

Hindu Business Line

FOLLOW YOUR HEART

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'Follow your heart'

Technologist's *advice* to aspiring youngsters.

D. MURALI

It is with a story that Srikanth Jadcherla, CEO-Seer Akademi (India) (<http://bit.ly/F4TJadcherlaS>), begins a recent lunch-hour interaction with eWorld. "The engineering entrance topper in Andhra Pradesh this year was the son of an auto-rickshaw driver; an incredible accomplishment for someone without any privilege or advantage by birth. The bright kid chooses to study Electronics and Communication Engineering and hold your breath — work for an IT major and move his family to Hyderabad. And thus we sink one more brain that could win a Nobel Prize."

As a technologist, entrepreneur and professor, tinkering around with energy-efficient homes and smart grids (the way Srikanth introduces himself on Twitter - @profJSK), his anguish is what has given shape to the Akademi's ambition to be a pioneer in electronics (Very Large Scale Integration and embedded systems) education. "Our vision is to make India self-sufficient in its electronics output by enabling Education, Research and Entrepreneurship. Hence, our mission is to bring high quality electronics education to colleges in all corners of India. We hope to expand this to all emerging knowledge-based economies in the future," states www.seerakademi.com.

"I don't blame the kid — he is all of 17 and has probably spent the last 2-3 years cooped up in some coaching academy," concedes Srikanth. "All he wants is an escape from his surroundings and 'cross' the divide into a gated community. Nor do I blame the parents — they are probably as bewildered by the word 'Electronics' and don't have anybody to tell them that their son is capable of much more than just buying that flat in upscale Kondapur (hi-tech city area of Hyderabad). In fact, my point isn't to assign blame at all..." And my conversation with Srikanth continues over the email.

Excerpts from the interview.

So, what is your advice?

In four years, this kid will savvy up though and realise that real engineering is a long road and he will have that tempting offer from an IT major. I often get asked, "Sir, what should I do — I have this job offer from Infosys (or TCS or Wipro) but I would like to continue to study in my core field." And then this is inevitably followed by, "My parents want me to take the offer, please help."

They are rather stunned and visibly disappointed by my response: 'Follow your heart.' Of course, this unburdens me from having to say anything really wise — but at least, it is what I practise. Over time, I have learnt to position this as my 'mantra' for success. We Indians like mantras — of any kind. Somehow, that seems to make my words more acceptable.

But would they know what they want to do?

Many a time, young adults do know what they want or at least what they don't want. The trouble is convincing themselves and



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everybody else.

But if you don't have the courage to follow your heart today, it is not going to happen tomorrow either. If you don't follow your heart when you are under economic pressure, you are not going to do it once you are stuck in the morass of EMIs, kids' school fees and the general comforts of life.

Perhaps, the biggest myth of our times, perpetrated by the IT boom, is that an engineering degree, of any kind, is the only (and quick) ticket to prosperity.

Yet, a society does not grow by engineers alone. Nor is everybody meant to be an engineer or even an IT professional. We need high quality people in all fields — law, banking, accounting, media, entertainment etc.

Markets pay a premium for services and goods of all kinds. However, from pre-Independence times, we have been a passive lot. We just don't like the idea of physical struggle — but we can easily kill the mind and the heart. So, ride the IT bandwagon it is.

Somewhere in your life, you figure out that your parents want the best for you but they just don't always know what's best for you. But then, this is very difficult to figure out when they are paying the fees. This puts parents in an inordinately powerful decision-making position and being able to swing your decisions.

Likewise, parents are often willing to do anything to assure you of a bright future. However, it should not be that parents do everything. You must take charge of your life — after all, if you can't convince your parents, why should anyone believe that you will convince a client, patient, partner, or investor later in your life?

▶ If you want to join a course because all your friends are doing that, that's the wrong reason. Before you can convince anyone, you must be clear yourself.

How does one follow one's heart?

Read, read, read. Following your heart means being honest with yourself. If you want to join a particular course because all your friends are doing that, that's the wrong reason. Before you can convince anyone, you must be clear yourself.

I find that a lot of young people haven't really spent the time reading up within their own chosen fields. A lot of times people come to me and claim an undying interest in chip design, but can't name a time when they checked out the latest developments in the field.

Passion is easy to see and a lack of it is even more obvious. As such, before you settle down on something, be well-read and exposed. Children in the West often explore various fields through their childhood and teens to a depth that we cannot fathom in India. Hence, they make informed choices about their likes and dislikes.

In India, our kids do not have this luxury. However, the Internet is the great equaliser. Read and do your research. Over time, you will know what you want to pursue and what you don't.

Is there a problem with goals?

The bar has to be set right. Often, we are given the example of the person next door: son of a low-level government employee, who now works for Accenture or something like that, and has a flat in the posh parts of the city.

Remarkable accomplishment, no doubt. But does it have to stop there? Why isn't the bar in IT set at Bill Gates or Larry Ellison? Why doesn't any parent want their child to be a CEO? But, oh wait, the parents' job is done once the boy starts earning or the girl gets married. It is up to you to see whose career you want to emulate or what heights you want to scale. Nobody can set this for you.

You mentioned studying one's core field...

Go deep. Too many young people in India take a very superficial attitude to their education. This is a primary effect of the whole 'mug it up and spit it out in an exam' system. It is really a degree, not an education.

You cannot, however, go through your life superficially. You have to cultivate depth. This comes from reading and researching; develop, therefore, second and third order thinking.

Say, you like electronics. Why? Is it because it is 'hot'? Or is it because you have tinkered with it? What's happening to the field in 10, 15 years? What is it in the ocean that is electronics that you want to study?

I often find that once you cultivate this depth, the easier it is you will find to be honest with yourself about your interests, set the right goals and targets and convince your parents, peer groups and the auntie next door that your path is right.

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