

26th July 2005: Mumbai in siege

An experience in maturity

26-07-2005

13:15 hrs: I was in the Table Tennis room, a tree-house kind of a structure within the NMIMS campus. Rain drops falling on the sloping roofs made a rather rhythmic sound. But it seemed innocuous.

14:15 hrs: The game was long over. I just had a curling staircase to climb down to reach the 'dry zone'. But taking this decision was proving to be difficult. The rains were ominous now. I took the plunge. A six-second climb down drenched me completely.

15:00 hrs: It had been some time now. But it was a welcome relief for NMIMS students, especially outstation students, who in mid-monsoon season were beginning to pooh-pooh the famed notion of Mumbai monsoons' notoriety. They loved it. It was time for an impromptu rain dance. It was party time, caution thrown to the wind, and awesome fun.

15:15 hrs: Ankle height water in the 'quadrangle' part of the campus. My friends dragged me out. They ensured that my wallet-laptop-watch-mobile combination was tucked away to the safety of the 3rd floor lockers. The scene resembled 'Ganapati Visarjan', another Mumbai specialty.

15:30 hrs: A campus tree fell down as if it was felled by a chain saw. No rain-dance enthusiast was injured, luckily. Suddenly it seemed that it was no longer fun and games. News started trickling in about the severity of the scene, mainly through word of mouth. All cell-phone and landline networks were down. There was no electricity either. It was clear that every-one in the campus was stuck for good – students and faculty alike. The female students were worried, and so would have been their parents. It was at this point that someone came running to our campus gate. What he said shocked us, one and all.

16:30 hrs: It was a lot darker than 16:30 hrs. NMIMS students were negotiating the waist-high Vile-Parle waters to rescue pre-school children whose school buses stood stranded in the flooded street. The tiny-tots were carried on shoulders to the safety of the NMIMS campus. The wet kids were shivering – more in shock of the situation than the wet, feverish weather. They were channeled to Room 21, second floor. The kids were restless. Every time one wailed, it set off a chain reaction. Volunteers manning the centre had it really difficult.

Water had flown into the college building by now. The library and the ground floor computer centre resembled the 'Titanic'. The water was rising alarmingly.

18:30 hrs: The flood situation was clearly out of hand. The campus water was chest high. Most female students were being taken to the safety of the girls' hostel, near Amitabh Bacchhan's bungalow, Juhu. It was not an easy decision. The rains were not letting up one bit, it was quite a distance and it was very dark. What's more, the group of male students that was to lead the way had to return to the college campus. After all, a major crisis situation was unfolding there. NMIMS students had rescued children from 5 school buses stuck on the roads nearby. Approximately 150 school children, including some special kids, were camped inside. There was no food, no light, no electricity, restless kids and to top all that – worried parents were expected shortly. Volunteers were aplenty, but nothing seemed to be aplenty then.

19:30 hrs: Parents of the rescued tiny-tots had been trudging through neck-deep JVPD waters for hours to reach here. And now they were coming in hordes. Anxiety levels sky-rocketed. Obviously, very little information regarding the whereabouts of their wards was made available to them. Schools from where the buses had left could provide little help but for the bus codes. The only choice available to them was to charter the entire bus route on foot so as to locate the ill-fated vehicles.

20:15 hrs: Room 21 had turned into a war zone. A visibly shaken Prof. Dr. Kondap, Vice-Chancellor NMIMS deemed university, admired in silence his students' collective effort. He must have felt great pride. NMIMS students were putting up a real brave effort. The rooms were now swelling with children, parents and volunteers alike. Children wailed on one hand and so did disappointed mothers on the other, unable to fathom what had become of their wards whose names did not feature in the list available with us. Additional rooms were being opened to facilitate the scenario.

Handling the parents was becoming a nightmare. Two class room tables had been joined together to form a temporary information centre for parents. There was practically no light with just a couple of emergency lights being the only main source, apart from candles – which were nothing more than birthday candles really. Mining the names of the missing from the ad-hoc lists that were being updated continuously was difficult and the search often proved negative. Every time that happened, it seemed that all hope had ended for the parents. Obviously, at this stage, it was impossible for them to venture out anywhere else to search their kids. One improvisation we carried out immediately was that we never said "*The name doesn't exist in our list.*" Instead, we said "*It is possible that your child may have been harbored in a building close to where the bus was stranded.*"

The streets in Mumbai had turned into rampaging rivers in the unrelenting rain. Floating Mercedes cars and auto-rickshaws alike bore a grim reminder of nature's law of equality. However rich or poor, nature's fury knew no distinction.

22:30 hrs: Most children had been united with their parents. Must confess, seeing tears of an improbable re-union was the best feeling I've ever had in my life. I was gripped by emotions.

Comfortable arrangements were made by the volunteers for the children and their parents to spend the night at NMIMS. The rain after all didn't indicate to be running out of gas. In an ingenuous effort, NMIMS students had ventured into neck-high waters to collect edible food items from nearby buildings. They received open-hearted responses. Food items ranging from chips, biscuits, and bread to even dal-rice and poori-bhaji were collected this way. This kept the spirits relatively higher in every soul in the campus that night. Grateful parents also offered help in the way of cell-phone calls (in case a particular network was working), food items and harboring unclaimed children in case they lived close-by.

00:00 hrs: The exceptions in the happy re-union story numbered in single digits. But they were the worst to handle. Their patience was running out and no information was forthcoming about their wards as all the cell-phone networks lay dead. One mother in particular was so agitated that four – five volunteers were constantly restraining her. She would have no other way than venturing out at this hour in waters higher than her physical height. She calmed after she was assured that a search party would leave at the sight of the first rays of the morning light.

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01:30 hrs: After some frantic and hectic activity in the hours before, 3rd floor corridor was more or less at peace. The rains, still, were fury personified. The kids were off to sleep as their parents stood guard.

The pre-school children yet unclaimed, disturbed the quiet intermittently with their high-pitched crying. It is at this point that I discovered totally different personalities in some female class-mates whom I thought I knew well. They hugged the children to their breasts like their biological mothers would, walking from one end of the corridor to the other and patting them gently on their backs – in rhythm with the continuous gibberish dialogue. This carried on for hours – tirelessly. I salute the sense of womanhood they exhibited.

At last we had some time to sit and cool down a bit. We were suddenly faced with the prospect of chatting and gossiping to kill time – what a welcome relief! Almost 12 hours had passed before we could even wink.

02:15 hrs: I had found space above the student lockers. Admittedly, the 3rd floor notice board was invading that narrow space. But it was by far my best option to have some sleep. Every other area seemed to be occupied. It wasn't even five minutes when another anxious parent rushed in. It was back to office for us. The gentleman was a doctor from the Breach Candy hospital. He had abandoned his vehicle at Matunga, and covered 15 kilo-metres in consistent chest-high waters from there to reach NMIMS. There was no problem in locating his child. Relieved, the doctor praised our efforts profusely. His 4-year old child suddenly sprang to unseen energy levels on seeing the familiar face. Before the doctor was to take our leave for his residence, the child very sweetly repeated after his father "*All unkils aunties, pils come home shum day. Tank woo. Ba-baeee*"

07:15 hrs: It had rained unabatedly till now. However, the intensity now was much lesser. We decided to bide some time till the waters receded. We were to take refuge at a friend's place in Juhu, after dropping a female classmate to the already overcrowded girls' hostel.

09:30 hrs: The heavens had fooled us again. It was still raining, minus the venom. We decided that the waiting game had to end. This was the time. The college was

evacuated of all children, parents and most NMIMS students, but for a couple of challenged people with two accompanying attendants. Help for them was on their way. We moved them to the faculty area in the custody of some faculty members who were waiting for the waters to recede further.

10:30 hrs: Waters had receded to waist level but it was still drizzling. We found our group of five people to be among hundreds who were wading the water. Slowly the scene of destruction became evident. Immobile cars, buses and auto-rickshaws had choked all roads. The incessant rainfall had removed all signs of life, it seemed. It was one huge, staid water-body. The only things that moved were puny humans like us. Human superiority on mother earth: Alas! What a mockery! A royal joke!

12:00 hrs: The police ambulance was ferrying three dead bodies to the Cooper Municipal hospital. As it passed by us, the raised water level almost drowned us for a minute. The floating cars were also agitated violently. Everywhere there was mayhem. Sights of mothers carrying new-born babies on their heads, physically challenged people making a fight out of it and office goers of the previous day still on their way home greeted us. It left a very depressing taste.

12:15 hrs: As the group made its way in a reflective mood, a very funny incident changed our mood. A man completely drenched, yet carrying an umbrella, sat on the roof-top of a floating Mercedes. "*Ek gaadi pe ek free! Aao aur le jao!*" he exclaimed to very amused wading members of the public. We burst out laughing and quite appreciated the man's terrific sense of humor even in this time of disaster. It was infectious.

A foreigner with a camera hanging on his neck soon waded past. The group in a sudden jolly fit asked him if he could click a picture. Even before he could nod his agreement, the group had assumed the 'say cheese' pose! As soon as the camera flashed, one in the group exclaimed "*Sir, hope it wasn't a false flash!*"

We had a hearty laugh as we moved ahead.

A little ahead, a group member suddenly realized that her childhood dream was to drive an auto-rickshaw. She explained thus to shocked group members "*Look, what's the big thing if one dreams to drive a Ferrari? One can always work hard, earn lots of money and fulfill the dream. If one thinks pragmatically, my dream is much more challenging.*" We saw logic in what the fellow MBA said. I held her hand and

manipulated her to a stranded driver-less auto-rickshaw. She achieved her dream amidst our giggles. Someone shouted "Abbe meter to chaalu karo!" Our accomplished 'auto-driver' friend, otherwise a strictly 'luxury cars only' traveler, started looking all over the steering area for the meter!

13:30 hrs: We finally reached the girls' hostel and dropped off our 'auto-rickshaw driver' friend there. We also had a sneak peak into the famed girls' hostel which now, of course, had turned into a refuge for more boys than girls. In an unprecedented gesture, the otherwise extremely secure building was thrown open to all keeping in mind the severity of the calamity.

14:00 hrs: We then made our way to our final destination for the day, yet another refuge, this time a friend's place. We had lots to look forward to – promise of warm food, drinks and rest!

As we took the flooded roads again, thoughts of how life itself played management games with us that night, with people who were to ride the business world in a few days, came into my mind. How inconsequential humans are in God's scheme of things! And yet, we all must play our part. We believed we played our part well that night. Yes, satisfaction felt good and warm in the heart. What an experience, an experience in maturity! A lot of people had 'grown up' in just a night.

Note: *As I write this piece on 28th July, I have reached my 11th floor residence in Andheri (W). There's no electricity yet, no water supply, no essential food supplies and no cell-phone connectivity. Mumbai, India's premier city hasn't yet recovered from a day's rain that has broken world records, consumed 300+ lives and caused widespread devastation.*