

Humble Beginnings

My story unfolds in the quaint village of Bhudoli, nestled in the Sikar district of Rajasthan. Within the close-knit community, my family sustained itself on trade and business ventures. Initially, we all resided together with my uncles and their children, but as time passed, each of them embarked on their own journeys, settling in various cities. My father, in pursuit of livelihood, made his way to Jaipur, where he eventually brought us to reside alongside him. Our parents' lives were brimming with daring exploits and audacious decisions, their profound influence shaping the characters of us three siblings.

I was born in Jaipur in 1993. Both my parents emerged from modest backgrounds, having received a basic education. My mother attained a High School certificate, while my father completed his studies up to the Senior Secondary level. I accompanied my elder brother and sister on our educational journey, which took us to several schools in Jaipur. Our parents had a simple yet stringent criterion for school selection - it had to be English medium and conveniently located near our home. As a result, I found myself changing schools frequently, having already attended five by the time I completed 7th standard. My parents, especially my mother, placed immense importance on our education, yearning for us to excel and lead successful lives. As the youngest member of the family, I always looked up to my parents and older siblings. My brother assumed the role of a fatherly figure, while my sister became my closest confidante and friend.

From a very young age, I exhibited a strong affinity for education. Even as a 5-year-old, I would not miss a single day of school. I distinctly remember an incident that illustrates this. One day, in our usual rush to school, my siblings and I were running late (probably because the school was merely a 5-minute walk away). My brother, in his haste,

forcefully pushed open a massive colony gate to let us through. My siblings managed to slip past, but before I could make it, the gate swiftly swung shut, striking my left eyebrow with its handle, causing it to bleed profusely. Despite the excruciating pain, all I wanted was to attend school!

As I matured, my focus remained firmly fixed on academics. I was not particularly adept at sports, and I refrained from engaging in extracurricular activities. Overcoming stage fright and a lack of confidence in my speaking and writing skills, I had few friends. Our family's financial situation was precarious, and we lived in a rented house. Our circumstances also took a toll on our physical and mental well-being, especially affecting my mother.

Eventually, in 2007, our financial situation collapsed with another bankruptcy. This time it meant that we had to sell our house that we had constructed not long ago and move to another city, thus leaving Jaipur behind - the city where my parents had created a small world for themselves and us. My father moved out first in search of work. The rest of us moved to a rented house.

At the Shoe Shop

After enduring prolonged struggles and a stroke of good luck, my father's hard work eventually bore fruit as he opened a wholesale shoe shop in Dahanu, a small town in Maharashtra, nestled near the Gujarat border. A year later, the rest of our family joined him in Dahanu, except for my brother, who chose to remain in Jaipur to continue his studies in the 11th standard, preparing for IIT-JEE. While Dahanu was a charming town, it had only one government school, with no private alternatives. Unfortunately, my sister and I couldn't secure admission there since Marathi was a compulsory language, and our proficiency in it was lacking. Little did I know then that fate would lead me to spend most of my adult life in Maharashtra, eventually becoming proficient in the language.

After much contemplation, our parents decided to enrol us in Shri Swaminarayan Gurukul, a reputable CBSE School in Vapi, Gujarat. Simultaneously, my father made a strategic move to open another shoe shop in Vapi, considering the limited income generated from the Dahanu store. However, the considerable distance of 80 kilometres between the two shops posed a challenge, as my father couldn't effectively manage both establishments while juggling his income and time constraints. In one such critical moment, I implored my father to let me shoulder the responsibility of the shop in Dahanu while he focused on running the larger one in Vapi. It seemed like the only solution to our predicament, and I was eager to contribute to the family's welfare.

Every morning, my sister and I would board the 5:45 am local train to school, rushing back to the train station as soon as classes ended to catch the 1:50 pm local train in the afternoon. During the commute, we made the most of the time by taking turns to rest and sleep. Once back home, I would hastily finish my lunch and head straight to the shop, usually arriving around 3 pm. Despite having a helper, my role in the shop encompassed various tasks, including retail and wholesale sales, packing, delivering goods (sometimes carrying heavy cartons on my shoulders), managing inventory, and handling debt collections since most sales were on credit.

Balancing the work responsibilities with my academic performance was a prerequisite set by my father for allowing me to run the shop. Fortunately, I kept my promise and achieved commendable grades. By the time I returned home with my father around 10 pm, I had little energy or time left for anything else after dinner. I would study briefly before finally surrendering to sleep, knowing that the same routine awaited me the next day.

Our stay in Dahanu lasted for three years until I completed my Secondary School Education. Then, we moved to Vapi for another three years before eventually returning to Jaipur in 2013. Those years in Dahanu, handling additional family responsibilities, inadvertently forced me to mature ahead of my time, leaving little room for the child in me to explore the world. With few friends and no involvement in sports or extracurricular activities until the 10th standard, my focus primarily revolved around studies and business. Meanwhile, my father transitioned out of the shoe business to pursue more lucrative opportunities, joining his brother in civil construction for the military. This added to my responsibilities, having to take on the daily outside chores of the house due to my mother's health condition.

In 2010, when the results of the 10th standard board exams were announced, I achieved the remarkable feat of being the sole student in the entire Valsad district (including Vapi) to score a perfect 10.0 CGPA. Suddenly, I became the school's hero, my photograph adorning every notice board. At that time, we had already relocated to Vapi, and I took full charge of the shop, deciding to close down the one in Dahanu.

Choice between Science and Commerce

It was now time to make the life-altering decision of choosing between Commerce and Science for the Senior Secondary School. Our school had only two options that excluded the Arts stream. I was very firm that I wouldn't opt for Science which meant that I had to go for Commerce instead. However, as it happens in most schools across India, I was the high achiever who was expected to study only science while the other two options were reserved for average students. I never believed in such binaries in life. Despite that, I acquiesced to the pressure of the school teachers and management, and got myself admitted in science stream. But I couldn't last with that decision for

more than a week. I was struggling to find a direction. This is when my brother came to my rescue.

We started debating on what I want to do in life, starting with the larger goals such as having a positive impact on the lives of many people rather than just earning money, and working for the betterment of the disadvantaged sections of the society. Then we discussed how I could achieve that. Since my interest in science was diluted, the conversation mostly revolved around career options with commerce as a stream going forward. We spoke of law, MBA, etc. It is then that we stumbled upon the idea of me attempting the UPSC Civil Services Examination and becoming an IAS Officer.

The road suddenly became clear and the plan was all laid out. I was going to study Commerce in 11th standard with a special focus on Economics as a subject. I would go on to study BA (Hons.) Economics at the University of Delhi and opt for Economics as my optional subject in UPSC CSE.

It was then that I was reminded of another incident that had occurred in my childhood. All of us had gone to visit my father in Dahanu. He had also started trying his hand with government supply work. Necessarily, it involved him interacting with many bureaucrats. One such bureaucrat was posted in Daman. He would call my father every day at 8 am in the morning to his office and keep him waiting there till late in the evening, without giving him time to meet him. This went on for many days. One such day my father came back home, all exhausted and disappointed and when dinner was being served, he just called me near him and told me in Hindi:

“बेटा, तू बड़ा होकर कलेक्टर बनना और एक अच्छा अधिकारी बनना जो लोगों की मदद करे, ना की उन्हें परेशान करे” (*Son, you become a Collector when you grow up and be a good officer who helps people, rather than troubling them*).

I was too young at that time to gauge the intensity of the statement, nor did I know what it entails to become one. But somehow, it became a part of my subconscious mind that moulded my thought process in a certain way, ultimately leading me towards my life goal of becoming an IAS Officer.

As per the cut-off system at the time of admission in the university, after failing to get through any of the shortlisted colleges in the first list, in the second cut-off list, my best of four subjects score qualified me for admission in B.A. (Hons.) Economics in Atma Ram Sanatan Dharma (ARSD) College, or B.Com (Hons.) in Delhi College of Arts and Commerce (DCAC). The choice really was whether to stick to the plan to study Economics as was planned in 11th standard, or to go for a slightly higher ranked college and tweak the plan a little bit by opting for a different course. My brother and I decided in favour of the latter, took admission in DCAC and I returned to Vapi, all set to start a new phase of life in Delhi.