

Arvind Singhal: The next Tagores and Ramans

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It was wonderful last week to read about the prodigious feat of 14-year-old, home-schooled Sahal Kaushik in topping from Delhi in the JEE for IITs. What was more refreshing and encouraging was his reported interest in pursuing higher studies in physics and mathematics rather than tread the beaten track of going for computer science or electronics, only to become a glorified code-writer at one of the IT giants, or else crack the CAT to join one of the IIMs and then become an overqualified sales and marketing professional in a multinational FMCG company. Unfortunately, the Sahals are an exception (not because they are unusually gifted) in their choice of subjects to study. The highest-performing Class XII pass-outs, if not pursuing (or getting admission in) engineering or medicine as careers, find it more enticing to take up an honours programme in economics or commerce. Those who do take up basic science or humanities streams usually do it to acquire the undergraduate degree before writing their CAT papers. Psychology has also become fashionable recently, with a perception that it can be a stepping stone to a great career in HR, even though many of those graduates end up — at best — working in the back-offices of global HR firms or in other glorified KPO outfits.

One generation ago, it may have been true that career options — beyond the civil services and select PSUs — were rather limited and were generally the best for those who trained as engineers, doctors, chartered accountants, and managers (MBAs). Those who ended up in other professions — either by choice or on account of lack of it — generally ended up living a comfortable but not really a fast-track life either in terms of financial gains or perceived status in society.

Fortunately, this is certainly not the case today. The Indian economy, about \$1.3 trillion in size this year, is poised to double in real terms within the next 10 years, becoming comparable to a Germany or a France of today. The economy is already very broad-based in terms of its components. All the three major constituents (services, manufacturing and agriculture) are very highly diversified to offer unprecedented career opportunities for just about every individual interest and talent, and for just about every level of raw intellectual calibre. Some of the best-performing careers even today do not require extraordinary intellectual skills, or 95 per cent or more marks in school leaving examinations. Instead, to succeed, they require a reasonable level of intellect supported by superior behavioural and soft skills, such as analytical reasoning, ability to self-start and self-motivate, out-of-the-ordinary thinking, superior interpersonal skills and superior communication skills, preferably in more than just the mother tongue and English (yes, in the years to come, ability to communicate in one or more global languages, e.g. Spanish or Mandarin, will add to the employability cachet).

Sadly, most parents and most students make scoring highest marks their primary objective for most of the school years. Even extra-curricular activities are chosen more as per the fashion of the day (e.g. tennis, golf, piano and dance, including ballet etc.). For those who can afford it, even vacations are chosen to give the “right exposure” and “experience” to the young ones. The rat race does not stop here. Students are “encouraged” by parents even after just completing the first year of college to take “internships” in the summer holidays, not for earning any money like in the US but to get some “experience” rather than “wasting time at home”. Any discussion with these parents or students on the value of such an experience vis-à-vis using those few months between college years to develop softer skills or pursue something truly of their interest which may or may not have any “commercial” value is either a non-starter or futile.

In such an environment, a Sahal Kaushik and his mother provide an isolated ray of hope that India may still find some more Tagores and Ramans from the 25 million or more that are born every year in our already very populous nation. While such individuals are extraordinarily gifted naturally, it may be worth noting that even beyond the Nobel

laureates, modern India has yet not seen too many Gates, Jobs, Dells, Brins, Spielbergs, Rowlings, Kamprads and Ortegas either. They are all truly gifted too, but they probably did not score 99 per cent in their “boards”!

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