

In June of 2005, I joined Christ Raj School at the age of ten for middle school, also known as the upper primary school in India. Christ Raj was a High school located in one of the southernmost states of India, Kerala. As the name suggests, the school was associated with a church, financially aided by the government of Kerala, and the medium of instruction was primarily Malayalam, the native language. Thanks to the myriad of languages spoken in India, I had the opportunity to learn two additional languages; Hindi and Sanskrit. Note, *en passant*, English was already part of the curriculum, and I started learning English at the age of three. However, I never envisaged myself fluently speaking English at the time, not least writing original coherent articles. At this point, let me tell you, this is not a story about how I learned a new language or how it had any influence on my life, but about someone, a teacher, who made an everlasting impact in my life.

Jayasree was the course instructor for Sanskrit; a fifty-two-year-old lady at the time, and on the first week of classes, would ask the students to write Sanskrit letters on a notebook, say 2-3 times and get it examined the very next day. These recitations are a common practice when you learn a new language at a young age. It was the second day of classes, and the teacher was scanning through the notebooks, except that I didn't have one to show my work. Now, let me take a slight digression and unravel the situation here. My father was a laborer; to be precise, he used to paint buildings with daily earnings of 150 rupees which would be a little more than two dollars in 2021. You could imagine, even in India, for a family of four with two children, this number was never enough. On top of that, June was the month of monsoon in Kerala, a time when nobody would prefer to get their houses painted. Consequently, my father was jobless for weeks. He would borrow money from someone and make sure we had sufficient food, but anything more than that was challenging. As time progressed,

our living conditions got better, but I will not delve into those details for now. Back to the main story, to be honest, as a ten-year-old, I was scared to face the instructor. For your information, in India, teachers used to cane students under the circumstances of disobedience. Nevertheless, I decided to be honest and explained my situation to her. To my surprise, she was calm and let me go back to my bench. The following day, she called me up, and I could see a bunch of notebooks on her desk. She gave it to me and said, "This is for you; if you need anything else, let me know and never let your financial background dictate your academic performance." I can't recall what was going through my mind at the time, speechless, and overwhelmed with gratitude, but above all, I believe it gave me a sense of responsibility to demand more from myself. For the following three years, she would guide me to generate the best out of myself, not just academically, but to participate in almost every activity in my school. They had a significant impact on shaping my character. She would even pay for my school trips to ensure I could enjoy a day with my friends. On the last day of classes before retirement, she called me to her office for one last time and said, "You have great potential, and through constant hard work, you will reach the top. Never doubt your abilities and make us all proud". Even after graduation, occasionally, I visited my favourite teacher in her house near North Paravoor; she would offer me books to read and make sure nothing stopped me from following my dream. This continued till I moved to Thiruvananthapuram for higher studies.

Sixteen years later, I am in the United States doing PhD in Physics, still following the dream. On 25th January 2021, I received a WhatsApp message from my sister back in India with an obituary notice of Jayasree teacher. I typically am not a person vulnerable to emotions, but that message did produce a few drops of tears in my eyes. I took a moment to contemplate on my life and realized

how an act of compassion, even as small as a notebook for a fellow student, could transform one's life, and I wish she were around to see that progress.

*Jayakrishnan*