

Walk Down the Memory Lane: My Association with Dr. Kirit Parikh

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The founder Director of IGIDR, Dr. Kirit Parikh is a unique personality. Even now at eighty five, none of us can match his enthusiasm, energy and drive. On an occasion such as this, one is flooded with many memories. Let me pick and choose among them those that best illustrate various facets of his persona and more importantly, what we have learnt from him.

Library classification: IGIDR library those days arranged books by accession number, without any subject classification. Dr. Parikh always believed, and am sure still believes, that it is great to be able to see all sorts of subject books sitting next to each other, without a 'subject caste' system. We were all too beholden to the Dewey decimal classification system for books. And we kept bugging and kept badgering him to accept to the Dewey decimal classification; and finally he agreed with a resigned look, but even today in his heart of hearts, he does not believe in subject classification and can give very convincing arguments for accession system ordering. But, again, despite his own strong alternative belief, he did not veto the majority opinion.

Blank cheque: He has his own unique ways of checking people out. However, once he is convinced about your motives and commitment, he would never ever ask a question. It took us some time to win his trust with regard to IGIDR library, but one fine day we won it when he told us "I give you a blank cheque with regard to library" and after that never said "NO" to anything that we dreamed with regard to the library, be it budget, extension, or new annexure building.

We all learnt some of the most important lessons on academic management from him. To give a few examples: he taught us the importance of practicing "no free lunch" principle; subsidies were never ever hundred percent, be it the canteen coupons or book grants – at least 40% the user has to bear. He ingrained in our minds the futility of having rules and more rules. His refrain always was "you younger guys should never fall into this trap of rules". One could blame him for not codifying rules, and most of us did those days; but with hindsight, I can only say how right he was. I should emphasize that we always had strong social norms. Looking back, we now understand better what it takes to ensure the continuity of those norms, which used to be recurrent theme of my conversations with him – I always used to tell him that he is assuming that all people share the same social norms and that it is unlikely to be true. As is the norm with him, he always thought the best of human behavior. We now also understand what it means to build and maintain "institutional cultures". To give a specific example, say, you want to stop people from visiting unmentionable internet sites. KP would say "Forget it. The cost of wasting your brains and time on trying to stop people from misusing internet is way too high." At the same time, he was very aware of the need for checks and balances – that fine balance between rights and responsibilities. That is one lesson of his that I constantly remember:

¹ This is based on my quarter of a century academic and personal life at IGIDR, from where I am presently on leave.

“Just because there is no plague today does not mean you will not have plague control mechanisms in place”.

Walk-in to offices and computer center: Those of us who had the habit of breaking occasionally into a game of “Solitaire” would dread the scenario where KP would be standing behind, and often he did – quietly standing behind and catching them literally with the fingers on the keyboard. People often fondly remember his informal style of walking into faculty offices for a chat. His usual opening sentence always was: What is up. There was a deeper purpose behind such visits; while making us all feel at ease with his charm and informality, he was also implicitly goading us in our own, as well as Institute’s work. His own office door was always open to all. His secretaries would cry that no one follows the appointment route. Blame it on KP: that is the reason why most of us at IGIDR react so violently to the not-so-uncommon “meet by appointment” culture. From what I have heard, he followed that culture in the Planning Commission too. Don’t know how those hierarchy and protocol conscious Delhiwallas reacted!

Bias: In a country like ours, which is full of stories on nepotism, regionalism, and all sorts of chauvinisms, IGIDR was one of those rare places free of any of these diseases. I am sure the entire world searched hard to see if at all there is some chink in KP’s armor, but could not find any. However, I did find one; his soft corner for fellow leos. At one stage, there were at least eleven of us Leos on IGIDR faculty. And we had several fights with our dear friend and former colleague Veena Mishra which always used to end with: “God...You all leos...the bane of this earth”. Alas...we are in a minority now. But, you know, even that is not really a chink in his armor. To give an example, like most parents in India, mine too wanted to put me in school as early as possible and increased my age by four months. So, my official date of birth is in April. Hence, you can’t blame KP for showing soft corner for a fellow leo. Hmm...May be you can still blame him for showing soft corner for Aries perhaps. No prizes for guessing...Mrs. Parikh is Aries of course. Jokes apart, that unbiasedness of KP has become the hallmark of this Institute, viz., IGIDR.

Campus Life: He was one of those few people on campus without cable connection those days. So, it was not uncommon for him to go to one or other faculty home to catch up on some cricket or football. We almost always saw the world cup football finals in Seminar Room 1. And towards the end of his career, we started to get lot of dance-crazy students, and many a moon-lit Saturday night, KP and JP have joined them in: “Saturday night, and the moon is out, I wanna head on over to the twist and shout, find a two-step partner and a Cajun beat, when it lifts me up I am gonna find my feet, out in the middle of a big dance floor.” And that big dance floor was our red square. So, it should not be a surprise that he and Mrs. Parikh often won the best dancers award in our annual Garbha.

He made it a point to attend all seminars whenever he was on campus. It was not uncommon in the later years to see him doze off a bit in the seminars, but when everyone thought he was asleep, he asked the sharpest question that more than once put the speaker off balance. He also made it a point to ask the simplest possible query, to encourage students that it is alright to ask even the simplest of the doubts, as long as you don’t know it. It never mattered how others would judge you for asking that question. You ask because

you can't follow it. Simplest principle – but in our self conscious world, almost no one follows it.

And he was always there in the cafeteria for lunch and would choose the table randomly. He was a strict follower of a principle that my grandmother had already ingrained in me – no wastage of food. So, I would get this additional utility whenever I happened to be on the same table, when he would gently remind a student who is about to waste food, “It is self service system after all and you got it. So, you should not waste it”, and would sit there till the poor student gulps the food down the throat.

His way of solving students' problems: Till date none of us know how he solved some of the trickiest student problems. Before the problem blows out of proportions, as often happens in small academic campuses such as ours, KP has already solved it. There was this famous case where an anonymous student destroyed all the data files of another. All we know is that the destroyer had gone to KP for a confessional. Till date we don't know who it was, how he solved it, or what punishment he meted out.

JP and KP: It is a cliché to say “behind every man...”. However, I think I can give you some hard evidence of their life long complementarities. Having worked with both of them, and having had the advantage to observe their methods of guiding students, I can tell you that JP is the most successful supervisor and even more successful Co-supervisor. KP was always full of big pictures. He could never be satisfied with small picture dissertations. The research agendas he outlined for his students were more like forty year programs. If you wanted to be a successful KP student, you needed to know how to get him to agree to your micky mouse four year agenda. If you didn't have those tricks of the trade, at least you ought to be smart and get JP on your committee. The pragmatic JP often stepped in, and bailed many a hapless student by defining time bound goals. I bet my life that even now KP would be telling Satya, who is one of our all time great PhD students, how he wishes that Satya had done that one more model run or included one more sector...

The following two episodes from IGIDR history of 1990s capture his personality.

One of our promising Ph.D. students failed in Ph.D. qualifier examinations and had to leave with M.Phil. In the ensuing qualifier examination committee's discussion, some of us thought she should be in but others thought otherwise. Final decision was that she had to leave. KP and myself were in the minority side. And it was a sad evening for some of us. That day, KP was walking back to his bungalow quite crest fallen. I met him near the children's park and at some point I told him “Dr. Parikh, you suffer from soft heart problem” and he looked at me for a moment and said with a twinkle in his eyes “Do you know who has softer heart than me?” and walked up the hill to his house. This episode underlines his style as the Director. He could have perhaps vetoed the decision, which obviously he thought was a wrong one, but he didn't. And at the same time, his heart was for the student whom he thought was PhD material and spent the entire evening thinking about it.

KP was completely convinced that one of our own Ph.D. students had everything to become a colleague at IGIDR soon after his graduation, and was quite keen to recruit him. However, all of us faculty those days used to cherish the ideal of “no inbreeding” and in a “Cool-off

period of at least three years” for our own students. Despite his conviction, he deferred to our wishes and did not overrule us. For decades, and perhaps even now, except for one exception, IGIDR is perhaps the only institute in the country which has not recruited any of its own students.

As a mature adult, you learn that life is not black or white. And in the same way, in one’s relationship with another, it is never going to be a rose garden; nor is it going to be only a field of thorns. It would be a mix, as we learn from an individual rose plant. The same is true with our relationship with Dr. Parikh as well. I am sure we all have had our share of fights with him. Also, it is not as if KP never made any mistakes. In fact, therein lays KP’s greatest virtue: he is one of those rarest of rare people who always admitted their mistakes and made course corrections if you could convince them that their logic was wrong. And the next greatest trait of KP relates to this first: to convince them, they ought to be willing to listen to you – and KP always listened to you – and with that ALL important qualifier, “with an open mind”. To sum up, KP for me is synonymous with those three qualities: willingness to rethink if proven wrong, patience to listen to opposite views, and an open mind to weigh differing and conflicting views. Thank you, Dr. Parikh, for bequeathing those great qualities to us, and we can only hope to make proper use of them.