

## My tryst with books

My tryst with books started early. The first “book” I can recall was an atlas that I loved to pore over – states and cities, nations and capitals, rivers and mountains – I still love atlases. The India map in that atlas was simpler – North East was easy to remember (anyone can recall NEFA? ☺); Punjab was one large state, while Karnataka was called Mysore. Today’s school students have a lot more states to deal with!

Around this time, my parents subscribed me to a Bengali children’s monthly, Shuk-tara – but I remember I read only the cartoon strips in that – never touched the stories. Later in third standard, I made my first long journey – from Dhanbad to Delhi was a 19-hour train ride, and that initiated my abiding love for the railway time table. By the time, I was in eighth or ninth, I recall, I had calculated the average speeds of all express trains in the country – a consequence of my love for information connecting with my love for calculations (I did not have a calculator then!). I still buy the railway time table, even though I don’t really need it, except when we need to plan journeys that [www.irctc.co.in](http://www.irctc.co.in) can’t provide effortlessly.

When in class 3, I received a present I still cherish – an “Amar Chitra Katha” – there were very few of those, then, and this first one made me hungry for more. My mother told me I can get one every time I topped in class, so that was a real motivation. I recall telling my mother when I start earning, I will buy them all! I quickly graduated to Secret Seven, and then on to Famous Five, and Hardy Boys. In parallel, I slowly became an avid reader of Bengali fiction and Shibram Chakraborty was very popular among children of the seventies.

I got introduced to my favourite English language author quite by mistake. I was in third or fourth year of my B.Tech. and there was some exam the next day that I was not prepared for. I made my rare trip to the library, so I can avoid the commotion and the distractions in the hostel. The table I sat at had a book with an interesting name, “The Razor’s Edge”. I opened a random page, and here was Isabel reflecting on how to make her choice for marriage – should she marry for love or marry for security? The discussion was too good to avoid, and of course more important than the electrical engineering exam I had the next day! Thus began my rendezvous with Somerset Maugham – Of Human Bondage, The Moon and Sixpence were two of my favourites, apart from many of his short stories – I had probably finished most of his novels before I completed my electrical engineering.

I was interested in quizzing in school (it wasn't so focused on obscure topics then) and so "general knowledge" books were another attraction in school, apart from periodicals like Sunday, Sportsweek or Science Today which fuelled my need to stay abreast of information. Apart from such info-focused reading, most of my "extra" reading right till my early professional life was limited to lot of Bengali and some English fiction, light reading (Tintin, Feynman, George Mikes), or philosophy (Bertrand Russell, Capra). Like a true technical guy, I avoided "management" or "self help" books. Till one day in 1995 when one team member resigned, and we were discussing on the farewell gift for him. I suggested "Tanenbaum" or some other technical book, and I recall Sylvia suggested why not ask him? To my surprise, this 24-year-old went for Steven Covey's "Seven Habits". This led to introspection on why I never looked at such books (I felt technical people are smart enough not to need those), and here was this youngster's first choice!

Over the next six months, I had finished three of Covey's books. I recall devouring "Principle Centered Leadership" during the two and half hour flight from Bangalore to Delhi, and from then on, looked forward to long flights. Each was one more opportunity to finish one more book. In a way, it was a continuation of my habit from my student days when I'd finish a Shankar novel in the upper berth of the 19-hour train ride from Dhanbad to Delhi.

### Why do I read books?

Well, plenty of reasons – first, I love books, and that's reason enough.

Second, books help you do a job – as a student, it helps you learn some concepts easily. Once at work, good books give you the confidence you have got the essence. Late in the 90s, after more than a decade of technical work, I moved into Human Resources for two years. I was anxious to know all the basics I needed to know. I recall books gave me that confidence. Later, my first job in MindTree was Knowledge Management – again, delving into books convinced me I can do it. But I must put a caveat on the avid book readers on this point – books are not a substitute to listening to people. Listening to people and their pain, or even better, getting into the mud and experiencing the pain, are always better teachers than books.

3. Books build perspective. Again, quite by accident, in my school library, I discovered Vincent Smith's "Oxford History of India". It was amazing to read this book. My heroes of 1857 were not quite painted in heroic light in this book, and the people they fought (the British Resident of Oudh, for example) were the heroes here. I can't explain how much a transformational experience this book was in my life. I wish children of every country had access to history textbooks of other countries – in one

generation, the world will not just be a safer but also a more collaborative place to live in.

4. I read to relax – a lot of reading I do today falls in this category. But relaxation also leads to reflection – a good laugh after reading a cartoon, I'd realize "oh God, it applies to me" and then smile once more.
5. In my tenth standard, I bought lots of books and I regretted after the exams I did not read a substantial number of them. I felt immensely guilty, and became choosy about what I bought. Later when I started earning what looked like a lot of money, and I got introduced to these "management books", I started buying lot of books just to see what another author has to say on the topic. Once in a long while, one would hit upon a Hamel or a Senge, and feel pleased with the acquisition, but more often it's a waste of money. Then I'd convince myself, my knowledge on the topic is not bad either, and would feel pleased about it! Besides, a lot of rubbish gets passed on packaged in attractive jargon, and non-readers do get overwhelmed when others throw these terms around. If you are reading enough, you know to recognize bull shit even when it's packaged with perfume, in an attractive container.
6. I recall my last strategy session in Wipro. I was the HR head of my business then, and I had a large list of ideas I proposed to implement. The Friday evening before the conference week, my CEO (Jani) wanted to see my presentation, and that was a disaster. I was unambiguously told it was unacceptable, and I needed to re-do the whole thing. I had reason to be worried. The conference begins in middle of next week, and I had lots of other work to do before that. Somehow I convinced myself my ideas were good, but the packaging was not, and my concepts seemed too complicated. I spent the weekend delving into my store of books at home – looked at charts and tables, onion rings and four quadrants. By Monday, I was confident I could prepare a good ppt, and for the first time I could prepare one that had something beyond text. Don't for a moment conclude that the 4-quadrant diagram is mere packaging; expressing my concepts in diagrams helped structure my thoughts, brought in clarity, and helped differentiate between the essential and the peripheral. My final presentation at the conference was a hit, and since then I have not questioned the money spent in books.
7. That leads me to another thought – I read books not just for content but to understand how thoughts are structured. I look at hit books to decipher why they are a hit. Simplicity, touching you emotionally, connecting with some real experience of yours are just some attributes of successful books, for example. Nevertheless, there's nothing to beat relevant, compelling content!

8. Reading helps you find patterns. Through the late nineties and post Y2K (true even now), newspapers in Bangalore would focus on technology, the internet, and technology businesses. You didn't find that in newspapers in some other metros, for example. You get the flavour of Bangalore that way, you also get the pattern of things to come. You could confidently predict Bangalore is going to be the pre-eminent tech city. Over the last couple of years, every Indian newspaper writes about education in our country. I can conclude this is going to be among the most happening themes in the decade to come. Think of the number of Indians who have won international literary awards in the recent past – I bet you can't name them all. Are Indians suddenly writing a lot better? More probably, it just indicates the world (at least the English speaking world) is getting more interested in India. That's another pattern.
9. Reading, in some unexpected ways, can help one clarify purpose. I recall in the summer of 1995, I was enjoying vacation at home, and reading Vivekananda. I was lost in thought, connecting his writings with problems in modern India, and I thought how prescient he was. Then I realized he was relating to the India of a hundred years back, and regrettably, we still have similar problems. I reflected Vivekananda, with all his capabilities, could not ensure the ideal society he dreamt of. Yet he did what he did. Who am I to expect I can bring more complete or more lasting change than he could? That was a defining insight. I must not wait till I have the perfect plan or I am perfectly capable, that time will never come; I will just do what I must do.
10. Wide reading also helps us connect – across domains and contexts. They lead to openness of perspective, and innovative solutions. It helps us stay with contradictions, and make sense out of them.

Let me finish with a caution. Reading is a must, but it's not the only thing. If you read so much, and came till here, chances are you are a good reader. However, don't just read – act! Action is more important than reading. How much reading is too much? Reading should lead to thinking, discussions, writing, doing. Reading is like investing, and long term. But you do not want to make recurring deposits into a bank account you cannot withdraw from. In short, do read but follow it up with reflection, connection, action! Also, don't try to read all. If a book is worth reading a chapter, just read the chapter, no need to read cover to cover just because you bought the book. It's like a buffet – eat what you like, but trying to get your money's worth will affect your health.

Finally, if you are already a good reader, try and spread the virus. Try and gift thought provoking books to your friends any time you find an opportunity. Quite by chance, I happened to gift Childcraft to my sons early on in their lives, and that got them attracted to books like a magnet. But then, that's *their* tryst with books.