

Speaking for Myself

Doctored admissions: Are we sowing the right seed?

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Krishna's description came as a shock to me. When I talked about this with my friends, superiors and even editors of medical magazines, the standard response was that of disbelief, 'What evidence do you have?' This latest news report (Exams for sale)¹ seems to have vindicated my stand. The whole affair is very revealing, and therefore it is high time that this story is told to everyone. I will narrate a bit of background before the actual incident.

In August 1970, Abhay and I joined a 'well-known' medical college and soon became good friends. Although our names began with the same alphabet, our personalities were vastly different. I was a book-worm while Abhay was an extrovert. As undergraduates in medical college, I focused on studies, while he enjoyed life with his flamboyant style, carefree attitude and 'Bullet', his motorcycle. I may have got all the medals but he had the attention of all the girls. In 1974, I stood first in the university examination, joined the army and proceeded to work towards my postgraduation. Abhay took another couple of years to pass his MB,BS, did a diploma in radiology, and later opened an X-ray clinic in Meerut.

Several years later, I met him again when I was transferred to Delhi and went for my daughter's admission to a famous public school. His daughter was in the same class as mine. My daughter Rima was doing well, always among the first five in her class. Abhay's daughter Sonali was not doing too well and had been shifted to the 'W' section for extra attention. The Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) Class 12 results for the year 2003 showed that Rima had done reasonably well, securing 93% marks in aggregate and 96% in biology. I was now confident that she would make it in the MB,BS entrance examinations. She had also worked hard with a nationally famous coaching institute and was consistently scoring well in their test series. Sonali, on the other hand, had 68% in aggregate with 72% in biology but she also wanted to be a doctor.

Rima had applied for 14 MB,BS entrance examinations. As the results were declared one after another, I was devastated. Results showed that Rima always got a merit ranking just below the clear selection mark. For example, Delhi has 400 medical seats, of which only 196 are for the general category while the remaining are reserved for various categories of students. Rima's rank was 245. She did not make it at all in the CBSE medical entrance. She was on the waiting list of most of the medical colleges with a small chance of getting a seat only if other people refused their seats. What came as a bigger surprise to me was the fact that Abhay's daughter Sonali was clearly selected in the combined premedical entrance test, one of the only 2 examinations she had appeared in. I was baffled and did not know what to believe!

I rang up Abhay, congratulated him and asked him, 'How did you do it?' He laughed and asked me to come over 'as we can't talk of these things on the phone'. When I met him the next day, he said, 'You should have come to me a long time back!'

I was amazed, 'What is the mystery? How come Sonali did so well in only one entrance test and not so well in other examinations?'

Abhay smiled, 'AC, you are naïve. You live in your dream world, hypnotized by your academic brilliance.'

I was still in a state of shock. 'Honest, I have no idea what went wrong. Rima was doing so well, but in all the entrance examinations she failed to make the grade. She is likely to be offered a dental seat at three places but she wanted to be a medical doctor. I know she has worked hard and is capable.'

Abhay was still smiling, 'I guess, being in the Army, you are cut off from the real world. Since the time you passed your MB,BS, there has been a sea change in the rules that our society follows. Today, money is the key to everything. Didn't you read the editorial in *The Economic Times* a few months back? It said: "Corruption is no more a moral issue, it is an economic issue." Today everything can be purchased, if you are willing to pay the price. And all the management books also teach you, "look at the value don't look at the price".'

'Let's put all the philosophy aside. Tell me, how can I get my daughter admitted to a good medical college now?'

'You have woken up too late. Now she can be taken only through the "management quota" by paying 20 to 30 lakh rupees (2-3 million rupees) depending on the medical college.'

'But I don't have that kind of money. Even after nearly 30 years of service my provident fund is approximately 8 lakh rupees.'

'Okay, I will give you a mobile number of a friend. He is Mr Krishna, the managing director of a company called "Siksha India". He may suggest something. Krishna has arranged Sonali's admission to the medical college.'

'How much did you have to pay?'

'I paid about Rs 15 lakhs for placement on the merit list. And that was because Sonali did not have very good marks in the examination. You could have done with much less.'

I was seriously wondering whether I should use the phone number given to me by Abhay. Will I have the guts to ask for a seat in this manner? Finally I decided to check it out in any case. It seemed very symbolic to me that I was going to be advised by 'Krishna' who symbolized 'Siksha India'. And I dialed the number.

Krishna was very cryptic on the telephone. He said he was driving and would call me later. He did not call me for three days and then finally I got a call. He advised me to meet him at his office, in a posh colony of New Delhi. I went there at the appointed time. The office was a two-room set in an ad hoc mezzanine floor above a garage. The company consisted of his office furniture and a 12-year-old boy as his runner. He asked me in a cultured voice, 'Yes, Colonel *Sahib*, what can I do for you?'

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I had introduced myself to him as Doctor and not as Colonel. Did he have me investigated before calling me? He was about 28 years old, looked smart, spoke fluent English and was carrying two mobile phones. The phones kept ringing off and on during our conversation. He would respond to some, and not to others. Once he used the same phrase, 'I am driving and I will ring you back.'

I explained my problem to him. 'My daughter has done well in the Class 12 examination but has not been able to make it in the entrance examinations. A friend of mine has asked me to contact you.' And I narrated my problem in detail.

'Yes, I can help you in whatever way you would like. How much are you willing to spend?'

'It is the career of my daughter; I will be willing to spend all I have.' I was not sure that I should tell him about all my savings, so I mentioned an arbitrary amount. 'I can arrange about 4 to 5 lakh in a short period of time.'

'In that amount you cannot get a medical seat through the management quota in any medical college. We will have to try something else for her.'

'And what is that something else?'

'Well, I have a very good team that looks after the problems of people like you. I'm going to talk to you as you have been referred by a good friend and you are who you say you are.'

I was not sure what he meant by that. Krishna continued, 'I have decided to help you for one reason. Your daughter has secured 96% marks in the CBSE class 12 examinations. So far in my business of the past four to five years, I have never placed a person with such a high percentage. In fact, most people who come to me are those who were not doing very well in their studies. Before taking up this profession, I was also a teacher. In some way I feel responsible that a brilliant child as yours has not been able to make it on her own.'

I was surprised at his frankness, 'How can you be responsible?'

'If Rima's ranking in the Delhi premedical test (DPMT) was 245, then I'm definitely responsible because at least 70 students have entered the DPMT through us. And to some extent, what we do is a backdoor entry. If those 70 were not selected, your daughter would have clearly made it.' He smiled, 'There is only one examination left this year. It is your last chance. It will be much cheaper for you if you wait for the next year. I can guarantee a seat for your daughter next year within your budget.'

'Can't you do something in this year's DPMT?'

'Once the result has been declared, we can do nothing. We can only work on the exam that is still left. If you are willing to spend about 6 lakh rupees, then I will tell you what to do. I can assure you 99% success or you pay nothing. Are you willing to spend that much money?'

'I will be frank with you. I do not have that kind of money ready. But I will try to arrange as much as I can.'

Krishna opened his diary. He showed me several pages one after another. On each page was pencilled the name of a child, a telephone number, and the list of documents already submitted by the parents. On the top of the page, an amount ranging from Rs 12 to 15 lakh was mentioned. At the bottom of the page, a correction mark seemed to have concluded the transaction. 'You can see I have asked all these people for 12–15 lakh rupees. I am making a special concession for you for two reasons. First, I feel guilty that your daughter has not made it because of some activities of my group. And second, she is brilliant and she deserves to be in on her own merit.'

'What am I required to do?'

'The entrance exams will be conducted on 27 July. The results will be declared on 7 August. If you want me to process your case then you must deposit the original certificates of passing the 10 and 12 class exams along with the mark sheets with me in the next two days. This should be accompanied by two post-dated cheques of Rs 3 lakh each. That will be step one.'

I was not mentally prepared for this. 'I told you that I do not have that much amount in my bank! It will take me a few weeks to arrange the money.'

'Don't worry. These cheques are only for surety. I'm not going to encash these cheques.' Then he laughed, 'I do not want to go to jail.'

He went on, 'On 26 July, in the evening you will get a phone call from me and I will tell you an address somewhere in Delhi. You will have to send your daughter for the special coaching classes to that address, so as to reach there before 11 p.m.'

'11 p.m.?'

'Yes, 2300 hours. I know you will not feel safe to send your daughter alone in the evening to an unknown location. I do understand your concern but that is our requirement. This is the most crucial phase of the operation. She will not be allowed to carry a mobile phone. And in case she is very apprehensive, her mother can come along but no males are permitted. Both of them will be frisked as they do at the airports. This special coaching class will begin at 11 p.m. and continue till 5 a.m. on 27 July. This is step two.'

'But if the child is awake the whole night, how is she going to appear in the tests?'

'Don't worry, children are very resilient. We will leave them at around 5 a.m. so that she can get a couple of hours rest, freshen up and reach the examination hall in time. There will be 10–15 students in that class and we will give them around 200 questions to solve and discuss the answers in details. Out of these 200 questions, depending on the amount you have paid, 100–150 questions would be those that will be asked in the examination next morning.'

'How can you be so sure that these questions will come in the examination?'

'I told you that we have a very nice arrangement. We charge you only for that. Generally, we have seen that the top position in these tests goes to someone scoring around 75% marks. If about 150 questions are correctly answered, the child reaches a near top position. Therefore we never give more than 149 questions. If we tell the students all the 200 questions then there is a good chance that someone will suspect leakage of the paper. In your case, I'm sure even if I tell your daughter 100 questions and their answers, she will make it to the top.'

'What if you are not able to arrange the question papers that are going to come?'

'So far we have always managed. But if for some reason we are unable to do it, and your child does not make it in the first half of the merit list, then we will refund the entire amount and will not charge you anything. Not only that, we will also give 20% concession at the next appearance.'

Then he went on to step 3, 'On 27 July, when your child has recognized that the questions in the paper were the same as those given in the previous night's coaching classes, you will have to deposit 10% of the amount in cash along with the original admit card with me after the examination.'

'On 7 August, when the results are declared, the fourth and final step will be processed. You take back your post-dated cheques and all the original certificates and hand over the remain-

ing amount in cash. At this stage, our transaction will be over and we will disappear from the scene. From here onwards to the counselling and admission, you will manage on your own.'

'How sure are you that it is going to work?'

'Ninety-nine per cent sure. There are occasional students, who will still make mistakes despite having learnt the answers the previous night. But you don't have to worry about your daughter and I am sure she'll do alright.'

'And you have admitted 70 students in the DPMT like this?'

'Now, that is an unfair question. I cannot tell you the exact number, but hundreds of students have been admitted by us in several medical colleges. For each examination, we keep the numbers limited to escape suspicion, especially in the government and state medical colleges. In some private medical colleges, all the merit seats are auctioned by the management itself 2 years in advance. Already some people are questioning how weak students are coming in, while some good ones like your daughter are not making it in the entrance tests.'

'But 6 lakh rupees is a huge amount for me. I may not be able to arrange it. Give me time to think it over and see if I can arrange it.'

'Well, it is up to you. If you report this to the police, I will have no option but to deny everything. I am only a front man of this operation and there are several like me. We have to work very carefully. It is also the reason we do not disclose the place where such coaching classes would be conducted. We take small batches of 10 or so. It is also the reason why we do not allow the fathers to come to these places. I have given you the option, now it is up to you to decide what you want to do. If I don't hear from you in the next three days then I take it that you are not coming.'

This was today's Krishna representing 'Siksha India'!

I came away, shattered. The whole operation appeared to be professionally run and I could produce no evidence that it exists. I do not blame my friends for not believing me. If I was not party

to the story of Sonali and Rima, I would not have believed them. I had heard the news about 'Chaos over Karnataka college admissions'² and 'Education bazaar: College seats for highest bidder'.³ I had also read about newer methods of cheating.⁴ Still, I was not prepared for this.

Everyone says that life is not fair. Those who expect life to be fair have not grown out of their childhood. Krishna raised some serious doubts in my mind about this whole business of MB,BS entrance examinations. If 50% seats are reserved for various categories of students and, of the remaining, half are sold out like this, what chance does a student like Rima have? When I discussed this whole episode with her, she was surprisingly less angry than I was. She said, 'I will take the dental seat which is being offered to me.'

The problem is bigger than my personal one. Is the medical profession getting correct material? Banning of capitation fee by the Supreme Court has no meaning if this is how the entrance exams are being conducted. And if it is money that is going to take you into the medical profession, what can you expect the students to do after passing MB,BS? Can you expect them to selflessly serve the poor of this country? Won't they worry about getting their investment back with profits? If this is how our students get into medical college, do you expect them to ever understand what medical ethics means?

Note: The names are fictitious, but the conversation with Krishna is real.

REFERENCES

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