

Two Hundred and Eight. 208. Total number of days I spent in the IISER Pune campus before packing my bags and returning home for a few months. At least, that is what I thought that morning. I have now spent 175 days more in my home than I did in total on campus.

I joined The Indian Institute of Science Education and Research, Pune, in year 2019 as an Integrated PhD Student. For first week in campus, I kept waiting for someone from the administration to walk towards me and say “Sorry there was a mistake, we sent the admission letter to you, it was for Sri Mittal or Hari or Sree.” That fantasy didn’t turn real. I am indeed here. Excited to be in presence of people buzzing with science AND an actual Laser! AND a Supercomputer! AND all those biology labs on the first floor with equipments I-can’t-name but tickle my brain. So much Science all around! I want to talk to all the professors and all the students about what weird science they are working on and finally figure out one fine evening during a discussion what is spin. Big Wants from someone who finds it awkward in approaching people. Wants one the less.

Flush all that down. I barely survived my first semester. I guess trying to do a Master’s and a PhD at the same time isn’t

as easy as it sounds. Onto the second one, trying to ease into this IISER Pune life. Finally starting to talk to other Homo Sapiens in this new neighbourhood. These are some nice people I can be friends with. Bam! There goes the neighbourhood in March 2020.

Then came the isolation. I was withdrawn before being sent home. This made things worse. I was not acquainted enough with people of my own courses that I could ask what did it mean for my grade when professors said “the mean is 38 ± 5 ”. Or what exactly happened in the last class cause I ran out of battery in my laptop and 24x7 electricity is a privilege. Or what was the answer to Question No. 5 from Assignment 4. I am here, in my home town, alone. Not that the professors didn’t try. At least in my courses, they all tried to adapt to the new mode of teaching as reasonably as anyone can in 3 weeks. On the PhD

front, things were already not in good shape for me. Then with the onset of isolation, it got worse. No one to talk to because I don’t know anyone to talk to. I am worried about finding a guide and a project I can devote myself to, but, whom do I talk to about this? It’s not so much that if I ask for help I will be denied, rather, where and how to ask for it from people whose first names are not known to me. I

THE YEAR THAT WASN'T

am a new kid in the town and I don't know who's who and what's what.

Third semester rolls in slowly, everyone trying to adapt to the new life. I am having bad days and weeks because I don't know who I am supposed to work with for my PhD. Still, LET'S GO! It's a New Semester after all!

The first two weeks of any semester are the Ideal Student days. The proof of this claim is left as an exercise for the reader. So I was the Ideal Student for two weeks. Then things start to go undesirable again. The first few infractions are minor. Missing a class, completing only half of an assignment, replying to an email from the professor a week late. Why? To be brutally honest, because I just cannot. It is too much to ask from my Lonely Clinically Depressed brain. Not because of being home, though it certainly didn't help. My mental health was a concern before Pune happened. Weeks go by. I keep trying to contact professors who would agree to work with me. Some see the confusion and disorientation in me. Some take a look at my Grades. They all say no. Not their fault. Why would you take in a potential PhD candidate who doesn't even know what he wants to do a PhD in. It's not like I can meet them everyday to make my case. Or ask some senior of mine what to do now that the cows have come home and I can't do this any longer. Setting up appointments for a half hour meetings takes a week any ways. I reach for help one last time, to have someone, anyone, who would agree to work with me. Well, it is "last time" for a reason. The only logical choice therefore it seemed is to give up. Yes, I know, it is a privilege to get selected for the Integrated PhD Program in Physics Department of IISER Pune. Less than a handful of people get that chance every year. I guess I was right to think it's a mistake that I am here. The admission committee is not infallible, right? So I give

up. I decide to withdraw my admission, take up after my father's small shop in my home town, and try to live happily ever after. I cannot afford therapy. The one available in campus isn't where I can go as I learned after my first attempt to seek help there.

Stories having sad ending are quite unsatisfactory to read. Fear not, for the end of this storyteller's story has not been written yet. In December of 2020(The Universe is in on a joke here definitely), my friends of yore, who live in the same small town and have fancy jobs now(Yeah, people land jobs by the time they turn 22-23, who knew?) decided to pay for my medical expenses. Until I get well. My therapist suggests to not withdraw, rather ask the institute if I can take medical leave. A bunch of emails, confusion, difficulty in reaching the administration because I am 1,500 Kilometers away from the office, proof from the Psychiatrist that I really am sick, I did get time off. Slowly building myself up again with regular therapy and medication. It's hard. I don't know that if I return, will my goals be same to those of 2019 August Shree Hari Mittal. Hence, The unwritten part of story.

My only hope with this raw telling of tale is that it gets read. A text belongs to the readers as much as to the author. I am not going to write the points or lessons you as a reader should take away from this. I hope it is read and you are able to take away what you deem valuable in this story.

- Shree Hari Mittal, iPhD