

IIT / K gave me a wholistic perspective'

Arvind Gupta reminisces about his days at IIT-Kanpur.

I joined IIT-Kanpur in 1970. My rank was 28th in the North Zone. Coming from a small town I had no clue of which branch to opt. So, as a very practical person I asked every person who returned after counselling about his branch.

All the students ahead of me had chosen electrical engineering. This is the reason why I landed up taking Electrical!

Then, it was a 5 year BTech course. Apart from the technical courses we did eight courses in Social Sciences - Philosophy, Logic, Development & Underdevelopment etc. These courses helped me see things in a wholistic perspective.

There were some outstanding and inspiring teachers - CNR Rao, Mahabala, Balu etc. My English teacher Suzie Tharu prescribed *The Little Prince* as a text-book!

The 1970's were politically very volatile years. Revolution was in the air. Anti-Vietnam, civil rights movements were rattling America. Intellectuals were swearing not to participate in war research.

In India, the Naxal Movement was on the upswing. Some of us wanted to do meaningful social work. Our mess servant's children had no school to go. The Campus and Central school would not admit them.

Some people had set up the Opportunity School. So I started teaching there. We taught poor children. It was deeply satisfying. I also helped a dozen students from the nearby Nankari village to pass their high school.

My batchmates were just outstanding. Out of the first 20 CBSE toppers 15 were in my batch! These passionate individuals helped hone my sensibilities.

We could borrow 10 books from the library. I read a lot - 5 newspapers a day. The La Montage Film Club screened *Rashomon*, *Bicycle Thief* and other classics.

We heard exceptional individuals - Bhishm Sahni, Begum Akhtar, Anil Sadgopal, Jan Mrydal, Anil Agarwal etc. They had a profound influence on me.

Anil Sadgopal (PhD Caltech) - a molecular biologist had left TIFR to work in a backward district of MP. He introduced "activity science" in government schools.

In 1972, he recounted his very difficult experiences. Teaching village children science was a big challenge then, and even a bigger challenge today. It was an unforgettable experience. It stirred my social conscience.

After BTech, I worked in Telco/ Pune for a few years. In 1978 I took a year off to work

with Laurie Baker and Anil Sadgopal. Then I decided to work fulltime with children. Teaching children science was far more satisfying then working in a corporate.

Over the years I have conducted workshops in over 1,500 schools in India. I have written a dozen books on science activities. I have translated over a hundred books in Hindi and presented 92 science programmes on TV. Most of my books/teaching aids/toys can be downloaded from my website <http://arvindguptatoys.com>

The IIT years helped me choose a vocation which has been deeply satisfying and through which I have meaningfully contributed to society. A Young Oxfam poster in the early 70s did capture the spirit of those times. The poster showed a Concorde (supersonic) plane flying over a parched Indian village. The slogan below was

Somewhere there are engineers Helping others to fly faster than sound. Where are the engineers helping those Who must live on the ground.

(Arvind Gupta B.Tech IIT/Kanpur (1975) received the inaugural National Award for Science Popularisation amongst Children (1988) and the Distinguished Alumnus Award from IIT / Kanpur (2000). Presently, he works in Pune at IUCAA's (Inter University Centre for Astronomy & Astrophysics) Children's Science Centre.)

The Indian Institutes of Technology need no introduction either in India or abroad, for their alumni have already made their presence felt everywhere. The Institutes were set up by the Government of India as 'Institutions of National Importance' and almost all reputed international academic benchmarks have given them high rating. **Sakshi Arora** takes you through the corridors of IITs.