

Early life

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I was born and raised in [Lucknow, the capital of Uttar Pradesh](#). My father, Jagdish Prasad Rajvanshi, who was a freedom fighter was imprisoned in 1942 freedom movement in Delhi and then sent to Lucknow jail. In late 1945 on his release from jail, he liked Lucknow so much that he decided to make it his home. Our first house was in Hazratganj (center of Lucknow) where both I and my brother Alok were born. This old bungalow in front of Lucknow Railway Office was probably constructed by Britishers in late 1800 because it was made of *lakhauri* bricks (very thin clay bricks prevalent in those times). In 1960 after the great Lucknow floods when huge cracks developed in our bungalow and made it unfit to live, we moved into a flat in Lalbagh (in front of Basant Cinema) near Hazratganj.

My father came from a family of *zamindars* (landlords) in Rampur (Bijnor district in Uttar Pradesh). In his family he was the first to graduate and in 1942 was doing his Ph.D. in Hindi literature from Allahabad University when he was imprisoned in the freedom struggle. He wrote about his experiences of being imprisoned [in a book called Hawalaat](#). He was a member of Congress Party and remained in active politics till early 1980s. I have written about him in some details in my book [“1970s America – an Indian Student’s Journey”](#).

My father was a saintly man. Though he was very much involved in the Indian politics but never got a ticket either for a Member of Parliament (MP) or Member of Legislative assembly (MLA) because he felt it undignified to ask for such favors. He always felt that his sacrifices and work for the party will be rewarded but, in the cut-throat environment of Indian politics, which

even existed at that time, and degenerated very rapidly after the Independence from the heights of idealism to wheeling dealing and corruption, one had to be really pushy to get the tickets.

He never had a regular job or a source of regular income and whatever money he made either by selling the land or his short stint as a failed industrialist, he gave away when his friends asked for it. He could not refuse anybody if they asked him for favors and because of his political connections he helped large number of people. They remembered those favors when he was alive and even now almost 14 years after his death, I have met several people who remember his generous help.

[My mother Hemlata](#) came from a middle-class family. Her father Bhagwat Prasad Garg was a small-time jeweler and Hon. Magistrate in [Mawana tehsil](#) (District Meerut). She did all her education in Meerut staying with her uncle who was an advocate in the local district court. She was a brilliant student and passed with flying colors her M.A., law exam (LLB) and Diploma in Foreign Affairs. In those days it was remarkable for girls to be so educated but she wanted to do well in her life and so studied hard for all these degrees. In late 1940s after her marriage she also wanted to practice law, but my father's male sensibilities did not allow her to do so. However to make ends meet she became a teacher in Bhartiya Balika Vidyalaya - a local Lucknow college.

She was very ambitious and since she was not allowed to do lots of things professionally, she channeled all her ambitions through me. I guess I inherited my ambitious nature from her.

Early memories

My mother tells me that as a child I had tremendous energy, so I was like a rogue. Whenever they would take me to their friend's house, I would play havoc in their house and so they used to be afraid of taking me out. My father told me of an instance when they had invited [Shri. C. B. Gupta](#) (CBG)

to our house for dinner. Shri. Gupta, I think, at that time was the home minister in U.P. Government (he was chief minister of U.P. three times later on) and, being a very close friend of my father, used to be a regular visitor to our house. One day after seeing my wild behavior, he got angry and told me that I was a scoundrel. Immediately I shot back saying that I am not, but you are. Naturally, my father had a great laugh because politically that was somehow a correct statement!

Later on in 1978 I met CBG in Delhi at my uncle [Dr. Atma Ram's](#) house. Both of them were close friends and members of Prime Minister Shri. Morarji Desai's Cabinet. At that time I had come from U.S. to Delhi to present some papers in the International Conference on Solar Energy. [Dr. Atma Ram](#) who was the Chairman of National Commission on Science and Technology (NCST) was the Chief patron of the Conference and had invited Shri. Gupta for lunch. CBG remembered my childhood behavior and remarked about it.

My mother also told me that in my childhood my palms used to be like burning coals. I could only sleep when she would put them on her face to cool them. Because of the tremendous energy I also had the propensity to destroy, in no time, any toys given to me. These toys so destroyed were then joined together by a chord and a train made of them! I was always fascinated with [trains and steam engines](#) and probably provided the motivation to become an engineer.

Another early memory is that I had an ability to get smells of anything I thought about. If I were thinking of flowers, I would get their smell or if I was thinking of trees (there were many near our house in Hazratganj), I would get the woody smell. This ability went away quite early. Also anytime I got sick I felt as if I was falling in a dark tunnel. Thus whenever I felt or dreamt about falling in dark tunnel, I knew I was going to fall sick. Both these abilities I lost by the time I was 7-8 years of age.

Still another early memory is that whenever I got a haircut, I used to have a severe headache afterwards. I could never understand why this happened – it felt as if the body was reacting to something [useful being removed from my head!](#)

If I remember correctly these headaches continued till the age of 6 - 7 years. After that they reduced and ultimately stopped.

Early Lucknow memories

An interesting memory is of drinking Coco Cola. I think it was introduced in Lucknow in 1957 or 58. I remember a salesgirl coming to our Hazratganj house and giving two coupons for the Coco Cola bottles. My mother gave the coupons to me and asked me to also take my younger brother for tasting the drink. If I remember correctly, we went to a restaurant very close to our house where the coupons were accepted (I now forget the name of that restaurant). But I vividly remember the look of surprise at the restaurant manager's face when he saw two very young (I was 7 or 8 and my brother Alok was 4 years old) children asking for coke!

He gave only one bottle to both of us with a straw. After taking 2-3 sips I burped and also received a very sharp sensation in my nose. I felt I was going to die! The sensation and its memory were so powerful that I could only develop the courage to drink Coke next at the age of 19-20!

Similarly around that time our family was invited for a dinner party at the house of one of my father's friends. After dinner flavored pan was served. My father used to eat tobacco in his pan. So he asked whether the tobacco is strong or not. I heard the host saying that it was not and at that age (7-8 years) I somehow felt it was safe to eat the pan. So I ate it with tobacco.

Almost immediately after eating it I vomited and had tremendous headache and felt like the whole world was spinning! I also felt that I am going to die. The upshot of this episode was that I got a visceral aversion to anything

connected to tobacco and used to get headaches when anyone smoked near me. I guess both these episodes were the result of acute smell sense that I had.

A childhood happy memory is that of *Soochna Kendra* (Information Center) located next to Gandhi Ashram in Hazratganj. This was a Government of U.P. news section which had children room stacked with all sorts of good children's books, play material, etc. It used to be run by one [Meera Sharga](#) a Kashmiri lady who, she claimed, was related to Indira Gandhi.

Meera was our neighbor in Hazratganj house and hence introduced us to this wonderful facility. So from 1958 to 1960 I enjoyed going there every evening. I would be so absorbed in reading books including comic books in *Soochna Kendra* that the watchman had to shoo me off since the Kendra would be shutoff at 8 p.m.

After 1960s Lucknow floods our house in Hazratganj was flooded and became unlivable. Meera also shifted to a distant place and in her absence the children facility in Kendra deteriorated.

In my childhood my mother would leave me and my brother Alok to get the haircut done in a shop in Hazratganj very close to our house on Naval Kishore Road. The shop was housed in a small room sublet by a Chinese Shoemaker. So as we entered the shop, we used to be greeted by a strong smell of shoe solutions. The Chinese shoemaker was well known for his craftsmanship of making excellent shoes and some of the solutions were used to glue the soles.

The cost of haircut in those days (mid 1950s) was 25 paise (4 annas). I and my brother would go once a month to get the haircut since our hair grew at a phenomenal pace – a trend which continues even today at the age of 70!

When we shifted in 1960 to our flat in Lal Bagh, we started getting our haircut in a proper barber salon which was located in the Mayfair extension building opposite our flat. The excellent haircut given by a very professional Muslim barber who wore a white apron coat was very impressive and the whole salon environment was very pleasant and different than the claustrophobic environment of Hazratganj shop. Besides the haircut was much better. My mother had given me 4 annas and when I presented it to the barber, he said that it is 8 annas (50 paisa) and told me to get the rest of the money from home.

Since we lived nearly opposite the salon I went up to our flat and told my mother about the 8 annas charge. She got really angry and brought me to the salon and had a fight with the barber for charging double the amount that she was paying before. I was very embarrassed by this exchange because I was impressed with the salon and barber's work. The barber did not budge, and we continued getting our haircut in his salon though I got the next haircut after 3 months to make up for the costly haircut! Later on the salon closed and the barber shifted his shop to a place under our flat in Lalbagh and I enjoyed getting the haircut from him whenever I went to Lucknow to meet my parents. This continued till his death sometime in late 1990s.

The Muslim barber was the epitome of [Lucknowi tehzeeb](#) (culture). I never saw him shout at anybody and he always spoke in chaste Urdu in a sweet and soft tone. That culture is almost gone now.

Early school memories

From kindergarten to second standard (1954-1957), I attended the newly opened [Cathedral School located in Hazratganj](#) and from class three to class XI (1958-1966) I went to a well-known missionary school - [St. Francis High School](#) which was close to our house in Lal Bagh.

If I remember correctly either in kindergarten (KG) or first class in Cathedral School, I was forced to take part in the sport of boxing. I did not want to be a part of this sport and cried and resisted as much as possible but the principal – an Italian Padre forcibly put me in the ring. The opponent, who was much stronger than me, bloodied my nose in no time and that was the first and last time I ever entered the boxing ring. I have never understood why this barbaric sport is so popular in most countries.

Another strong memory of Cathedral school was the beating I got from the teacher for cheating. I think I was in KG class when during a mathematics test, I copied from my classmate. Since the classmate made a mistake in his calculations I was caught. The teacher punished me by hitting my palms with a wooden ruler. She obviously used excessive force, with the result my palms got all red and swollen. When I went home, my mother noticed the swollen hands while giving me bath. In a fit of rage and anger she took me back to the school and complained bitterly to the Italian Padre. After that I never got a beating in Cathedral school. Corporal punishment was quite common in the schools in those days especially in missionary schools.

My energetic antics knew no bounds. I remember clearly that one day, when I was in the first class in Cathedral school; I tried swinging between two desks during lunch break. I lost my balance and fell flat on my face thus breaking all my front milk teeth! Similarly one day, on an impulse, I put my fingers in the wheel of the sewing machine that my mother was using and bloodied them. I must be 4 years of age and just got this urge to stop the wheel spinning!

Another incident about this energetic behavior is still etched in my memory. I must have been 7-8 years' old, and we were still staying in the Hazratganj house. The house was surrounded by lots of trees, and we used to have a tremendous monkey menace. They would come and try to steal foodstuff from the house. So one day in the afternoon, when a group of monkeys came, I tried to shoo them away by throwing stones at them. Some of them

ran away but I guess the leader somehow sneaked up to me and bit me deeply on the right thigh. It was like instant Karma!

Immediately my father got our family physician Dr. K. N. Gairola. He used to stay close by in Park Lane near Hazratganj. Dr. Gairola was a very experienced general physician. He asked my father about these monkeys and their behavior. Though they were wild ones but often came to our house and so Dr. Gairola felt that the possibility of their being rabid must be low. Hence after 10-15 minutes of deep thought he decided to burn the wound on my thigh chemically. It burnt like hell and the mark of burn is still there, but this treatment was far better than getting 14 painful rabies injections in the stomach (that was the only treatment available in middle 1950s).

Dr. Gairola was a freedom fighter and a close friend of my father. They were both together in Lucknow jail during independence movement and hence had become friends. I still remember very clearly his booming hearty laugh that was infectious and our families used to meet frequently. Any time my brother or I got sick my father would fetch him from his house or his dispensary, James & Co. in Hazratganj.

I still vividly remember Dr. Gairola as a very gracious and humble person and never charged any fee for the house visit. My father would invariably carry Dr. Gairola's physician bag back and forth either from his house or the dispensary. However his medicines always consisted of a black mixture which tasted horrible. So many times just the thought of drinking the horrible mixture cured me! Unfortunately, he stopped practicing medicine in the late 1960s when he got increasingly involved in UP politics.

Dr. Gairola was a remarkable person. His family told me that he did his M.D. in Vienna in the early 1930s under a Nobel Laureate and did his apprenticeship under Dr. Sigmund Freud. Being a distinguished Indian physician in Europe he treated some famous Indians like [Kamala Nehru](#) and

[Subhash Chandra Bose](#) when they were in Europe. Yet with all his distinguished education and career, he was a very humble person. He was from Garhwal area and after his return to India was smitten by the Independence movement and so went to jail. After release from jail he was for some time the Minister of Health and Defense in Garhwal State. He must have made quite an impression on our first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru because he mentioned him in his autobiography "[Discovery of India](#)".

After Independence Dr. Gairola practiced in Kanpur and then moved to Lucknow in early 1950s. It was a sad fact that such a distinguished person was never taken into active politics by the powers to be, though much later in life in 1970s he became member of upper house (MLC) in U.P. assembly. ***I feel very blessed to have had such a distinguished and genuinely nice person as my physician.***

Dr. Gairola was also fond of cricket, and he also knew my interest in it. So when the English cricket team played a test match in Green Park in Kanpur in February 1963, he took me to see the match. That was my first cricket test match experience. Though I was engrossed in the proceedings I found out that it was more of a picnic. Dr. Gairola and his friends had packed a sumptuous lunch and after the match we went to Dr. Gairola's friend's house in Kanpur for a delicious dinner.

My energetic behavior of mine continued till the age of 12 and changed dramatically when I came under the influence of spiritual forces! But then I am getting ahead of my story.

Though I studied in [St. Francis High School](#) (one of the best schools in Lucknow in those times) I hated its strict discipline (the headmaster was a terror) and wearing of tie. I still remember how the moment I was out of the gate of the school the tie was taken out and stuffed in the pocket of the shorts. Thus ruined, the tie had to be replaced periodically and this resulted in constant scolding from my mother. Somehow wearing the tie and

speaking English symbolized to my young mind colonial control and this attitude might have come from the influence of my father. I therefore inculcated the habit of reading books in Hindi and became an avid reader of Indian folk tales.

St. Francis High School also had a tradition of corporal punishment. Both the Anglo-Indian Headmaster and the Italian Principal were masters in dispensing the treatment. I felt very proud of my record that in my 9 years of stay in the school (1958-1966) I never got any beating from these two. I was given detention class quite a few times for coming late to the school, but never subjected to beating.

However, some of my classmates described very graphically the sadomasochistic behavior exhibited by the then Italian Principal in dealing with young boys. If a boy was caught misbehaving in the class, he was sent to the principal for getting the punishment. This happened generally in classes up to 6th standard since the class teachers were all females. In higher classes the male teachers dispensed the punishment. In the Principal's office the shorts of the boy were removed, and the principal would beat the bare buttocks with a bamboo cane. But before that he would sometimes also massage them!

Those days there were no complaints against such corporal punishment. I am sure when later on complaints were made such barbaric practices stopped.

I was a studious and competitive person and so always got first or second position in my class. Besides, I loved to make different models from Meccano set which was gifted to me on my 8th birthday and thus exhibited a natural flair for engineering. This coupled with my love [for steam locomotives](#) made me decide to become an engineer.

In my childhood I possessed a photographic memory. My mother told me an instance of this gift. When I was probably 3 years old, she had taken me to a marriage party in her hometown [Mawana](#) (a tehsil in district [Meerut](#)) when somehow, I slipped out from the function and reached home (a good half a km distance). I would remember landmarks, places etc. even if I visited them once. Similarly, in my lessons and books I read I would remember almost page to page. Thus part of the reason I did well in my studies was because of my excellent memory.

I used to be very fond of cricket and used to listen to the test match commentary. I also played little bit for my house division in school. When I was 10 years old, I could recite verbatim the cricket commentary that I heard on the radio. My father saw this ability and so any time any of his friends came to our house he would show me off and I had to recite the commentary. I found this circus performance very embarrassing and distasteful so would try to hide whenever his friends came.

Sensitive child

I was also a sensitive child, so took to heart anything said about me. My maternal grandfather Bhagwat Prasad Garg was a strict person who believed in the old maxim that a young male member of the family has to be tough. He used to regularly taunt me and challenge me to push beyond my physical capabilities. Thus he got quite upset when he found out that at age 10, I did not know how to ride a bicycle.

He taught me to ride the bicycle by simply putting me on an adult bicycle and pushing me on the road. I fell in a ditch full of thorns, but because of my pride learnt to bicycle extremely fast.

In the same way he wanted to teach me swimming - which would have meant throwing me in a mini-canal in Mawana but after my experience of bicycle learning, I simply refused. I learnt swimming later on in 1968 in

polluted Gomati River in Lucknow when I came home from [IIT Kanpur](#) [during one of the summer vacation.](#)

My mother and her sister, who were both schoolteachers in Lucknow, used to take all their children (five of us) during summer vacations to Meerut to their uncle and then we all used to go to Mawana to our maternal grandfather's house. Besides being a small-time jeweler, my grandfather was also an honorary magistrate in the local tehsil court. He had only three daughters and since I was the eldest male member of their brood, bore the brunt of all his experiments that he wanted to do on his son which he never had.

My maternal grandfather was a self-made man whose father died when he was 12 years' old. Being the eldest son he single-handedly managed the large family and his father's business. He would therefore regularly taunt me about the fact that at the age of 12 he did everything which I was unable to do.

Being a sensitive child I wanted to prove my worth to him so at the age of 12, I decided to take my brother and three of my cousins (all younger than me) from Lucknow to Meerut by train. In those times there were no reservations in train (this was 1962), and so we had to manage getting seats in general third-class compartment. Throughout the journey the fellow passengers, who were very helpful, were amazed that a 12-year-old boy was taking four younger siblings alone to Meerut-a journey of about 14 hours by train!

If I remember correctly, in 1962 during one of our regular summer vacations to Mawana I started having acute pain in my stomach after meals. My grandfather was a great proponent of naturopathy since he was inspired by Mahatma Gandhi and hence never believed in any allopathic doctor.

So in his dictatorial way he decided that I should be given a full 21 days' naturopathy course, which included regular enemas, fruit juice diet, putting a clay poultice on the stomach, stomach rubbing in bathtub, etc. He also gave me the naturopathy book (Hindi edition) written by [Louis Kuhne](#) to read. The methods outlined in this book were apparently used by Mahatma Gandhi in his nature cure therapy. For a 12-year-old this was heady stuff and a unique experience.

This naturopathy cured my pains and may have had an unintended benefit of cleaning my system thoroughly. Naturally when we came back to Lucknow my father was terribly angry that a 12-year-old boy was subjected to naturopathy.

Those yearly summer vacations to Mawana also exposed me to the rural life. We used to have couple of cows which supplied milk for our household and so my grandmother taught me how to make *uplas* (cow patties). It was distasteful work, but I learnt a good deal about rural fuel. These *uplas* were burnt in a stove where the milk was continuously simmered. Since in our house there was no refrigerator, the milk was continuously heated so that it would not get spoiled.

Similarly we used to eat in the kitchen where my grandmother used to cook on a *chulha* (wood stove). The continuous smoke from wood and *uplas* in the kitchen was a nightmare and it was difficult to sit in the hot and sooty kitchen for any length of time. Yet I was amazed that all her life my grandmother cooked and spent a considerable amount of time in this polluted kitchen. Still she never suffered from asthma or eyesight problems and died at the ripe old age of 81.

During few of our summer vacations we also went to the River Ganges for *Ganga snaan* (dip in holy river) near Hastinapur. This used to be quite an affair with 3-4 bullock carts being properly decorated and all the members of our family would travel in them to Ganges which was about 10-15 Kms from

our house in Mawana. The 10-15 Kms distance was covered leisurely in 2-3 hours.

My grandfather was dead against our going to English medium school in Lucknow. So anytime we went to Mawana he would put me in the local primary school which sometimes was held under a *peepal* tree! There I learnt how to carve a pen out of a bamboo reed and write on a white painted wooden plate with locally made black ink. Incidentally, my grandfather did all these experiments on me and not on any of his other four grandsons.

Most of the times there was no electricity in our house in Mawana. So spending summer vacation in hot weather was quite unbearable and challenging. Sometimes during hot and humid nights, we would take bath in the cold water of well and by the time we came out of bathroom we were dripping in sweat. And without electricity it was unbearable.

Also there was no running water in that house. We only had a well. Being the eldest male member of the family my job in the morning was to fill up about a dozen buckets with water drawn from the well. Nevertheless all these things introduced me to the real problems of rural life in India and helped me, when I came back from the U.S., to work on solving some of these problems.

Awakening

On my thirteenth birthday in 1963 I was given a present of a Hindi translation of Mahatma Gandhi's autobiography ([My Experiments with Truth](#)). Reading this book completely changed my life. I became obsessed with it and read it continuously - in the process neglecting my studies and other activities. Gandhi's early years simply caught hold of my imagination and there arose a great desire to know about the religions of the world.

How this leap took place I do not remember but it must have been triggered by reading Bhagwat Gita since this was Gandhiji's favorite book.

I therefore embarked on the journey of reading all the religious books that I could get from the local Acharya Narendra Dev library (ANDL) - Gita, Koran, Bible, Rigveda, Upanishads, Patanjali Yoga, Vivek Chudamani, etc. As can be imagined, how much can you absorb at the age of 13 or 14, but the desire to read all these books was intense. It was almost like a *Junoon* (obsession, passion). Nevertheless, reading Patanjali *Yoga Darshan* created a tremendous impression on my teenage mind since it showed that one could gain superhuman powers by practicing Yoga!

Together with the reading came the desire to practice some of the things that Gandhiji did. Thus I became a vegetarian, started eating mostly boiled food and started meditating. Lucknow was the capital of [great Awadhi food](#) and to start eating simple boiled food was quite an exercise in self-control. Also, later on I realized that eating only vegetarian food during the growing years might have affected my health. In early 1970s when I again started eating non-vegetarian food, I regained my health.

Meditation was done as described in [Shri Ramakrishna's](#) biography. The meditation, which sometimes lasted for one to two hours, produced wonderful feelings and dreams. I remember starting an experiment of meditating on my heart and visualizing that it contained a small earthen lamp. This resulted in a tremendous feeling of love and good feelings for everybody. If I remember correctly this must have lasted for a month or so but I got frightened by the experience and hence stopped the heart meditation. The fear came from the thought that without any guidance on these matters, this powerful experience may make me mad. I tried repeating the same meditation many years later but was never able to duplicate the experience of love.

During this time I also got a tremendous yearning to help people. My grandfather, who used to live with us in our Lucknow flat, had stomach ulcers which became cancerous later on. He used to vomit very often and was sick most of the times. I used to be like a nurse, cleaning up his vomit

and doing other nursing chores. Later on he died probably of stomach cancer.

One of the outcomes of deep meditation was that my concentration improved drastically, and this helped me tremendously not only in my studies but in other things in life. This increased concentration also inculcated in me the habit of developing a [Junoon for anything](#) I focused on. This proved to be extremely helpful later on in my life.

At this time, I also developed an ability of remembering the sequence of my dreams. So while sitting in the toilet in the morning I would remember my latest dream and somehow started remembering the sequence of dreams that I had dreamt that night. With time and practice, I started remembering many of my dreams. This was a pleasant experience though the time spent in toilet kept on increasing!

Later on I discovered that Buddhist use this sequential dream remembrance as a mechanism to learn about past births. According to their theory if one starts remembering his/her dreams then it can lead to the memory of first dream and beyond that the memories of past births.

I could never go to that extreme but some of the powerful dreams of my childhood that I remember even today could be the result of this exercise.

Since I read all these religious books, I also got a desire to read about the lives of great religious leaders of India. So I read about Vivekananda, Ramakrishna, [Swami Rama Tirtha](#), [Swami Dayanand Saraswati](#), etc. Reading about Swami Rama kindled in me a great love for mathematics, and it became a challenge to solve more and more complex mathematical problems. So after having finished solving the tough problems of my schoolbooks, I started checking out regularly from the local Acharya Narendra Dev library books on mathematics used in B.A. and M.A. courses and started solving the questions in them. Apparently, I found out that they

did not seem to be that tough once the fundamental principles were mastered.

The upshot of this intense mathematical journey was that I started acing all my mathematics exams in school and got a reputation locally in Lucknow that I possess a power that when I see a mathematical problem, I immediately get a solution! My classmates thought I was a genius – the truth was that I had, by hard work, solved lots of such problems and so was basically a slogger.

I also remember that during this time (especially during school holidays) I went for [long walks of eight to nine km](#). Most of my thinking has been done during long solitary walks and this habit has continued till today. [Lucknow in early and middle 1960s was a beautiful city](#) with lots of parks and my walks ended at cremation grounds near Dilkusha Gardens beyond the famous La Martiniere School. Beautiful trees surrounded these grounds and since nobody would come there, it was very peaceful. I would often meditate sitting on the platform where the bodies were burnt. When my mother came to know about it much later on, she scolded me to no end. I never felt any fear but just a sense of peacefulness.

I also developed a habit of going in the afternoon to the National Botanical Garden (NBG) in Lucknow. There under a tree I would read spiritual and religious books. [Lucknow in early 1960s was a city with beautiful parks](#) and NBG was the queen of all parks. NBG was just one km from our flat and so going and sitting under a tree and reading books was very enjoyable. There were hardly any visitors during the afternoon and so it gave me privacy to read these books.

If I remember correctly one day I was sitting in NBG reading [Vivekachudamani of Shankaracharya](#). Though it was a difficult book to read, the desire to read it was intense and so I was trying hard to understand it. Suddenly one person came and stood behind me and asked

me when the MA exams in Sanskrit are scheduled in Lucknow University. I told him that I do not know anything about them. Since he saw me reading Vivekachudamani he inferred that I must be an M.A. student. In fact he started accusing me of telling lies when I told him that I am only a ninth-class student! After that I stopped going to NBG in the afternoon to study.

I got so involved in reading spiritual books that I became a recluse, and antisocial. To test my progress on the path of spirituality I started taking various vows. This vow taking was inspired by Gandhiji's experiments that I had read about in his autobiography. So I took a crazy vow that I will not see a movie! I do not remember why I took this vow but to keep it became a tremendously challenging exercise in self-control. I finally broke this vow in 1971 after 7 years! I never had a taste for Hindi movies but loved seeing English comedy movies of Charlie Chaplin, etc. But more than the movies it was the resolve, which helped me in developing a sense of discipline.

In my early years I was quite influenced by movies and also remember very vividly that anytime I was taken to see a film; I would get so engrossed in seeing it that I never blinked; with the result I would have a severe headache after the film. I think I saw the film with tremendous concentration and got quite immersed in it.

In those days in Lucknow, Mayfair cinema in Hazratganj used to have Cub Club for children. Any school going kid could enroll in this club after showing the proof that he/she was a student of one of the reputed schools in Lucknow (mostly missionary English schools). The Cub Club films show used to be once a month and the films shown were mostly English comedies like Charlie Chaplin, Laurel and Hardy, Cartoons, Jerry Lewis, etc. These were the films which we were allowed to see.

The ticket to these shows was heavily discounted and if I remember correctly, in early 1960s, it was 8 annas (50 paisa) for the balcony. Besides the discounted tickets another attraction for Cub Club was that during the

interval it used to celebrate the birthday of all those members, which fell during that month. This included singing happy birthday by a professional singer and distribution of cake to all the birthday kids.

We (both I and my brother Alok) would normally buy a 4 anna (25 paise) ticket. I remember that once the 4-anna seats were all sold out, but the balcony tickets were still available. Since Mayfair was in front of our flat and just a one-minute walk from our house, I rushed back to the house to get 8 annas from my parents. The show was about to begin and hence getting back with money was urgent.

When I came to the house, I found both my parents had gone out (my mother to her school and my father somewhere else) and only my paternal grandfather was there. After tremendous amount of discussion and pleading he very reluctantly gave me the 8 annas and in the process we missed the cartoons that were normally shown before the feature comedy film. My grandfather parted with 8 annas as if they were the last 8 annas of his life! After that I never asked him for anything.

Since I was really fond of movies, taking a vow to never see them was quite an exercise in self-discipline.

Unfortunately, such self-discipline could not be practiced later on in life - either the power of resolve had weakened and was diluted or maybe I could justify my actions and rationalized conveniently about not taking a vow.

The desire to get the spiritual experience got so intense that sometime in 1965 at the age of 15 I decided to run away from home to the Himalayas. I do not know how, but somehow my father got a whiff of my intentions. So one day he and his friend who ran couple of industries in Lucknow, had a long discussion with me and tried to convince me of the futility of such enterprise. Either that or my desire to continue my studies made me give up the plan of running away.

Nevertheless, a pleasant outcome of meditation and intense reading produced wonderful and remarkable dreams. Some of the vivid ones I can remember were:

1. I am running in the courtyard of our house in our village and a bright beam of light descends from the sky and hits my right side. My face and shoulder are totally engulfed by it. There was no fear - just a feeling of well-being.
2. In another dream, I saw a fire-breathing dragon that would have killed me. I immediately recited the name of Lord Shiva. He appeared and gave me a bow and arrow with which I killed the dragon. I am sure both these dreams may have been influenced by some of the movies on holy people that I saw as a child.
3. One dream was really strange. I saw my younger brother and myself all alone in a desert. The skies suddenly opened up and a beam of bright white light bathed us both. But besides the light I also heard wonderful western classical music. Since at the age of 13 or 14, I had no access to western classical music, this dream was something very strange.
4. One dream was of an out of body experience where I am in the battlefield and "killed". However, the "I" remained, and it could go anywhere and pass through walls and obstacles.
5. Another dream showed that I am travelling in a spaceship and witnessing the formation of galaxies in an egg-shaped envelope. This was really fantastic and psychedelic and could have come out of almost any science fiction movie.
6. In one dream I saw myself levitating by climbing on invisible steps. This dream came at the time (sometimes in early 1980s) when I was thinking deeply about gravity. A thought therefore came that probably gravity is quantized.

These types of dreams continued even later and there was a time (sometime in early 1970's) when I continuously had dreams of having discussions

about the future of India with leaders like Mao, Trotsky, Lenin and above [all with Gandhiji](#). There were many dreams of Gandhi. In one strange dream he even merged into my body!

These lucid dreams, I believe, were an outcome of the powerful brain that got developed through meditation. The brain became very supple and with increased concentration it could absorb huge amount of information, which resulted in these great dreams.

Reading Gandhiji's book also kindled in me the desire to know little more about the freedom struggle of India. ***In our 10th class syllabus we had a history book entitled "Brief history of India's Independence". I read and reread it and somehow had a very vague feeling (bordering on *deja vu*) that I had been a part of that struggle!***

Those 2-3 years of [spiritual awakening](#) were intense years and I have always thanked the higher forces for giving me the opportunity to experience them. They changed my life and gave me a certain perspective that has always remained with me and helped me live a sustainable and emotionally satisfying life.

I feel that all youngsters should undergo such a spiritual awakening because it will give them wisdom and hopefully will awaken in them the feelings that there is more to life than simply chasing money and material goods.

Preparing for an engineering career

In December 1966 at the age of 16, I passed with good grades, the Indian School Certificate from St. Francis High School. Since I wanted to be an engineer, I decided to sit for Joint Entrance Exam (JEE) of Indian Institute of Technology (IIT). The JEE used to be held in May and since I had time on my hand from January to May I thought it was best that I enroll in U.P. Government's intermediate board so that in case I do not get into IITs at

least I will get an intermediate certificate. So I joined [Colvin Taluqdar College](#).

Coming from a very disciplined environment of St. Francis School, attending Colvin Taluqdar College was like going to a circus. The students were not disciplined at all; they would throw paper balls and chinks at the teachers when their backs were turned and would make loud noises by rubbing shoes on the floor. Only when I attended Colvin College did I realize how good St. Francis School was.

In those days [St. Francis was one of the best schools in Lucknow](#) with great discipline, excellent teachers and first-class extracurricular facilities like huge cricket and football grounds, indoor badminton court, swimming pool, etc. I spent nine formative years in the school from January 1958 to December 1966. ***I still remember with great nostalgia my time in school because of some great teachers.***

In particular, I remember two teachers who really inspired me. One was Mr. Mishra – the history teacher. He taught us to think beyond dates. For example, every school student was taught when did Babur invade India? Mishra taught us why Babur came to India. In 10th class, this was a unique idea and made me aware of the forces that shape history and thus kindled in me a love for history.

Similarly, one Mr. Mukherjee taught us physics and mathematics. He made great effort in making these subjects interesting and would also tell us about the teachings of Vivekananda and other great spiritual leaders of India during his class. To my mind, these “extra-curricular” teachings were far more important than the simple teaching of the subject. And I have always believed that a student learns more from these discussions than the curriculum which is mostly pedantic and boring.

If I also remember correctly, films from United States Information Services (USIS) and British Council Library (BCL) were shown regularly in our school. These films were about life in USA and UK. One film I vividly remember was about the World Trade Fair in US. This film showed fascinating life in US and inspired me to go to US for higher studies. Thus I have always felt that a well-rounded school education is extremely important for overall personality growth.

Thus attending Colvin College was quite a letdown and I felt that the classroom environment, as I found in the college, would be quite a waste of time so I doubled my efforts in reading books on Physics, Chemistry and Mathematics from Acharya Narendra Dev library for preparation of JEE.

Whenever I could not solve some tough questions in previous JEE exam papers, I would take the help of teachers in Colvin. But very soon I found out that most of them were incompetent and moreover would try to discourage me from appearing for JEE. They felt that if I continued in Colvin then I might get a position in the Intermediate board which will help increase the status of their college. They knew this because I was getting first position in the internal college exams.

Nevertheless, I was determined to appear for IIT-JEE. This resolve was further strengthened by an incident that happened in the mid-term mathematics test at Colvin. In almost all the mathematics exams there used to be a question on algebraic series expansion. In the pedantic way the series expansion was a lengthy process and generally one got an answer after elaborate addition and subtraction of the series. Since I used to be good in higher mathematics, I solved this problem by differential calculus. Thus the answer was obtained in one line!

After the corrected examination paper was returned, I found to my dismay that I had received a zero in that question. I went to the teacher and asked him why he gave me a zero. He asked me who had taught me this method

and further added that it will be covered only the next year and so I was not supposed to answer it this way! Our education system all along has been very pedantic and never encourages any innovation.

I felt that the teachers and system which did not encourage innovation and with such a stick-in-the-mud outlook was not meant for me and so I doubled my efforts to study for JEE. In those days there used to be only one JEE coaching class and that was in Delhi. Some of my affluent classmates did attend them but I decided to read and practice from books that were being used in IIT Kanpur syllabus and which I got from the AND library.

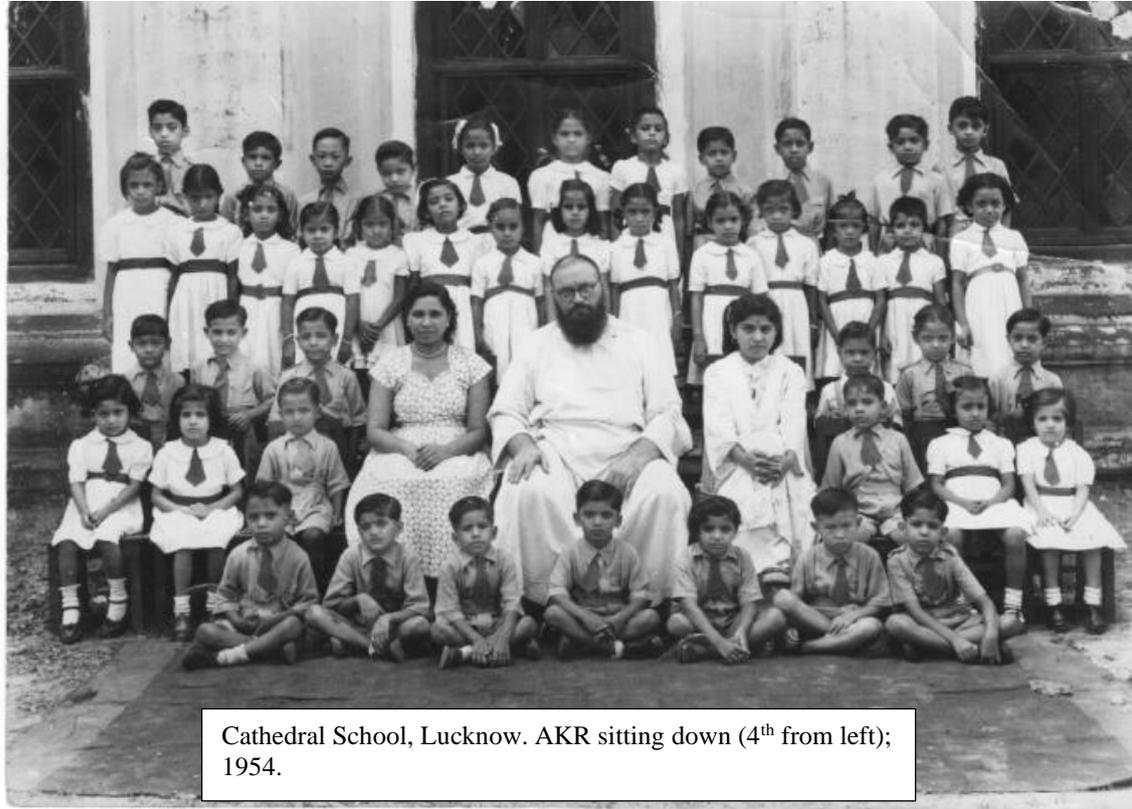
Since the teachers in Colvin College were of very little help in my JEE preparation, my mother got me tutored for two months in physics and mathematics by a senior teacher from local college. The teacher was very knowledgeable, and his tuitions really helped me in the preparation of JEE.

In the meantime I also gave the test for [National Science Talent Scholarship \(NSTS\)](#). This was a prestigious test and very few were selected. However, I was only one of the two students selected from Lucknow in this Exam in 1967. The preparations for IIT entrance exams helped me greatly in passing the NSTS.

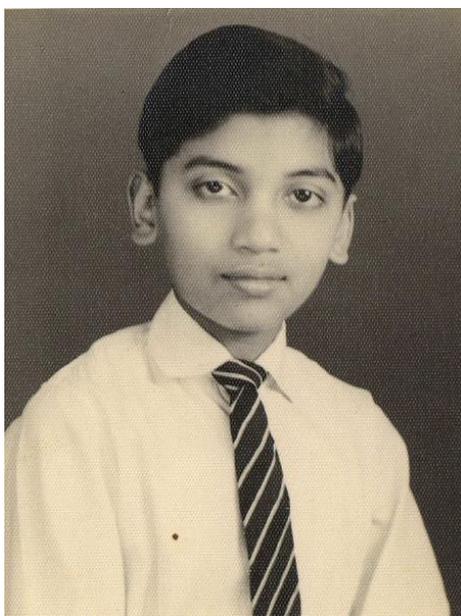
If I remember correctly NSTS in those days gave a handsome fellowship of Rs. 150 per month plus paid all the tuition fees until Ph.D. The results of NSTS had come before IIT-JEE and so my father insisted that I take up the NSTS offer since all my education would be covered by scholarship. With our precarious financial situation he felt that going through NSTS route would be better. However I wanted to do engineering education only and had my first serious discussion with him. I told him that even if I had to go to the farthest corner of India, I will never do basic sciences (this resolve was strengthened with my experiences with teachers at Colvin) but will do only engineering.

Luckily after a few days the IIT results came out and I got ***JEE rank of 29 in North India*** and was thus selected to join IIT Kanpur. [My experiences in IIT Kanpur](#) are written in next chapter.

Photos



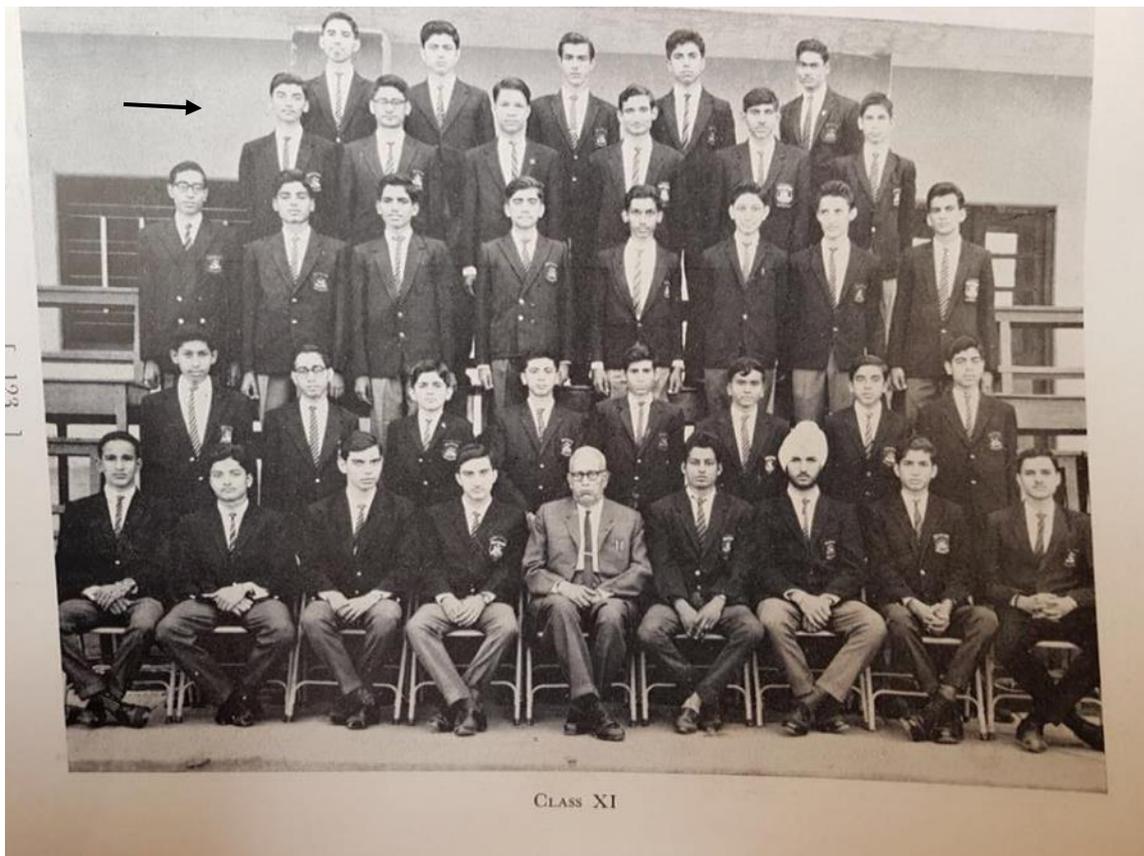
Cathedral School, Lucknow. AKR sitting down (4th from left); 1954.



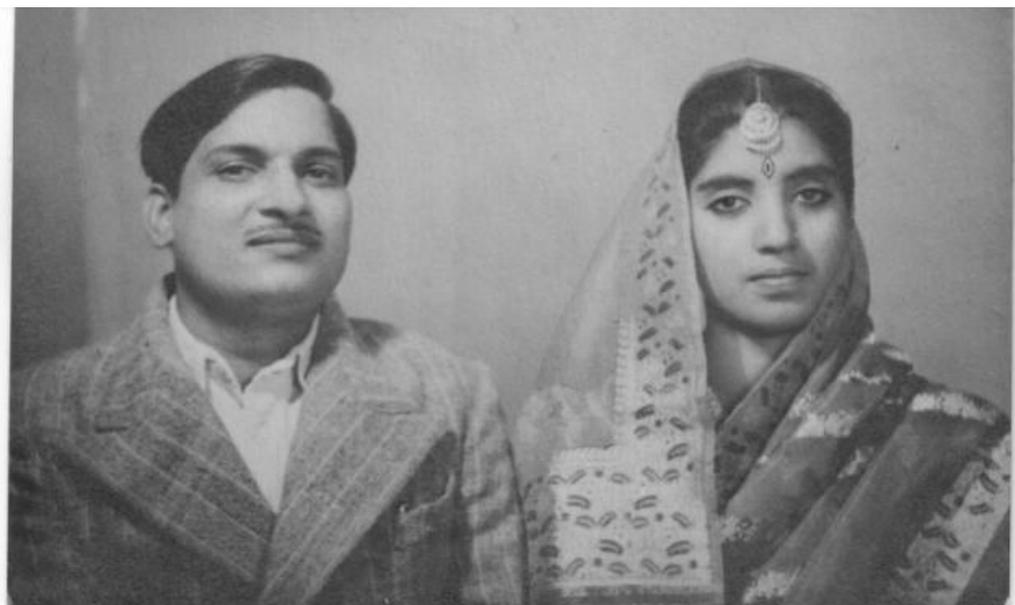
Anil age 11 years (1961)



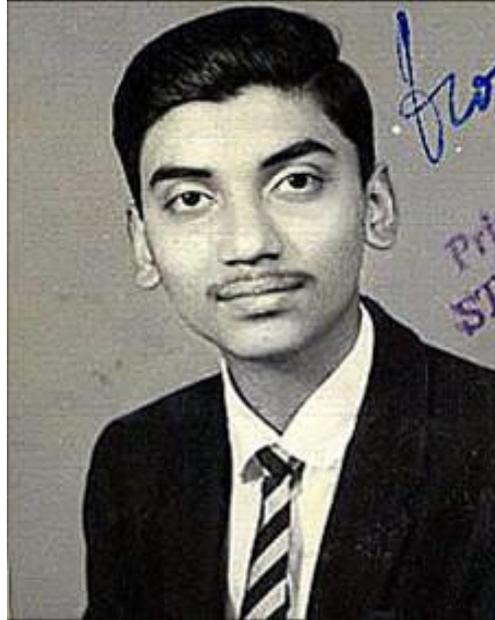
Anil and his brother Alok. 1964; Lucknow. Both of us are wearing the St. Francis School uniform.



Class XI photo of St. Francis School (1966). AKR is standing at extreme left in second row from top.



My parents' marriage portrait. March 1948



AKR 1966

[My experiences as a student in IIT Kanpur](#)

[HOME](#)

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