

MY ENGAGEMENT WITH PAPER



I travel back a few decades in my thoughts when as a young boy, I got a chance to join Paper Industry. After having spent a few years in the bustling city of Bombay where I pursued my Post Graduation, I recall landing up in one of the remotest & obscure places in Koraput, Orissa where a large Paper plant of JK Organization operated. I distinctly recall an early wintry morning on November 15, 1975 when I got down on a deserted Railway Station, Singapur Road, with only a remote lamp post, reminiscence of a scary movie “Bees Saal Baad”. Chill ran through my whole body and I was not sure I was at the right place. Somehow, I gathered courage and walked across the railway tracks and luckily could see a Jeep parked a distance away. The sleepy driver on seeing me uttered my name in an unclear accent but I could sense he was waiting for me. After a few minutes’ drive, I was dropped at the Guest house, with the instructions that I had to report on duty, (my first day) at 8.00 AM.

The first day turned out to be quite eventful indeed. There was a planned maintenance shut, I was handed over a handful of Jute and asked to climb down pit of Paper Machine and to start the cleaning operation. What Destiny: A Gold Medallist from Bombay University on his first day assigned with such a fabulous job. And what a contrast; away from the glamour and g... friends from Bombay, I was not sure this backward, sleepy place was for me. I would probably not stay for more than ten days- was my initial thought.

But what I did not imagine in my wildest dreams was to happen. Days slipped into weeks, weeks slipped into months and months into years; and surprisingly, the ten days I had given myself turned into ten years. Ten years spent that too fruitfully, productively and with lots of learnings & education.

And when I try to analyze the whole situation in the above context, I find that I along with some of my friends who

joined almost the same time, the key factor for our continuing was ENGAGEMENT - both learning and pleasure wise.

‘Paper making’ itself is an immensely interesting subject and supplemented with a sound ‘Training Program’ and ‘Periodical Assessment’ to judge your progress of learning and knowledge by the senior executives kept one involved with some studies and spending good time learning the paper making process. One never missed the tests and exams we took in the college.

Stay in the ‘Bachelors Hostel’ with regular parties was huge fun and not different than the college; an extremely conducive ‘Social Life’ in the Housing Complex turned out to be real attraction. The ‘Cricket Matches’ for the company team, rehearsals and singing songs on the company ‘Music Orchestra’, participation in ‘Dramas’ and organizing the open tournaments in various sports kept one so busy that a few years seemed an extension of the college life, a phase which I am sure we all tend to miss during our life time.

Human Resource in Paper Industry has been a vital topic of discussion and a concern is always expressed regarding acquisition and retention of right people for various disciplines. For today’s young talented engineers, is there a hesitation to join Industry as most of the Paper Plants are in remote, rural areas; a trepidation and unease I too felt initially.

Was this total ENGAGEMENT key to my persistence with Paper Industry! I reflect it could be. What do you say!

Well more so on my ENGAGEMENT.... A large greenfield Paper Project, Century Pulp And Paper was announced by the BK Birla Group of Companies in the year 1983 and at what a serene location; Tarai belt of Nainital in the foothills of Himalayas! Getting a job in this unit was probably a dream of many young aspirants that time. And as destiny would unfold, I got a chance to be associated with this unit during February 1984. Of course, leaving JK Paper was indeed painful; I had been so much in love with the place and people and would always miss the awesome time, ten long years of great learning, amity, and family bonding.

Filled with some excitement and nervousness, I landed at Lalkua, then a tiny, sleepy township about eight kilometres away the well-known Pant Nagar University. The initial period at Century was equally adventurous and audacious. Since it was the initial phase, it was all civil work and erection at the plant site. We stayed at a nearby town, Haldwani about 18 Kilometers away and commuted daily to and from the erection site. With the poor public transport during that time,

we would often seek lift from the lorry drivers and reach Haldwani in the wee hours of morning, again to be ready to get back. It was indeed a testing but exciting time.

Well the initial phase at any upcoming project would have a similar environment; what shattered most of us was a serious bout of Malaria prevalent in that area. I was down for almost two months with a wrong diagnosis and getting treated for every probable ailment other than Malaria. Suffering with the dreaded disease and managing the work assignment was indeed a huge challenge. But as the saying goes “when the going gets tough, the tough gets going”. When I recall this time of my career, I feel it was the phase that probably made me mentally tough and instil a sense of perseverance.

After the early hiccups, things gradually started settling down and with the plant commissioning, I kept productively busy with establishment of Quality Control and Laboratory setup that I was initially assigned. The equipment procurement, manpower planning and recruitment, training, and development ... it was a good learning again and the ENGAGEMENT process which I have talked about started with a bang!

The most valuable lesson I have learnt during my entire work tenure is that a right attitude towards your job, your peers and your superiors is far more important than even the knowledge and skills that you possess. I passionately believe this attitude helped me progress proficiently with various assignments that I was offered during my stay at Century.

My association with Century was truly exhilarating. Starting with a post of Asstt. Superintendent, I grew with the company up to a level of Sr. Vice President while the company with the initial two streams of Rayon Grade Pulp and a Paper plant saw the expansion of Bagasse based Paper, Tissue and a Board plant besides Recovery and Turbine. It is the only plant with most diverse Raw Material and Product-Mix.

Let me mention a few interesting instances which though challenging bring a smile & satisfaction when I recall these.

WHEN I RODE PILLION ON BULLET MOTORCYCLE: During the initial phase, due to some Industrial Relations issues, the Rayon Grade Pulp unit was to be shut and ‘Lock Out’ had to be declared. Though the staff did attend the factory hours, there was practically little to do. In order to make good use of time and to make some contribution, I volunteered to join undertaking a survey in the surrounding area and adjoining districts to locate vacant land where Company could take up forestation and plant trees for long term Raw Material requirement. I would ride pillion on the ‘Bullet’ with our Forest Officer, covering 70 odd kilometres on days surveying various locations, talking to the concerned tehsil, and collecting data: and returning late. The whole exercise though

exhaustive still gives me a kick when I recall my stupendous rides.

WHEN I TRIED HUNTING A TIGER: When the Company’s Housing Complex was still being manicured, there was a speculation of presence of a Tiger around the heavy vegetation and bushes at the proposed site of VIP Guest House. And the busy body that I always was who involved with diverse activities, I was asked to do something about the Tiger menace. Some technical, quality issue in the process was understandable but tackling a Tiger!! Well if there is a will, there is a way. I contacted the Forest Department, all the way by taking a pillion ride on motorcycle to Ramnagar, a place 70 kms. away and got a written permission for two numbers of Elephants with gun men to scan the whole area. Out of enthusiasm, I too took an elephant ride along with the Foresters. However, the crackers they used to drive away the wild cat disturb the elephant and he shook with a wild trumpet. I got so scared that I jumped off the elephant and ran away, probably sensing that facing a tiger was safer than the elephant ride.

WHEN ISO CERTIFICATION MADE ME CRY: I was assigned to be the Management Representative for implementation of ISO -Quality Certification and later as Coordinator for TPM by the company. Those early days of ISO movement, it was a tough exercise and we really had to work extremely hard putting all procedural practices in place to implement the system. The final assessment by 4-Members KPMG team was a gruelling exercise and they put us on our tows for three full days. The announcement in the closing meeting that the certification was being granted brought a big relief and cheers. That was perhaps one of the rare moments in my life that made me cry uncontrollably; but those were tears of utter happiness and achievement.

WHEN I READ PAPERS AT TAPPI: During time, Century earned a good name in terms of Environmental practices, Energy Efficiency and Process Innovation using Bio technological applications etc. I had a chance to read the related technical papers at various forums, winning Best Paper Awards on three occasions. I recall with pride and satisfaction that three of our papers got published in TAPPI, USA. Our President, Shri RL Lakhotia was a huge support and encouragement and deputed me to present these papers in USA. These probably paved the way for my being awarded “Man of the Year” (2003) by American Biographical Institute, USA and “Marquis Who’s Who In the World” (2005) by Marquis Publication Board, USA besides many other prestigious National Awards.

I reckon my Engagement with Paper had solid bonding right from the very first day. I cherish the nostalgic memory of my exhilarating and eventful innings with Paper. I have many striking instances to recall and share; may be some other time. Until then, take care.



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