



Living on wheels, racing to rebuild lives

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In 1990, I was a student at the Indian Institute of Management, Bangalore in my second year of a two year Masters programme in Business Management. They were amongst the best years of my life.

I am ashamed to say that I don't recall much of the academic ground we covered in those two years.

But I remember clearly like it was yesterday the interaction with my fellow residents on campus and the many life lessons we learnt that could never have been taught in a classroom.

Thanks to social media and the tenacity of a few of my classmates, we've had multiple opportunities to reconnect.

No longer in the early throes of carving out successful careers, most of us are well established in our chosen paths and in a few cases are on to the second or third

legs of working lives. In the recent years I have also reconnected with someone who has a special place in my heart. He is positivity and grit personified. This is the story of S Vaidyanathan (Vaidy).

It was the evening of 27th July 1990. Vaidy and some of his friends were celebrating a couple of them having received scholarships.

They'd been out for a few beers and even managed to sneak a few back on to the campus. They played table tennis, watched TV and continued to chat. The effect of the alcohol had worn off and the crowds had thinned.

It was well after 2am on the morning of 28th July. Vaidy and a few of his friends were on the first floor balcony just outside the dormitory rooms.

Vaidy was perched on the balcony wall on the first floor, something he had never done before. At one point he reached down to pick up his footwear, lost his balance and fell through a gap plunging to the ground beneath.

It all happened in the blink of an eye but Vaidy remembers it like it was yesterday and in slow motion.

"My back landed on the mini-iron railing that used to be around the hostel ground floor, holding the edges of the flooring together.

The mini-iron railing did the damage even though I was fully conscious and there was not even a scratch anywhere in the body. There were no broken bones either. At that time, I had no idea of the importance of the spinal cord.

I had read about it briefly years ago in school. As soon as the dive was completed, I realised that my legs were not moving, nor was my core. Below the upper part of the chest, the body appeared to have become paralysed."

Vaidy's companions came rushing to his aid. He was carried to the back seat of a car and rushed to hospital. Through a combination of luck and presence of mind, the way in which he was carried and transported by his friends avoided putting further pressure on his spine and minimised any collateral damage.

Vaidy believes that greater awareness and proper handling of the injured person at the scene of an accident is instrumental in saving lives and reducing loss of mobility.

That night changed Vaidy's life forever. The initial diagnosis pointed to him being in a wheelchair for the rest of his life, confirmed by a specialist two days later. "When the specialist mentioned these effects, I just asked to be left alone for five minutes. I did not cry or sulk or think on the lines of 'why me' or 'why this type of a challenge'."





"I did not look at the past. I just crossed out a few aspects (including sex in its fullest sense) that may not be possible, and made a decision to do every thing that I could to help the process of recovery. One other decision that I made very early was that I was going straight back to IIM-B to complete the course."

"On July 30, early evening when my Amma (mother) walked into the room, I told her that it is best to look ahead and I would like her also to do so immediately.

I also told her to show her usual courage in facing up to reality. What I remember is she did not cry at all, and she immediately assessed the situation and agreed with me."

What followed was six long months of recovery and rehabilitation. Bangalore did not have the requisite facilities and so the decision was made to move Vaidy to Christian Medical College (CMC) in Vellore, more than 200km away.

"As the ambulance was about to move out, I cried, not for the injury and its aftermath but for the fact that I would miss the fun and frolic with my batch mates.

When we reached CMC, Vellore, there was no bed in any ward, general or private, and so I was taken to the ICU where I spent two days and a bit. Watching and listening to more gravely sick persons was a sobering experience. This was my first exposure to an ICU."

"In CMC, Vellore, my next stroke of good luck came in the form of Dr Suranjan Bhattacharji, who epitomises everything that is and can be good about life. Dr Bhattacharji is one of the earliest to specialise in the field of Physical Medicine & Rehabilitation in India (PMR).

In 1990, he was considered among the top five in the world in the field of spinal-cord injury treatment and rehabilitation. He had offers from hospitals across the world and at a price of his choosing.

He opted to stay in Vellore and has now devoted four decades and counting in working for the physically challenged in India."

"The baton for PMR in India had passed from Dr Mary Verghese, the pioneer of this specialty in India, to Dr Bhattacharji. To be in his safe custody in 1990 was the best thing that happened for me in life, not just from a

medical perspective."

Vaidy was indeed fortunate to be in the care of an excellent team of doctors, nurses, physiotherapist and occupational therapists. His body had to relearn the many things we take for granted.

Simple tasks such as sitting, brushing his teeth and eating independently needed relearning; having his hair washed was a treat.

He drew confidence from his mother's "courage and smile." He also speaks reverently of Dr Bhattacharji and his "messianic calmness," and the healing influence he had on him.

"In any rehabilitation post a spinal cord injury, almost nothing is routine and nothing can be taken for granted, however simple the task. Hard work will help you learn each task and improve in efficiency over time.

Every task in day-to-day to life had to be relearnt, apart from newer needs for mobility, bladder and bowel management and skin care."

Vaidy was in good hands during his six-month long stay at CMC Vellore, but the real challenge would be living independently once back in the real world. Vaidy's first goal was to head back to IIM-B to complete his MBA along with his classmates.

He missed the camaraderie with his friends back on campus. Painfully aware that they would all be graduating in the summer of 1991, he wanted more than anything else to spend the last three months of the academic year with them.

At first, the management of IIM-B was unsure it was





equipped to let Vaidy back on campus. There had been no precedent of taking on a student with a physical disability. But Vaidy was not a new student; he simply wanted to finish what he had started. In December 1990,

Dr Bhattacharji sent a letter to the institute outlining Vaidy's condition, his needs and his views on how he might be allowed to return. Vaidy found a copy of this letter amongst his late mother's meagre belongings 21 years later. It is now one of his treasured possessions.

Dr Bhattacharji's intervention was clearly instrumental in changing the minds of those in charge of the Institute. But Vaidy's hope of doing three semesters worth of coursework in one was perhaps too optimistic.

He would go on to stay at the institute for an extra year and graduate a year later than he had originally hoped.

Vaidy believes his mother, Ganga, had complete faith in his ability to cope independently back on campus. But she asked permission to accompany him and stay with him for her own peace of mind.

Ganga was given her own room in the dormitories alongside Vaidy's on the ground floor. Their rooms overlooked the quadrangle: a hub of activity, where the parties and other student gatherings happened.

It must have been a proud moment for Ganga when her son completed his post graduation in 1992. And she got to live like a student for a year and three months in one of the most prestigious academic institutions in the country.

A dream come true for someone whose love of learning and reading surpassed her own formal education that ended at the age of thirteen.

Earning a highly regarded qualification, it turns out, is not enough to get a job. Vaidy discovered that most employers were not willing to risk taking on a candidate in a wheelchair.

Vaidy was vehement that he only wanted a job on his merits, not because someone felt sorry for him. He tells me of the time he had started a working at a respected financial institution.

On his third day he was handed some paperwork which

would have effectively have classified him as handicapped and eligible for inclusion in their disabled employees quota. He resigned.

It was not an easy time and money was in short supply. His mother remained a pillar of support believing with utmost conviction that things would work themselves out.

Vaidy got a job working for the The Hindu Group (an Indian broadsheet newspaper) as Head of Business Research where he remained for twelve and a half years.

He later went on to work as Risk Manager at Sundaram Finance, a respected financial services firm and manager of mutual funds in India where he remained in full time employment until March 2010.

Vaidy believes firmly that education plays a big part in how people respond to someone in a wheelchair. The institute had initially been very reluctant to let Vaidy back in because he was in a wheelchair.

But the students took things in their stride, partly because they had known Vaidy before his accident, and more so because of Vaidy's own positive attitude towards life. Once you get past seeing the wheelchair, the fact is that it is still the same person you once knew.

Ganga passed away in 2002 after a brief illness. But before she died she helped Vaidy secure further independence by helping him to buy a small piece of land on which a purpose built house stands and where he lives even today.

Vaidy credits his mother for his unshakeable faith in the future, refusal to dwell on the past and complete unwillingness to indulge in any form of self pity.





One evening in 2009, Vaidy, Elango (his dearest friend from the IIM days) and another good friend Girish from his time with The Hindu Group got talking. They talked about the plight of people with disabilities in India and their lack of inclusion into society.

They decided to set up The Ganga Trust. In doing so, Elango and Vaidy were translating into action what Dr Bhattacharji had told them in 1990:

‘As alumni of IIM B, you guys will be in position of influence in due course. You must do your bit to enhance the quality of life of persons with disability.’

The initial objective of The Ganga Trust was not so much to raise money but to bring together top quality individuals who would pledge their support and provide the money to meet some key objectives. This involved working with other organisations around the country that deal with people with spinal cord injury.

In 2010, Vaidy moved to working on a part time basis so he could spend time on The Ganga Trust. In March 2013 he gave up his job altogether so he could focus all his attention on it. He now also works for The Spinal Foundation, a pan India self help group for people with spinal cord injuries.

One of the core aims of The Ganga Trust is to set up ground level infrastructure, especially for people in remote parts of India. The data collection mechanism is poor, but Vaidy estimates that there are 10-15,000 new cases of spinal cord injuries each year.

The vast majority will not get the care they need. The correct treatment, starting from the time of the injury and long after rehab is completed, can ensure the patient lives a reasonably normal life.



Greater awareness amongst ordinary people plays a huge role in ensuring better treatment and greater inclusion of people with physical disability into society.

Today Vaidy works tirelessly for his cause. He has participated in multiple fundraising wheelchair marathons and networks relentlessly aiming to reach more of those whose lives have been blighted by spinal cord injury.

He does not take a penny as salary and is, at present, living off his modest savings built up during his working life. His work for The Ganga Trust and The Spinal Foundation is a labour of love; a promise fulfilled to his mother who had wanted him to simply put something back into a world that had been kind to him. Giving came naturally to her, even when she herself owned very little by way of resources.

I recently apologised to Vaidy for being so dimly aware of the fact that he had returned to campus after his injury and that I had barely registered his mother’s presence on campus.

Vaidy only smiled and said, “That is as it should be,” a response that typifies his desire to be treated no differently just because he happens to be in a wheelchair.

Vaidy is an inspiration to me and all who know him.

What we can do for Vaidy and others like him is to support their efforts to find new meaning in their own lives and to empower others who have suffered the devastating impact of a spinal injury. We must remember to look beyond the injury and its aftermath and see the person who is still there, and do our bit to restore a semblance of dignity and normality into a life that has been so cruelly altered by fate.

