

FORTY YEARS OF ACADEMICS AND ADMINISTRATION: EXPERIENCES AND LESSONS

By

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‘Face- book’ did not exist during most of my career and ‘face-to-face’ contacts were what my generation yearned for-particularly with the greats-in the hope of enriching one’s professional and personal experiences. I also belong to a generation which adhered to certain traditions of the time and was thus lot less informal than the generation of today. For instance, Prof. Ram. J. Garde with whom I worked very closely for over thirty years at the University of Roorkee (now I.I.T) was always ‘Sir’ to me and never ‘Ram’, because he had been my teacher and mentor! Considering that most of the readers of this article would at least be one generation younger than me, I, therefore, had doubts about the relevance of my experiences and the lessons I learnt from them to the younger generations, who are certainly different from my generation in many ways. Nevertheless, even though the incidents I talk about may be rather mundane, the value systems they led me to believe in are still probably important and relevant and it is this belief which emboldens me to write this article.

1. My entire career of over 40 years was spent at the University of Roorkee (now I.I.T.) where I was involved in teaching, research, consultancy and administration. It is only natural, therefore, that the experiences I write about are all those from Roorkee. One of the great strengths of Roorkee was recognising right from the time of inception of the institution over 160 years ago that while Academics are important, it is not everything. The emphasis was on the overall development of the personality of the student. The stress on sports, hobbies and cultural activities helped instil the qualities of leadership in the students and it is no wonder that many of their alumni occupied important positions, particularly on the national scene. My own association with River water Disputes-domestic and international- in recent years has convinced me that you need many more attributes than a strong academic background to make a significant contribution in the resolution of these disputes.

2. The University of Roorkee always laid great stress on discipline and had a system of imposing fine-in cash or in terms of marks-for misdemeanours of students. As Dean of Students’ Welfare, I also imposed such fines in a few cases. An incident I remember in this connection was of a student who was shattered when a fine was

imposed on him and kept on pleading with me that it should be waived. I explained to him about his guilt and that the punishment was commensurate with his wrongful actions. I also advised him to put it all behind him and turn a new leaf. A few months later, he showed exemplary courage in coming to the rescue of some of the girl students of the campus who were being teased by some outsiders. I wrote him a personal letter sincerely appreciating his actions and thanking him on behalf of the University. When it was time for him to leave the University after graduation a few months later, he came to me to seek my blessings. About five years later I was thrilled when this student came running to me when he sighted me at an airport, introduced himself, enquired after me and told me how well he was doing in his career. After all, if he bore any ill will against me, he need not have come to talk to me after he saw me. This incident convinced me that the student community, in general, is willing to accept punishment gracefully if they are convinced that the administrator in question is fair and applies the rules and regulations uniformly without bias or prejudice. By and large, they bear no rancour against those who punish them if they are certain that there was nothing personal and there was fairness overall.

3. One of the problems we faced at the University of Roorkee for a while was the delay in the submission of marks by some teachers, which often delayed the declaration of results. As Dean of Academic Affairs, I had evolved a system by which a rather stern letter would go to the defaulting teacher from my side after the due date of submission of marks, pointing out to him that he had not yet sent the marks and that he should do so immediately. It so happened once that such a letter wrongly went to one of our sincere and very senior teachers, because the office had included his name my mistake in the list of defaulters, and he was naturally furious. I called the concerned clerk to my office and told him that I would take the blame and apologise in writing to the teacher concerned without ever mentioning the clerical error which had occurred, but that he should take care to ensure that our office is not so embarrassed ever again in the future. This action gave the entire office the confidence that I would protect my staff in the event of unintended mistakes without any adverse entries on the file and, as a consequence, I was assured of their loyalty and commitment.

4. On another occasion, I felt that the Assistant Superintendent in my office ought to have shown a little more intelligence and initiative than he actually did and told him so. His response brought a smile to my lips: He said, "Sir, were I so

competent, would I have remained an Assistant Superintendent and not become an officer?!" I then realised how we often have expectations from individuals in a group, beyond their training and competence. By giving vent to our frustration at those expectations not being met, we are probably being unfair to the individual, undermining his confidence and in the process making him less efficient. Most of us would never have the luxury of picking each member of our team; we would be required to work with a set of people of varying intelligence and competence, and getting the best of the team needs an understanding and tolerance of the shortcomings of the individuals as much as an appreciation of their strengths.

5. Prof. R.J.Garde and I were once having discussions with another professor from a sister institute, who was visiting Roorkee. The visitor was talking at length about some research work done recently in another premier institute in the country. Having heard him, Prof. Garde merely said, "I am aware of that work, we have a copy of that thesis in our library". I was truly amazed at his modesty, because I knew that it was Prof. Garde, who had examined that PhD thesis and then passed on the copy of the thesis to our library! This incident happened in the 1960s when not many doctoral theses were submitted in the country and examining a PhD thesis was certainly considered an honour and most of us would have found it hard to resist mentioning the fact of having examined the thesis! Prof. Garde was the acknowledged expert in the country in the area of Fluvial Hydraulics at that time and he was probably trying to stress, in a subtle way, the value of modesty to me, his disciple.

6. Prof. Garde's doctoral supervisor, Prof. M.L.Albertson of the Colorado State University (USA), spent a couple of hours with Prof. Garde and me sometime in the 1960s. He had some interesting observations to make on how to ensure pleasant and harmonious relations amongst the members of a research team. He said that once the pecking order is established, meaning when the peers know from track record who the prime mover of the research project is, it is immaterial whether his name appears as the first author or as the third; he will always receive due recognition. Unfortunately, there are often heartburns about the sequencing of names in the academic world. Once your reputation is made, you could always opt to be the last of the authors even though you may feel that your contribution is no less than that of the other members of the team. Such magnanimity often spurs the younger members (who are looking for their own places in the sun) to greater heights and certainly fosters team work.

7. The last of my experiences I talk about is one concerning Prof. H.A. Einstein, a legend in the field of Fluvial Hydraulics and the son of the more famous Einstein of Relativity Theory. We were running a Summer Course on Fluvial Hydraulics in 1969 at Roorkee for which Prof. Einstein was one of the resource persons. He desired that the faculty of Roorkee should go ahead and complete the planned material on our own and that his lectures should be deemed to be supplementary. Interestingly, he chose to sit in the lectures of all of us! I was required to deliver a lecture on Einstein's Bed Load Theory and that too with Einstein sitting in the audience! Wanting to be sure of not making any mistakes in my presentation, I went to Prof. Einstein the previous evening to understand from the great man himself about the physical significance of one of the correction factors introduced by him in his classic paper. Smilingly, he told me, "Young man, that diagram is the most illogical thing in my paper. On the one hand, I had my Mathematical Model based on the Theory of Probability and, on the other, the experimental data of Gilbert; the two did not agree. I had to introduce that empirical correction factor you mention to get a match between the two!" I left his office wondering whether such honesty and candour comes from greatness or people rise to great heights because they dare to be frank and honest under all circumstances.