

Have Junoon - be Happy*

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Last month the President of IIT Kanpur Alumni Association was very kind to write a story on my life (though the format was as if I had written it). It was based on my book [“1970s America – an Indian Student’s Journey”](#). The IITK students, after reading that story, have invited me to give this talk and I am delighted to be here. For some of you who have not seen the story, [please read it here](#) to get an idea of what I am going to talk today.

The title of my talk is a constant theme in my life and hence I would like to share with you the idea of how junoon can bring happiness and desire to do things out of ordinary.

Junoon is defined as obsession/passion and when you have junoon all other things get obliterated and only the goal of your junoon remains in the vision field. Junoon gives you focus and puts the worries out of your mind.

I always wanted to be an engineer. That was my first junoon and that is what propelled me to appear for IIT Joint Entrance Exam (JEE). In mid-1960s there were no coaching classes for JEE, so we studied hard our class XI curriculum and material from extra books. In those days Lucknow (where I was born and raised) had excellent public libraries and hence I could get books on Physics (Resnick and Halliday), Maths (Thomas) etc. from them. These were the books used in IIT curriculum and hence solving the problems in them came in handy and I passed the JEE in 1967 with 29th All India Ranking (AIR).

* [Invited talk given to students of IIT Kanpur on 16th March 2013.](#)

Then it was an anticlimax. Somehow the teachers in IITK did not inspire us very much. I guess the same thing happens even today as quite a few of you have told me. But being smart kids we had to find some way to keep us occupied. In those times there was no internet, mobile phones, faxes etc. So we got involved in lots of campus activities like gliding, TV production, bull sessions, playing bridge and chess, playing all sorts of games like TT, badminton, tennis and reading literature (especially in my case), etc. These interactive activities allowed us to vent our steam and provided us tremendous bonding with our batch mates. I have written about [my IITK student days in a blog](#).

Somehow, I find that among students nowadays, internet and cell phones have led to more isolation and less face-to-face activities. For the emotional wellbeing of students it is very important that they interact with their friends and peers on more face-to-face basis.

I also vividly remember that in my final semester (5th year), I suddenly realized that I did not know any engineering. I do not know how this knowledge dawned on me, but it was very frightening, and this propelled me to my next junoon of acquiring knowledge. This led me to do my M.Tech also in IIT Kanpur since I could not get into any U.S. university with scholarship. In early 1970s IITs were not brand names and hence getting scholarships was not easy.

This desire to increase my knowledge got a fillip when in my 5th year I attended a lecture on solar energy by a Mechanical Engineering professor. This lecture and exposure to solar energy was like a switch and gave me my second junoon!

I became obsessed with the idea of finding everything on this subject under the sun ! I therefore read everything that was available in the IITK library and in those days our library was very good. This desire to learn more

about solar energy made me ultimately [do my Ph.D. in this subject under a very famous professor in U.S.](#)

The U.S. university system in early 1970s was far superior to that in India. With most of the departments being present on the same campus it allowed tremendous interaction with faculty and students from different disciplines. Thus the junoon of acquiring knowledge multiplied many times and I started attending seminars and lectures in almost any field that caught hold of my fancy. So from lectures on sleep and dreams, to quantum physics, gravity, near-death experience etc., to some very great seminars by visiting Nobel Laureates in physics and chemistry-all made a tremendous impact on my mind.

This junoon was also boosted by the thought that I should use this knowledge for the betterment of India.

Thus after my Ph.D. and teaching for a couple of years in the U.S., I returned to India in 1981 to start work in rural Maharashtra in a place called Phaltan. This was also because of the junoon and my arrogance that I will change India with my inventions. India did not change but it changed me!

Life in Phaltan was tough and primitive in those times. For example just to make long-distance phone calls, many times I had to hop on the bus and go to Pune to make those calls! Very few things of daily use were available in Phaltan in those days and thus even for minor purchases one had to go to Pune.

If I had an iota of intelligence, then probably I would not have taken this route. It is the junoon which makes you take decisions without any great evaluation process. If you think deeply and evaluate the pros and cons of the decision you are about to make, then you will never become a pioneer

and create a new path. With junoon you jump in first and then try to see where you have landed!

However, the junoon to do some worthwhile work for rural areas allowed me to ignore the problems of daily life in Phaltan. In fact when junoon is there then lots of the problems go into the background and sometimes are solved by new avenues which appear and help one to achieve the goal. Besides my work on [spirituality and writing about it](#) (another junoon) also helped me in having a proper perspective in life and overcoming problems.

Getting any worthwhile R&D done in Phaltan was a challenge. With hard work and junoon, I think, [we have been able to do a decent job](#) and hence lots of our technologies and inventions have spawned similar development all over the world. Getting good engineers to come and work in rural India is always a challenge. I do hope some of you may want to spend a year or two with us as interns. This experience of developing technologies for rural areas will help you later on in life.

Nevertheless in the last 30 years we have survived and thrived! You can read all about our work on [our website](#) and on my journey from [US to rural India](#).

Obviously in the junoon process, having an understanding spouse is very necessary. He/she may not have your passion but should help you or at least not hinder your journey. [I was lucky to have a wife like that](#). I guess so many others who have done this type of work will have a similar story to tell about the understanding spouse.

Also the junoon for higher things makes hankering after money and mundane things irrelevant. It therefore helped me in reducing my needs and made me [live a sustainable lifestyle](#).

Thus my young friends, my advice to all of you is to have junoon and do everything with passion. This will help you develop a discipline of doing

everything with vigor and will hopefully take your mind away from running after money alone.

Also, as students at the premier engineering school of India, you should have a junoon for having a career in technological field. This is a technological age, and the world moves because of technology. After the technology is developed, we should worry about how to manage it! Thus I am dismayed that majority of our IIT students opt for non-engineering careers after graduation. This is a great loss to the country. If you develop technologies for uplifting the lives of rural poor, then you will help 60% of our population and help make India a great country.

Money is not everything in life though it is necessary to make things happen. [Happiness is the most important thing to strive for](#). Junoon for doing something worthwhile for poor people is a very noble goal and will give you happiness. This is also your contribution to society.

I do hope that my small example will inspire some of you to take this path of social entrepreneurship.

[HOME](#)