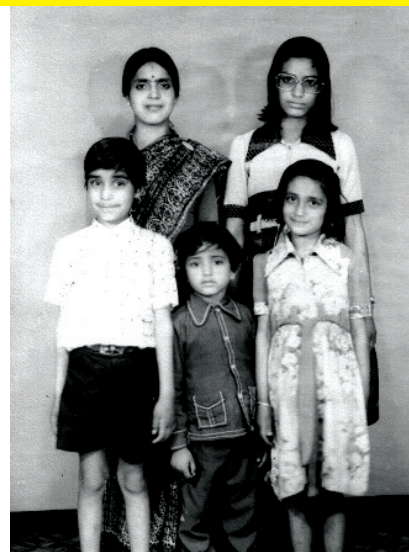


NARESH AGARWAL AT HOME IN
MILTON, MA, USA - DECEMBER 2015

#MYSTORY NARESH AGARWAL

Naresh Agarwal is an Associate Professor at the School of Library and Information Science at Simmons College, Boston, Massachusetts, USA. Growing up in M.G. Marg, Gangtok, Naresh stood First in class throughout his school days at TashiNamgyal Academy (TNA) and topped the Class X ICSE exams, setting a new record for TNA in 1993. He became the School Captain, the Best All-Round student, and topped the Class XII ISC exams. His journey spans Singapore and the US, where he now lives. He can be reached at nareshag@gmail.com

WITH SIBLINGS IN GANGTOK, SIKKIM - EARLY 1980S



The journey so far...

The word journey is a loaded word. I'm beginning to write this on a short plane journey from Boston to New York City. As the pilot announces the beginning of descent, this journey will end soon. Thus, there is the day-to-day journey that you travel, or one that spans a few days. The days then become weeks, which turn into months and years. The years turn into decades and then a lifetime. There are countless journeys within these journeys.

My co-passenger in the flight is a lady who has her dog in the bag in front of her seat. She's a tad sad for having had to pay \$125 for carrying him along in the flight. "These airlines", she says, "charge for everything. Next time they'll charge for boarding early". I tell her that she's found mention in my write-up - both as a way of informing and seeking informed consent. She asks if I'm a writer. I tell her, "No". Again, who I am a much bigger question to grapple with - a professor, teacher, researcher, computer engineer,

Indian (with large bits from Singapore and the US), Sikkimese, Marwari (with a large part Nepali), Hindu (with major influences of the Gita, Buddhist principles of suffering, and the common essence of all religions), inclusive, secular, liberal, son, brother, husband, father, colleague and friend. Yet, one is often deeper and beyond the



AS SCHOOL CAPTAIN, TASHI NAMGYAL
ACADEMY, GANGTOK, SIKKIM - 1994



WITH COMPUTER ENGINEERING BATCHMATES FROM NANYANG
TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY, SINGAPORE – AUGUST 1998

epithets. I seek to fall in line and to fall out of line, to look for one in the many, and the many in the one.

Back in Boston and a week later, I continue my reflections. My thoughts go to my childhood years. “Panibapu, suno ho ke” (Pana’s father, are you there?) – I think of my grandmother calling out to my grandfather. I grew up in a joint Marwari business family (that traded in ‘badielaichi’ – cardamom from Mangan) as the youngest child in a family of four girls and three boys. My family had moved to Sikkim from Rajasthan in the first few years of the 20th century. I’ve heard accounts mentioning 1902 and going back to late 1800s. Patriarchy was strongly entrenched with my mother deciding to give away her eldest son to her husband’s elder brother and his wife, naming her youngest son for the wife of her husband’s deceased younger brother, while keeping all the daughters.

It was after my grandfather’s death in 1982 (my eldest, married sister also passed away in 1988), and the joint family structure crumbling, that my

mother gave up her ‘ghoonghat’ (veil) of twenty years. She didn’t let her Class III education in Hindi (and lack of knowledge of lower case English alphabet) prevent her from becoming the first Marwari woman (save for the old lady in Chotta Bank) to start a shop in Gangtok. From cardamom to groceries to sarees to fitted clothes to Tibetan curio, she tried it all. This paved the way for many more women to open shops or accompany their husbands in their shops. It was my mother’s faith, compassion for others, and fearless conviction that has been one of my profound influences. At 73, she continues to be feisty and a businesswoman.

Not only did my mother ensure my school education in TNA, she also ensured I go to Singapore. Gender equality and helping fearlessness in women is a major quest for me. I’m married to an equally feisty woman who went from a Marwari family of four girls (all highly educated), topping ICSE at Loreto Convent, Darjeeling, becoming a doctor, to pursuing medical residency in New York to becoming

a Director in a Boston hospital. My 7-year old daughter is feisty as well. My female colleagues, Dean, Provost and President at Simmons are all fearless and feisty women. We need to make more of them in Sikkim.

At TNA, I had a simple formula for standing first in class – not letting my teachers proceed if I didn’t understand something. I tell the same to my students today. I greatly respected all my teachers and looked up to them. I was praised and loved both at home and in school, and this propelled in me the desire to not let those down who expected a lot from me. I painted, created crafts and participated regularly in elocutions and debates. The more I participated, the less inhibited I became.

A big day for me was in June 1993 when I topped the Class X ICSE Board exams with 92% marks and a new school and state record (which has now been broken multiple times). Suddenly, my picture was in newspapers. My mother bought me and my brother Titan watches. Two years later, that made me a contender for the coveted

School Captain's position – something I'd never imagined growing up. Some people from the Marwari community congratulated me for being the first Marwari school captain of TNA (perhaps, after Vijay Singhi in 1972). That made me uncomfortable, yet I appreciated a minority community's identity pride.

At the end of my final school year, I was awarded the Founder's Medal for Best All-round Student. In early 1995, my eldest brother got a book from the Community Centre Library which talked about scholarships in India and abroad. My friend Siddhartha encouraged me to apply for a 100% scholarship for undergraduate studies in Singapore offered by Singapore Airlines and Neptune Orient Lines. "Naresh, if you don't get this, I'm not sure who will," he said. Sometime later, my schoolteacher, Mr. Pandey, brought me a newspaper clipping of the same advertisement.

After an application, I was invited to Hotel Taj Bengal, Calcutta (now Kolkata) for two written tests and an interview (the first time I'd seen a five-star hotel). I travelled alone to Calcutta and met many smart students gathered there for the interview. I thought with all those people, there was no way I could get the scholarship. I decided to just be myself in the interview. Later, when I actually got the scholarship and reached Singapore, I noticed that none of those people who had interviewed with me had made it to Singapore.

I became one of fifty students selected from all over India that year (from supposed tens of thousands of applications) to go to Singapore on scholarship. There were a number of firsts—my first time to an airport (Netaji airport of Calcutta), the first flight ever (the Singapore Airlines international flight), and the first landing on foreign soil on the morning of July 8, 1995. When the then modest Calcutta airport impressed me so much, Changi was a sight to behold. The countless lights, the carpeted airport floor, the fixtures and the people, all seemed out of this



world. I thought, "So, this is what they mean by 'foreign'".

Singapore was extremely clean, neat and efficient. When my roommate at the Nanyang Technological University (NTU) and I went to class the first day, we were late by a few minutes and knocked on the door. After a few minutes of no response, we went inside and found another door. Beyond that, we saw a huge lecture theatre (more like a movie theatre) with hundreds of students, with the professor at the very end on the stage. We were a batch of 350 students in Computer Engineering (with ten students from India on scholarship). The educational pattern was very different from the small class sizes and the personal interaction I'd experienced in TNA. The huge class sizes ensured almost no student participation (though there would be tutorials and labs with fewer students).

Those were four rigorous but fun-filled undergraduate years, with a 6-month internship at Hewlett

Packard. In the final year, I ran for and served in the office of the President of the Debating Society. While I had been a star student in Sikkim, in NTU, I was one among the stars. The scholars from across India in different years formed a 100-strong mini India of young and smart people. They provided a sense of community, even as I tried hard to forge friendships with the local Chinese, Malay and Tamil population. I graduated with a Bachelors in Applied Science (Computer Engineering) with Honors.

What the scholarship provided me was a chance to be independent at the age of 18 and not having to take a single rupee from home. Any college in India would have been more expensive. Along with monthly expenses, my scholarship money allowed me to buy a small refrigerator, a \$3,300 desktop computer (with the brand new Windows 95 with color display and multimedia speakers, 8 MB RAM and 1.6 GB hard disk :-), music systems



and air-tickets to India twice a year, and contribute to the wedding of my youngest sister (along with my first salary from my first job).

As the scholarship came with a bond to work for 6-years in a Singapore-registered company, I worked in Singapore startups as a software engineer. In my first job, I worked in a team to develop Voice-over-IP software, handling voice calls with 6-million registered users.

In the year 2000, after about two years of working, I went through my quarter-life crisis and started questioning everything. I had achieved whatever I wanted to – topping my school, becoming a software engineer, buying a computer. I thought anything else (whether a car or a house) will be just another thing and will not make me any happier. American psychologist Abraham Maslow called it self-actualization.

In 2001, I moved to Santa Clara, California, my first trip to the United

States. I found the people extremely honest and forthright, a quality I greatly appreciated. I thrived during the months in California. As one of the two key people working under the Chief Strategy Officer, I evaluated gaps in technology, brainstormed innovative ideas, recommended solutions, and created prototypes for other teams to continue. The September 11, 2001 attacks in the US happened during that time. I also worked for a few months in the Hyderabad office of the company, and was very pleased to experience the work culture in India.

Back in Singapore, I worked as an R&D Engineer in bioinformatics and then in Digital Cinema. I travelled to Mumbai and to small movie theatres across Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh in India to install digital cinema servers. The company had signed up with Adlabs to digitize cinema theatres in India. It was a work I loved. Not only did I get to see many Hindi film stars and directors, I also got to experience India up-close. My time in Los Angeles with the company saw me work and interact with Hollywood-associated firms of Technicolor, Dolby, Disney, Warner Brothers, etc. to determine new digital cinema standards.

I thought of going back to studying and doing an MBA but that didn't inspire me. Finally, as they say in Vedanta in the quest for God, "Neti, neti" (not this, not this), I stumbled across academia by a process of elimination. Married by now, I joined the National University of Singapore (NUS) as a Research Assistant for a professor, and also started my Ph.D. part time in 2005. To streamline my efforts, I combined my research area with the work I was doing as Research Assistant. I scored a perfect GPA of 4.0/4.0 with 5 A+s and 3 As in the courses I took. I made sure I did the readings beforehand and not after the class. This was key to my excelling in class. I thrived in the small class-size format. Even in Simmons where I teach now, the class sizes are not more

than 25. I'm really hoping the current TNA will find ways to reduce its class sizes – a prerequisite to going back to its days of glory, even as it marks its golden jubilee in 2016.

I learned how to write research papers and got funding for travel to conferences in Hong Kong, New Zealand, China, Tokyo, Canada, Russia, US and France. Some of these travels were combined with my role as Chair of the Association of Pacific Rim Universities (APRU) Doctoral Students Network – an organization consisting of 45 universities from 16 countries. I also held an exhibition of my paintings, did modeling assignments and bit roles for Singapore television, and worked with a famous sculptor to build a marble sculpture for my school – the School of Computing. For my PhD, I wrote a 280-page doctoral thesis and defended my thesis in 2009.

By 2008, my wife had moved to New York to pursue her medical residency. The final part of my thesis was written there. A big next step (my daughter was born by then) was finding a faculty position in the US. The first year I tried, I had a campus visit but couldn't make it as I still wasn't close to finishing my Ph.D.

The following year, with a large number of interviews (e.g. 14 in one, 17 in another) scheduled in four research conferences, I was first invited for a campus visit at Simmons College, Boston. After two days of one-on-one interviews and a public talk, I was offered the position of a tenure-track Assistant Professor. Just before joining Simmons, I was also able to help resolve a 19-year old property dispute back home, which assured peace for all, mending of relationships, and was greatly satisfying for me.

Tenure-track implies that you have five years to demonstrate excellence in teaching, research and service – the three facets that make up the life of a professor, and get reviewed at many different levels. Tenure implies a job for life and promotion to Associate



**WITH HIS WIFE DR. ARCHANA AGARWAL AND CHILDREN
EESHA AND ISHAAN IN MILTON, MA, USA - JUNE 2015**

Professor. A ‘not strong’ in any one category meant that you would have to leave the university at the end of the sixth year. While many faculty members go through a lot of stress owing to ‘what if I don’t get tenure’, I loved the process as I saw it as a team of people invested in helping you succeed. 2015 was a great year – with the getting of tenure and the US green card, and the arrival of my second child.

Over the years, I’ve been teaching courses in evaluation, technology, web design, knowledge management, and theories to Masters-level students. I teach both face-to-face and online. Each course requires extensive preparation and changes based on feedback. At the end of my classes, I also give a happiness talk to my students. Swami Vivekananda, Mahatma Gandhi, Art of Living, Iskcon, the Bhagavad Gita, Kabir, Thich Nhat Hanh, Eckhart Tolle, Tao Te Ching, have been some of my major influences.

Research requires a lot of time gathering and analyzing data, writing research articles and getting it reviewed by journals. The process of getting each article published can range from a few months to a year to 2-4 years. I have about 37 research

articles published by now (as well as book chapters and other write ups). This entails scheduling a few hours of writing time each week. I enjoy collaborating with other international researchers (with places ranging from Japan to Kuwait to Singapore) and scheduling writing sessions on Skype or GoToMeeting.

Along with serving in various committees in the school and the college, I have been active over the years in various capacities at the Association for Information Science & Technology (ASIS&T) – a 78-year old organization with presence in 50 countries that serves as home for my professional and research work. My research quests lie in the fields of information science and knowledge management, where I investigate questions such as, “Where do people go for information when faced with a certain task or need?” In 2012, I was awarded a Leadership award by the Association, named after James M. Cretsos, one of its former leaders.

To all my young friends reading this, I’d like to repeat the words of my colleague and former Dean Michele Cloonan when I told her that I’d finished all my work. She said, “Work never ends.” While continuing

with my teaching, research and service, I hope to work on a synthesis of Bhagavad Gita commentaries – something that I’d initiated a few years ago, and fulfil my interpersonal roles, including for my people in Sikkim. I also have a book contract to write a book in my research area of Context in Information Behavior during my 6-month sabbatical in 2017.

As long as one is alive, we need to keep working, keep moving. We need to find ways (in our own little ways) to be useful to the people around us, and to help improve the human condition. Taking education seriously, learning continuously and empowering ourselves is the first step we can take in the direction of being useful to others during our lifetime. Through this, we need to be happy and learn to have fun.

‘Panibapu’, the one who called out to him, and Pana are all gone. Each has a limited time on earth. We all have a song to sing during our lifetimes. We need to have the freedom and the courage to sing this song (and ensure this freedom for others). Do not let any doubt or fear silence or weaken your voice. Trust in life! Devote yourself to the present. The future will take care of itself. Remember, there is nothing more important than the ‘Now’!