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## IIT – It is tormenting

**G Venkatesh**

It was sometime in 2021. The Covid storm had not yet receded. Venkatesh found himself in Singapore, after 17 years, to attend a conference at the National University of Singapore (NUS). He had first landed at Changi Airport in 2004, as a Master student of Industrial Ecology at the Nanyang Technological University (NTU) in western Singapore. This was when he was 32 years old. He had taken a calculated risk, or perhaps it was not as calculated as he had thought it was. He had cut short his 6-year long career in the print media in Mumbai, and embarked on the long and hard route back to academics. Daunting, yes. Foolish and unreasonable, perhaps.

Inadvisable, maybe, as many may have thought. Doomed to failure, certainly not!

It had been his wife Varshita's fond wish to visit Singapore once, and they had lined it up as a 'to-do' for the future. That was not to be. Varshita had passed away in January 2020. Cancer. It had relapsed and this time, it was deadlier than what it had been in 2012 when it had intruded for the first time, and damaged beyond repair the bliss they had sought in matrimony after each having waited till the age of 36 to tie the knot.

One evening, after a tiring day at NUS, Venkatesh walked down to the Kent Ridge metro train station on the Circular line (the Yellow line, as Singaporeans call it), to take the train to Botanical Gardens. He would alight there and connect to the Downtown Line (the so-called Blue line) to get to Little India to dine at one of his favourite vegetarian restaurants. It had been there in 2004. It still was functioning, albeit it looked a bit different now. Changing with the times. Singapore looked pretty deserted. Singaporeans, it seemed, were still wary of returning back to life-as-usual, with the Covid storm having dented their confidence big-time. The more he tried to be mindful and dwell in the present, the more Varshita's memories kept occupying his mind-space. Regrets surrounding the inability to visit Singapore with her, kept niggling him.

He alighted at Botanical Gardens and was about to head towards the Downtown Line, when he heard a female voice behind him calling his name. At first, he thought he was imagining things. Often, when he was deep in thought about Varshita, he tended to feel that she was close to him, guarding and protecting him. The voice sounded like hers, moreover. When he heard the same voice again, he halted and turned to see an Indian woman, dressed in formals, walking towards him. She neared him and extended her gloved hand – 'Mahalakshmi. You know me. From Ruia College.'

His heart missed a beat. That was 33 years ago. They had been 16 years old, when he had first met her in the library of the said college in Matunga in central Mumbai. Class XI. Just out of school. She, from a girls' convent and he from a boys' convent. Both unaccustomed to interacting with members of the opposite sex, when compared to girls and boys from co-ed schools.

'Ah, yes. Mahalakshmi. How are you? Are you also visiting Singapore, like I am?'

'I stay here near Botanical Gardens. Have been staying here for over 20 years now. I was at NUS today, attending the same conference as you. In fact, I was among the audience when you were presenting. I must say that it seemed like you were acting in a play or a film. Just 15 minutes, but it was enthralling.'

'Thanks a lot. It is always good to hear something like that at a conference.' My mind was getting foggy.

'I guess you have flown in from Sweden, then?'

'Yes.'

I hated the silence. I did not want to ask any questions. I wanted her to dominate the conversation and tell me what she wanted to and ask me what she wished to.

'My husband is a professor at NTU. Nanyang Technological University, that is. It is not far from here.'

'I am an alumna of NTU. I was here earlier too but we were not destined to bump into each other then. 2004-05.'

'Oh!' She paused for a while, 'What did you study here? In your early 30s?'

'Industrial Ecology. Got a master's degree before wending my way to Germany, Norway and now Sweden.'

‘Impressive, Venkatesh!’ No sooner had she said that, she knew that she should not have.

‘Relatively speaking, it is not. I know that. You know that.’

‘You should not think.....’

I interrupted her. ‘It is okay, Mahalakshmi. A lot of water has flowed under the bridge. So, where did you meet your husband?’ I looked right into her eyes, when I asked her that question.

‘He is also from IIT-Bombay, A year younger than I. We got engaged while at the IIT. And marriage followed soon after he had graduated.’ I was not in a mood to listen to all that narration. I assumed that there may have been some issues regarding intimacy and perhaps pregnancy followed by abortion, which may have resulted in the engagement and marriage in their very early 20s.

She continued as if it was my duty to listen and her right to say all that she had locked up in her heart waiting to tell me after all these years. ‘His father and mine were colleagues at work, and his mother and mine had been schoolmates.’

She was trying to muster up the courage to stand there and speak, knowing well how much I was feeling hurt and wounded...wounds which had dried up being teased upon again. She proofread her name-card. I looked at the name on it.

‘Dr Mahalakshmi Venkatesh, Research Director, Sustainability Research Group, National University of Singapore...’

She read my mind. ‘Yes, his name is also Venkatesh. I am not ashamed to say that I think of you and the happy times we spent as teenagers in college, almost every day.’

I glared at her, tucked the name-card into my shirt-pocket, removed my glasses, and ran my handkerchief over my eyes. I

was trying to hold back any tears which may efflux. I did not want her to feel one bit that I cared for her any longer.

I took out a name-card of mine and handed it to her.

‘Karlstad University. Where is this exactly? Close to Chalmers?’

‘Midway between Oslo and Stockholm. About 200 kilometres north of Chalmers, as the crow flies. No big deal. Small unknown university. Nothing like the IITs, NTU or NUS.’ I looked at her and smiled meekly.

She deciphered the pain-laden sarcasm behind those words, and looked away for an instant, and then continued.

‘What does your wife do in Sweden?’

‘You assume that I am married, Mahalakshmi?’

‘You mean to say you.....,’ she did not complete the question.

‘I was. I am widowed now. Lost my wife to cancer early last year.’

‘I am sorry, Venkatesh. How stupid of me to pry. What right do I have to want to know more about you after....’ She stopped in mid-sentence again. Her cell-phone started beeping. She took it out of her purse, glanced at the screen and cut the call.

‘When are you heading back to Sweden then?’

‘Tomorrow afternoon. The flight takes off at around 1 pm.’

She looked into my eyes without blinking. She had done that once before with tear-filled eyes. That had been way back in 1989. ‘Please forgive me, Venkatesh. I will pray that God blesses you with a lot more happiness than what he has bestowed upon us lucky ones. You will remember me when this happens, if you want to, that is.’

I remained silent.

‘I have got to leave, Venkatesh. I hope we can stay in touch, and collaborate, as our research interests overlap to a great extent.’

I glanced again at the name-card. She waited patiently for me to say something. ‘Mahalakshmi Venkatesh. The affluence and grace of Mahalakshmi and the opulence of Venkatesh. You two are made for each other, indeed.’ I smiled, but this time, there was no sarcasm. A tear ran down my cheek. She spotted it. I added, ‘It is not just the research interests, but there were many other things which were common between us once upon a time. Time needs to be one’s side, Mahalaxmi, to enjoy the ‘lot more happiness’ you mentioned. In some people’s lives, divine timing delays, and that is as good as a denial...implying much less time to bask in god-sent happiness.’

‘You have the right to get angry at me and hate me and even curse me, if you wish to. You know that.’

‘It is getting late for you, Mahalakshmi. You must head home. I will go to Little India for my filter coffee. I am not lucky enough to have that cup of coffee you said you would prepare for me someday. Bye, Mahalakshmi.’ So saying, I scampered down the stairs like a teenager, three at a time. I did not turn back to look at her. Maybe she stood there looking at me for a while and reminiscing about the past when I would scamper down likewise, three steps at a time...maybe she did not. I would never know.

The metro-train was practically empty. I could occupy any seat I wished to. This was not how it used to be in 2004-05. I remember always having to stand while onboard. I permitted myself an analogy here - It was quite like many girls wanting to get married to me, and the universe conferring upon me the option to choose the one I wished to tie the knot with and say, ‘I am sorry...you all are just good friends,’ to the others. The analogy made me laugh and cry, smile and weep at the same time. I did all four.

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The monsoon of 1987. Ramnarain Ruia College. The library, I used to spend a lot of time in. Else, I would be at the cricket ground, requesting acquaintances at the different cricket clubs there, to let me bowl at the nets for a while. I was a loner otherwise. Hardly spoke to anyone much. She had once just walked in and occupied the chair in front of me, and introduced herself. I had been taken aback. That had been a great initiative to break the ice and I interpreted that rightly as a sign of interest in me – a 16-year old who never wore T-shirts and jeans to college, but preferred to wear full-sleeve shirts and formal pants, or cricketing whites (God knows, why!)

She was studious and shunned fashion and I instantly understood why she was attracted to me. It also turned out that she was a cricket connoisseur unlike most girls of her age who used to follow the sport because they had a crush on the likes of Ravi Shastri or some other handsome bloke who also happened to be a good cricketer – doubly blessed men, both by nature and nurture. She could identify all the fielding positions on the cricket field – she once asked me to quiz her on anything about cricket and I was amazed that she answered 80% of the questions right! She could tell me exactly how a googly differed from leg-spin, when I told her that I was training to become a specialist leg-spin-googly bowler. Within a few days, I was pretty certain that God had introduced me to my soulmate at age-16!

I pined to see her at least once every day but that used to be difficult. We did not have cell-phones those days to keep each other informed. I did not have a telephone at my place. There were times when I did not see her for days together. When she used to make an appearance after a long period of absence, I used to be thrilled like a bowler is when the captain hands over the ball to him and asks him to have a go at a well-set batsman. She was brilliant, as Tambrahm girls often are. She

helped me with solving some abstruse Physics problems while we were preparing for the IIT-JEE (Indian Institute of Technology – Joint Entrance Examination) together, while I helped her out with Mathematics. My father used to give me some pocket money daily, and I used to save that up to buy books for myself usually. I took delight now in treating her to filter coffee often at a popular Tamil restaurant opposite Matunga railway station. Instead of buying books for myself, I got her a gift for her birthday. When she held the gift close to her and looked to be so much in love with me, I was in seventh heaven, on cloud nine. She often told me that she wanted to treat me to filter coffee at her home one day, when she realised that the only vice I had – if it could be called so – was coffee-drinking. I consumed a lot of caffeine as a teenager, and read voraciously.

My mind was racing ahead on that metro-train, faster than the train itself. Fast forward. I did not want to dwell much on the happy moments from the late 1980s.

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IIT-JEE. Exam day. 1989. There were high expectations from me. Friends, acquaintances, teachers and family members thought that it would be a cakewalk for me. The joint study with Mahalakshmi had given me a lot of confidence. She had told me a week before the exams that she thought I would be among the top-10 rank holders, and she would then be very proud to take me home and introduce me to her parents and make that cup of filter coffee for me.

‘Only filter coffee, no lunch?’ I had joked.

I was running a high temperature on the day of the exams. That impeded my performance. I went to sleep out of sheer fatigue on my chemistry answer sheet and woke up dazed, realising that I had only 30 minutes to go. The upshot – I could not clear IIT-JEE. Mahalakshmi did. Her father had gone over to IIT Bombay to take a look at the results put up on



the notice board there. She wrote a letter to me, in which she said that she wanted to meet me for coffee at the same place where we used to meet to study, and that if not for my help, she would not have been able to do well in her mathematics paper. She also asked me about my rank and said she was eager to know. She wrote that it would be great if we could seek and get admission to the same IIT so that we could always be together.

I went over to see her. I tried to stay cheerful for her sake. I asked her not to feel sad that I had not made it. She had and that was enough. She, after all, was my better half and thereby it was apt. She looked at me, and her eyes started watering. She started sobbing, and then began crying out aloud, inconsolable. The old man who often served coffee to us, came over and asked me what the matter was. I explained everything to him. He placed a hand on my shoulder and said in Tamil, ‘It seems she really loves you, young man. Treasure that.’

‘Venkatesh, you will not forget me. You will write to me frequently and I will respond. You should not think less about yourself because you are not at the IIT. If fever had not intervened, you would have topped the bloody list! You are the best as far as I am concerned, and will always be.’

‘Thanks, Mahalakshmi. I promise.’

We parted ways. I must mention here that I had not once touched her during all those months of friendship and camaraderie. For the next 18 months, I corresponded with her. I had sought and got admission at the Sardar Patel College of Engineering in Andheri in the western suburbs of Mumbai. Once in 3 months, I used to visit the IIT-campus to meet Mahalakshmi and have a cup of coffee with her, and also use the resources in the library.

Everything was going ship-shape and we had dreamed up plans for the next five years in life and career. She said that

she would wait for the right moment to introduce me to her parents. She said however, that she had told them about how much I helped her with mathematics and that she owed her good performance in the mathematics paper to me, and that they had blessed me and asked me not to underestimate myself needlessly. She added that they had also expressed an interest to meet me someday.

It was sometime in early 1991. I sent her a letter and kept waiting for a response. A month passed by. Nothing came. I sent another letter. Waited for a fortnight. Nothing. I decided to go over to the campus.

When I arrived there, I happened to meet a common friend, who had been our classmate at Ruia. I asked her if she could let Mahalakshmi know that I was waiting for her at the canteen. She said that she would, and disappeared for what seemed to be eternity. She returned and told me that she was not in her room which was locked. She had asked around, but none knew. They assumed that she would have gone home for a few days.

‘Thanks Jyoti. Can you leave a message for her anyway?’

‘Yes, Venkatesh. I will. And you please take care of yourself, okay? It was so nice to see you. I cannot forget all the help with mathematics I got from you. Mahalakshmi keeps telling me how grateful she is to you for helping her with some abstruse mathematics problems.’

I smiled and walked away. People I had helped had made it. But the person who had helped was languishing and struggling at a lower rung on the ladder. The way in which Jyoti asked me to take care of myself, made me suspect that she knew something which she was not revealing. I prayed that everything should be fine with Mahalakshmi. Did she have any health issues which she did not wish to let me know of, lest I would be disturbed? I stopped at a Lord Hanuman

temple *en route* to Bhandup railway station and prayed for her.

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Now it dawned on me. I had got proof at the Botanical Gardens metro station in Singapore, of all places, 32 years after I had last seen her. I had struggled long and hard with her thoughts...there had not been a proper closure to the whole thing. This had affected my performance in the engineering exams, and I got pushed back in life and career, and endured depression and low self-esteem for a long time. How different my world would have been if she had not done what she had. I had heard about sexually-intimate relationships developing at the IITs and IIMs...I could not rule out that possibility. Perhaps the attraction which she had towards me was purely on a mental-emotional-intellectual level. After all, I had not touched her. We had not even shaken hands while we were friends. When she extended her gloved hand for a handshake at the Botanical Gardens railway station, these thoughts had come rushing to my mind. Was that all there was to love? I looked at her name-card. Saw my name on it, which in a way was not mine. I wanted to crumple it and chuck it in the recycling bin. I decided against it. Perhaps the universe wanted me to know that she was still a soulmate, but perhaps of a professional nature.

The universe has its mysteries which are never fully unravelled, till they are. I recalled how in the Hindi movie - Super 30 - the girl the protagonist used to be in love with, assists him secretly in his noble endeavour even after getting married to an affluent IAS officer. Perhaps, Mahalakshmi would want to help me skyrocket in my career by suggesting my name in research projects.

I walked into the restaurant. I ordered a plate of idli-sambar. I ended the evening with a cup of hot filter coffee.

## **Venkatesh Govindarajan**

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Venkatesh Govindarajan, born in Chennai on 13-1-72, is currently Associate Professor at Karlstad University in Sweden. He has two Master's degrees (Mechanical Engineering from India, and Industrial Ecology from Germany) and a PhD in Industrial Ecology (from Norway). He speaks, reads and writes English, Norwegian, Swedish, Hindi, Marathi and Tamil. Venkatesh has published four volumes of poetry<sup>1</sup>, four e-books and over 100 scientific journal publications; crosswords, and articles of various genres in magazines around the world. He sketches in his spare time, likes singing, and is a cricket aficionado/connoisseur. Venkatesh lost his wife, Varshita, to cancer in early 2020, and has been devoting himself to charitable causes in her honour since then.

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