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MY COLLEGE YEARS...

## 'Nothing is impossible'

Educationist Bala V. Balachandran's journey is proof that sheer determination can move mountains

■ MADHUVANTI S. KRISHNAN

American writer William Arthur Ward believed, "The mediocre teacher tells. The good teacher explains. The superior teacher demonstrates. The great teacher inspires." Bala V. Balachandran, industrialist, educator, founder and dean, Great Lakes Institute of Management (GLIM), bears ample testimony to this – from introducing modern, relevant courses to inspiring generations of students, he has been doing it all.

"I graduated with an honours degree in statistics from Annamalai University, as my father wanted me to become an IAS officer. However, I wanted to pursue engineering from College of Engineering, Guindy, in Chennai – quite a reverse from the usual where parents want their wards to become engineers!" he says. "As I was only 17, I did what was asked of me. Later, I went on to become a lecturer of statistics at Annamalai University. Fortunately for me, a professor came from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and told me that I could pursue my engineering without an undergraduate degree in the course.

I got a scholarship from the

Ohio State University sponsored University of Dayton and did my master's in engineering, after which I wanted to do my Ph.D in operational research and industrial engineering. Consequently, I went to Carnegie Mellon, and was awarded a gold medal for my Ph.D thesis. Soon after, I went to Northwestern University as an associate professor. Three years later, in 1976, I had become an assistant professor there. Somewhere down the line, I realised that I had to learn some accounting and studied chartered accountancy too. Now, I teach both operations and cost management at Kellogg School of Management and at GLIM."

### Spinning success

Though I was largely into academics, I was also a cricketer at Annamalai University. I loved the game and represented the university as a spin bowler. To be an able spin bowler, the wrist movement is important – eating curd rice and rasam rice helped me perfect my wrist movement! As a child, my mother would watch like a hawk to ensure that my siblings and I didn't drop a grain of rice while eating. For this, I would have to twist the whole wrist to ensure

that the rice would enter my mouth without a grain falling on the floor. This movement of the wrist was what went on to stand me in good stead and strengthened my spin techniques. The point is that all of us have special skills and if we use our skills to the optimum, we will benefit, no matter how ingeniously we do it.

One of my other skills is that I do not need a computer or a calculator to do calculations. I am strong at mental math. This added to my core competencies and played an instrumental role in helping me win my gold medal.

I worked on sharpening my existing abilities in order to gain an edge over my peers. Similarly, it is necessary for students today to cultivate their core competencies in order to gain an edge over others and make a mark for themselves in their respective fields of interests. Do not blindly follow what your parents want you to unless you have the passion for it.

One lesson I learnt in life was to never give up. I firmly believe that winners never quit and quitters never win. An incident that spurred me to follow this was that my family was insulted for being poor. That was when I decided that I wanted to achieve greatness

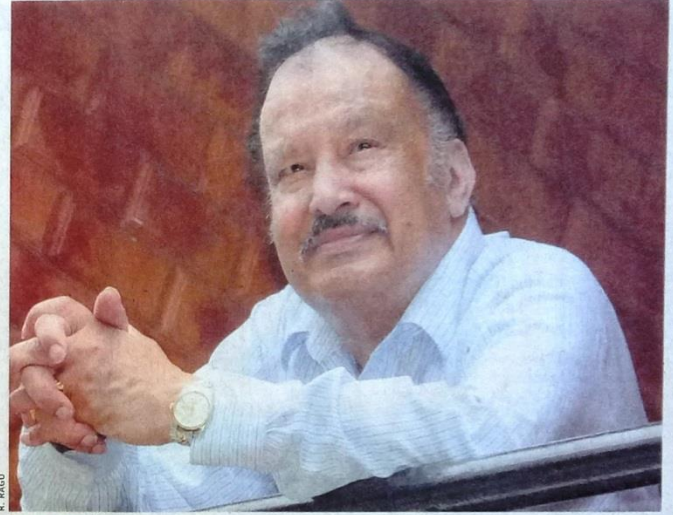
and wealth, not just as financially, but mentally, too. And that could not have happened if I had quit at the smallest sign of difficulties.

I take great pleasure in achieving what people say I cannot, and for that, giving up is not an option. Perseverance is the key to success. For instance, Rajat Gupta told me, that he had created ISB at Hyderabad, but as I was a professor and not a wealthy industrialist, I could not create a business school. That spurred me to singlehandedly set up Great Lakes – despite undergoing heart surgeries.

The takeaway is that you don't necessarily have to be humiliated to achieve success and laurels. However, on the flip side, if you have been humiliated, it will work wonders to channel that humiliation to bring out your best.

### Memories

My most memorable moment happened at Annamalai University when a famous historian visited it. However, only those who were secretaries of societies – such as the mathematics or chemistry society, for instance – were permitted to dine with him. I went on to become a secretary all because I wanted to converse and be photographed with him.



Perseverance: Key to success.

Yet another memory is when we were told that around 30 students from the university would be going to Delhi to meet the then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. Obviously, I wanted to be a part of the delegation. I was told that I would have to be selected for a play that would be performed in front of Nehru. I persevered at it, was selected for the play, and went on to meet Nehru. I was elated when I finally met and interacted with him.

The conversation veered to-

wards how, much like how he had created the IITs, I too wanted to build a business school. He applauded my goal and said, "That is a lofty goal, but keep at it and you will achieve it." It is after all every day that the Prime Minister acknowledges your goal and assures you of success.

### Favourite mentor

My math professor, Rangaswami, was my mentor. He was a huge motivating factor and made math extremely interesting. I

firmly believe that if a person can make math fun for an individual who comes from a family where math wasn't the favourite subject, he has to be a genius.

### A message

Nothing is impossible, no goal, unattainable. If you can dream big, believe in achieving the impossible, and think of ways to convert that dream into reality, the sky is your limit. Determination, dedication and perseverance will show you the way.

To read online, visit –

<http://www.thehindu.com/education/nothing-is-impossible/article19239846.ece>