani, Professor of Chemistry at IISER Pune, has won the Bronze Medal of Chemical Research Society of India (CRSI).



Prof. Thomas Pucadyil, Chair, Dept of Biology, has recently been elected a Fellow of the Indian National Science Academy (INSA).

Nine IISER Pune students are among those selected for this year's Prime Minister's Research Fellowship (PMRF)

Prof. S G Srivatsan (Chemistry, IISER Pune) has been selected for the Sun Pharma Research Award for 2020 in the Pharmaceutical Sciences category.

Prof. S G Srivatsan, Professor in Chemistry at IISER Pune, has won National Prize for Research on Chemistry of Peptides and Nucleic Acids. The award is given by Prof. C.N.R. Rao Education foundation to scientists below 55 years of age.



Prof. Anup Biswas (Mathematics), Prof. Angshuman Nag (Chemistry) and Prof. Rejish Nath (Physics) have all been awarded the prestigious Swarnajayanti Fellowship of DST. IISER Pune has picked up the second-highest number of awards this time -- right after IISc, which has 4 awardees

A New Abnormal

There was nothing too peculiar about the campus chatter in March 2020, except the usual brisk business that the end of semesters usually ushers in. Newspaper headlines about the new virus hadn't infected the common psyche until the lines on the graph wriggled further up, and dead bodies piled up across the globe. Suddenly, we were living in the middle of a global pandemic, were being carted off to our homes, and a hazy scramble had ensued. The semester was suspended indefinitely - midway abandoned with heaps of unfinished coursework and untended assignments. What had started as a hiatus soon transformed into looming uncertainty as numbers didn't bode, nationwide lockdowns were imposed and soon the world was gripped in panic.

The semester, which had been disbanded earlier, had to be picked up as classes started again. But adapting to an entirely foreign system of learning that hadn't been tested for its efficacy was a largely unsolvable problem. End-semester examinations were scrapped, and final grades for Spring 2020 were awarded by extrapolating scores received in the mid-semester exams. Some courses chose to give a Pass/Fail grade instead. Adil*, a then 2nd-year BS-MS student recounted, "In our 4th semester we were given P (Pass) grade for the Physics lab course. It undermines so much of work done in physics lab just to be disregarded in transcript."

The Fall 2020 semester was ushered in, online classes were put into place, but there were a number of considerations. Getting used to a system that was so out of the ordinary and different from our usual classroom setting wasn't easy for students and teachers alike. 77.5% (268) of the 346 students who responded to our online survey felt that the quality of education had worsened in the online semester and 66.8% (231) of the people cited the lack of one-to-one interactions with both faculty and peers to be a contributing factor.

Shekhar*, a fourth-year BS-MS student noted, "So most of my online class, I've been really silent. And I think it is the effect of the fact that you can't see your peers, and you can't properly respond to your peers, most of the time. You're just talking to a void, and that's very uncomfortable, that definitely worsens the learning outcome, because the classes are not designed for that kind of learning." Sania*, a second-year BS-MS student also reflected a similar sentiment citing the sheer disconnect that online semesters brought.

Some felt that even the amount of content covered in a few courses was more than usual. "The professors (in some courses) ended up doing a lot more material than usual. There were courses where the professors uploaded videos on holidays, tried to cram in as much material as possible in a video (which would have been somewhat hindered by live student questions during an in-person class)" said Alex*,

a fourth-year BS-MS student, expressing an opinion seconded by others. However, there are people like Shekhar* who on the contrary felt that the content covered was far lesser than usual.

But it isn't just coursework. For students in a science institution who have to work in labs and gain research experience, projects and lab stints are important, something that the pandemic has completely suspended. Shekhar* said "A lot of people in biology rely on the lab experience to be able to at least plan for the future, figure out what they want to do, and get recommendations from professors. And a lot of those things do depend on lab experience because not everything in biology can be theoretical."

67.3% (231) of the students from the survey also complained of not being adequately equipped for online classes, with reasons ranging from minor inconveniences to problems far more severe. Arun*, a second-year BS-MS student, elaborated, "I had to completely rely on my mobile data (on some days). So, one of the things I noticed is [that] G-meet takes up a huge chunk of data actually and so students who don't have unlimited internet, they might actually face a lot of issues because of this." Others struggled with fluctuating internet connections, some eventually switching to LAN connections.

Mayank*, a third-year BS-MS student, struggled since he did not have a laptop or computer. "Initially, it was not a big problem but there was a course in my last semester - Numerical Computation on MatLab. And exams on CodeTantra. If you give your exam on your phone, some or the other problem happens every time. I had to drop a course this sem because it is very difficult to do it without a laptop. Can't do courses without a laptop because they require (computer) packages." Udayan*, an iPhD student, noted that internet connections aren't the only problem. "Electricity isn't a reliable source everywhere in the country. And so, even if you have internet like I have (decent enough internet that I can download videos), but the electricity thing is a bit of a problem. And so, therefore, I have to plan my whole study around the availability of electricity. So that's at least an issue or at least an issue that I never see discussed anywhere. Electricity is actually a resource."

Senior physics faculty, Dr. Sunil Mukhi when asked about his experience with the online semester added, "So, you know, from my side, it was pretty easy, because I'm quite well versed with devices and with the internet and with softwares, and I have a



good internet connection. I think a few students suffered from poor connectivity, particularly in smaller towns and rural areas. But some others who had better connections were slow to adapt to online teaching and felt that the live sessions are not important - attendance in live sessions was only 35% of the class.”

63.9% (221) of the survey takers also felt that their homes were not suited for or conducive environments to sustain the kind of academic rigamarole that is required. Reasons ranged from household chores and overbearing family members to being stuck in harsh home environments. Mabel*, a second-year BS-MS student, confided in us, “I do not have a friendly home environment. I legit[imately] had to stay in the same house with someone who had sexually abused me in childhood. My mental health deteriorated dramatically.” Mabel* was not the only one. 6.3% (22) of the people who took our survey reported having been stuck in abusive or toxic households. A slew of factors like precarious domestic situations, lack of social interaction, being away from friends, and a general sense of isolation may be among the factors that gave rise to a posse of mental health problems.

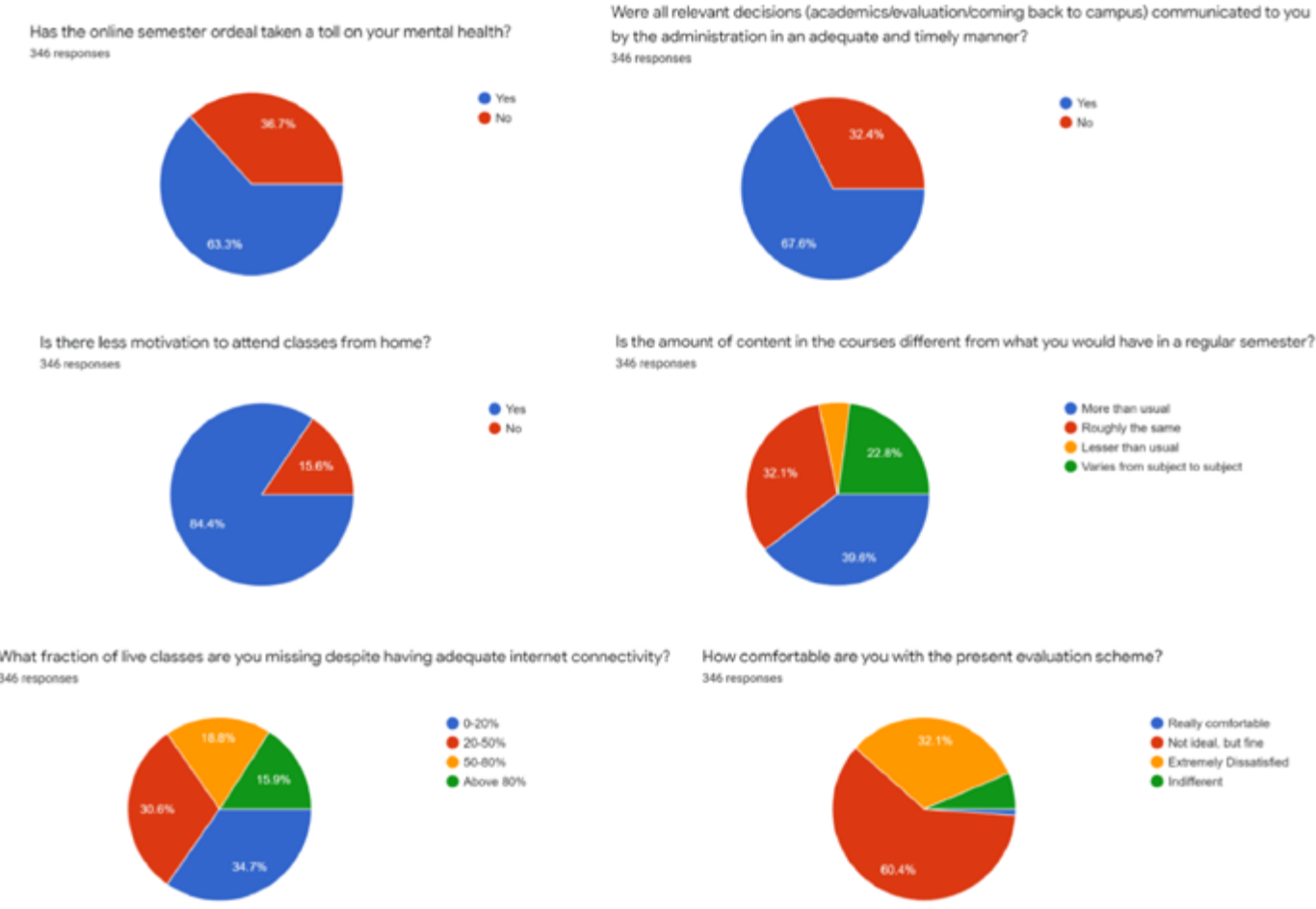
For Udayan*, being diagnosed with a mental health issue during the lockdown made it difficult for people working with him to navigate around it. “Initially, for the first two months, it just felt very surreal. They weren’t insensitive to it, but it felt as if they didn’t know how to deal with it, and would avoid mentioning it in future conversations.”

Our survey revealed that students were lagging by an average of 4 weeks in their coursework. But in this whole chaos, is there a silver lining, if at all

there could be one? Alex* explained, “Because of the recorded lectures, I could fast forward, skip ahead, go back. [Even after two months] I could still go back and revisit that lecture and understand.” He also noted that the lack of a strict attendance policy helped him focus his energy on courses that he liked more. As the weeks rolled by with no signs of the storm abating, many took into stride what we now have resignedly accepted as the ‘new normal’, despite the irreconcilable abnormalities. In Shekhar’s* experience, he noticed how professors switched to more interactive platforms and digital chalkboards while students started using collaborative platforms for group study.

The administration did try to put in place a series of initiatives to help students. As Mayank* put it, “I don’t feel like that (in response to, if the administration could’ve done any better). IISER is doing better than other universities. IISER is making an effort.”

But when you are dealing with a student body that is so diverse in background and circumstance, to account for and accommodate everyone, might turn out to be a mammoth administrative job. Associate Dean of Graduate Studies(Exams), Professor Arijit Bhattacharyay, when asked about this said, “We realise that we have to do things online, but, many students don’t have that facility to do and go through these online courses. And these students faced a lot of problems. Still, we had to go ahead without stalling things for an unknown period of time. We had to start this process with the ones who could actually join and do coursework online, keeping in mind that some are really getting just left behind, and we need to offer some help also to these students to cope slowly with this kind of change. That is where came all these different



relaxations, given at times keeping in mind the difficulty of the students who are unable to cope due to lack of facilities.”

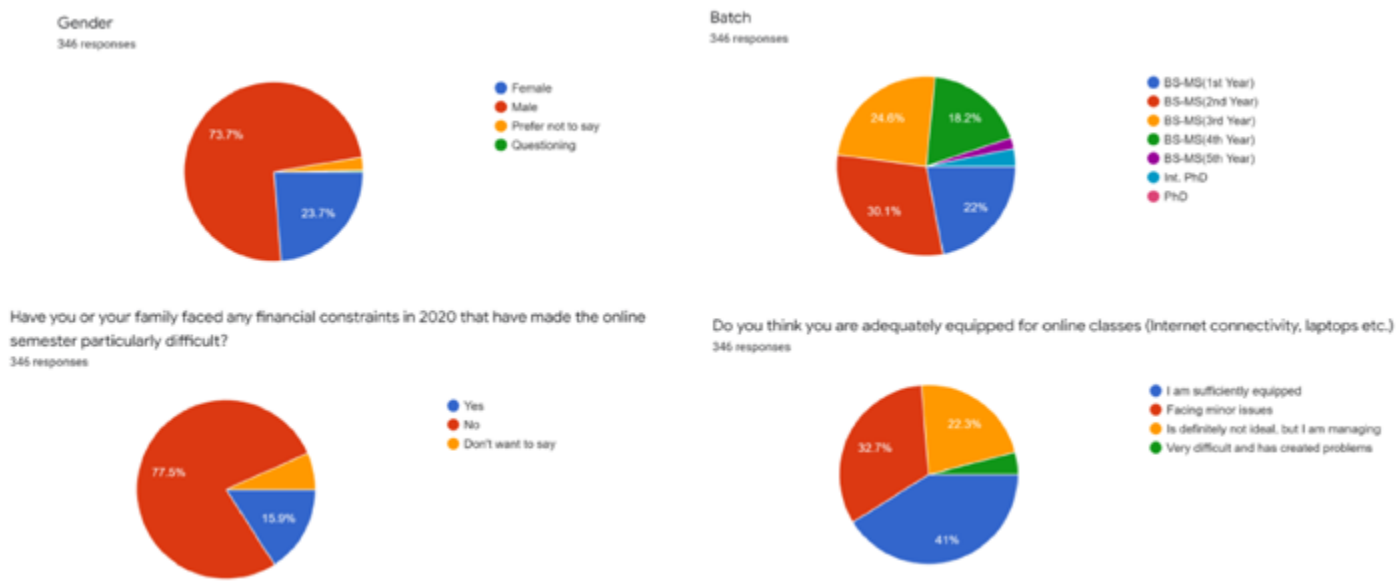
Initiatives like making all library resources available online, making course selections more flexible, providing online counselor services for those who wanted to avail them, were put in place by the administration. But for many, these fell short of the needful. As Mabel* elucidated, “There was no way to avail help while being stuck at home. Even to be able to contact counselors, I need a place where I can be private. And privacy is a joke at home.”

amongst students, only to find that 30% of the survey takers had subpar network connections. Administrative schemes like giving out broadband connections to students, mobile data packs, or even USB sticks containing course material were designed to help such students out. In the case of Mayank*, however, the lack of a computer made it difficult for him to even apply for administrative schemes like the USB sticks when he struggled with connectivity issues.

Alisha*, when asked about the success of the USB sticks scheme, said, “Very few people applied for it, and some complained about the material on the USB being incomplete. We were not included after we gave them (the administration) information from the form about people needing the USBs.” She commented that the administration was keen on helping students out, but was limited by logistical issues. While they were successful in helping out most students who requested assistance with mobile data plans, the institute found it difficult to set up broadband connections remotely. This was confirmed by faculty members as well. Professor Arijit Bhattacharyay said that only 10-20 students had signed up for the USB sticks scheme, but about reimbursing underprivileged students for their internet packs, the institute ran into hurdles

The newly elected Student Council also had to rise to the occasion. Balagopal*, a student representative elaborated on the issues of how the Student Council functioned during the semester. “It was a first-time Council, so a lot of the structures had to be set up.” Alisha*, another student representative added, “Most people didn’t work, just 4 -5 active members. Most have problems at home. But it was very difficult. It was already a first-time Council, so there was a disconnect.” The Council found itself in demand to streamline the communication to bridge students’ grievances to the administration.

The Council surveyed the availability of the internet



as the procedure to reimburse the students could only be executed once the students were back on campus - which has not yet happened in entirety.

While everyone grappled with coming to terms with the newer methods of teaching, setting up an appropriate evaluation scheme opened a larger can of worms. The evaluation for the Fall 2020 semester, in the spirit of all things 2020, was unusual. The continuous evaluation that the fraternity at IISER had accustomed itself to over the years was done away with. It had been decided at the beginning of the semester that continuous evaluation would be conducted only if every student in the course consented to it and that it would carry very little weightage. It was capped at 30%, leaving the remaining 70-100% of the weightage to be determined by a single examination that would occur at the end of the semester after all students were brought back. However, the COVID-19 pandemic continued its scourge and most students were still sitting far away from the 98 acres of IISER Pune when the semester ended. After some deliberation about whether the end-semester exams should be conducted immediately after the end of the Fall semester or after the forthcoming Spring 2021 semester, it was announced that the end-semester examinations would be conducted from 11th - 27th January 2020. The announcement was made exactly three weeks prior, on 21st December 2019. It was also declared that the earlier bar on conducting assignments without every single student's consent was being lifted, as the admin was making plans to bring back students with poor internet circumstances. This resulted in a fresh set of assignments to complete for many students, who were already busy scrambling to study for their first-ever online exam. In some cases, assignments were announced with just two weeks to go until the end-semester exams.

Students, the Student Council, and professors unanimously agreed that the dearth of continuous evaluations made the semester more difficult and stressful, in an already stressful year, however, there is no consensus as to why it was done away with. Professor Arijit Bhattacharyay said, "In hindsight, I understand that [it] was probably not a fully correct decision." He also told us that the Student Council had approached the administration, to ensure that any evaluation that took place in the Fall 2020 semester should be one that was fair for all, on the grounds that a lot of students would neither have

the privilege of good computers nor that of good internet connectivity. "And we understood that, I mean, if this evaluation process is going to happen over a longer period of time, or rather many times, in bits and pieces, that [continuous evaluation] might be difficult for some of the students," Professor Bhattacharyay said, explaining why the administration decided to do away with continuous evaluation. However, members of the Student Council gave us a contradictory account. According to Alisha*, the Student Council had collated a bunch of suggestions including continuous evaluation for the evaluation of the Fall 2020 semester at the beginning of the semester. However, she felt that it was unfair that the Student Council be blamed when the administration decided to make a U-turn from their earlier decision and allowed assignments to be conducted, a few days before the semester ended, since the Council's suggestions had not been heeded to initially, and the clauses they had come up with had been largely ignored. Members of the Council also expressed their dismay at being excluded from the Academic Committee. "So, we are completely out of the loop with whatever decisions they (the committee) are making. Our academic rep[presentative] is just there, they are not part of any committee. The Academic Committee - we have zero involvement." The Council members also suggested that greater interaction of the administration with the general student body might have helped.

Students did write to the Academic Committee in the first week of December 2020, more than a month before the exams actually took place. A mail was drafted by some third-year BS-MS students and signatures were collected from other students who agreed that 100% online examinations would put too much at stake on a one-day performance and thus be susceptible to cheating and other malpractices, which could significantly harm the grades of honest students in a relative grading system. In their opinion, a fairer system would have been assignment-based evaluation where the concern of malpractice adversely affecting honest students would have been nullified. The mail was sent to the Student Council who forwarded it to the administration, but to no avail. The plans for a full-blown online end semester exam remained unaltered with many students having to determine 100% of their grade based on a two and half hour performance in an exam covering 100% of the syllabus for several courses.

The platform for exams was chosen - CodeTantra. IDs were created for students by the administration and the vendor. When the first mock tests were conducted and students got access to the CodeTantra portal - they were concerned. There were three primary concerns - the website's privacy laws, significant inconveniences caused by some proctors, and multiple avenues for unchecked malpractice. The students (mostly from third-year BS-MS) wrote to the administration immediately, in large numbers voicing their concerns. With regards to the privacy policy, students were concerned as the CodeTantra website said that the company could store and sell all data of the users. The administration was quick to react in clearing out that the privacy disclaimer hosted on the CodeTantra portal was not one that would govern the handling of students' data according to the agreement between CodeTantra and IISER Pune, and sent an electronic copy of the privacy contract between the two organizations. With regards to the possibility of malpractice, students complained that no matter how rigorous the proctoring was, there would always be students cheating without being caught, as had happened in other big Indian institutes like IIT-Bombay [1]. They claimed to have pointed out specific ways in which students could cheat, to the administration. These included virtual machines, using other devices parallelly, having webcams on the bottom of the screen as opposed to the top. Most of these emails had been written on the 4th of January 2020 - the day of the first mock test and exactly one week before the first exam. The administration responded promptly on the 6th of January, 2020, attaching a copy of an 'Honour Code' explaining the consequences that students would face if they were caught cheating.

The exams happened.

A large number of courses opted for MCQ-only question papers, likely due to the convenience of grading the tests, some students speculated. Some students welcomed all-MCQ papers. One said, "For some subjects having totally MCQs was a very good idea because, well, it made things easier of course. For example in maths, things such as proofs and stuff were lost but then it also reduced the burden on students." Other students were not so welcoming, "They need to see how you understand the concept and not [just] take uses [of the formula]. You don't just need to remember the formula, but you need to

know the inner workings of it, how everything works. So I think for that, they shouldn't [have had all-MCQ papers], MCQs would have been a bad choice." The types of question papers were not the students' only concerns. CodeTantra had glitches. "I got Bs in the course, where I had glitches in the exam, even though those courses were easy. I was muted, so I couldn't ask the professor any questions. And they were not attending the chatbox." said a fourth-year BS-MS student. Their batchmates too had technical concerns, "All software work differently on different devices, there is no software key. And that should not be something that the administration believes. I hope they don't, because software are written by people. People make mistakes and bad things happen. So I was locked out of an examination (due to an unforeseen technical glitch). I got locked out for five minutes. That five-minute thing is not a big deal because the examination is worth two hours. But it is definitely a big deal because you're giving the exam at home and you can panic."

Students were also concerned about the proctoring at times, "First of all, the proctors weren't there half of the time. And I noticed, like connectivity issues and stuff, but then mostly, the proctors weren't there (and) that was really like a gateway for cheating," said a third-year BS-MS student. Some students confessed to cheating, "There were some exams that were so information-heavy, I didn't see any point in not [cheating]. I didn't, you know, completely, like search on the website [for] answers to it. My cheating was like, I made some formula sheets, and I just saw formulas of them, or I just saw names, and I copied them in the exam." Other students claimed to know about cheating. In a particular mathematics course, the professor found exact replicates of proofs from online resources, and those students were given an I (Incomplete) grade. A third-year BS-MS student speculated on whether only those students who had poor grades in previous semesters but good grades in the online semester, were accused of cheating. He wondered if students who had a history of good scores would've been suspected at all even if they had cheated. A few students were accused of cheating in a physics examination and were awarded an F grade. Ghazal*, a second-year BS-MS student, shared their experience of the 'interrogation' that followed, "[Without mentioning anyone's name] but I know a lot of people who have cheated in the exam, and almost all of them did not receive the mail. Yeah, a bunch of random people are chosen. Until and unless there is solid proof that I

have copied from someone else, or I have passed on answers to someone else, I don't think that it is right for them to accuse me." Professors too were concerned with malpractices in the examinations and expressed their dismay at it, and measures were taken to disqualify all such papers. Professor Sunil Mukhi said, "The biggest problem which makes me very sad and heartbroken is that there was a massive amount of cheating. This has happened in my course before, and happened again on the CodeTantra platform. And I cannot blame the platform because frankly, if you want to cheat in an exam, you can cheat. I mean, it's not that difficult." He stressed that there was only a limited amount that the CodeTantra portal could do to prevent cheating. "Well, the problem with the CodeTantra platform is it can only be limited to making you share your screen and have your hands and face visible. But there are a few issues which we couldn't predict. For example, some people's laptops have a camera at the bottom of the screen, this makes it hard to show your paper as you write."

A fourth-year BS-MS student also complained about not having had their evaluated papers shown to them in a large number of courses before the grades were announced. "So they (professors) were not given sufficient time to show us our papers? And that is really weird because, at IISER, you see your papers. It is very rare that a course instructor does not show the paper before submitting the grade. So this was almost non-transparent, it was like, 'You have no right to look at your papers situation.'"

The pandemic has affected almost everyone around the world. We talked to a few people from other universities to find out how they have adapted to the situation. A BS-MS student from IISER Mohali said, "We were given the freedom of paying the fees anytime during the semester and not before it started (which was compulsory earlier)." Universities around the globe have also shifted to varied patterns of evaluation. A student from the University of Illinois talked about the Covid Pass system which was introduced. "For people who might not perform well, the college takes this situation into account. We have an option for Covid Pass where you can apply for a course to become pass/fail. So, while others getting an A will keep their grade, you can waive it off so that your GPA doesn't tank." The Covid

Pass system, if availed at the beginning of the semester required a grade of C- or better to earn the credit that does not contribute to the GPA but is assessed as credit hours [3]. A student from IIT-BHU (Metallurgy department) and an IISER Mohali BS-MS student talked about how their colleges implemented a grading system that focussed more on assignments and projects.

Professors have also been considerate and helpful in these testing times. Faculty from Jadavpur University, Kolkata, donated one day of their salary in June 2020 to equip students who did not have smartphones and data packs with the needful. The Vice-Chancellor of the government-funded university, Professor Suranjan Das made an appeal later in August 2020, "I feel it is our moral responsibility to provide the students who do not possess a smartphone (which they would have to return to the University upon the completion of their courses) and to offer financial assistance to those students who need it to upgrade their data connectivity. I am sure you will agree that the adoption of these measures is required to address the challenge of the 'digital divide.'" [2]

Professors at IISER Pune too were compassionate and active in providing relief during the pandemic. We spoke to Dr. Suhita Nadkarni who talked to us at length about the plight of some of the residents of IISER Pune. Apart from the students, staff, the campus of IISER Pune is home to labourers, who live with their families in the slums behind the tall shadows of the Rahul Bajaj Hall of Residence for Women. Most of these workers are migrants - and we know that the pan India lockdown was not kind to their fraternity. "I think we would see these people in the basti come and buy basic groceries from the store downstairs. And over the few weeks, it was shocking to see the changes in these kids who come basically running errands for the family, they were seriously emaciated." Dr. Suhita Nadkarni told us. "Obviously, there was no work. And whatever savings they had at some point, they had run out of it. Also, because they were not local, it was harder for them to have access to the facilities that were provided by the government." Dr. Nadkarni and her colleagues (Dr. Pooja Sancheti, Dr. Vineeta Bal, Dr. Aarti Rapol, and Dr. Aparna Deshpande) decided to take it upon themselves to help the migrant labourers in the slums. "I think the pandemic forced us to pay more attention to our local surroundings.

One realized very quickly that the laborer's camp (basti) in the campus was in dire need of help at that point. And this was something well within our reach. They were right next door, and it could be shocking if we as a community had ignored them. What was heart-warming and endearing was how quickly we were able to generate sufficient funds that we could give them basic ration until there was work." She talked about the responsibility of the privileged to understand that their position is not based on merit alone but an advantage at birth, especially in India where caste and class differences still dominate our lives. It is therefore even more pertinent in times of crisis that we are willing to let some of this privilege percolate down. She also talked about how the migrant labour force in India is situated so low in the social hierarchy, and that many in the IISER community have taken up a long-term engagement with the Milk and Eggs program and the Doorstep school. "I think another useful lesson the pandemic taught us is this awareness that no one is above falling through the cracks. Before the pandemic, there was sense the world is running reasonably on smooth wheels. We just assumed that the kids in the basti had appropriate nutrition, clothes, and toys and went to school as mandated by the government. Then COVID hit and there was a realization that someone taking care of the system had to be you and simply doing your job was just not good enough. Several people in IISER signed up for doing various things beyond the call of their duty. That the basti people are no longer invisible to us, doing their jobs in the background, is a big achievement of the times."

As the lines between reality and dystopia have grown incoherent, and we have been forced to stare uncertainty to the face, it has only been difficult to deal with our circumstances, and arguably more so to transition into newer systems, and harder still to design them. As the pandemic rages on with little hope of respite, in the end, we are all teetering to settle into a system that resembles the normal more and less at the same time, with each passing day, leaving barely anything that makes sense to the intuition. Will these circumstances last long enough for us to get acclimatized to them? Will they last even longer? We cannot say. We can only wash our hands, wear our masks, and brave this new abnormal.

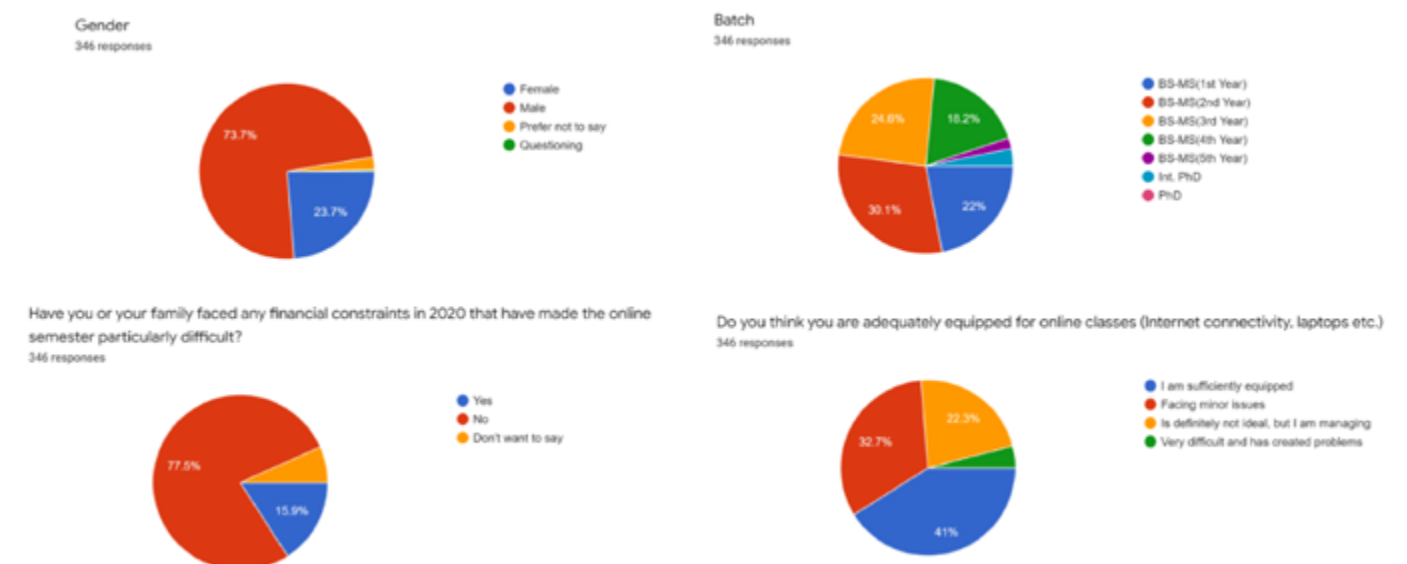
Sources:

[1]<https://indianexpress.com/article/education/online-exam-cancelled-by-iit-b-after-incidents-of-cheating-surface-7064288/>

[2] Quote used verbatim from <https://www.abpeducation.com/news/ju-seeks-faculty-help-for-providing-smartphones-data-connectivity-to-ne-edu-students-1.1191801>

[3]<https://registrar.illinois.edu/registration/registration-process/credit-no-credit>

- Ranojoy Baisya, Rajashree Nayak, Suryadepto Nag, Sabareesh SS, Satavisha De, Ishani Hira, Varuni Nagesh, Naren S Narayanan, Amoghavarsha AV



Quarantine Quandary

I've had many good years among the 21 that I have been around for. I have been told that the year 1999 was extraordinarily productive for me (I made considerable progress in motor and cognitive matters); a marathon school crush made the years 2010-2013 rather sunny; the year 2015 brought with it good grades and a spot of mental development, and 2018 was quite special, not in the least because I trekked the Himalayas for the first time. In comparison to all this, 2019 was a certified Class A rotter—for reasons not interesting enough to bring up here. So by the end of the year, I had resolved to make 2020 my own.

That was not to be.

The year started off well, with news that I had been given the opportunity to leave the Motherland and visit the Fatherland^[1] for 3 months for a summer project. I was thrilled! Ignoring coursework, I spent most of my energy reading in preparation for my project and making arrangements for my stint abroad. Forms were filled, documents prepared, tickets booked, and an aunt who had preemptively settled down in Frankfurt in 2010 was kept in the loop. Like the idiot protagonist of a movie never made, I dreamed of doing good research and performing at German open mics^[2], blissfully unaware that, to mix idioms, batshit was about to hit the fan. Nervous laughter that began with the German quarantine soon turned into nervous non-laughter as IISER shut down and we started banging plates. Finally, in a sizable dose of disappointment, the internship got canceled. Soon, everyone's summer hopes were dashed and an appropriate amount of time was duly spent in an orgy of collective self-pity.

But Life finds a (usually substandard) way. Opportunities—weeks of intense learning, engrossing discussions with the guide, a chance to meet new people and in general, have loads of fun—were traded in for weekly (if you are lucky) pixelated discussions with the PI from the comfort of your bedroom. In college, the guide has nowhere to hide. Breezing into their office uninvited might be irksome on occasion, but it prods work along. Stochastic Skype[®] calls, on the other hand, are likely to catch the opposite party in the middle of a jhadu-pochha session, making technical discussion inelegant and ineffective in equal measure. So, work proceeds at a snail-slow pace if it proceeds at all; without the luxury of long, fruitful discussions peppered with head-scratching and whiteboard-staring, research or for that matter, reading, becomes achingly sluggish, and in the absence of a bustling academic environment, sloth inevitably takes over. The theorists are still the luckier bunch; the only experimental facility open for business during the pandemic is the Devil's workshop^[3]. And with online classes less engaging than even real classes, the student is left with acres of unstructured time and a tendency to be miserable about things out of his/her control.

Of course, that's not all. In the absence of bright deadlines and visible results, motivation becomes a rare commodity. Often, the situation at home is not conducive to tranquillity, much less academic progress. It is common knowledge too, that every day feels exactly the same, and in the absence of a bustling social life to lend color to the day, mental health is bound to suffer. I find milling about our campus and soaking in the sunlight very invigorating, but alas, the kitchen and the bedroom are only a few meters apart at home and the builder thoughtlessly gave my house an opaque roof.

The words above may have painted a gloomy picture, but I firmly believe that all is not lost. The number of open doors may or may not be a God-mediated conserved quantity, but I think that there is much we can do to better ourselves during this time. The interfering challenges are unique to the individual, so generic advice rarely serves any purpose apart from conveying a false sense of smugness on the part of the writer. However, we might do well to resolve to do something—academic, co-curricular, or personal—better than we did before, set ourselves discernible goals in such a direction, and work towards them for a few hours every day. Maintaining a sleep cycle, a proper routine, and setting the phone aside for long stretches goes a long way in aiding this endeavor. If nothing else, we can use this quarantine to learn how unemployment feels; this experience may well come in handy in the not-too-distant future.

Stay safe.

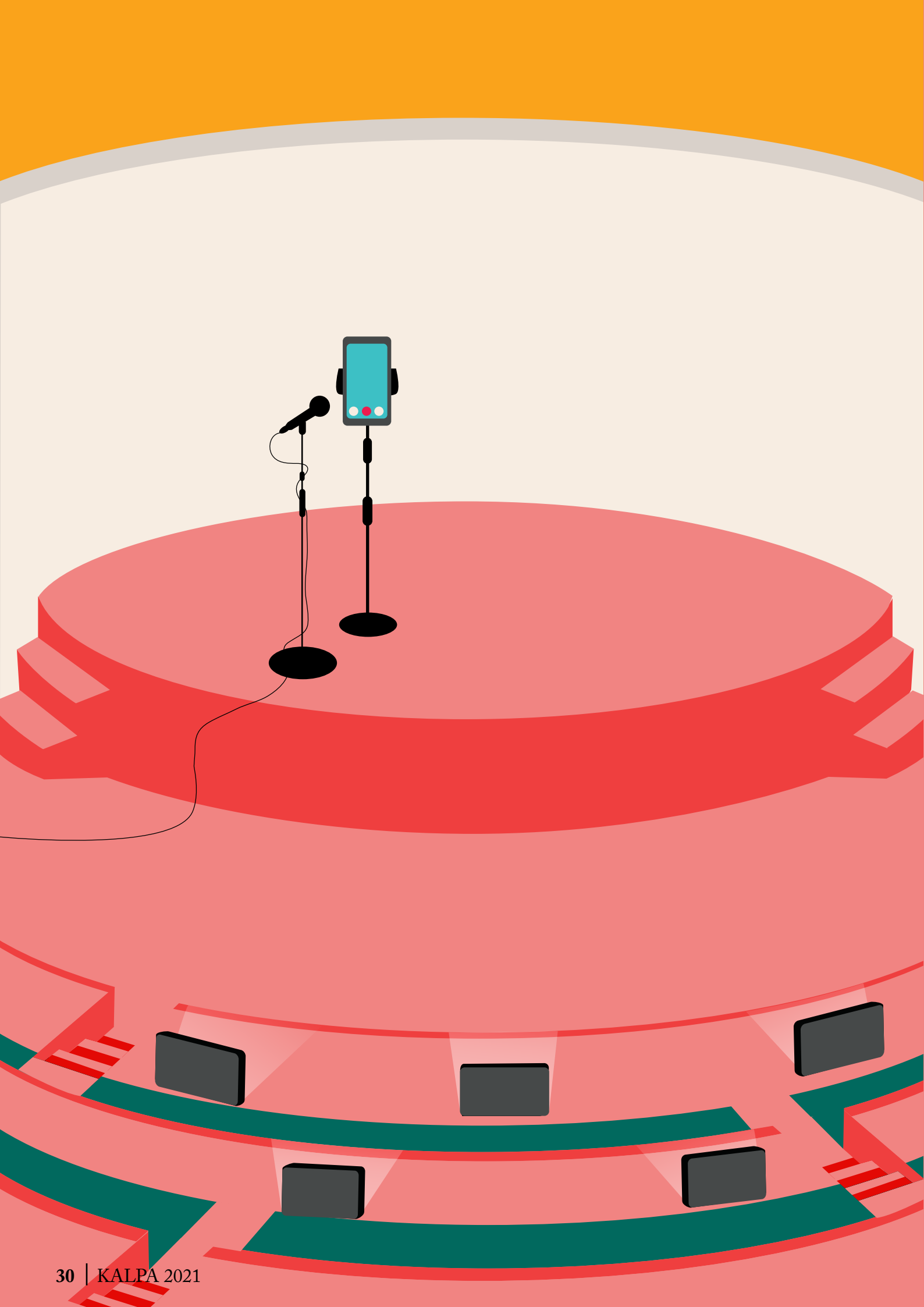
^[1] To be clear, this is a case of what mathematicians and physicists would call 'abuse of notation'; the Mother and the Father are not related here.

^[2] In English.

^[3] Sorry.

- Aditya Kolhatkar

(This article was first published in Sentience Volume:1 Issue:2 on June 2020)



CLUB REPORTS

PRUTHA

Prutha - the green club of IISER Pune - had a change of coordinatorship with Dinesh PR and Pratyush MR, the long time previous coordinators passing on responsibility to Vikram Iyer and Krishna Chaitanya Sattaru. The club's inaugural step was to unveil its new logo.

Along with the yearly bird count on campus, a wildlife photography exhibition was held, with all entries being displayed on the club Instagram page. An Earth Day screening of a talk by esteemed environmentalist Pradip Krishen in collaboration with Kaleidoscope followed, along with an interactive session where PadCare, who describe themselves as a "hygiene management solution," talked about the present state of menstruation in India, its associated challenges, and their efforts to combat them.

The All IISER Conservation Committee was founded in early 2021 with the aim of organising all the IISERs in order to facilitate communication and coordination amongst the respective environment clubs and collectives. While still in its infancy, the Committee is planning several events over the rest of the year. The semester concluded with the launch of the IISERP Marketplace Discord server for IISER Pune students, where one may buy and sell second hand items, eventually leading to increased reducing and reusing, analogous to the likes of OLX or Craigslist.

The club plans to expand its domain and scope through the summer and fall '21 semester with hopefully stronger and larger events and initiatives.

- Vikram Iyer



TEDXIISERPUNE

“A successful journey is the one that can be reminisced after days, weeks, months, and years.”

The year has been stressful but certainly not less lively. Despite the numerous hurdles, the TEDxIISERPUNE club has been working incessantly to make a successful comeback after a memorable maiden event. And we are proud to say that we have done our best by not cutting corners despite our decision to hold an online event. A memorable online event!

Apart from the usual tidbits of talks and barraging mails, we organized TED circle events for the first time and coordinated a discourse related to the climate crisis. Over the past semester, much of our efforts have been directed toward finding performers, shortlisting competent speakers, designing the web page, creating an enticing theme, and preparing for the massive final TEDx event.

We have chosen ‘Frosted Glass’ as the theme, and our objective is to explore the misconstrued notions around us. The Theme reveal was a massive success after our subtle publicity hints earned us enough curious audience. NarraTEDx, a creative writing competition, also garnered us a fair share of submissions.

We also organized a couple of Watch Party events on Censorship and Procrastination and/or Life Gamification in line with our theme. Our intention was to bring light to what our theme entails, to give a flavor of the backbone of our curated talks and performances, and attract the audience for the main event.

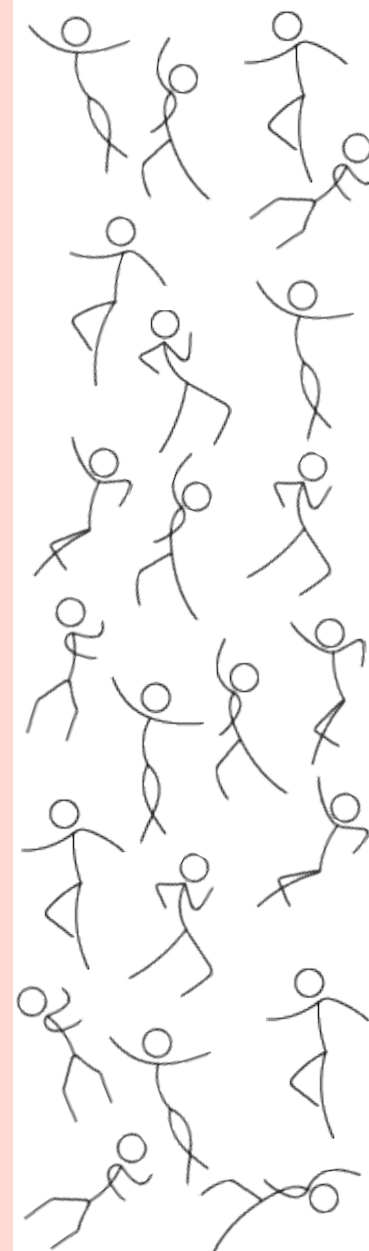
Setbacks were numerous during the entire course of planning, but we stayed rooted, and so did the community. The days of the pandemic will be looked back in years to come, and we hope our event becomes just as memorable. 26th of September is the mayday, and we hope to see you with us!



YOGEN

Yogen is an emerging club that aims to create a stress-free and healthy environment on the campus. We aim to show the full spectrum of yoga-related activities. We have successfully organized an e-yoga competition called Yotsi and a webinar that taught the audience the benefits of heartfelt meditation. The e-yoga competition was welcomed enthusiastically by the IISER Pune community and all participants were awarded certificates of participation. These events have been organised to create the right stimulus aimed to inculcate the habit of doing yoga every day.

This is the beginning of a long journey for Yogen to become an integral part of IISER Pune's pride. We are planning to conduct 30-day yoga challenges, regular sessions on improving flexibility, posture, and strength, along with events related to International Yoga Day for the new online semester. Do check out for all the exciting events Yogen has to offer!



NAVARASA

In the year 2020, dance took on a whole new form, from a construct of expression to a companion in loneliness and a path to freedom in quarantine, and we at Navarasa went with the flow. Our first performance of the year took place in the CV Raman Auditorium on the occasion of Republic Day. Unfortunately, it was also the last performance we practised and performed together. Despite missing the Dance room rehearsals, we were driven to keep the dancer in the IISERites alive.

Perceiving the pandemic as an opportunity to revive our Instagram account, we hosted an Online Solo Dance Competition in May. The viewers voted for their favorite entries and the judges selected the best 3 performances. For Independence Day, we hosted ‘Rhythmic Recitals’, a 3-day online event during which we uploaded dances in different languages that moved the dancers.

On the occasion of Navaratri, ‘9 Pages’ was streamed on our Instagram handle. In compliance with our name, videos depicting one of the nine emotions of life were posted each day. The viewers would guess the emotions and write captions for the same. Following this, we released two dance covers in December - Sawaar Loon and Pookal Pookum. The “Dance Off 2020” video was released on New Year's Eve.

Navarasa concluded the year of uncertainty with a compilation of dance moves that helped beat exam stress and forget the worries that the year brought. We look forward to Step-up soon in the dance room with a vow to put on many more enthralling performances.

- Anuja Raorane, Ritvee Talele and Sandhya Vijayan

LITERATURE CLUB

As the lockdown bound everyone to their rooms for weeks on end, we were compelled to come up with online events to keep people connected and sane for the duration. We started the year by organizing Tales and Verses from the Quarantine. In July, when it became apparent that we wouldn't be called back anytime soon, we moved our usual events - Speakers Forum, Book Discussions, and Poetry Nights - online. Virtual meetings did decrease interaction and intimacy, but they helped us increase the accessibility and reach of our annual talk series - Caste Away - where we chose to focus on addressing caste and casteism in the modern world. The situation also allowed us to call in speakers and reach an audience from afar. We look forward to continuing our current events and getting started on our flagship events - CSI and HMD. Stay tuned!

- Akash, Pallav, Vasudha



MARATHI CLUB

We took the opportunity to reactivate MaayMarathi Mandal (Marathi Club at IISER Pune) during the lockdown. The reason behind restarting the club was to share our rich culture and language with the non-Maharashtrian IISER community. We organized several activities and events, exploring Maharashtra's historical, cultural, and literary aspects.

Due to the pandemic, all events were conducted virtually. Here are some of our major events -

Colloquial Marathi classes: We helped people from the IISER community learn Marathi to better enjoy their time in Pune.

1. Omarkar Utsav(IISER Pune's Ganeshotsav): Omarkar Utsav was celebrated online with a decoration competition, mythology hunt, and cultural programs together with other clubs. Students described their experience of Ganeshotsav in their states.
2. Kavya Vachan: We organized a Marathi Poetry recitation session to strengthen bonds with the language.
3. Gappa-Goshti: In this semi-informal talk show, we invited people doing phenomenal work related to the Marathi language and culture to talk about their journey.
4. We aim to widen our scope with many such exciting events in the coming year.

- Atharva Bhide, Shruti Patil, Pranav Sadhu



DRAMA CLUB

After being stuck at home for 5 months, courtesy of the pandemic, the Drama Club decided to pull itself together and get creative given the new situation. Being absolute newbies at filmmaking, our first attempt at making a video production was Vartalaap, made in collaboration with the Hindi Club. This was a very important learning experience for our future productions. We had a comeback with Beparda, a flipped perspective on the way society treats the LGBTQIA+ community. This was our largest and longest project, spanning 2 months and involving 20 actors, 4 writers, 7 video editors, and 4 reviewers from the Satrangi Club. We also produced Shanaya, a 4-part mini-series focusing on the story of a girl approaching her twenties. The actors put immense effort into making props, finding the right camera angle, lighting, and costume. The best parts of all our productions, though, were the meetings and behind-the-scenes bloopers, which brought us together despite being miles apart.

Instagram: @iiserp_dramaclub

Youtube channel: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UChoOefkKkoqMSLaZzL_JyfQ

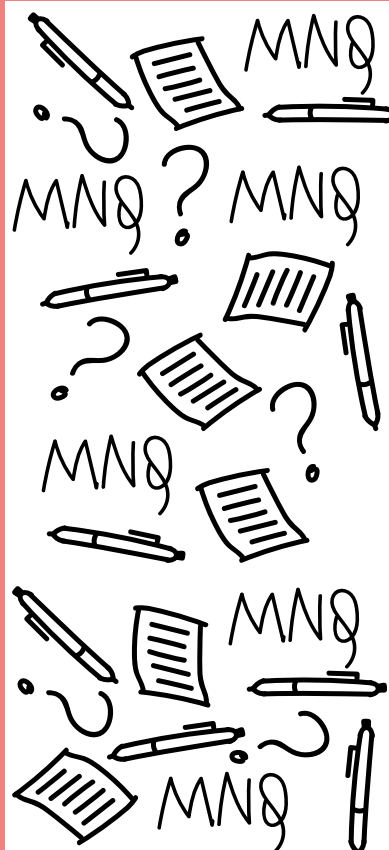
- Arsh Shaikh, Maria Sabu and Namitha Deepak



QUIZ CLUB

Many consider the Monday Night Quizzes an integral part of the weekly campus schedule. With the current situation though, the Quiz Club had to reorient its activities towards a quizzing system that would be feasible for everyone stuck at home and still bring the same joy of quizzing every week. We experimented with various formats and time slots to capture the essence of in-person quizzes, just without the instant gratification of prizes (chocolates!) earned. From Instagram Stories to WikiQuiz, we tried to achieve the perfect balance of camaraderie, friendly banter, and serious quizzing over the past few months. With leaderboards already open to all IISER Pune denizens, we even welcomed enterprising non-IISER participants. To this end, we restarted our beloved MNQs, with both the written and live components spread out over a month and, of course, even better prizes! We plan to be back soon with the much-awaited inter-school and open marquee events - but even bigger and better this time. Happy quizzing!

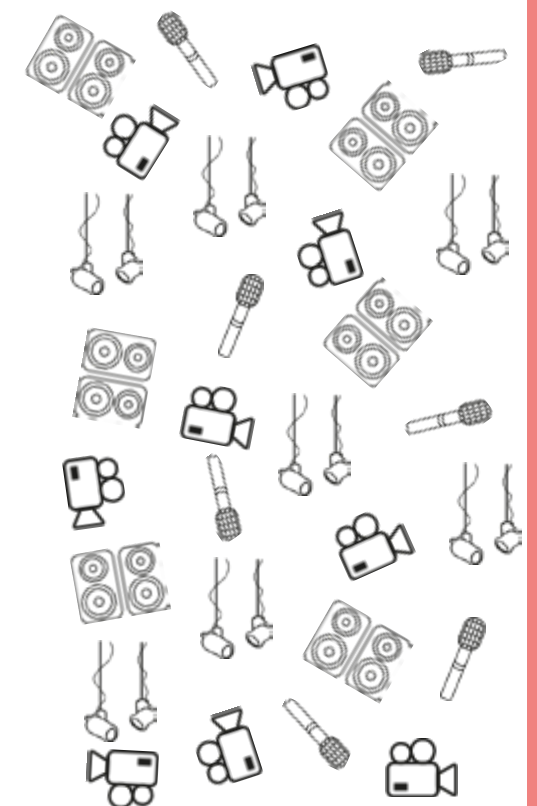
- Punya Sethi



SPICMACAY

One of the major downsides of the lockdown was not being able to experience the delight of being at a live concert. Hence, we, at SPICMACAY IISER Pune, began thinking of ways to adapt to this unexpected turn of events and keep the spirit of Indian heritage alive within us. Prof Nagaraj Balasubramaniam, our faculty coordinator, gave us the excellent idea of introducing a cultural newsletter. Without any delay, the core team set itself to work. We surfed the internet for exciting content, looked up online events, and gradually put it all together. That was how Kalaatatva came into being. It features articles about art, culture, and history from the untold pages of our nation's rich cultural history. Our zeal for the newsletter has only intensified each passing month. That said, we have been kept far from our cherished concerts for too long now, and it's about time we revive the passion. We have quite a few events coming up this semester. Stay tuned!

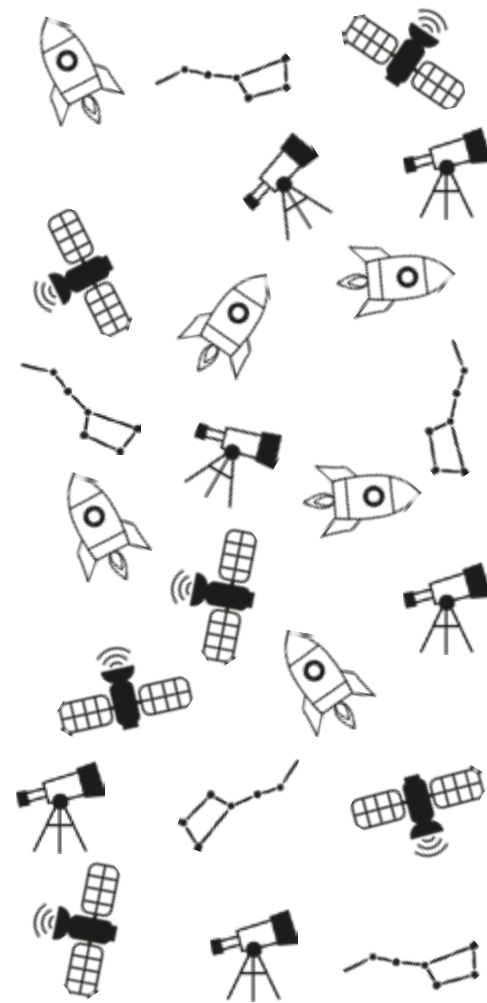
- Manav Sriram



AAKASHGANGA

The most challenging thing for Aakashganga was coming up with ideas for activities that we could feasibly conduct online. Not having skywatching sessions was a significant loss for us. However, we put our heads together and came with some exciting events for the semester. Alumni Talks saw IISER Pune graduates working in Astronomy and Astrophysics at various places in India and abroad give an overview of their research and provided glimpses into their IISER journey. In collaboration with the Physics Department, we organised a public talk by Prof. Ramana Athreya in memory of Prof. Govind Swarup, a titan in India's Radio Astronomy Venture. In a joint effort with the Art Club, Cosmic Canvas brought out the inner artist in our fellow Astro enthusiasts and gave people relief from the stressful online semester. It was our first experience with judging art. Deciding the winning entries for this astropainting competition nearly caused a civil war - all the entries were simply stunning! Throughout the semester, we also maintained an active Instagram page with weekly posts. Finding new ideas to post every week was challenging, but we learned a lot in the process.

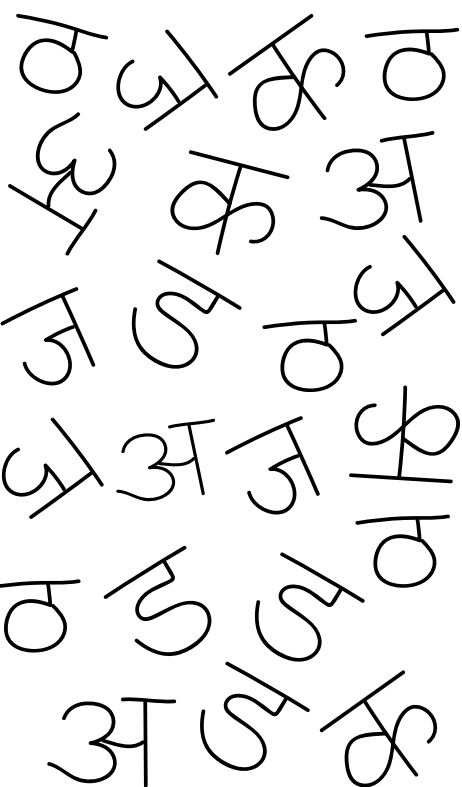
- Kaustubh Gupta



MATH CLUB

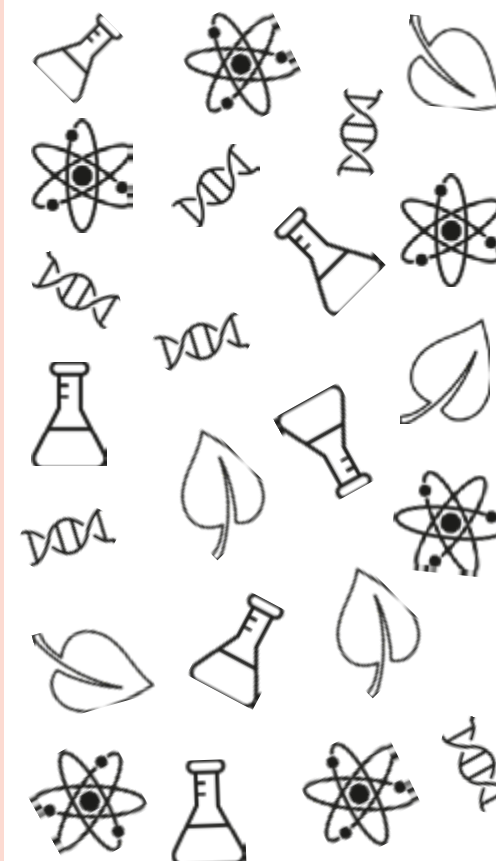
Planning events and then making them happen online has been a challenge, but this medium has also made us all the more accessible to people in IISER Pune as well as people outside. In addition to a collection of online talks as part of the "What is...?" series, we conducted the Pi-Approximation Day treasure hunt last year. The online treasure hunt, based on problem-solving as well as math and pop culture trivia, saw over a hundred and fifty teams from various IISERs participating. Math Day, the Math Club's marquee event, took place over the March 12-13-14 weekend. The main events included a colloquium by Prof V. Kumar Murty, a faculty talk by Dr Moumanti Podder, a new addition to the Math department at IISER, and fun interactions with the faculty at IISER Pune. Throughout the weekend we also had math competitions, quizzes, and a game night. A Monday Night Quiz, and a Math Day skit were put up in collaboration with the Quiz Club and the Drama Club, respectively. If not for the collaborative effort, the event would not have been possible. Our future plans primarily include restarting events like weekly discussion sessions and continuing with our current events.

- Aniketh , Varun



HINDI CLUB

At the start of the academic year, Hindi Club made a short film with Drama Club as a tribute to the brave freedom fighters on 15th August. Gitesh Masram and Mohit Singh wrote a poem to honour them on this day. To bring us closer during these challenging times, "Jashn-e-Kalam" was organised on Hindi Diwas, which the IISER family enjoyed thoroughly. Even though not on campus, IISERites did not lose their spirits and demonstrated their writing skills with poetry and prose. They took part in various writing competitions and even won prizes. In collaboration with iPlug, Hindi Club organised a literary puzzle. A poetry night with freshers was organised - a gathering that made everyone feel close even when hundreds of miles apart. A blog was also published to exhibit the works of IISERites. No matter what the time, as long as there is a Hindi Club, the pen will keep working.



SCIENCE CLUB

We hope some of you remember our offline events; not all of 2020 was over Google Meet! The year kicked off with Nobel Evenings 2019 and Science Day celebrations. When the pandemic took over, it became difficult to see the point behind anything, including club events. Fortunately, enthusiasm is something that can build upon itself. We introduced Discussion Forums, whose trajectory has been akin to our club's: brimming with potential but yet to be explored fully! Then came a panel discussion dissecting the nuances of the new online semester. We are delighted that the 'Know Your Professor' series made a difference, providing some much-needed inspiration and optimism in these testing times. The year, peppered with various exciting talks, was finally garnished with a Quantum Mechanics Talk Series and Nobel Evenings 2020 (and dreams of a better 2021). We shall summarise our future plans as "more, bigger, and better" due to the word limit.

- Amitaprajna Mallik, Krishna Chaitanya Sattaru, Rapti Pal, Neel Shah

Taking up responsibilities often questions your capabilities and how you approach various situations that you often are unprepared to deal. This has been one of my major learnings as being Mimamsa GC.

My GC experience has been entirely online, and here I have been asked to write how it has been with this pandemic.

Just a brief note on how it has been: I took over the reins when the 2020 edition was incomplete; the mains was supposed to be held a week later but we all were already sent home. It all seemed too soon. After a lot of discussion, we seemed to nail in on a plan to have the 2020 Mains online and to also have the 2021 edition with the initial stages online.

The event went well and well, putting up the event was it itself a great success I would say. It was extremely stressful to say the least. After 2 months of putting in work, it was satisfying to see the end results. To put in one word though, the overall experience was scary.

Coordinating 20 people who reside in different parts of the country makes it extremely critical to have good communication with the team members. I did falter a lot initially because I have never coordinated work with a set of people before, and this was new as I had to delegate work to people as well as do work. It was hard, as we cannot 'see' if the others are doing the job. To add to this, there are people who tend to lose interest given the online mode, and that is why communication becomes so crucial.

Managing studies has been horrible with the GC workload. Often, I have had

to compromise time on studies which started to have a negative effect on me and my grades. It was then I understood that being a GC is similar to a full time job as a Team leader, and one should designate specific hours to work on it. Easier said than done, I've started to implement it a bit more, and it is starting to show some improved results.

I haven't always had the happiest of times being GC. It does take a lot of energy out of you. I felt quite lonely depressed and extremely tired. I had multiple breakdowns, especially the period after Mains, where I hoped if I never did GC. Things like these do come for everyone taking up this role, and it's just a passing cloud. One should be calm rather than focusing too much on the negatives. Keep it simple, as they say. And have someone to help you emotionally. You need it and you deserve it.

Since we all are at our homes ; Parental supervision has become a constant feature. Believe it or not, you do need the support of parents in one way or the other to help you with coordinatorship. They have the power to make or break anything. My constant source of support has been my mom. Very few parents support their children to pursue such activities ahead of academics, and I'm glad to have had one. Not only has she been an emotional support, she has also been a mentor, a friend and a good support system without which I don't know if I would have even been as good as I was.

To end my rather long soliloquy, I would like to say that while Online coordination is definitely hard, it isn't impossible, and ofcourse, the fruits that one bears out of it is tasty.

- A. P. Aravintakshan



The International Genetically Engineered Machine (iGEM) Foundation is an independent, non-profit organization dedicated to advancing synthetic biology, education and competition, and the development of an open community and collaboration. The iGEM competition is conducted every year to give students from all over the world opportunities to push the boundaries of synthetic biology.

The iGEM community is a global network consisting of entrepreneurs, scientists, and students.

Undergraduates and graduate students from all disciplines are eligible to participate in this competition, and it's not restricted to just biology majors. The team consists of 8-15 members (in our college) selected by the previous team members. So, how do you get on the team?

This year, interested students (approximately 70) were assigned a Wiki (project) to read on which they would have a group discussion. Then they were asked to submit a written report (4-5 pages) or a recorded presentation (10 minutes) on any two previous iGEM projects of their liking. The reports had to be thorough. Finally they had to present their own unique idea or develop a previous iGEM project in the same format. Shortlisted candidates were then called for an interview for which no additional preparation or prior knowledge of synthetic biology was required. Twelve students were selected from across BSMS and iPh.D. according to these criteria that judged their ability to work in teams, deliver constructive criticism respectfully, work in strict time schedules, and innovativeness.

The bar was set high for a project idea since this year's team had to follow the gold-medal winning "Half-blood Princess"- the previous team's goal of finding a viable treatment for malaria, and their project idea did not disappoint.

After juggling and sifting through a bunch of ideas, all of which had the common thread of Sustainable Development Goals connecting them, they finally decided on working toward reducing the net global carbon dioxide emissions by converting it into an industrially viable product- Succinic acid. Here's a brief rundown of the process (please excuse the jargon): Cyanobacteria make food by photosynthesis by taking up the available atmospheric CO₂. To prevent any untoward changes in the osmolarity of the cell, cyanobacteria naturally produce sugar in saltwater. Once the sugar accumulates, it gets secreted into the external environment- ready to be consumed by other organisms. The team by co-culturing (defined as: is a cell cultivation set-up, in which two or more different populations of cells are grown with some degree of contact between them by NCBI) the cyanobacteria (*Synechococcus elongatus*- which is super efficient in secreting most of their carbon intake as sucrose) with genetically engineered E.coli are attempting to produce Succinate (produced in the metabolic processes of E.coli) via a single-step conversion process, which could then be converted into a myriad of biodegradable products with applications in packaging, drug delivery, medical implants, etc. through further syntheses. Perhaps upon further research, they might even be able to produce more complex industrial products through the consumption of CO₂.

Due to a large majority of their team being cut off from access to a wet lab, they are currently working on optimizing their co-culture conditions and narrowing in on their gene of interest for the production of Succinate in E.coli. The team needs to lock in on their source for the cyanobacteria as it requires specialized light-controlled incubators, and cyanobacteria-based research in India is shockingly less. The safety concerns in the lab with respect to the

genetically enhanced, antibiotic-resistant E.coli are incredibly important and lab conditions and planned way before any actual wet lab work takes place.

"The twelve people are divided amongst wet lab, dry lab, sponsorship, and other departments. So each person is doing a lot," says Ashli while talking about distributing the workload.

Obviously, the most important thing for any project is money. You can never have enough money. It is also one factor that sets this particular competition apart from your regular run-of-the-mill projects: the need for a long-term money source. This year, the sponsorship team along with the support team, utilized various social media platforms by putting up posts hoping to gain public support. They also tried to connect with and mail accommodating companies with similar goals as their project to fund them.

When asked the best way to gain sponsors, they replied with a unanimous "by building contacts." The team operates by reaching out to and networking with various professors and with other teams participating in iGEM (Professor Hotha from IISER Pune's chemistry department helped them significantly in this aspect)- and try to collaborate with establishments. Owing to the ongoing pandemic and the money crunch that came as a package with it, the companies weren't as forthcoming as the previous years due to other pressing covid related commitments, and grants that were usually available to them were canceled this year. Forced to resort more so to other methods, they made an unprecedented amount through crowdsourcing this year.

Another essential part associated with iGEM is pitching these ideas to people from the industry. Setting up an entrepreneurship cell lets students come in contact with stakeholders and potential buyers. With wet labs out of the question, their primary focus is on outreach- explain their project to the non-scientific people, list out their stakeholders, and prepare extensive questionnaires. One of

Team members

Misaal Bedi - Team Lead
(3rd year BS-MS)

Sanjana Vasanth - co-Team Lead and Wet Lab Head
(2nd year BS-MS)

Soorya Narayan - Dry Lab Head
(2nd year BS-MS)

Vidisha Hate - Human Practices Head
(2nd year BS-MS)

Likhith Chandragiri - Documentation Head
(2nd year BS-MS)

Ashli Jain - Sponsorship Head and Wet Lab co-Head
(2nd year BS-MS)

Akash Dutta - Measurement and Safety Head
(2nd year BS-MS)

Namasi G. - Social Media Head
(2nd year BS-MS)

Arsh Shaikh - Design Head
(2nd year BS-MS)

Jason Joby - Wiki Head
(2nd year BS-MS)

Arya Narnapatti (2nd year BS-MS)

Ashwin Uday (1st year iPhD)

the main features of iGEM is that it's more of a lifelong association in terms of allowing the participants to remain with the organization and work toward scaling their product, making their prototype marketable, and eventually putting it out for retail consumption.

When we talk about the exposure they get, the core team emphasized that this aspect of iGEM was very huge. The interaction with undergraduates worldwide, working on similar projects, they say, gives them inputs to improve their own projects. The after iGEM network is another aspect of exposure that is immensely useful to them, shortly, either for continuing their projects to form startups or for procuring great Ph.D. programs. iGEM is beyond a science competition; it nurtures the team to think for themselves, as a team, and make decisions at the undergraduate level, which was one of the main motivations behind Akash joining up. These include: procuring sponsors for the project- which in itself constitutes a lot of exposure to the financial world; outreach- reaching out to both scientific and non-scientific audiences about their project in an appropriate way so that the idea is put through; developing communication skills, and many more. The exposure didn't end there- to validate their ideas, they had to reach out to a lot of professors, both within and outside the institute. From all of this, we can safely say that iGEM is not a competition where teams just have to produce results from experimentation; instead, it is a more whole experience of the scientific world, complete with research, funding, and exposure.

“Wholesome deal different from anything else”- Ashwin

Not having lab access, the support team consists only of a Design, Social Media, and Outreach wing. Getting help with modeling was also not possible as the project demands time, and students were already under pressure because of the crunched semesters. Sanjana also mentions the need to put an upper cap on the number of secondary team members, “As the team grows, it gets hard to manage and come up with a coherent project.” The team got a decent number of applications, and the volunteers were selected

The team was supposed to complete brainstorming, planning, and reaching out to companies for sponsorship before registration. The time crunch and some policy changes added to the pressure. In addition, because of the academic calendar shift, the members were left with a shorter break than usual. The nonexistent vacation meant that they had to catch up with coursework and reach project goals. The pandemic being out of sync in places leaves some teams disadvantaged since commutes suspended, and campuses shut, while some regions have started to open up. Not to mention the daily problems one faces while living through a raging pandemic. Meetings happened virtually and lasted anywhere from two to six hours. That and reading papers add on to the daily screen time. Arya mentions, “Although it sounds cliché, Communication is very hard.”

“I feel it's difficult to build team morale and togetherness from afar,” Likhith says, “if this were on campus, we'd be in a room discussing, hanging around, ordering pizza together, and be there with each other. You can't do that online”.

In essence, iGEM is a wonderful opportunity to explore the facets of science and all the processes aiding its development. It's uniquely designed to provide maximum exposure into the world that you're stepping into. Here's hoping that they are successful with their project and make some real change in the world!

- Khushi Datri, Vedant Ingawale,
Naren S, Varuni Nagesh

चाहल

तू होतीस गुलाबाचे फूल, वान्याबरोबर डुलणारं
झाडांसोबत गाणी गात, अलगद खुलणारं
मी मात्र माझ्याच नादात, तुला दुरुन निरखत राहिलो
काट्यांकडे पाहिले फक्त आणि सौंदर्याला पारखा झालो

तू होतीस वान्याची झुळूक, मुक्त आणि स्वच्छंद
तुझे केवळ असणं देखील फुलवायचा आनंद
कधी अनुभवलंच नाही मी तुझं सौम्य मार्दव
तुझ्या स्पर्शातून खुलणार, ते मंद आर्जव

तू होतीस पावसाची सर, चिंब भिजवून टाकणारी
कोण्या उदास जीवलाही, गाणी गायला लावणारी
खिडकीतून तुला पाहताच, मी थबकून गेलो
आणि चिंब भिजण्याची, मजाच हरवून बसलो

केव्हा कोण होतीस तू नाही मला कधीच कळले
तुझ्याजवळ असताना मात्र, काही वेगळेच घडले
त्या एका क्षणातच, साठवलं होत खुप काही
तुझ्या जवळ येताना मात्र, मीपण विसरू शकलो नाही

कोणास ठाउक म्हणूनच मी, तुला नाही ओळखू शकलो
निखळ आनंद विसरलोच, आणि स्वच्छंदपणे जगण्याला मुकलो
पण पुन्हा एकदा हो तू झुळूक, किंवा एखाद गुलाबाचे फुल
माझे आयुष्य ओवाळून टाकीन जेव्हा लागेल तुझी चाहल

- Atharva Bhide

Illustration By Sumant Chopde



Grave Flower

- Khushi Datri

A flower bloomed beside a marbled stone
feeding off tears,
charmed by the ghost of sun
it grew, uncoloured and yet beautiful
White on black soil, unaligned by hue.

The flower spread like weed
its roots burrowing deep
enveloping the bones with the souls still attached.
It hugged the dead like their kin
never did.

Un-fragrant, the flower was loved.
By the forgettable mailman
by the housewife of no note
by the drunk, by the cheat
by the child that drowned deep.

There were other flowers at the tombstone,
brighter, fresher. They all wilted away.
Only the grave flower meandered its way
through suffering, sadness buried six feet deep.
Never did it discriminate.

One beautiful spring day,
seeing the world blossoming around him
a man plucked the flower beside his father's grave
and asked the gravedigger to do the same
around every grave.

The flower sighed, hemmed in by its petals
it could do no more
The bones beneath cackled
they had once been human
they had known humanity
Nothing good can stay.

The flower was plucked away
its roots cut; its embrace cooled.
The sun shone brighter, the bones rotted faster.
All soil and sadness mixed together
The dead were dead
The other flowers stayed fresh.



Illustration By Sanjana Vasanth

ZOOM FATIGUE

Summing Up My Virtual(ly Non-existent) Life

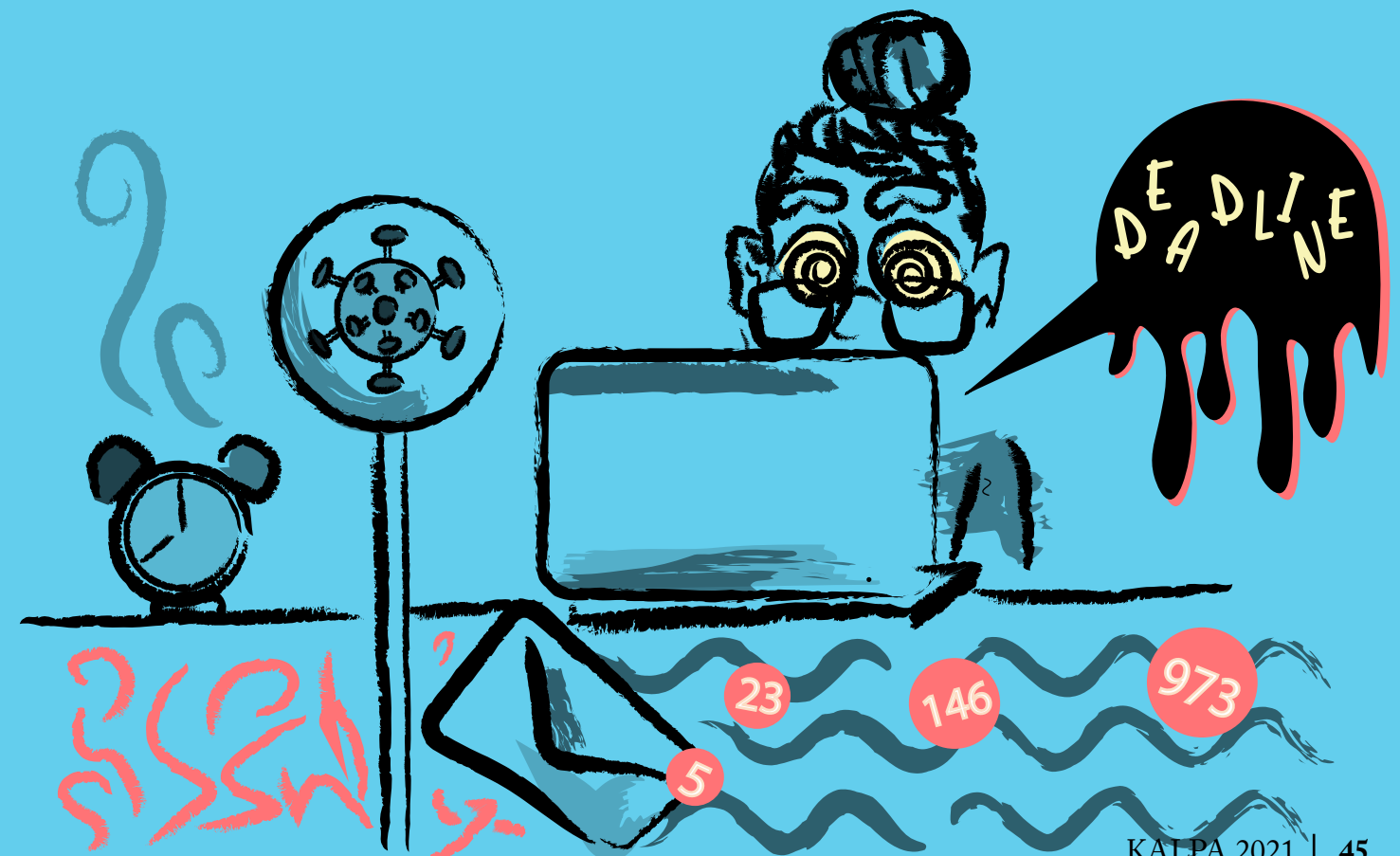
- Darshini Poola

It was 10 pm! Many of you may not consider that particularly 'late'. But where I stay, you can find households retiring for the day at 9 pm, hence explaining that exclamation mark. I literally slammed my laptop shut and summoned my last ounce of energy to lift my drooping eyelids and drag my numb self to bed. It had been six hours since I had left this damn spot, my workspace-cum-retreat-cum-canteen-cum-everything.

Being the socially awkward nut that I am, I won't deny — I was secretly happy that the pandemic would shift the world to an online platform. I would not have to be conscious of how I reacted (misconception one). It would be great to have everything in one place (wrong, again). I would be able to multitask (no, yet again).

A few weeks of virtual disco was more than enough to knock me back to reality. I realized that I was feeling more drained than ever. And it was not merely the strain on my eyes or the migraine in my head. Initially, I assumed it to be my obsession with organizing things that disconcerted me during meets, where plans did not always pan out the way you'd want them to. But that was not it. People slowly began taking time for granted. The meeting that wrapped up at 10 pm was supposed to have done so by 9:30 pm. Those error bars conveniently stretched beyond half-an-hour, ripping my sanity apart.

My classes did not require me to turn on my video, and I couldn't have been more thankful. However, professional meetings, live sessions (for context, I host poetry reading sessions on Instagram), or anything that required face-to-screen interaction did more harm than merely



nullifying all that I was grateful for. It was only much later that I came to know that ‘Zoom fatigue’ was a real thing.

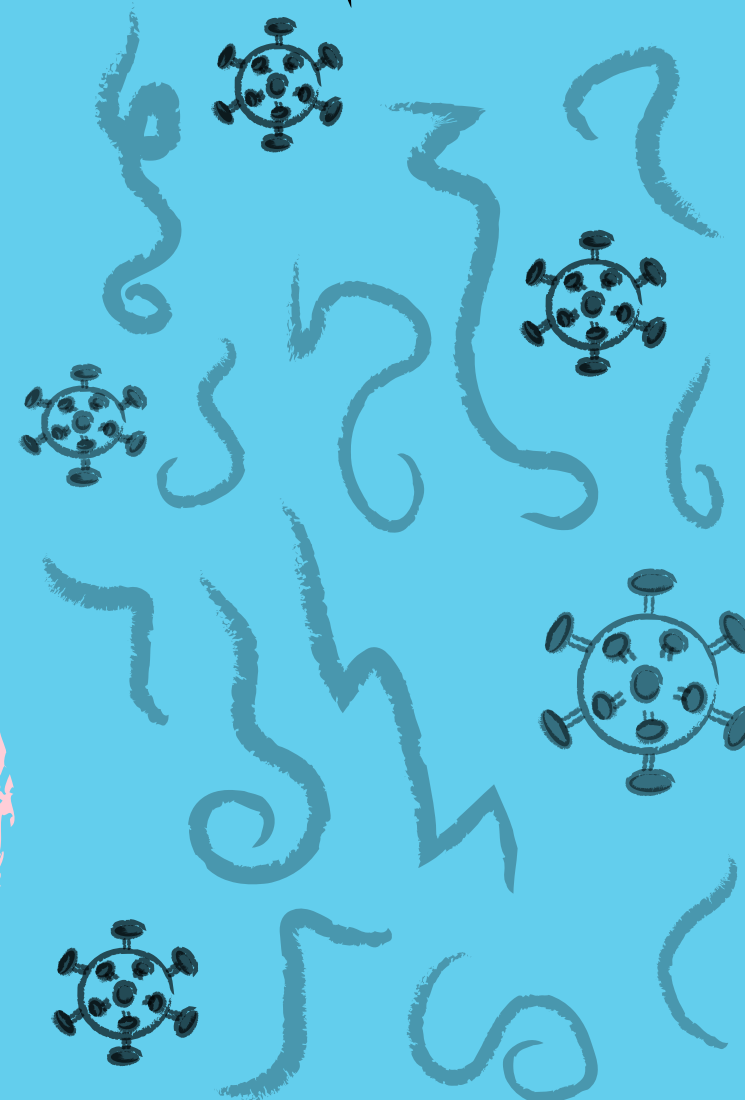
I always preferred written communication over spoken exchanges — so much that I even learned to typewrite. However, not everyone was up for reading or writing long messages. I’ve lost count of the number of times I heard my mind scream, “This meeting could’ve very well been an email.”

That said, the meetings had their own set of unnerving elements. One, the eerily long pauses punctuating online discussions gave me the jim-jams — strange for someone who loved her silence. Often, it made me feel that the others weren’t interested in what I was saying or worse, that I was making a huge joke of myself. A 2014 study by German academics showed that phone or conferencing systems’ delays negatively affected people’s views. Pauses as short as 1.2 seconds made people perceive the responder as less friendly. Even in the classes where all I had to do was listen, I missed the lecture hall’s background ‘thrum’. I finally began to see why body language and ambience mattered so much.

Moreover, humans communicate when they’re quiet too. During an in-person conversation, the brain focuses only partly on the words spoken. It also extracts additional meaning from dozens of non-verbal cues, such as whether a person is facing you, if they’re fidgeting, or if they inhale in preparation to interrupt. These hints help paint a holistic picture of what is being conveyed and expected from the listener. Since we’ve evolved as social animals, perceiving these signs comes naturally to most of us, takes little conscious effort to analyze, and can lay the footing for emotional amity.

A typical video call impairs these innate abilities and requires persistent, intense attention to words instead. Also, the option of viewing hand gestures or other body language is ruled out if a person is visible only from the shoulders up. Low video quality further dashes any hope of gathering something from subtle facial expressions.

Secondly, seeing my face on screen ‘zoomed’ those anxiety levels to skyrocketing limits. I couldn’t take my eyes off the visage of me that appeared on screen (and, if you know what I mean, that is NOT a self-compliment). Besides, you can’t recognize how non-active participants are behaving — something you would otherwise pick up with your peripheral vision. According to an article featured in National Geographic, the extended split in attention creates a bewildering sense of being drained while having achieved nothing. The brain becomes swamped by unfamiliar excess stimuli while being hyper-focused on searching for non-verbal cues that it can’t find. On the other hand, some people just don’t like attention, and my fear of public speaking did not help. It was only then that I realized how messed up this entire setup was.



Those who have a stable internet connection may not relate to this, but a flimsy signal is a genuine pain in the neck. I’d be a topper if I were offered an extra point for all the times I was kicked out of online classes due to terrible connectivity. My eyes got into the habit of subconsciously flitting to the signal bar at the top-right corner of my screen, as though that would keep them steady. Between all this mental gymnastics, focussing on the actual content of the class remained a distant dream.

Movies are fun because you can allow your mind to drift, letting your guard down. In stark contrast are video calls — Imagine how you’d feel if the characters in the film began staring right back at you! Nevertheless, if video chats come with extra stressors, our Zoom fatigue can’t be ascribed solely to them. Whether it is quarantine, lockdown, working from home or otherwise, our current circumstances are also adding to the hassle.

Additionally, the problem isn’t helped by the fact that video calls make it easier than ever to lose focus. Let’s face it — we’ve all, at some point, decided that we absolutely could listen intently, check our email, and text a friend, within the same thirty seconds. Except, of course, that does not happen without us losing track of at least one, if not all, of them.

More exasperating is our work-from-home situation. We’re no longer just tuning into virtual meetings. We’re also continuously figuring out polite ways to ask people not to disturb us. I still remember crawling across the floor to grab my headphones so that I wouldn’t make a guest appearance in my brother’s class. It’s especially challenging when you don’t have a private working space.

Above all, it’s the monotony of being stuck to a single screen that is exhausting, even for socially challenged introverts. To be honest, there were days when I felt like my own life was ‘seen zoning’ me. Believe it or not, there was a point where I decided to keep all devices switched off for most of the day, even if that meant I did not attend classes (though I eventually bombed my tests). The pain would sear through my temples within forty minutes of screentime. I never thought I, out of all home-loving people, would pine to go back to campus. Anyway, we’ve all started afresh with the new semester, and I wish you the very best. I hope we meet soon — in person.

Illustration By Saanchi Thawani

MOON

- Naren Narayanan

The irony.
Lifeless rock, covered in white sand, moving around one brimming with life.
Seeds don't sprout. Nor do the potatoes.
Is the Earth's child doomed to be lifeless?
Apparently not.
Frozen on the sunless face,
Where the coldest demons dance,
Where the darkest of nights shrouds the ethereal pallor of moonstones,
Stands drooped, a tree.
Frozen, dismal tree, on a lifeless rock zooming through space.
Alone, biding its time to greet the sun, unaware, of the scorch it brings.
Thirteen and a half days, till sunlight.
Thirteen and a half days, till the dark dies of fright.
There it stands, the lonely tree, icy flowers glistening.

Days roll by. The warmth starts seeping into the cold darkness.
There comes the sun,
With its beautiful rays of dazzling brightness
Ready to light up the dark mind of the lonely tree.
Thirteen and a half days of biding time
Thirteen and a half days waiting, for that shine.
The tree smiles.
There comes the sun.
The tree hopes for peace. The tree hopes for life.
The tree hopes to be freed from the stare of the freezing knife.

No, the sun had different ideas for our lonely friend.
Of course, the sun provided the light.
Of course, the sun provided the life.
The frost melted from the heat.
The darkness shrunk in front of the light.
The tree blinked its sleepy eyes, and relished the sight.
The thermostat in the bearable range, the tree smiled. Again.
"Back to life. Back to peace. No more frozen seeds," mused the tree,
Blissfully unaware of the sun's spiteful generosity.

The scorch began. The heat was becoming unbearable.

The tree's straightened spine drooped again.
This time, from the heat.
The tree couldn't bear the burning light anymore.
Fell on its knees, begging for the sun to stop.
The tree started seeing spots. The light was blinding.
So much for peace from the cold.
Withering, the tree starts biding its time again.
Thirteen and a half days till the frost.
Thirteen and a half days till the scorch ceases.



Illustration By
Bhagyalekshmy

DUST & SUNBEAMS

– Ipsa Bezbarua

It was on the 25th of April, 2015 that I received my first work call.

“It’s a disaster of such magnitude that they are asking for help from India too,” our team leader, Chandan da explained to us. “No one saw this coming.”

This is the moment you have trained so hard for, I said to myself, although deep down, I felt unsure if I was strong enough to handle the demands of the mission. As we were packing our bags for the trip to Kathmandu, Chandan da called me aside to speak in private for a few minutes.

“Rishabh, we know you have been through similar circumstances earlier. It is highly desired by all that you accompany us as your insights will be very valuable. Still, I must ask you, if only to quell the nagging voice at the back of my head – are you comfortable being a part of this mission?”

“Dada (brother), this is my shot at the redemption I have been seeking every moment for the past 4 years. If I don’t go with you guys, I will regret it for the rest of my life.” Kathmandu in Nepal was near the epicentre of an 8.1 Richter magnitude earthquake that had struck sometime around mid-day. Several buildings had crumpled into heaps of dust, leaving their poor residents trapped within. They say human suffering is of several kinds, but all look rather alike. As we travelled to the disaster site, I was struck by a sense of déjà vu. The scene that lay before me reminded me of another in the recent past – only that time, I was the one who needed rescuing. As I looked out of the automobile window, I was suddenly back in the afternoon of 18th September 2011 at Gangtok, where another tragedy, so similar in my eyes, had changed my life as I knew it.

The earth below my feet is shaking as if it has lost all control. I hear a loud crash and look out of the window. The scene before my

eyes chills me to the bone. All around, small buildings are crumbling to the ground like dust, and screams of people ring in the air.

An earthquake was not what we had in mind when my parents and I came to Gangtok. It was supposed to be a short family holiday, away from the hustle of the city, giving us time for some quiet introspection into where our lives were going – something I particularly needed. We did not expect to find ourselves in the midst of an apocalypse where we would be fighting for our lives, with no guarantee of making it through.

“RISHI!!!”

Mom’s scream brings me back to my senses and I realise that our hotel too was not faring well. We need to get out quick, else it would be too late.

“Rishi, go downstairs and get out of here quick! This hotel won’t stand the quake!” my mother screams.

I rush towards the staircase with Mom and Dad, and we attempt to make our way through the crowd of people, all struggling to exit the doomed building. Suddenly, I cannot see Mom and Dad anywhere nearby – I am only surrounded by strangers, all being driven by pure instinct towards the nearest exit route. As I try to look for my parents, I feel a sharp pain sear from my head all over my body and my eyesight turns black...

My head throbs very painfully, but I do not hear people’s footsteps anymore. Opening my eyes, I behold a sea of debris all around. I rub my cheek and feel it caked with blood. I must have been unconscious for a while. How many hours have I been here? I wonder. Or has it been days? As I try to stand, I find I am trapped under a pile of concrete dust from waist-down. Near me, Mr Barua, whom we met on the day of our arrival, is lying unconscious.

“Uncle!” I yell, as I pull myself out from under the pile. “Are you alright?”

I drag myself to him and attempt to shake him awake, to no avail. A sudden realisation prevails, and I try to feel his pulse – he has none!

I too might die in here, I begin to think, terror-struck. No, no, no! This cannot be!

I recall my quarrel with Mom the morning before the quake. She was rebuking me for my lack of ambition, and I refused to talk to her till she would apologise. I wonder if I’ll even get a chance to say sorry myself now!

I try to stand, but pain sears through my body – have I broken my leg in this ordeal? No choice left, I crawl towards what I recall could be the way to the exit. I arrive at a door, but the way is blocked by a pile of bricks and concrete dust. I begin to pull at the bricks, and one finally comes out. Then another, and another. And finally, I see a tiny hole of light, almost as I had always envisioned the idiom “light at the end of the tunnel”. Had I really reached this end?

“SOMEONE HELP ME OUT OF HERE!” I yell. I hear some inaudible mumbling. There are people on the other side! The small crack becomes larger and larger, and soon I feel firm hands pulling me out of what had felt like a prison cell.

“My parents!” I ask the rescue person. “Have they been found yet?”

“Your name, son?”

“Rishabh Phukan. My parents are Brajen Phukan and Plabita Phukan.”

“Your father has been rescued successfully and is now in hospital.”

“What about my Mom? Where is she?”

He falls silent, confirming my worst fears. I break down into tearful sobs, partly so relieved that my father was alive and yet so dismayed that my mother had not made it through.

We heard a slight voice from the other side of the pile of debris blocking the door. Along with the others, I started pulling at the bricks one by one. A brick gave way, leaving a small hole, and almost immediately a tiny hand tried to reach out and grasp onto us. We removed more bricks, and the hole grew bigger and bigger. Finally, it was large enough to pull the child out to safety.

“Mumma!” she screamed.

“Beta, what is your name?” Manish, a local rescue person asked her. She was identified and we rushed to deliver her to her mother. “My child! I thought I had lost you forever,” the young woman broke down, as we stood beholding the angelic sight.

“Let’s get back, shall we? We still have a lot left to do,” Manish started.

As we headed back, I felt the soft sunbeams caressing me almost as if my mother was watching the scene unfold, proud of how an apocalypse had turned her wayward son into a responsible citizen ready to meet the world eye-to-eye.



Illustration By Sneha Jain

Not Your Average Staycation

The term quarantine has been around for quite some time now, albeit it had slightly different connotations- beginning with the Venetian word *quarantena*, which literally specified the 40 days required for all ships to remain docked until their passengers could disembark during the Black Plague way back in the 1300s, and has slowly evolved to mean any 'period of forced isolation' later in the 17th century. Now it's defined by the CDC as "The separation and restriction of movement or activities of persons who are not ill but who are believed to have been exposed to infection for the purpose of preventing transmission of diseases." All of us have had a first-hand experience with what the terms 'separation' and 'restriction' mean - but perhaps only in the physical sense. For many, especially the LGBTQIA+ community, these terms have had a more profound impact.

Parents are quite often a child's first glimpse of society. For the longest time, a child depends upon their family to form their first opinions of this world. They are the support system that every child needs, somebody they can always turn to when they need help. Familial love is meant to be unconditional. But the pandemic and the subsequent quarantine and lockdown made it exceedingly clear to many that that is indeed not the case.

While the process of sexual identity development is continuous, the adolescence and late adolescence period are one of significant change and transformation, a period in which a child starts to develop some sense of autonomy and tries to establish their identity (of course, few rarely manage to do so, and it's perfectly fine if

you emerge unsure and stumbling at the end of your teens, that's what the rest of your life is for!) This span is the most crucial when it comes to their receptivity toward positive affirmation from their parents, family, and friends. Sometimes all they need is to know that their parents will always be there for them, that they are, and will always be loved, no matter what. This assurance usually plays a huge deciding role in the kids' mental health in their future years.

Family, influenced by society, has a skewed perception about what is 'normal' and what isn't. Non-conformers are subjected to continued gaslighting and emotional blackmail. They are repeatedly told that their identity is just a phase and that they would get over it soon enough, leading to an amplification of their insecurities. Parents are meant to be a shield, to protect their children; instead, they become their worst bullies.

Several peers of mine have shared stories where their parents completely restricted them from communicating with the outside world, from receiving positive affirmation from their friends. They have shared instances where their parents blamed all of their problems on the kid's sexual orientation. Parents also tend to use their children as a dumping ground for all of their problems and troubles, not realizing the effect that that can have on a teenagers' mind (Hah! and they say that we don't understand them). Earlier, many adapted to this by spending as much time as possible outside their homes (yes, mom, we had extra classes). What the quarantine did was to bring families together, forcing children to endure countless hours of their brain-washing talk with no chances of reprieve.

Cue feelings of worthlessness and being a burden to their family, translating to low self-esteem. This meant that years of having to listen to a blow-by-blow account of all the ways in which one was not 'normal' - which was only heightened by the lockdown - coalesced into a complete mental breakdown of many young minds.

Well, what I would really like to know is how do parents not understand that everything that they do, wrapped in a bubble of 'this is all for your good!', takes their children years of therapy (which they are denied because, of course, how can one trust a complete stranger over their own family!) to move on from. The cherry on the cake is that it doesn't even occur to them that they value the opinions of people they barely know over their kin's happiness.

Additionally, most students lost access to their school/college counsellors and therapists (quite possibly, someone they had just begun to trust), depriving them of some much-needed help. Online classes over Zoom, a "wonderful" side-effect of quarantine, further served to demoralize students as it provided the college experience minus the fun and friendships.

On a more positive note, there has been a surge in online resources and support platforms for those who require (and can access) it. Multiple NGOs have come forward to provide assistance in whatever way they can to those who reach out to them. Therapists, forced to shift to an online platform, are offering sessions with better affordability and accessibility. Our very own LGBTQIA+ collective, *Satrangi*, has been absolutely incredible at making students feel welcomed and at making them feel like they belong here. They have made huge strides in providing a safe space for those students who don't necessarily conform to the conventional societal definitions of gender and sexuality.

It's beautiful and refreshing to see parents who have a healthy relationship with their kids, the ones that don't expect to live out their dreams through their children, who've managed to realise that beyond the unnecessary walls of hatred they had put up, there exists a beautiful world of love and acceptance. But

these instances are shockingly too few and far between. It's pretty easy to blame the older generation for wanting to correct or 'cure' their children, for wanting to watch them grow up sheltered and obedient- head down in the midst of a society of hawks. It is that much harder to catch a glimpse of their world, to understand the world in which they stand - a world where traditional gender roles were hammered into their identities, where adhering to them meant the difference between having a roof over your head and not. A world wherein families meant everything, with a systematic order in which one's lives must proceed - leaving no room for the proverbial black sheep. They were not allowed to feel anything different or know that things could even be different, for that matter.

Our parents grew up in a generation that was not big on talking about their feelings; they were told to snuff out all of their 'ugly', unappealing thoughts or ideas- anything that did not conform to their definition of a perfect, golden child - and to tuck it away into a tiny, black box at the back of their minds. This led to years of repressed, festering emotions, which, quite ironically, probably warranted therapy. They were taught to show no crack to the society, maintain a strong, happy facade in front of the community- and above all, to always conduct themselves with an illusion of dignity. So, when the realization strikes that the perfect cis-hetero normative lives that they had envisioned for their children won't come to fruition, their instinctive response is denial and disownment. They've probably never quite understood how big of an effect that can have on a codependent adolescent's mind. At this point, the primary hope is that things eventually get better. Until then, we will have to learn to take everything one day at a time. Relaxing with our friends, having a day out, treating oneself to cake might just be the self-care we all need to get through these harrowing times. In the same vein, it is necessary for us to reach out to our therapists/psychiatrists and to remain in touch with them. Every one of us needs to pay more attention to our personal well-being and acknowledge that these last two years were indeed a struggle, but you know what they say about the brightest rainbows following the darkest storms. Here's hoping to see y'all on campus soon!

- Varuni Nagesh

THE BICYCLE THIEF

[Certain sections are inspired by the Punk Poet Laureate, Patti Smith, particularly her masterful composition and oral rendition of the poem "Oath".] - ha19k000/

Back in the day,
When they had not yet devised,
These fearsome hulking machines,
That whirl up and set to task,
Draining, depriving you of your lifeblood,
A steady dripline of regret and cardinal sin,
Back when I still had agency,
A room of one's own,
I stole a bicycle.

Not just any bicycle-

A rusty unused shed
Overgrown with weeds and scattered human detritus,
In that Garden of Eden lay my neglected seed,
Of pain and destruction.

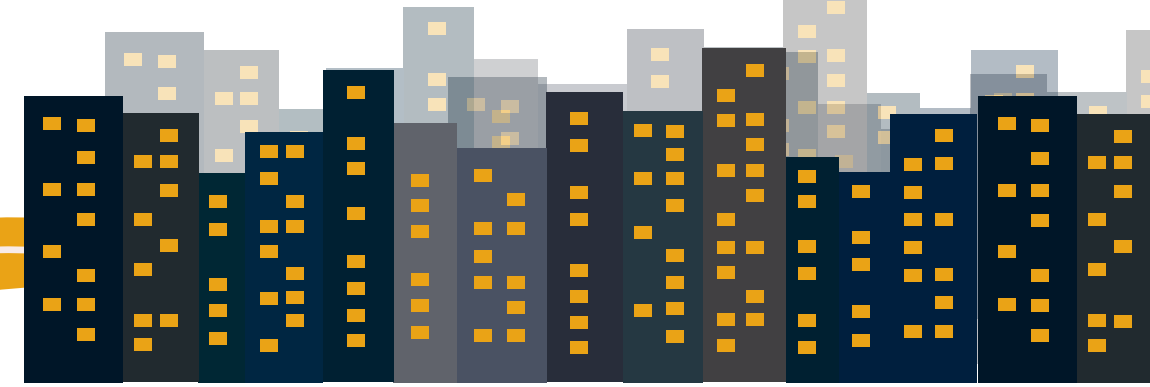
When I seized it,
It had sprouted into a white sapling,
In desperate embrace with the dry earth,
Cracked, the lock missing, the frame bent,
Dirtied by age and harassed by mold,
I stole it on a dime.
No regrets there.

Astride my white steed,
I headed out of this synthetic, hostile campus,
A waking shadow lurching out of the imposing gate,
Out of this world of make-belief greatness
And brittle intentions.

A solitary figure on a road to nowhere.
Passing through a desperate land,
In need of a stranger's hand.
Reaching out-
-But finding none.



Illustration By
Kashika Singh



I started off on the sides,
The streetlights flickered and met,
A sudden death.
The pavement giving way to an untamed expanse,
Emboldened,
I took centerstage, moving into the centre lane,
My way or the highway.

Caught in a cyclical descent,
Into madness and grief,
Burning thighs and pinpoints of pain
A death spasm,
In a world of my making.
The stage where I would carry out the final act
Of this pitiful, loathsome play.

I watched,
Bitter vision, the cold stinging
Bloodshot, scattershot eyes.
I stuck my tongue out,
Tasting eternal damnation,
And methylated exhaust,
As heavy trucks rumbled by on either side,
Me dancing in-between,
Watching them shudder
And disappear into the far distance,
Only leaving behind the quivering air.

I would like to pretend,
Unlike those bastards that litter that campus,
That pepper spray of human refuse,
-That in that moment,
Floating down that highway,
Powered by his animal lust for a brutal killing,
The bicycle thief cared,
Neither for life nor death.
That he was untethered,
Free-falling, unbound, unhinged,
That he could make his own light shine,
And that darkness too was equally fine.

M^{ILK} AND EGGS

Sheepish, gap-toothed grins stretched so unabashedly wide, standing in a small, disorganised group, most either not wearing their masks at all or with it pushed down to their chins in front of aluminium roofed sheds on muddy-squelchy ground is how our interviewers - Salam, a PhD student and Yuvraj, an IISER alumni - found the inhabitants of the vasthi located on the campus grounds. Quite enthusiastic in their replies, they informed us that they have absolutely no problem in going to the Pashan market to get their supplies now. Innocently the kids listed out their favoured foods - unsurprisingly, chicken was the mass favourite. Despite this fact, they don't have access to chicken or any essential protein which stunts their growth. This nutritional deficiency was made even more apparent during the pandemic which was when one of our professors Dr Suhita Nadkarni recognised it as a problem.

"It was shocking to see the changes in these kids who came basically running errands for the family, they were seriously emaciated," said Prof Nadkarni.

However, this story starts with a fateful email from the institute which facilitated the genesis of the IISER Pune Community Service group. While limited in their reach across the country, the group comprising of Prof Sancheti, Prof Nadkarni, Prof Rajamani, Dr Aarti Rapol, Prof Deshpande, Prof Bal and Ms Janaki came together first in the form of a Whatsapp group and then took up a more hands-on approach during the initial months of the lockdown of 2020 to help out families that did not have food, clothes and basic amenities. They couldn't work because they were stuck in the migrant labourers' vasthi. These families mostly consisted of daily wage workers who couldn't earn in the face of a country-wide lockdown.

IISER Pune Community Service Group started by distributing food, clothes, masks, sanitation products and other daily provisions. The groundwork was primarily carried out by

employees of IISER Pune. Most of the fresh produce was sourced by Govind, a VSquare employee who basically manages the grocery store. Ajit, one of the housekeeping staff members, would manage and distribute the rations procured by the Group among the construction workers. He developed an amicable relation with the kids and they would always be ready to hop on the rickshaw that he drives. Chandrashekhar Pujari, a VSquare employee involved with the supply of the packaged food to Ajit, when asked about the migrant workers' response to their work, said "hum phir director jaise hain, parde ke peeche rehte hain, parde mein toh Salman Khan hi naachta hai na(I am like a director working behind the screen, it's only Salman Khan that's seen on screen)". On being asked about why he became a part of this project, he responded- "wo hum dil se kiya(I did that from my heart)".

The members of the Community Service Group, having not had much interaction with the kids, became "biscuit-wali aunties" to them. During Eid, they threw an iftaar party for the workers. The professors had a merry time with the vasthi people.

Prof Nadkarni on Ajith knowing the kids personally - "These are all kids with names, they were people. It's not a number, not a statistic".

The WhatsApp group was created by the Community Group for the easy and accurate dissemination of information and immediate redressal of false claims and rumours related to Covid-19, setting themselves apart from other initiatives that sought to provide only relief. Being professors at a familiar science institution, the workers placed great trust in them, more than the other NGOs who were also helping during the first wave of the pandemic. Workers even used the Whatsapp group to seek correct information and clarify doubts. At a time when currents of panic and anxiety were running high, making various social media platforms easy breeding grounds

for dangerously inaccurate information which was being circulated even amongst the highly educated, the service group worked tirelessly to debunk the myths and assuage them of any fears.

The group provided ration packets to the people of the vasthi. On being interviewed, a few vasthi residents said “5 kilo chawal(rice), atta(flour) 5kilo, 1kg dal(lentils), 1kg tel(oil)” were provided to them, and how “ration mein poora saman milta tha (ration would have everything).” They also ensured the timely supply of sanitary pads to the people of the vasthi.

Along with this, the group ran drives to collect food, toys, books, and used clothes from the IISER community and supplied them to the vasthi. From what was left, they offered members of the IISER staff to pick whatever they needed. The remaining clothes were sent to a local NGO that works for sex workers. “The toys and books were hugely welcomed by the children of the vasthi because it isn’t easy for them to get these even at the best of times,” said Prof Sancheti.

Keeping in mind the pandemic, the group also arranged masks when there was a shortage of them. The masks were given to the watchmen at the gates, such that anyone passing by

without a mask, would be handed one. Home-made sanitisers were also distributed liberally among the residents.

After two rounds of distributing essential items, the restrictions due to the pandemic were somewhat lifted and workers could go out to work again. While some chose to return to their villages, most stayed in the city to work at other construction sites or resumed work on the campus. At this point, when at least one person in each family was employed, the necessity of providing them with food and clothes abated. The group then turned their attention to the children of the workers, who were neglected, uneducated, undernourished, with absolutely no access to basic hygienic amenities, and started the unexpectedly successful “Milk and Eggs Programme”. They reasoned that the necessity of daily natural proteins and calcium supplemented by the milk and the eggs were extremely vital to the growing children.

Under the program, the kids began their day by gathering at the bleachers of the cricket ground every morning at 8 am to get their glass of milk and one egg. VSquare and ShivSagar have been involved in supplying the milk and eggs in a monthly rotation.



To procure milk and eggs, they conducted multiple drives appealing to the community to donate whatever they can toward their initiative via which they managed to raise around Rs 1,30,900 the first time. When asked if the institute contributed to the funding in any way, they said that that establishment’s contribution was negligible and insignificant. Prof Rajamani said that “We are also working on aspects which are beyond the purview of IISER as an institute, so sometimes, if we end up associating in a more formal manner, we might end up restructuring ourselves to fall within the mandate of the institute.” She went on to inform us how the institute does know of the Community Service group’s existence, and how the registrar’s wife, Ms Janaki has been instrumental in the group’s efforts and sought the help of the housekeeping staff in conducting the drives.

As confirmed by Dr Rapol, a gynaecologist who was earlier appointed at the IISER Pune Clinic and is a part of the Community Service Group, a good number of the migrant workers’ kids living in the vasthi inside the institute premises were malnourished. We were informed about how changes in their hair colour and the formation of patches on their skin clearly indicated their condition. They also suffered from vitamin deficiency. She also shed light on the effects of the

workers’ living conditions on their health. We came to know that many of the vasthi women are uncomfortable and feel shy about approaching the IISER Clinic for medicines. So much so, that a woman living in the vasthi realised that she had been pregnant for 6 months before she finally decided to approach the clinic. Fortunately, even though her haemoglobin was incredibly low, she managed to deliver a healthy baby after being given protein and calcium supplements by Dr Rapol. But why is it that a woman living on the grounds of one of the leading institutes in science in the country, feels hesitant to seek help?

An important question that begs to be asked is that why haven’t the migrant labourers been provided with better accommodations when many of them have been living in the poorly-constructed vasthi on a semi-permanent basis? Of course, it’s quite easy to dismiss the question with the simple reasoning that the contract is with the hired contractor and not the labourers themselves, but it does bring under examination the moral obligation of the institute towards the families who stayed behind on campus and couldn’t earn due to the restrictions laid down by the institute during the pandemic.

As brought up in one of our interviews, there have been absolutely no Covid-19 testing

drives conducted on campus, despite the institute's labs being used as a sample testing centre for the local PMCs. This is quite shocking as such drives are being conducted across the country in various other institutes- even in ones not quite as premier as IISER.

"There have been no reported positive cases from the vasthi", claimed a faculty that we interviewed, which isn't surprising considering the lack of testing. Even the vasthi residents had a unanimous stance about their supposed immunity.

For an institute whose main goal at the moment is (or so one would hope) making the campus into a Covid-19 free zone, it would have been prudent to employ stringent testing methods and not just temperature checks to prevent infection from breeding and spreading in a place as cramped and unhygienic as the vasthi.

The pandemic didn't uncover just the sub-standard health conditions of people living in the vasthi but also the underlying class biases. Prof Nadkarni said, "You walk by them, you walk by the vasthi and very often, you don't notice the dilapidation, you don't notice how low in this whole ladder of class or hierarchy they are."

Health and hygiene became a convenient excuse for many people (including faculty who are vocal about certain issues) to ask for the exclusion of workers' children from common playgrounds. Naughtiness in kids is often endearing. However, underprivileged children are apparently exempt from expressing this trait. Children, whether it be faculty kids or vasthi kids, didn't wear masks when they played. To single the vasthi kids out for not wearing their masks properly or spitting is clearly discriminatory and stems from a deep-seated class bias apparently prevalent even amongst certain residents of a premier institute. Fortunately, the proposals of having different timings for vasthi kids to use the playground or constructing a different playground altogether were shot down by

the majority of people who looked through the feeble disguise of hygiene at the class discrimination.

However, the fact that people merely spoke out against this injustice isn't enough. It showed that even highly reputed faculty in academia are not immune to such inhumane practices, contrary to what most of us believe. It's not just the elites, however, who have such a bias. A Vsquare employee told us in an interview that giving more to the kids would be like spoiling the parents. The working class parents, who toil all day in the sun, would neglect their kids because someone gave them extra protein. He also opined that, "log kaam nahi karega, apne bharose mein rahega, ulta unka zindagi hum chheen ke liye jaise ho jayega (People will not work, they will depend on us, it will be like we stole their life)", when we asked if rationing should have been continued after they resumed work.

Not only did the Community Service Group try to provide proper nourishment to the construction workers' kids living in the vasthi on campus, but they also sought to offer them a chance of getting basic education. Being kids of migrant labour, they have been shunted around for their entire life. "These kids lack primary education; something as simple as fine motor skills to hold a pencil" is not developed amongst them, as Prof Suhita informed us.

Back in 2013, when large scale construction was going on on campus and there were numerous migrant labourers' and their families residing within the institute premises, Disha had contacted a non-profit organization called The Society for Door Step Schools (DSS) to effectively teach the kids living in the migrant vasthi. With this in mind, the Group approached Disha to contact DSS again during the pandemic and asked the club to fund this initiative, as their funds were being used to run the Milk and Eggs initiative. Due to government restrictions, however, the initial plan from October 2020 had to be shelved until February 2021 because the

COVID TaskForce did not allow for it. Calls for contributions were sent by Prof Anirban Hazra, Disha faculty coordinator, in April 2021, after Disha funded DSS during the initial days. The children were enthusiastic about getting taught in the morning, even if they didn't know it was DSS, who were doing the teaching.

In the interview, Prof Sancheti shared, "Honestly speaking, I was noticing them far more than I had in the past when things were 'normal'." This, however, does seem to be the case for most of us. It's unfortunate that it requires a pandemic for us to notice the precarious living conditions of humans not located in some country far away, but within the 98 acres of our campus; people with whom we have indirect, if not direct, interactions. Prof Nadkarni also said, "I think we have to make sure that these people are not- the people of lower privilege are not invisible to us."

Notwithstanding the devastation these past seventeen months brought, they did lead to the initiation of the Milk and Eggs Programme and brought DSS back to teach the vasthi kids. What we must now wonder about, is if these programmes would be extended beyond the pandemic as well. While it is important to understand that money is the main driving force, and the major bottleneck, behind the sustainability of these initiatives, one cannot

ignore the extensive role crowd participation plays in them.

We need to make combined efforts to acknowledge and improve the state of the underprivileged around us, contributing in whatever way we can, by means or methods, and ensure that the work started by others to aid them, does not get undone.

- Varuni Nagesh, Krish Pandey, Khushi Datri, Lokesh Tater, Naren S Narayanan, Manav Sivaram, Salam Maheshwari and Yuvraj

Photo credits: Salam Maheshwari and Yuvraj



నారాయణుఁ జేరగోరె నిల్వనామమువారు, నారాయణీనాథునిన్ శైవులున్,
మణిదీపమర్ధింప ముగురమ్మలగొల్చె చుక్కబొట్టువారు శక్త్యోపాసకుల్;
బ్రహ్మపదార్థమది ముల్లోకంబులయుండునట మరి ధాత్రిని మరచెనా?
సత్యంబుగ నిత్యమైనచోయది నా ఇంటనె నెరయుగాక సర్వావస్థలన్!

మోక్షకాంక్షతో వెడలె వేదాంతియొకడు పదునాల్గు భువనాలు మిథ్యయనుచు,
మాయమవుట కొరకు సృష్టియెందులకనెను బాటసారియొకడు భోగజీవి;
బోరుగొట్టెనట భగవంతునికిగూడ, సృష్టిమర్మమిదియె- లీలానిమిత్తము!
సంకల్పమ్మది పరమాత్మకుఁదప్పని పీడయొకటి మరి పరమైక్యంబునకర్థమేల!

- తిరుమల వెంకట చక్రధర్
Tirumala Venkata Chakradhar

Behind The Mask

Her hips swished with each step taken
A flippant smile fixed on her face
A wink thrown out in a casual way
Charming all those who neared her

Taken by her beguiling face
He followed her each step of the way
Cornered her at a broken alley
Thinking he would have his way

The pretty smile still gracing her lips
She turned her face away from him
Satisfied at having owned her
He left her there, thinking she had broken

She rose upon shaky knees
Shoulders curved but head unbowed
She made her way down the uneven road
Letting her smile fade at last

"Mother, mother", asked her love
"Where have you been all night?"
"Out, my dear", she answered her
"Out to get you some bread."

-Varuni Nagesh

Two Hundred and Eight. 208. Total number of days I spent in the IISER Pune campus before packing my bags and returning home for a few months. At least, that is what I thought that morning. I have now spent 175 days more in my home than I did in total on campus.

I joined the Indian Institute of Science Education and Research, Pune, in 2019 as an Integrated PhD Student. For the first week on campus, I kept waiting for someone from the administration to walk towards me and say, "Sorry, there was a mistake, we sent the admission letter to you; it was for Sri Mittal or Hari or Sree." That fantasy did not turn out to be real. I am indeed here. Excited to be in the presence of people buzzing with science AND an actual laser! AND a supercomputer! AND all those biology labs on the first floor with all the equipment I-can't-name that tickle my brain. So much science all around! I want to talk to all the professors and students about what weird science they are working on and finally figure out one fine evening during a discussion about what spin is. These seemed to be "big wants" from someone who finds it awkward to approach people. "Wants" nonetheless.

Flush all that down. I barely survived my first

semester. I guess trying to do a Master's and a PhD at the same time isn't as easy as it sounds. Onto the second one, trying to ease into this IISER Pune life. I finally started to talk to other Homo sapiens in this new neighbourhood. These are some nice people I can be friends with. Bam! There goes the neighbourhood in March 2020.

Then came the isolation. I was withdrawn before being sent home. This made things worse. I was not acquainted enough with people of my own courses that I could ask what it meant to my grade when professors said "the mean is 38 ± 5 "; or what exactly happened in the last class because I ran out of battery in my laptop and 24x7 electricity is a privilege, or what the answer was to Question No. 5 from Assignment 4. I am here, in my hometown, alone. Not that the professors didn't try. At least in my courses, they all tried to adapt to

the new mode of teaching as reasonably as anyone could in 3 weeks. On the PhD front, things were already not in good shape for me. Then with the onset of isolation, it got worse. No one to talk to because I don't know anyone to talk to. I am worried about finding a guide and a project I can devote myself to, but whom do I talk to about this? It's not so much that if I ask for help I will be denied. Rather, I

THE YEAR THAT WASN'T

didn't know where and how to ask for it from people whose first names are not known to me. I am a new kid in the town and I don't know who's who and what's what.

Third semester rolls in slowly, everyone trying to adapt to the new life. I am having bad days and weeks because I don't know who I am supposed to work with for my PhD. Still, LET'S GO! It's a New Semester after all!

The first two weeks of any semester are the Ideal Student days. The proof of this claim is left as an exercise for the reader. So I was the Ideal Student for two weeks. Then things start to go undesirable again. The first few infractions are minor - missing a class, completing only half of an assignment, replying to an email from the professor a week late. Why? To be brutally honest, because I just cannot. It is too much to ask from my Lonely, Clinically Depressed brain. Not because of being home, though it certainly did not help. My mental health was a concern before Pune happened.

Weeks go by. I keep trying to contact professors who would agree to work with me. Some see the confusion and disorientation in me. Some take a look at my Grades. They all say No. Not their fault. Why would you take in a potential PhD candidate who doesn't even know what he wants to do a PhD in? It's not like I can meet them every day to make my case. Or ask some senior of mine what to do now that the cows have come home and I can't do this any longer. Setting up appointments for a half-hour meeting takes a week anyway. I reach for help one last time to have someone, anyone, who would agree to work with me. Well, it is the "last time" for a reason. The only logical choice, it seemed, was to give up. Yes, I know, it is a privilege to get selected for the Integrated PhD Program in the

Physics Department of IISER Pune. Less than a handful of people get that chance every year. I guess I was right to think it's a mistake that I am here. The admission committee is not infallible, right? So I give up. I decide to withdraw my admission, take up after my father's small shop in my hometown, and try to live happily ever after. I couldn't afford therapy. The one available on campus isn't somewhere I can go, as I learned after my first attempt to seek help there.

Stories that have sad endings are quite unsatisfactory to read. Fear not, for the end of this storyteller's story has not been written yet. In December of 2020 (the Universe is in on a joke here definitely), my friends of yore, who live in the same small town and have fancy jobs now (yeah, people land jobs by the time they turn 22-23, who knew?) decided to pay for my medical expenses until I got well. My therapist suggested not to withdraw, rather ask the institute if I could take a medical leave. After a bunch of emails, confusion, difficulty in reaching the administration because I was 1,500 kilometres away from the office, and a proof from the psychiatrist that I really am sick, I did get time off. Slowly building myself up again with regular therapy and medication. It's hard. I don't know that if I return, my goals will be the same as those of the 2019 August Shree Hari Mittal. Hence, the unwritten part of the story.

My only hope with this raw telling of the tale is that it gets read. A text belongs to the reader as much as to the author. I am not going to write the points or lessons you, as a reader, should take away from this. I hope it is read and you are able to take away what you deem valuable in this story.

- Shree Hari Mittal, iPhD

SCAMMED RELIGIOUSLY

Karl Ohm Turk, Jan 2021

Astrology despite being discarded as pseudo-science is widespread and very likely one of you is fighting with someone you know closely, over this. TV channels, especially news channels which are TRP hungry to compete with entertainment channels, have found an easy route by allowing Astrologers to occupy live segments in their schedule. The programme works very simply, they start with daily predictions which are vague for each constellation. This is followed by a few phone calls from the viewers along with their date of birth, time of birth and your great grandfather's hidden birthmark. The Astrologer kindly finds you the perfect mantra, the times you have to utter it, which direction you have to face, and obviously what colour your undergarments should be. The terms and conditions apply to all these free services, if you are not serious or if you are not a rigid believer, it won't work. For some sad reason you did all this and it still did not work, why of course this was a broad solution, they had to find the fine details wrong with your unique horoscope and recommend you the 108 temples darshan package to relive the sins of your ancestor who had no clue you would even be born.

At this point I need to clarify, I do not hate your Gods or your religion or customs. I am actively annoyed by this middle man who tells you what to do and controls your lives. Unfortunately for me, I found that my own mother who encouraged me to do science had

now a persistent desire to meet one of these godly men who had conquered my mother's YouTube feed.

In India, there is a huge population of housewives who are reliant on televisions for entertainment and now are shifting quickly to YouTube. The algorithm-driven market of social media pushed media houses to be more sensational and clickbaity with misinformation and thus ruining the integrity of the news itself. Similarly, strong personalised data-driven YouTube algorithms are pushing hundreds of videos of astrologers into the feeds of people. Watching one of these videos is like cutting the head of a Hydra, the number of similar videos keep multiplying with every refresh or view. In the race to reach more viewers, the titles and the videos themselves have reached new heights of absurdity. They describe ways to sit, eat, shower and even shit sometimes. It is very difficult for a new user to understand the intricacies of the trap laid by the algorithms.

There is also very little accountability because of three reasons: 1) The lifespan of a YouTube video, on average, is a month, and even lower for astrology related videos. 2) Creation of echo chambers since the comment section is filled with believers and desperate people who want to reach out. 3) Many of these videos are in local languages and hence very rarely find wide attention.

In these pandemic-induced stressful times, my mother, who has certain intrinsic traditions and customs, tried to find comfort and insights from astrology, regrettably. Her new advanced phone helped her connect with thousands of other people she could relate with in the YouTube comments. She got an appointment with this astrologer for a considerable amount to solve all the problems our family faced. A fight eventually ensued and when it reached the stakes of 'no food', I was left with no choice. Instead of sulking, I had a smart idea: if I could convince my mother that this person was a fraud, it would end my mother's imprudence to find answers which do not exist.

The day arrived, we had to travel across the city and reach a

place that is at the city's edge. It was a huge house, and in front of the house there were already a few cars present, indicating the waiting families. After we entered, one of his assistants took information from us. The information was no less than what the government would have on us, they even wanted the house plan of the place we lived in and since we didn't have one, I had to draw one! Their tactics were simple and easy to unhook. The astrologer only arrived two hours after the given time, this is very intentional since people would have come from far and likely without breakfast, this makes them more desperate and irritated, in this state it is easier to extract information and to scare you. I took this opportunity to make some



Illustration By Sneha Jain

predictions about what he would tell us, scan around the house and listen to people and their experiences, and possibly find any planted people among the crowd. I say 'planted' because many times simple information you share with others is conveyed inside and convinced to you as foretelling. After four successive hours of waiting, we were finally ushered into the room. The room was wide with transparent windows on all sides. On the side of the only solid wall, the astrologer faced us, we were made to sit a few meters away and now the drama began. He looked at my horoscope and house plan and said we were living a life of no value. This is a scare tactic and is a very general statement, he would have repeated this to everyone in some form or other and it would, of course, be right because everyone was there cause they had problems. Later, he went on about how my name was the worst thing in existence, I would have shamed Hitler with my name! He wanted to learn more about me and where I studied. He continued bloviating about ancestors, not following rituals, fault in horoscopes and problems with our house. After this, he came back to me and asked if I had problems either with eyes or grades. If you keenly observe this is how he connected with me being a student. When I said no, he was visibly dejected.

Guess what! Most of my predictions were right and I had shown this to my mother even before we spoke with him. The place he had asked us to visit was the same one he had told another family earlier (Unique horoscopes having general solution!) They had returned after that visit and were advised to take part in a homa, they were visibly sad, they had not found any fulfilment and they couldn't step out of the scam because they were scared of the consequences of being a non-believer. I had thought I would have to fight with my mother on how wrong he was and how he had tried to connect the dots and seem intelligent but to my surprise, she was already disappointed with the whole ordeal and had recognised his pretense. I

have excluded all the boring information but basically, he had made all the wrong starts and did not find any valuable solution to my mother's questions and even though she had believed in the extraordinary knowledge he supposedly held, she was not scared by his sinister words. This may also have been because the astrologer did not try very hard (to my utter disappointment), probably because he had made his money. The over charming person on her phone had turned out to be an elderly, unhealthy man who was scamming common people and making rich.

For now, I have a happy and wise mother who has learnt not to fall to the traps of the digital world or its accomplice. I wanted to share this because I think there are a few things everyone can take away. 1) Help your elders with technology even without them asking, they can easily be targeted because of their inability to deal with technology. 2) Sometimes it is better to go through a bad experience and convince people of your views, instead of just opposing their beliefs and making it stronger in their heads because of the opposition. 3) Being inclined towards pseudoscience doesn't have to stem from ignorance or not being rational, it can come from a place of despair and hope for better, we need to be mindful of why people behave the way they do and support them to make rational decisions. 4) We need to be more critical of ever spreading pseudoscience in the media and not turn a blind eye.

A Song For Jim

A man is lying down on a lone, dusty road
Face up to the skies, sun in his eyes
His lids are fluttering like the damselflies' wings
Dancing around the bushes by the road

He is confused, does not know where he is
or how he got there, but he's got old boots,
and pants, and a jacket with empty pockets
He is disconnected from his roots

The sweltry breeze tickles his sweaty brow
The murmur of desert life has become
A low hum, a white noise to the scene
How can he know what does it mean?

Finally he feels, sees poking out his sleeve
The cold needle of indifference
He pulls it out, a painless sense
And walks on soleless feet again

- Anisha Karnail

ONLINE CLASS

- A student's review

It is astonishing, if not frightening, that a small, teensy-tiny organism such as the coronavirus, can disrupt the lives of the 7.8 billion people that walk the earth today. This virus has made us all incredibly frustrated, but at the same time, has forced us to introspect into our inner selves (at least, this is true in my case). It has been, and still is, a combination of two opposite poles of a magnet, depressing, yet mentally enriching, consuming, yet incredibly boring.

One of the main highlights of the COVID-19 pandemic has to be the online classes. The education system of the world that was in place, is probably one of the things that the virus has torn apart the most. Though online classes do an overall nice job at patching up the holes created by the disease, they suck. One could go on enumerating the reasons for the online classes, but the bottom line is that this mode of teaching just does not work. Again, from the bottom of my heart, online classes suck. 0/10. There are so many disadvantages to online classes that we simply cannot overlook. We have been accustomed to going to school on the school bus, going on treks with our batchmates, or just ditching our classes one fine day and crashing at the cinema. However, all of this came to a standstill as it just cannot be a part of online classes and online interactions in general.

Aside from the flowery aesthetic aspects I passionately miss (sadly reduced to dream about), there's the academic side of online classes. The one major thing that took a hit while we shifted to the online mode was the interaction with our professors (just a subtle way of wanting to 'simp' for amazing professors).

On a more serious note, the doubt clarification during classes has been extremely minimal due to time constraints and seasoned with recognition problems. Also, we need to look at the fact that attendance is something that used to drive people

to attend classes. However, in online IISER, such a thing is non-existent. We, as students, are entirely required to rely upon our so-called willpower and guilt to attend the live sessions. Some of us do not attend the live sessions at all since the recorded sessions prove to be much better. This does take a toll on our "discipline", which probably has deteriorated a lot over the extended period we are required to rot at home (mum complains so).

And then come the exams. I haven't had much of an experience with online exams, just the mid-semester exams that we had to give. Conducted on a platform called Code-Tantra, it was definitely one of the most exhausting experiences ever. The amount of scrutiny we had to undergo before the examination began, the camera placements, the scan-and-upload questions, were a huge hassle. Another noteworthy point here would be that most exams were multiple-choice questions. Even though MCQs are relatively easier to answer

and evaluate, it is only a short-term benefit. MCQs do not, in any way, benefit the student. We could just figure out most of the answers by eliminating the other options and with only a bare minimum understanding of the concepts. One might argue that exams themselves are not an effective method of testing one's understanding, and I would completely agree with that. However, we need to give exams because we haven't yet figured out a method of testing that is more effective than exams. But one can be sure of this—online exams are a step-down from exams in general. Here, we come to the end of my rant. Online exams and classes suck, and people need to figure out better ways of imparting education because this is definitely not a long-term solution. And with new strains of the virus slowly becoming rampant, we cannot be sure that the campus will open in the immediate future. I sure hope so, though.

- Naren S.



Image By Ryth Dasgupta

मैं खड़ा हूँ

मैं खड़ा हूँ,
बीमार हूँ, ठंड कुछ अधिक है
तन कपकपा रहा है
बर्फ की सफेद चादर है
और चारों ओर बस छोटी-बड़ी पहाड़िया
जहां तक नज़र जाती है
बस बर्फ ही बर्फ है।
कोई जीव नहीं है
शायद मैं भी निर्जीव हूँ
पर मैं खड़ा हूँ।

गला सूख रहा है
हाथ शिथिल हैं
पैर मानो बर्फ में धस रहे हों
संभवतः मैं सांस ले रहा हूँ
पर मैं सीधे खड़ा हूँ।

किंचित कोई तूफ़ान आने वाला है
या शायद हमला हुआ है
ये आवाज़ कहीं गोलियां चलने की तो नहीं
या कहीं भूस्खलन हुआ है
पर मैं तो खड़ा हूँ।

मुझे यह तो ज्ञात नहीं कि
मैं जीवित हूँ या मृत हूँ
मैं धरती पर हूँ या आकाश में हूँ
परन्तु यह ज्ञान जरूर है कि भारत की सीमा
पर मैं अभी भी खड़ा हूँ।

- Pranav Maheswari

Illustration By Sneha Jain

THE PRINSENGRACHT HOUSE



Cold wind blew, the lights went out,
The house was empty with no one about.
The whispers of the dead haunted the room,
the history of the house was despair and doom.
The house was happy once, with laughter all around,
the laughter was gone now, there was no sound.
The furniture was there covered in dust,
the railings and ceilings covered in rust.
The family that lived there was dead and gone,
gone so quickly before the rise of dawn.
Little was known of the secrets it carried,
Nobody knew of the dead that were buried.
The story of the house echoed through the halls,
The story of their despair and dying calls.
The child that lived there died in fear,
fear that Hitler's Nazis were here.
The parents were tortured before they were killed,
Butchered for the nation he had to build.
Nearly a century later only memories remain,
Memories of torture, hatred and pain.

- Varna Shenoy

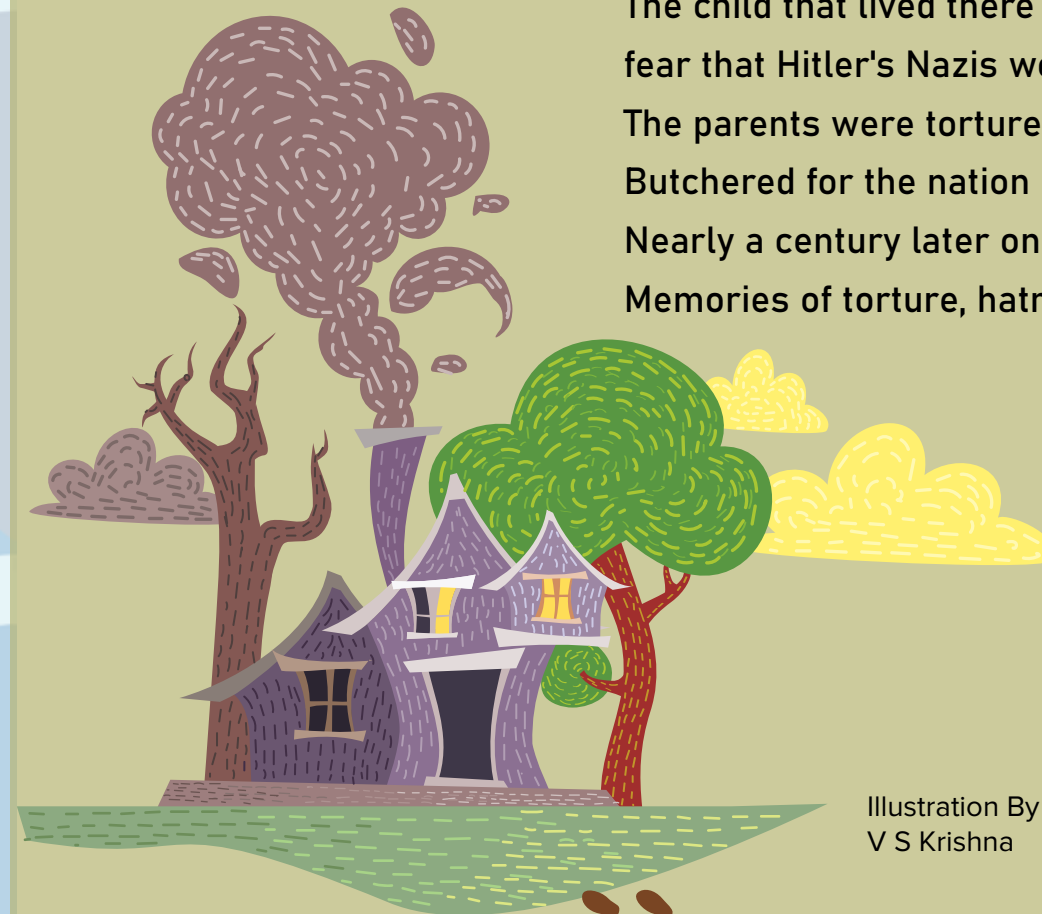


Illustration By
V S Krishna

Atypical at...

SARS-CoV 2. The pesky thing flipped the world upside down for us students, especially me. I'd dreamt of what college would be like since I was practically a kid. For me, college was an escape—an escape from all things around me, an escape to home. Everything was going according to the plan until March 24th, 2020. We all know what happened. Initially, everything appeared hunky-dory; however, we then realized, confining four people in four rooms wasn't going to be a smooth ride. The events that followed in these four rooms and virtually over the next 9 months have been anything but pleasant. But, here we are, we survived.

By the time I'd get my offer letter, the number of cases was receding. My naive self was eyeing to be on campus by February, which was quite a rosy prediction. During the Orientation, I learned that Semester 1 was to be held virtually, which meant no campus till April. Speaking of the Orientation, ours

was nothing like what I read on Quora. Instead of actual humans, I saw boxes with initials in the Zoom meeting that was our Orientation. There was no chance of getting to know people. Soon after, I discovered groups made for socializing across multiple platforms. I personally found them intimidating and kept my silence. Although there were instances where quite interesting conversations brewed, which compelled me to add inputs. But that's that. The days seem pretty mundane as usual. Even after two months, I'd have random realizations that I'm living the "college life." Not quite the life I imagined, though.

From what my seniors tell me, you experience an insane amount of newfound autonomy. The freedom to grow hair, decide bedtimes, go wherever, basically live life without having a guardian dictating it. In contrast, here, I am subjected to constraints regarding things as simple as talking with people or reading stuff.

I imagine what this autonomy they talk about feels like. Think about it, feel gloomy, get frustrated, try to distract yourself. Repeat. Classes started. They seemed very intriguing initially. New subjects. Different approaches. The novel post-school setup. All this, but online. Staring at the screen for 6 hours in one place without company is plain exhausting. When you're in a classroom, you register better, get to engage more, judge the difficulty of a topic based on the expressions of your peers. That being said, speeding up and rewinding the lectures are a godsend, which wouldn't happen offline.

Another thing that I (and quite a few) noticed was people fussing over marks. I thought I wouldn't see this when I get into college. I guess we never managed to leave our entrance prep days. A change in environment, I suppose, would have facilitated the transition. But we're in the same spot where we studied for hours, finding solutions and fitting information in mind. It certainly doesn't help to let go. By the end of the first month, I managed to make quite a few friends. Batchmates and seniors. We'd chat, play games, video call, listen to hostel stories, long to make our own; you know, the usual. For the first time in a long time, though online, I got to be who I was around people. I felt safe, if you may. Satrangi played a significant role in this. Although there were instances where I witnessed the bad front of these virtual exchanges. They've left their marks. Reminded me to remain vigilant even though things are online. Evoked the fact that there will be problematic people no

matter where one goes. That they weren't going to disappear when I joined this institute. Which leads me to expectations. Prof. Sudha mentions how important it is to recalibrate our expectations. Expectations we have about college. Expectations about academics. Expectations about ourselves. Things are pretty uncertain now. I guess we need to be reminded, we should be prioritized, our health should be prioritized. Academics and technical experience can be compensated. Our bodies and minds are more difficult to salvage.

These are challenging conditions for every one of us. Seeing the people we care for contracting the virus. At times getting infected ourselves. Managing academics. Being stuck in the state of competitive exams. Navigating ourselves into new social circles. Not knowing what all this is supposed to be like. Desperately trying to keep our sanity. We are anxious. Exhausted. Confused. Like we're stranded in the woods in the dark. Unable to see what's ahead of us. Oblivious to how we'd deal with it. We forget that we aren't alone. We forget to exhale.

So my college experience is, well, different. Though the majority of us do start studying 15 days before tests. So hey! We're perpetuating the IISER culture, after all!

- Vedant Ingawale

வாழ்வோடு ஒரு உரையாடல்

வள்ளுவத்தின் எழுபிறப்பை அறிவேன் - நான்
அதை அறிவியத்தினால் நம்பேன் - என்
ஒரம்பரை கிளையை கேட்டேனான் - என்
வாழ்வின் பொருளை அறியத்தான்.

எனக்கு அணு கொடுத்தவனோ உச்சியிலே
உடல் கோர்த்தவனோ அடிஆழத்திலே
என் உயிர்த் தொடுத்தவனோ நெஞ்சினிலே
உணர் மனம் கொடுத்தவனோ எங்கே?!

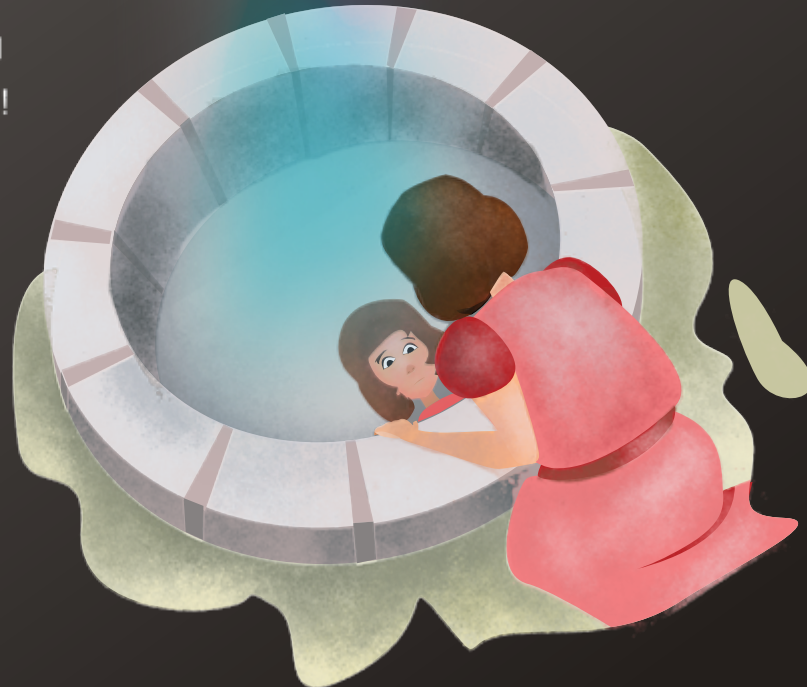
அரும்பாகி நனையாகி முகையாகி மொக்குளாகி
முகிழாகி மொட்டாகி போதாகி மலரானேன்!
உன் வழியோடு வழிந்தோடி வினையாக வந்தொழுகி
மனப்பசிக்கு உணவூட்ட வாழ்வின் பொருளை தேடினேன்!

காற்றில் சிறகாய்
வண்ண எண்ணங்களுடன்
வாழ்க்கைத் தேடலாய்
நாட்கள் பறக்க
வியாகி பொம்மலாகி செம்மலாகிவிடுவேனோ?

வேரெவ்வுயிர்க்குமில்லை தன்னுணர்வு மாயம்
மானிடா! நீ வொரு அதிசயம்
வாழ்க்கை பொருளைத் தேடியே
இச்சிறப்பை நேசிக்க மறவாதே!!!

-Moshikkeeran S

Illustration By
V S Krishna



ये जिंदगी के मेले

ये जिंदगी के मेले
दुनिया में कम न होंगे
अफसोस हम न होंगे
एक दिन पड़ेगा जाना
क्या वक्त क्या जमाना
कोई ना साथ चलेगा
सब कुछ यहीं रहेगा।

ये जिंदगी के मेले
मोह माया की बेला,
स्वार्थ भी नहीं अकेला,
क्या लेकर है आया
क्या लेकर तू जाएगा,
कर्म ही तेरा
और सब यही रह जाएगा।

ये जिंदगी के मेले
सब ख्वाब हैं अधूरे,
पर अभिमान हैं पूरे
यह रंगमंच है अलबेला
बस चंद लम्हों का है खेला
फिर जग बिल्कुल है सूना।
तब उत्पन्न होगी करुणा
यह जिंदगी के मेले ।

- Satyam Saurabh

Illustration By
Krishna Menon

The Fall Of A Dynasty

Alamelamma clutched the fringes of her sari to her chest, trying to make sure that none of the jewels fell down. Her blistered feet left bloody footprints on the leafy trails that ran uphill, her breaths coming out ragged.

She could remember the days of her innocent childhood, spent playing games here and in the river below; and later her recent years of womanhood, spent alongside her husband - Srirangaraya, a chieftain and landowner of Talakadu in the great Vijayanagara empire - ruling over his land, home and heart. Now, she was reduced to running away from soldiers, in a torn sari, her hair unkempt and no one to defend her.

She had run as far as her ragged breath would allow her to; she stopped for a moment, her hand on the tree trunk as she tried to catch her breath for the strenuous trek ahead. She glanced back and saw that the cloud of dust that had been chasing her all day had advanced perilously close; she did not have time to stop, lest the soldiers catch her and take her to that vile man, Raja Wadiyar - the undeserved Maharaja of Mysuru.

Everyone thought it was her fault that disaster had struck Talakadu - as if she had any choice in the death of a husband who loved her, the

sickness that had spread over the land, the evil eye of the powerful king of Mysuru, or the beautiful jewels that had been an excuse to brutalize her into this state.

It had been only three months into their marriage, but despite the age difference, she had fallen in love with her husband - undeniably and irrevocably. He was a just ruler, a kind man, and a caring husband, someday he would also make a loving father.

On a Poornima night, when the moon shined so bright that it seemed to make the stars disappear, he had invited her to the tallest platform of their small palace, where he had arranged priceless ornaments studded with all kinds of precious stones. They looked exquisite and precious as they sat twinkling in the moonlight. She let out an involuntary gasp when she saw them laid out and her breath remained hitched.

Her husband began with a quavering note that betrayed how nervous he felt, "My lady, the queen of my heart, I love you with every particle of my being. Just the peace and happiness of your mind would be worth a hundred thousand times more than these trinkets," he gestured at the jewels spread out.

The exquisite ornaments that Srirangaraya had called trinkets soon became famous throughout the land. They were all anyone talked about - the ladies envied them, the merchants praised them, the common folk were tongue-tied and every thief worth his salt made a plan to steal them.

To satiate everyone's curiosity and banish evil thoughts, Alamelamma suggested that these jewels should be seen adorned on the goddess Sriranganayaki in her temple in Srirangapattana during the Navaratri festival and every Tuesday and Friday from then on.

The jewels would travel swiftly with a heavy guard so they could reach the temple by dawn and they would be returned the same afternoon. Their fame spread quickly and people came from all over the land for a glimpse of these flawless and ethereal gems; some for more than a glimpse because the soldiers on guard had to stave off many thieves and robbers.

The next Navaratri festival was attended by the king of Mysuru, who wanted to see these praised jewels for himself. But his eyes never once left the delightful figure of Alamelamma.

The following year quickly descended to become a hell designed just for her. A sickness struck the land and her lord, who never recovered from it. Every time she closed her eyes, she could see his pale face, bleached of color, as he lay dead in her lap; she could smell the smoke of his pyre as they burned his body by the river; she could hear the old crones breaking her glass bangles, the wails of women and dull thuds as they beat their chest in grief of the untimely demise of their beloved ruler.

The jewels still came and went, but now she was only their guardian, forbidden to wear anything that would make her look appealing again. Even now, the Gods did not seem satisfied with her suffering and decided to

alleviate it - the Raja Wadiyar soon demanded that the jewels that were used to decorate the Goddess Sriranganayaki be handed over to him, as a mere widow of an obscure lord would not be capable of safeguarding them. And anyway, the king had a right to everything precious on his land!

But Alamelamma refused to hand them over. Not only were those jewels the last tangible token of his love, but they were also the security her land needed in case they fell into perilous times and had to be rescued by selling them off for the welfare of the people which is what Srirangaraya would have wanted.

Her outright rejection enraged the king and he quickly sent out a chunk of his huge army to get the jewels by any means necessary - even if they had to bring Alamelamma with them!

As soon as the news of this reached her, she sent out pleas to her neighboring lands and her own father's land, but every single one of them feared the might of the powerful king and refused to send help. Her own small army was already skeletal because of the sickness and she was not ready to waste one more life on her behalf!

She quickly picked up all the ornaments in the fringe of her sari and set out on foot. Before she left she made sure to extract a promise from her soldiers to tell the army where she had gone, for her small state needed every able-bodied man it had and there was no point in wasting more when her own destiny was set in stone.

Alamelamma finally managed to reach the peak and stand at the edge of the waterfalls. If she squinted, she could see her father's house, the house of her childhood, and the rest of Malangi - her father's lands. She was glad she was dying in sight of it, but at the same time, a large part of her despised him for not defending her.

She looked back once more and saw that the soldiers had almost reached the base of the hill and the sharp-eyed archers had spotted her standing close to the falls. Realization dawning on their face, they began shouting at her not to jump, meanwhile quickening their own pace.

‘Very well,’ she thought, ‘this was how it was destined to be. I am to be the one who destroys the evil in the king of Mysuru.’ She turned away, straightened her back, closed her eyes, and muttered a quick prayer, hoping that what she was doing was right and for the strength to not falter.

She swiftly turned to face the charging soldiers and her form cut an awe-inspiring figure in the sky, despite her disheveled state, for the Gods were on her side - the setting sun made a halo of fiery reds and oranges around her. The soldiers stopped in their tracks, their eyes widened in fear and their jaws slackened in awe.

When she began speaking, her words boomed through the hills, though never losing the undercurrent of anger and condemnation beneath them - “Devi Sriranganayaki, heed me! If what I am about to do is righteous then grant power to my words and make them come true!”

Her next words echoed throughout the ages and cursed the progeny, to right the wrong inflicted on a virtuous woman by an evil man - “May Talakadu be covered in sand
May Malangi be doomed by a whirlpool
And may the Maharajas of Mysuru be childless Forever and more!”

Proclaiming thus, Alamelamma - the lady of Talakadu, wife of Srirangaraya and a scorned yet a proud woman - damned the soldiers of Mysuru to be buried alive under sand and jumped into the whirlpool created by her own curse so that the jewels, which had been the excuse of her unjust treatment, would never be found or used by anyone ever again.

This is only an exaggerated and romanticized form of one version of the story. In other versions, the ornaments were never Alamelamma’s own, she was the only custodian; in others, the Raja Wadiyar only wanted the jewels and did not desire Alamelamma.

The curse still remains for only the adopted children of the Mysuru Maharajas can have biological children.

Sand still covers the temples of Talakadu and going to the river there is like going to a beach of sweet, river water.

Before she jumped, it is said that a gold nose ring studded with pearls fell out of her fringe and was later found. It adorns the idol of Sriranganayaki in Srirangapattana.

Raja Wadiyar lost his son and heir because of the curse, realized the enormity of his mistake, and built a shrine to Alamelamma.

- Vasudha Kulkarni

THE BATTLE OF MIND-MAZE

Our world is turning dead yellow,
Feathers burning without flight—
Sufferings bond by silver locks—
Definitions fall like autumn night—

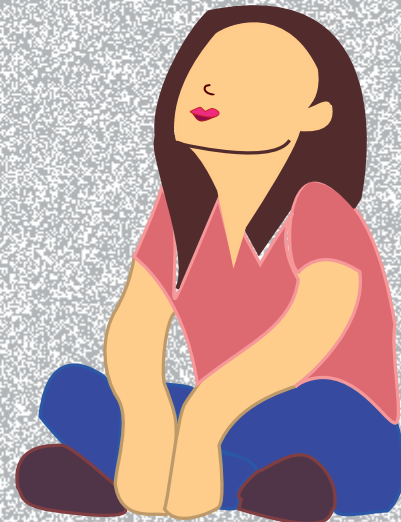
For it's the inclement season!
Of cold and numbed ache,
Of shadows filled with smoke-stained air.
We creep into the dark alleys of our mind—
Anxiously awaiting to surrender to despair!

Out of the blue, I find our old tram tickets
Crumpled in a corner, devoid of care
A lazy afternoon, some ecstasies...
And memories galore from another planet— That
echoed of joy, as much our souls could bear!

We thus, fill our little pockets, with
Borrowed sunsets and soft hugs—
And step out to conquer the lonesome
ombres. With whatever hues left in us!

- Meghamala Sarkar

Illustration By
Krishna Menon



निःशब्द

थोडे स्वप्न बघायचे होते
थोडे दिवस तरी जगायचे होते
शाळेत जावं, थोडं शिकावं
दादा सोबत थोडं हिंडावं
मायंच काम थोडं कमी करावं
बाप कष्टाचं रुणं फेडावं

जाती पातीचे काटे भर दारात आले होते
याच काट्यांनी कित्येकाचे प्राण गेले होते
मी तर माझ्या आयुष्यात खुश राहत होते
पण कोणाच्या तरी जहरी मानसिकतेची बळी मी पडले होते

शेताच्या नी शेवटच्या वाटेवर जाताना
बोचरी काटे भिडले
वस्त्रांनी देहाला सोडलं
तर काहींनी त्यांच्या लाजेला

थरथरनारे देह माझे
तयारचं नव्हतं मानन्यास
रक्ताने माखलेल्या कपड्यांवर
टांगली होती ती लाज

धडधडत्या मनात आणि पाणवलेल्या डोळ्यात
निराशा जमा झाली होती
जिभेची वाचा तर केव्हाच छटली होती

काही वेळानं मला माय माझी दिसली
रडत पडत मला जागी करू लागली
डोळे मात्र माझे जड झाले होते
जणु जगण्याचे आता ओझेच झाले होते

डॉक्टर मात्र कोणी दारातच घेईना
वेळ लागेल वेळ लागेल आणि जीव माझा जाईना
तुटलेल्या माझ्या हाडांसारखे
घरच्यांची मनेही तुटली होती
मृत्युच्या दारातून खेचण्यास सर्वजण जुटली होती

आला होता तो क्षण मला आता देहमुक्त करण्यास
जहरी मानसिकतेच्या जाळ्यातून भयमुक्त करण्यास

काही जणांसाठी मुद्दा तर काही जणांसाठी बातमी
अशी एका जीवाची कहाणी
पेपरवाले ते फ्रंट पेजवर छापतील
आणि काही जण बोलणार
वाईट झालं पोरीसोबत
आपण तरी काय करणार

- Darshan Dhanajkar

Illustration By Omkar Golatkar



Remembering Graham Staines: Mob Lynchings and Fake News, 20 years ago

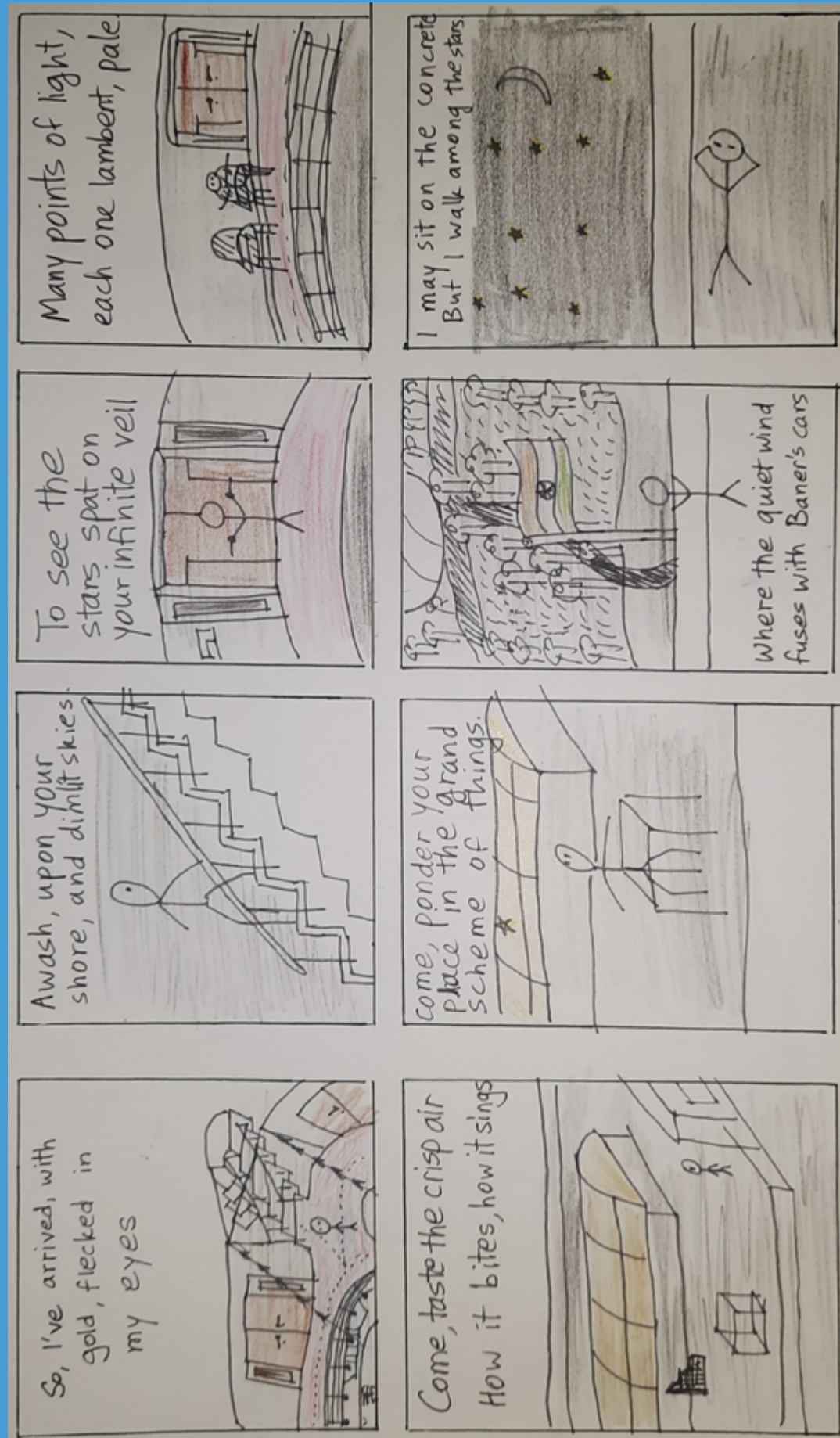
On 23rd January 1999, while most of Odisha woke up to the public holiday commemorating the birth of Subhas Chandra Bose, the villagers of Manoharpur, in the Keonjhar district were discovering the charred body of another martyr. Graham Stuart Staines along with his sons - ten year old Philip and six year old Timothy, had been burnt alive whilst asleep in a station wagon. The 58 year old Graham Staines had been sleeping in a station wagon, with his sons, after a jungle camp, when an angry mob of about fifty people, armed with torches, axes, and other implements attacked them. The mob was led by Ravinder Kumar Pal, better known as Dara Singh, a man now wanted by the police for several other crimes which have led many of his supporters to address him with the title of “Dharmrakshak” or “Protector of our religion.” Reports said that Staines and his sons had been fast asleep when the mob attacked them, trapped them in the vehicle

and set it on fire. Sources also said that the victims woke up and tried to escape but were disallowed from doing so by the mob. By the next morning, the three bodies had become soot and Dara Singh had become a hero. A hero big enough to be protected by villagers from authorities, for upto one year from the event. A hero big enough that his supporters formed organisations under the name of, “Dharmrakhyak Shri Dara Singh Bachao Samiti” (Committee for saving Dara Singh, the protector of our Religion) and “Dara Singh Parijan Suraksha Samiti” (Committee for the Protection of Dara Singh’s family) and other similar organisations. Given how Dara Singh enjoys so much support from the common people of India, it must be obvious that the people killed must have been extremely villainous people, right? Who was Graham Stuart Staines? Staines was an Australian missionary, who visited India in 1965, at the age of 24 and joined the Evangelical Missionary

Society of Mayurbhanj, and stayed behind to work in remote tribal areas in the forests of Mayurbhanj. His work primarily revolved around treating patients of Leprosy. Timothy and Philip were his sons who at the time were away from their boarding schools in Ooty, and had come home for their winter vacations. That particular night Staines and his sons had attended a jungle camp in Manoharpur, a conference of Christians in the area. When asked why they were killed, the assailants defended themselves by citing three reasons. First, that he was conducting forced conversions and coercing tribals to convert to Christianity. This, of course, has no credibility and there was no evidence of any coercion. As for the case of voluntary conversions, it is not unbelievable that a leper ignored by his own government and society, comes to believe in the God that his healer preaches of. The next reason - that Staines and his wife Gladys were feeding the tribals of the area beef. What’s interesting is that Graham Staines was perhaps the first example of a string of mob lynchings motivated by fake news revolving around beef consumption, a phenomenon that would eventually go on to claim the lives of many more people like Mohammad Akhlaq and Pehlu Khan. The third reason cited was that the Staineses were allegedly ‘destroying tribal culture’, by supplying tribal women with brassieres and sanitary napkins. There is little that can be said when people believe that giving tribal women sanitary napkins is a crime befitting death. But these reasons were not extensive. Staines and his sons were guilty of a much bigger crime. They were members of a minority religion, and unfortunately there exist an overwhelming number of people in India, who believe that is a crime, one often punishable by death. The “ghastly attack” was condemned by the then Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee. A commission was set up under Supreme Court judge Justice Wadhwa to conduct a judicial inquiry. Regarding the conversions, the commission reported that although tribals had been baptised in some camps, there was nothing to say that any of those were forced. Dara Singh, who was

already popular owing to his participation in Bajrang Dal’s cow protection movement, was sentenced to death by the District court.. The high court, however, repealed capital punishment for Dara Singh and awarded him a life sentence instead and the Supreme Court upheld that decision while going on at length condemning religious conversions in paragraphs that were later retracted after criticism in the media. Meanwhile, organisations like the “Dharmrakshak Dara Singh Sahayta Samiti” (Committee for assistance to Dara Singh, protector of our religion) and “Dara Sena” (Dara Army) was formed. There is a functional ‘Free Dara Singh’ website that calls for his support and hails him a hero of Hinduism. Several books like “Mu Dara Singh Kahuchhi”(This is Dara Singh speaking) and “Mono ku chhui gola” (He touched our hearts) condemning Staines and glorifying Dara Singh were circulated in Odisha. Gladys Staines, Graham’s widow did not go back to Australia after the gruesome murders of her husband and children. Neither did she bear any ill will for her husband and children’s murderers. She said, “It is far from my mind to punish the persons who were responsible for the death of my husband Graham and my two children. But it is my desire and hope that they would repent and be reformed.” She chose to stay behind and treat leprosy patients, continuing the work, that claimed her family from her, in the lands where it was claimed. The government awarded her the Padma Shri in 2005. She said, “The Lord God is always with me to guide me and to help me try to accomplish the work of Graham, But I sometimes wonder why Graham was killed, and what also made his assassins behave in such a brutal manner on the night of the 22nd/23rd of January 1999.”

- Suryadepto Nag



- Krishna Girish

പാലം

തീരത്തെ മണൽ തരികൾ നിർജീവമാണെന്നു വിശ്വസിക്കുക പ്രയാസമാണ്. ഓരോ ചുവടിന്റേയും ആഴവും വേഗവും അനുസരിച്ചു അവ പ്രതികരിച്ചുകൊണ്ടിരിക്കും. കുട്ടം തെറ്റിയ ഒരുവനെപോലെ അവൻ ആഴിയിലേക്കുനോക്കി നടന്നുകൊണ്ടിരുന്നു. പകൽ മാറി, സന്ധ്യയിൽ ആൾക്കൂട്ടം നിഴലുകൾ മാത്രം അവശേഷിപ്പിച്ചുകൊണ്ടിരുന്നു. ഓർമയിൽ എവിടെയോ മുഴങ്ങിയ പല ഭാവങ്ങളും അന്യമാണെന്ന തോന്നൽ അന്നാദ്യമായി അയാളിൽ ആഴമേറിയ ഒരു വിടവുണ്ടാക്കി. അതിലൂടെ പ്രകാശം ഇറച്ചുകയറി തന്റെ നിഴലിനെ അപൂർണ്ണമാക്കുന്നതുകണ്ട നടത്തത്തിന്റെ വേഗം കൂട്ടി. പക്ഷെ, അന്നാദ്യമായി ആ വേദന അയാൾ അനുഭവിക്കുകയായിരുന്നു.

തന്റെ പദങ്ങൾക്കടിയിൽ നിന്ന് കടൽ മണൽ കവരുന്നതിനിടയിൽ അയാൾ ആ പാലത്തിലേക്ക് നോക്കി. തൂണുകൾ ദ്രവിച്ചു നിലം പൊത്താനായി ഒരു അസ്ഥിപങ്ക്തരം പോലെ കടലിലേക്ക് നീങ്ങുകിടക്കുകയാണത്. കടലിന്റെ മൃദുലമായ ഒരു തലോടലിൽ പോലും അതിന്റെ ഞരക്കം കേൾക്കാം. എപ്പോഴോ പറഞ്ഞുകേട്ടിട്ടുണ്ട് അത് പണ്ട് ഭൂമിയെയും സ്വർഗ്ഗ ലോകത്തെയും ബന്ധിപ്പിച്ചിരുന്നു എന്ന്. അസൂയമുത്ത ചെങ്കുത്താൻ അത് തകർത്തുകളയുന്നതു വരെ അസംഘ്യം മനുഷ്യർ അവിടേക്കും മാലാഖമാർ ഇവിടെയും വന്നുപോയിട്ടുണ്ടത്രെ. വേറെ ചില കഥകളിൽ കിനാക്കൾ പേറിവരുന്ന നൗകകളെ അത് തീരവുമായി ബന്ധിപ്പിച്ചു.

നിർജീവമായ ആ പാലത്തിലൂടെ അലസമായി ഒരു മനുഷ്യരൂപം നടന്നു നീങ്ങിക്കൊണ്ടിരുന്നു, പിൻവിളികൾ ഇല്ലാതെ. വിണ്ണിൽ രാവീന്റെ ദുഃഖമായ കലർന്നുതുടങ്ങിയിരുന്നു. അതിന്റെ അറ്റത്തുനിന്നും താഴേക്ക് നോക്കിയപ്പോൾ ഒരു നടക്കമാണയാൾക്കുണ്ടായത്. പക്ഷെ, ഇരുട്ടിലും ആ പാലം ഇനിയും നീളുന്നുവെന്നയാൾ മനസ്സിലാക്കി. വീണ്ടും യാത്ര തുടർന്നു.

- Swarag T.

Illustration By Bhagyalekshmy



Shefali Sonarkar



Bhavik Majgaonkar



Bhavik Majgaonkar



Shreya Mehra



Kritika Kumari



Akshata Kotwal



Akshata Kotwal



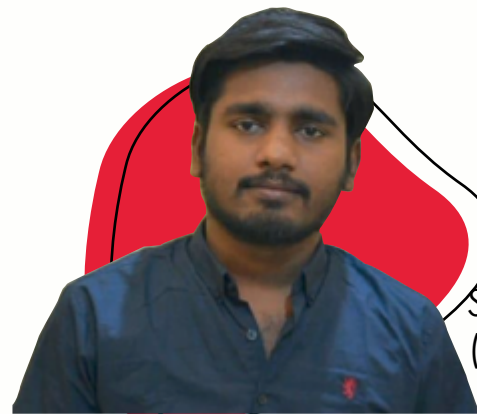
Aishwarya Juneja

NO NOSTALGIA

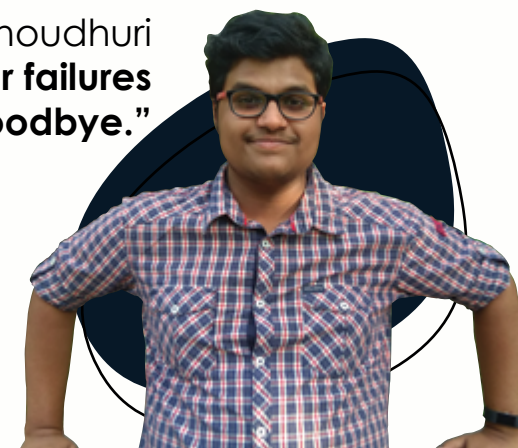
Photo by Shivam Dosajh



Jhelam
"Don't be scared"



Sanjay Golla
(aka Gola)

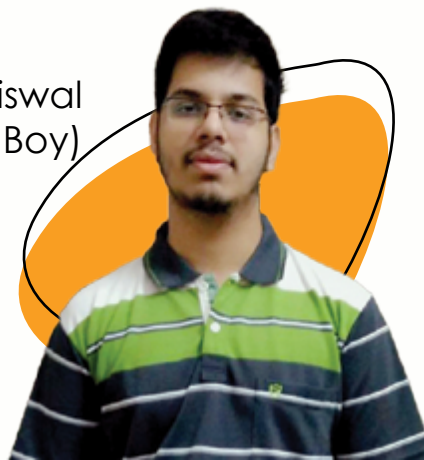


Sankalp Choudhuri
"Embrace your failures
and kiss them goodbye."

Sohan S.
(aka Sohaaa)
"1N73LL1G3NC3 15
7H3 4B1L17Y 70 4D4P7
70 CH4NG3."
-573PH3N H4WK1NG



Shreeyesh Biswal
(aka Solar Boy)



Sanjay Sriraj
(aka Sanbro)
"Attitude
makes the
difference"



Chitvan Chandolia
(aka Chits/Chitti/Chitvan)
"In IISER, you'll laugh,
you'll cry and everything
in between. By the end of
it, you'll be left with the
best memories"



Roshni Khamari
(aka Rosh)
"Survival of
the Fittest"



MY JOURNEY SO FAR...

“

I was born into a business family, where education is merely a social status. My father never paid attention to my academic needs, partly because of financial instability. Many schools expelled me after a year because of overdue fees, and my father admitted me to another school instead of resolving it. I ended up studying in eight different schools over 12 years. I usually went to school just before quarterly exams and covered up the coursework till exams. I was good at academics, but somehow it was engraved in my mind that I would do business later in life.

Life took a sharp turn when I was in eighth grade - my younger brother was diagnosed with cancer. My father visited many hospitals for his diagnosis, and I looked after his business since I was thirteen. I was running his restaurant, sometimes independently, sometimes with my elder brother. My studies were discontinued. The aim was clear as day: save a life. While I was away from school, I studied physics on my own, sitting at the workplace during break time. I was fascinated by the power of the prediction of physics. I also learned Java on my own to design my android phone and worked as an XDA Android developer. I also hacked over hundreds of Facebook accounts for awareness.

During the year I was supposed to be in tenth grade, I found a school that allowed me to give exams privately. It allowed me to skip the ninth grade and directly give

exams for the tenth grade. During this time, my brother's health deteriorated. After three years of struggle, he lost to cancer. It was three months to the tenth class board exams. One of the teachers was kind enough to register me and pay the fees herself. I did not want to miss this opportunity at any cost. I was confident about clearing the exams, but my parents were in a fragile state, and I realized that I need to give exams while working. I still remember that I just slept for two hours during the exam days and worked throughout the day at the restaurant.

On the other hand, things weren't going great for the restaurant. It was getting stressful day by day. I was not getting proper sleep. I did not want to continue looking after my father's work after the passing away of my brother, and I quit. My father opposed my decision, but I was clear about not running a restaurant.

I wanted to study physics and computer science. Out of his pride, my father did not admit me to school. I missed another year. Through my mother and uncle's support, I started going to a small coaching class nearby. Later, I joined a JEE institute. There was the problem of board exams - I needed to pass 12th grade to get into college, and I had missed 11th grade. I again resorted to the same school and insisted on not being part of mass cheating that used to happen there.

Things weren't great at the coaching institute. My concepts were fragile, and the mock exams were highly competitive. But I didn't stop putting in the effort. I knew one thing for sure, failing this means going to work at the restaurant. I started studying around 14 hours a day and prepared well.

Since I was working 12+ hours a day for a year, my body started demanding more rest all of a sudden. I messed up JEE Advanced. I was blank, tired, unable to calculate. I qualified for JEE Advanced, but my dream for CS in an IIT was all gone.

My uncle told me about the IISER exam. I gave it for the sake of it. At the time, I did not know the difference between science and engineering. I got accepted at IISER Pune. IISER offered a scholarship, the fee was less, and most importantly, it was not in my town. I knew if I stayed in my city, I would be dragged into the business eventually.

Regardless of my father's opposition, I joined IISER Pune and was supported by the institute scholarship and my uncle. My peers were toppers from all over the country, and I could not do well in the first few semesters. I was overwhelmed by students who were motivated to do research. I was more interested in computer science, but I couldn't find it. Besides, I had to study biology, which I hadn't studied since eighth grade.

Moreover, the problem was not just academic - I had never experienced a normal life before. Hanging out with people and going out for dinners and treks was just too overwhelming for me. It took me a few months to understand this way of life, but I realized I don't enjoy it much.

As the first semester was coming to an end, I needed to address a big question. Did I want to give JEE again or continue here at IISER? I approached a few professors for a winter project to

understand what research is, and Prof. Madhusudhan gave me one based on my computational skills. The goal was to find patterns in protein sequences. I really enjoyed it and decided to continue at IISER. I wasn't motivated by science but rather by computational complexity.

In my 2nd semester, for my IDC course, I came up with a model that used Lotka Volterra equations to explain the dynamics between an extrovert and an introvert. It was fun. By this time, I became interested in people in general, how they interact, how groups are formed, how people choose friends.

I spent the entire summer on the project. I also improved my programming skills, taught programming to friends and batchmates, and built android apps that didn't succeed because of lack of marketing. I spent a lot of time on them and hence did not do well in my 3rd semester or make progress in the project. I was feeling down, and at the time, I believed I would never be a good researcher. I started looking for alternatives.

After the 3rd semester, I went home for the first time. I reflected all winter and decided to give research a fair shot. The 4th semester was magical. I was making good progress in the project, and at the end of the semester, Prof. Madhusudhan told me that I had solved the project's problem and we would write a paper. To decide on my major, I asked Prof. Prasad for a project with my friend. I came up with a problem and solved it in the next two months. By the end of my 2nd-year summer break, I had two papers to write.

I got interested in complex systems and took a project with Prof. Santhanam for my 6th semester and continued working with him through the summer to get refined results and wrote a draft for a paper based on this.

In the summer, I came up with an experiment to find how gossip spreads,

and with the help of a few friends, performed an experiment. We monitored the spread of gossip (about myself, for ethical reasons). I found that gossip spreads very similar to how computer viruses spread. It sure was fun.

Seven semesters passed, and the quest for a Master's thesis project began. Little did I know, a tragedy was waiting for me. My father was admitted to an ICU in December, just before my eighth semester. During the semester, I hardly stayed in IISER. My grandmother passed away in January, and my father passed away in February during my mid-semester exams.

I still remember that day. I got to know he passed away at 7 am, and I had an exam at 10 am. I knew I could not leave sooner than the evening. I decided to give the exam. Prof. Madhusudhan came to see me just before and after the exam started. It was when I realized that I aspire to be someone like him - someone who is not only good at research but also supportive of his students. I went home that evening and finished the rites.

When I came back to IISER, I could not work. All this time, I wanted to prove to my dad that I can achieve things in life. But he passed away, and I lost motivation to work. I talked to my friends about it, but they didn't understand me; rather, it was too much to ask from them. I was frustrated. The semester continued, but I wasn't ready. I decided to meet the counselors at the suggestion of a close friend, but nothing got resolved. At this time, I was hoping for a break from life, and the pandemic happened, and I went back home.

At the same time, I was talking to a professor at Paris-Saclay for my master's thesis. The professor agreed to fund my project. I just had to reproduce a simple task from her paper, but I wasn't in a state to do so. I saw a great opportunity slipping out of my hands, and I couldn't

do anything about it. There were too many things happening simultaneously: online courses, the quest for the 5th-year project, and my ongoing projects. To get back on track, I decided to simplify a few variables, including doing my thesis at IISER. My supervisor wasn't an expert in the field, and we spent three months reading the literature to find a problem to work on.

The 5th year is not just about the project - it's equally about competitive/standardized exams and applications. The first half of my 5th year went pretty normal. The only concerning thing was that I did not know where to apply, and neither did my supervisor. It took some time, but I figured it out.

Recently, I got a few Ph.D. offers and am certain that I am going for one in Physics. Looking back six years ago, a Ph.D. in Physics would've seemed undoubtedly impossible. I didn't even know what a Ph.D. meant!

To everyone reading this, I want to convey a couple of messages. Life is going to be difficult at some point. At that time, I want you to remember that this time will pass. Just keep working towards your goal. Also, don't forget to be humble towards others. Everyone is going through something or the other, but going through a difficult time does not justify treating others harshly. Always be supportive and kind. Who knows what little kindness of yours will motivate someone to achieve something huge.

”



Dayal Singh

Rise and shine, it's time to get ready
But the hopeless flush wastes my time
There's no hot water; it's a tragedy
I shall complain; should be a crime

Online I go and lodge my complaint
And tell my friends to do the same
"This requires an action immediate"
And then I enter the lift that came

Got no time, I've gotta get going

My roomie had tied himself to the bed
With the chains made of deep sorrow
I didn't have time for the cry-head
He will likely be better by tomorrow

Got no time, I've gotta get going

The slum kids are screaming quite loud
From their unbearable cold water bath
'Facilities are dearly needed by this crowd'
I think, as I keep walking on my path

Then I see the gardener on the grass
Sewage-like water blasting from the hose
I postpone empathy as I enter the class
Gotta study now, no more sorrows

Got no time, I've gotta get going

I love doing science, that's why I'm here
I joined because it's fun studying nature
But let me tell you the truth, my dear
All that matters is publishing in Nature

Your productivity is your net worth
So quit your life and join a lab
You gotta work till a paper you birth
And then some more, coz that's fab

Got no time, I've gotta get going

I've gotta
get going

-Durgesh

It's fun to live in a gated community
Problems out there don't exist in here
I can do my work in tranquillity
Enough work to turn a deaf ear

I didn't care about the outside world
But then they stopped caring about me
"They're cutting funding, they're so cold
They don't value education. No more money"

We were angered and we headed out
Many signs and posters were made
We took to the streets and shouted loud
But the bystanders paid no heed and said,

"Got no time, I've gotta get going"



Purva Joshi
"Go Corona,
Corona go!"



Snigdha Samantaray
(aka Sniggy)
"Remember Red,
hope is a good thing,
maybe even the best
of things, and no
good things ever die."
- Andy Dufresne



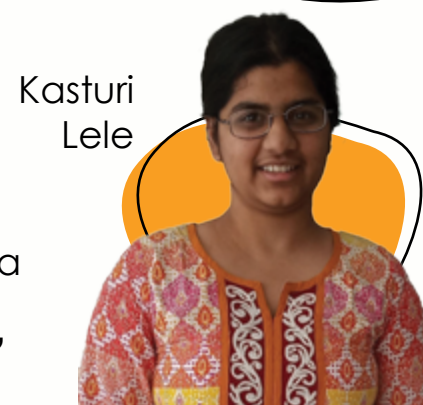
Sahiti Chebolu
"So Long, and
Thanks for All the
Fish"



Subhashree Subhadarsini
(aka Abeyy)
"In the grand scheme of
things, we are the
scheme."



Avi Adlakha
"Kya farak
padhta h?"



Kasturi
Lele



Shriya
"We're
all mad
here"

Amruta
Swaminathan



Rishabh Singhal
(aka Neta Ji)
"घर छोड़कर निकले थे
सपने पूरे करने, क्या पता था
कंधर जाना ही सपना बन
जायेगा।"





Jitesh Seth
(aka Jittu)
"Try not to miss classes, but definitely don't miss sunrise from the cricket ground."



Abhijit Duggirala
(aka Abhijit)
"Bwoah!"



Vruta
(aka Vrutato)
"If Trump played DotA he'd dodge the draft there too!"



Sagnik Ghose
(aka Shagwo)
"I know a guy who knows guy"

