



Growing UP with IISER

-T.K. Shajahan

I was just finishing PhD. As such life was peaceful in IISc; it was not only of very high quality, also we realised it as a life that was kind of laid back and unpragmatic. Get up early in the morning, take a stroll through the lush green campus. After a rainy day, it smells of fresh earth, with all leaves and flowers on the ground. In March it blooms in red and yellow. Or in December, the musky flowers spread their fragrance across the campus. Of course we spent most of the day and night in our labs, but came out of it whenever we felt like. There was an ensemble of the best in the country to give company in the mess or for tea - board photographers, writers, footballers, and sure, researchers. On weekends, we invariably ended up on MG road and in Casa Picola.

We spent a fair part of our time in library, near the last shelves. It was there, in a stingy room in old London, a twenty-four year old Bernard Shaw was changing the English Theatre all alone. We also found the benevolent, old Dickensian uncle coming with lots of money and good will to free the world of its miseries. Then sitting in the night near the now famous Gym Café, facing the vast cricket ground stretching up to the pole star, we lamented about why our times were not fiery and fighting. Then I came upon Braithwaite and Professor Higgins! The idea struck me - a teacher takes out the wretched soul from the world, and gives it new language, new thoughts and a new soul! That was indeed an intoxicating idea.

But such a life in ivory tower had its wrong sides too - lack of understanding and appreciation of the ordinary, mundane, practical life. And haughtiness, contempt for everything around. A romantic urge to set everything right and an unpragmatic will to shoulder the responsibility.

That's how I landed in IISER; still naive, unpractical, romantic and ignorant. Mar Ivanios looked like exactly the sort of place I wanted to live in. On a rainy day, with its

high rising church buildings and horrifying dark clouds, it looked and felt like a haunted old European palace; much like the opening scenes of Hitchcock's *Rebecca*. Behind it was a tiny hamlet as you find in Hardy's *Wessex*. I was living through a dream that had no roots in this world.

Mar Ivanios has the most beautiful sky around. On a starry night, sitting on top of the hostel, contemplating the insignificance of man compared to those gigantic fire balls shining far far away, and yet wondering how you are going to convince your students that this immensely vast universe could be comprehended in the elegant structure of mechanics, you suddenly notice that all this while there was a slow hum of melodious flute all around you, transcending you from this mortal earth to some unknown place. This eeriness was what contrasted IISc with IISER. IISc never sleeps, it is never silent, even in the dead of night one could stretch his ears to a gang of Bangla girls walking through the campus singing and chattering all the way.

But IISER is not IISc, yet. Apart from the hundred years of head start that IISc has, they are products of their time, and they both will bear the marks of it.

IISc was born out of a bold dream, and it always had place for dreamers. IISER sees the changing times around it. It is the practical world. There is a demanding landlord here. There is no Meena or Rakma here to shield you from the redtapes and files. One needs to swim through the rush and crowd of the city to reach there. To survive, one has to learn and learn to appreciate the practical life. From a student in IISc to a faculty member in IISER, I learned the demands and constraints of practical life. In IISc we abhorred the crowd, we did not want to be a sheep in the herd, but here a realisation comes that one has no choice but to follow the crowd if he has to eat and live like it.

So it was in IISER that I started growing up. From a mere student to a teacher; not in the Higgensian, but in a more earthly sense of the word. From a mere boy to a man. From a foolish, romantic dreamer to a practical man.