

In Memory of Ranjan Das - My friend, who died so young!



Comments 41



editor 3 November 2009 226112 views

Ranjan Das, President and CEO Indian Subcontinent of the software giant SAP passed away at the young age of 42. It is almost impossible to describe in words his multitude of talents and qualities. Apart from being a brilliant individual and a top notch professional, Ranjan was a wonderful human being with firm family values rooted in humility and compassion.

Ranjan was born to Khagan Das and Malati Das from Hengrabari, Guwahati and completed his early schooling at Dispur Government school and Gopal Boro school.

I first met Ranjan at my mess in Delhi University in 1987 on a dry and hot summer afternoon. Having completed high school from Daly College Indore, he enrolled in the undergraduate program at Hans Raj College and had come looking for a place to stay. Although a few years my junior, we got along almost instantly, and ended up sharing the mess accommodation for the next 12 months. Herein began our 22 year friendship that came to an abrupt and premature end on October 21st 2009.

As we got to know each other, he asked if he could use my single room while I was at class. I agreed and soon discovered that he was skipping classes at college. One day I confronted him about it and he looked me in the eye and said – “Sanjay da, I want to go to America and study at MIT. I also want to study at Harvard someday”. While I was somewhat skeptical of this young lad’s lofty goals, I remember the steely resolve in his eyes. Every evening as I returned, I found him cocooned in the room, immersed in a pile of books. We spent the next several months, studying, talking, eating, joking and on hot summer nights sitting on the terrace discussing Carl Sagan’s Cosmos, extraterrestrial life, or just listening to Bhupen Hazarika, Jayanta Hazarika, Jim Reeves and Englebert Humperdinck. Through our myriad of discussions, one thing remained constant – this young man’s resolve to make it into MIT.

At the time all the odds were against him. Given his financial situation, the high application fees for US universities, SAT tests, TOEFL tests, ACT tests was a huge challenge. He had no contacts or references, scarce funds, limited exposure to the US education system and virtually zero access to any of the prep resources. All he possessed was an unflinching resolve to make it into MIT. During power failures, he would setup a makeshift table from bricks and a wood plank under the street lights on Ring Road in Delhi’s Derawal Nagar where we lived. As the application process began I remember Ranjan skipping meals to save money for the application fee. Soon his test scores came back – he had scored a perfect 1600 on the SAT and a near perfect score on the TOEFL. He submitted applications to MIT and 4 other Ivy League schools (Cornell, Dartmouth, Brown, Princeton). When I questioned him why he did not apply to any of the lesser known colleges, he replied – “If I cannot get into MIT or an Ivy League then there is no point in going to the US”.

Four months later, he received a letter of acceptance to MIT. It was a joyful day, and I remember his smile fade away as he was reading through the letter. There was one key element missing - there was no mention of any financial aid. Without financial aid, attending MIT was no more than a mere dream for him. He insisted that we contact the admissions office at MIT. The closest place to make an ISD call at that time was the GPO at Eastern Court in Connaught Place. We both changed three DTC buses to get there from Delhi University that same night. Ranjan was so anxious that he asked me to make the call to Mr. Sam Jones who was the Associate Director of Financial Aid at MIT at the time. As I spelt Ranjan's full name, Mr. Jones said, "Yes, Mr. Das has been awarded full scholarship for the entire 4 years." Not only was this a triumphant day for Ranjan, it has been one of the happiest days in my own life.

Three months later his Dad (whom I fondly called Khagen Khura) and his mom came to Delhi to see off their son at the IGI Airport. As simple middle class parents this was a day of great rejoicing for them as they bid goodbye to their son. We all held hands and said a short prayer as Ranjan boarded the British Airways jet to London en route to Boston.

During one of his subsequent visits to India, he wanted me to meet someone special. We agreed to meet at Fujiya - a favorite Chinese restaurant for us both on Malcha Marg in Chanakyapuri, New Delhi. This special person was Rajashree Barua (Roopa) his fiancée. They had met in Mumbai where Roopa was pursuing her Masters and from the start they made a perfect couple. That partnership and trust grew and became stronger over time as Roopa continued to support Ranjan through his many dreams and aspirations.

After excelling at MIT in his B.S. Computer Science and Engineering he worked for two local software firms in the Cambridge area. Ranjan then joined Oracle Corporation and moved fast up the corporate ladder. Keeping alive his dream he then attended Harvard Business School to complete his MBA program and started his own venture named Patkai Networks. At Patkai he pioneered an innovative B2B collaboration solution. Subsequently, he joined the global software giant SAP where he co-founded SAP x-Apps that enabled the company to effectively address the mid size marketplace and thereby catapulted its revenue and client base to new heights. Throughout all his endeavors and accomplishments there was one person firmly rooted in the ground silently supporting him while raising their two wonderful little boys – his wife Roopa.

Ranjan's meteoric rise at SAP was not surprising. He lived, breathed, and dreamed work and was a rising star with tremendous technical and business acumen as well as amazing people skills. His appointment as President and CEO for Indian subcontinent during the worst economic crisis since the great depression was no accident. This was an endorsement of his capability, his innovation, his genius and his commitment. He gladly took on the challenge, agreed to relocate with family from the San Francisco Bay Area in the US, and defied the prevalent economic trends to grow his company's customer base and revenues many fold.

Despite the numerous achievements and accolades, Ranjan remained that same simple person I came to know 22 years ago. Gentle and kind, soft spoken and always sporting a smile, he would make every effort to keep in touch. He would remember the minutest of details from conversations and follow through on them. During one of my visits to the Bay Area, he and Roopa insisted that I have dinner at their home. I remember the Shillong style garden in their backyard that Roopa so painstakingly cared for and the wonderful dinner we enjoyed while reminiscing old memories. While visiting the NY area, they made it a point to stop by our home to have dinner and catch up. He would never miss an opportunity to say Hello and make you feel good and welcome.

His love for his birthplace Asom, his passion to contribute to the growth and development of India was his genuine desire. I recall his excitement on the phone soon after he accepted the position to lead SAP India. He was so happy to be back in the land that shaped his childhood. His contributions are evident from the results he achieved in past two years while based in India.

At a very young age, Ranjan accomplished what others struggle to do in an entire lifetime. I only wonder what heights he would have soared to in the future. Asom and India has lost one of its brightest stars.

Today I sketchily remember portions of the Essay that Ranjan wrote as part of his MIT undergraduate application in 1987. He had asked me to review it before submitting. The application instructions said -If you just finished writing a book of 100 pages, please reproduce below what would be in page 81. Ranjan's book was to be an Autobiography about his work in the business technology area and his subsequent years as a Professor at a world renowned university. He had envisioned that Page 81 will detail the day after his retirement at the university - getting up early as usual, workout, shower, dress up and start to knot his tie at the dressing table just when he notices through the corner of his eye a red rose in the vase with a farewell note from his longtime assistant at university. It then dawns upon him that he does not have to go to work again, and becomes restless and anxious as he cannot imagine giving up active work.

Ranjan, I am pretty sure you would have returned to Harvard or MIT as a faculty and how wonderful it would have been to compare Page 81 from of your essay of 1987 to page 81 of the real book that we will now never have the opportunity to read. Ranjan, I will always remember you as a genuine, honest and sincere friend. While you parted from us at such an early age, we will always remember your smile and your indomitable spirit to never give up. Your passion for the pursuit for excellence in any endeavor and your qualities as a wonderful human being will forever inspire us. May your soul rest in peace.

Sanjay Saikia, New Jersey, USA

editor

Please send your comments to editor@assamtimes.org

BY EDITOR

Witch hunting rerun in Chirang!

Police remand for Nagaon culprit

Candle lighting rally

ULFA condoles demise of SS Khaplang

Beef puts M'laya BJP in the red

ON THIS DAY

Radio Salesian Journalist makes to India Book of Records

Ayushman Bharat cards distributed

Hills scholar bags PhD for study on energy efficient architecture

Husband sets wife on fire

Sankardeb birth anniv gets underway
