

My tryst with Mathematics

by Gonit Sora - Sunday, April 17, 2011

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As a child, it is always imperative that elders ask you what your favourite subject was. Without any second thought, my reply to such a question was ‘Mathematics’. This was my constant reply since my 1st standard till I passed by Higher Secondary exams. In my early school life, there was a time when I used to score nearly 100% in Mathematics and in the rest of my subjects the average was below 80%. While, children of my age use to fear Mathematics, I use to love it and relish it while studying. However, this phenomenon got reversed when I started my Engineering studies to which we shall come later.

I am a firm believer that there has to be some configuration in your brain which makes you better at Mathematics than others. When I was a toddler, my mother says, I had a fall from my Tabu cycle, which inflicted a sharp cut on my back head, to which, on today’s date, I attribute my affinity of my initial years towards Mathematics, and I am presumably not joking here. I was nowhere near to memorising the tables up to 20, nor was I quick at numerical operations, but in crunch exam times, I was able to have a strong accuracy record.

It was in standard 8, that I started facing bigger and better problems of Mathematics. Algebra and Time and Work were the most interesting sub topics. If Hari can do a job in 10 days and Ram can do it in 8, how long will it take for them to do it together kind of questions became a delicious platter for me. Even if x had the power of 8, I would still find x out by tearing to it pieces. This new found confidence and agility gave me a big boost to take up Advanced Mathematics in standard 9. This was way back in 1997. Soon complex numbers arrived to make things complicated, which were followed by indices and logarithms. I had to change gear drastically during those times to keep pace with changing times. If Hari and Ram did the work together made me at ease, in standard 9, Hari decided to leave the job doing $2/5^{\text{th}}$ of it and brought in Shyam as his replacement who can complete the work alone in 12 days, to do $1/4^{\text{th}}$ of it leaving the rest to Ram. I felt pity for Ram, who would now take more time to calculate the remaining work than to do it. My condition became like Ram’s soon. And then came my first and only Mathematics Olympiad, I participated (1997). Mathematics Olympiad is the most prestigious Mathematics competition in Assam conducted by the AAM (Assam Academy of Mathematics). The exam did not have a center in Dhemaji at that time. And I had to go to Lakhimpur to appear in it. It was flood times and my friend Tarun and I had to travel 6 km interchangeably on foot and boat on NH52 in the early morning to reach the center in time.

I had practically no expectations from the Mathematics Olympiad after a devastating period of 3 hours of the exam. Most of the time, I and Tarun exchanged cursory glances with each other, indicating that both of us do not have any clue about most questions asked in the paper. By the end of the exam, I had lost all faith in myself that I was good at mathematics. It seemed, I was letting not only me but also my parents and teachers down and that was really painful. Instead of vowing to practice more and more of Mathematics, as usual, I lowered my self-expectations. From the belief that I was good at Mathematics, I brought it to a level of mediocrity. However, a couple of months later, I received a call from the local branch of AAM and was informed that I was among the top 15 who participated in the Olympiad. That

catapulted me to cloud 9.

Moral of the Story: Do not ever underestimate yourself.

Mathematics Olympiad's good show gave me a much needed motivational push. My preparation for the HSLC examination was smooth and I relied on a fat score in Mathematics and Advanced Mathematics to come out in if not flying but gliding colours. To the surprise of everyone including myself, I got the highest marks in General Mathematics (150/150) in the HSLC examination. That was indeed, the highest point of my Mathematics career. I started believing in myself as a good Mathematician, which however backfired some years later. I had a good run in Mathematics in my Higher Secondary days and like since childhood, score the highest among all my marks in Mathematics in both 11th and 12th standard examinations.

Riding on a good show in Mathematics, my marks in JAT (Joint Admission Test) put me in NIT Surat with Computer Engineering as my stream. By that time, I had taken Mathematics for granted, which backfired in the first 3 semester examinations. I could score exactly 55 out of 100 in all the 3 semesters.

Moral of the Story: High School Mathematics is totally a different ball game than Higher Mathematics. One, who excels in the former, may not have a cakewalk in the latter.

During my NIT days I saw from very close quarters, my friend Manasjyoti Sharma, a double Assam Mathematics Olympiad topper and a batch mate of mine at NIT Surat. His passion for Mathematics was very understandable as he used to write articles about Number Theory even during exam preparation leaves. He however never published those articles and wrote themselves for his own derivations only. When we used to glance through his notebooks, we were mesmerised by the grasp of Mathematics he had.

Mathematics had helped me to clear many MBA entrance tests as numerical ability has a lot of weightage and High School Mathematics come to one's rescue in Data Interpretation. If I have to declare by indebtedness to a subject for what I am today, it has to be unequivocally Mathematics. Through this prose piece, I extend my deepest gratitude to all my teachers and friends, who taught me Mathematics, the king of all subjects.

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