

IITs – The nursery of Indian Bridge

The Oxford dictionary meaning of a nursery is “*An institution or environment in which certain types of people or qualities are fostered or bred*” – the seventies and eighties saw a lot of bridge flora from the IITs which have now bloomed into bouquets of flowers today. Unfortunately, the nursery started choking in the nineties and is non-existent today. It is a story which started with “Once upon a time” but did not have the usual ending of “they lived happily ever after”. Bridge players from that era usually hum

*Remember how we laughed away the hours
And think of all the great things we would do
Those were the days my friend
We thought they'd never end*

None of us ever learnt Bridge by attending classes and listening to lectures. We learnt it by just talking to friends and observing people playing the game. Hostel life was very informal and every IIT used to have one room designated as a “Bridge Room” – no fancy tables, bidding boxes or convention cards but just a couple of packs of cards and we used to drag the writing table to the centre of the room and pull three chairs from neighbouring rooms and were all set to go. When chairs were not available, sitting on the floor and playing was a practical option. My room was a designated “bridge room” and I had great difficulty in getting people out of my room when I wanted to sleep or study for a “perio” next day. The unwritten rule was “if light is ON in room 311, Godavari, we can go and play bridge”.

Every deal used to take much more than 7 minutes. Bridge was never played with just 4 players – it was usually with a number of kibitzers who were either learning the game or waiting to give their expert comments. Each deal was followed by debates, discussions and sometimes serious arguments till someone would say that it is time for the next deal. All of this led to learning and a stepping stone for becoming good to expert players.

While inter-IIT sports event did not have Bridge as a discipline, inter-hostel matches were keenly contested. Another key contest was IIMC-XLRI match where Bridge was included as both colleges had reasonable players. Of course, we had kibitzers galore to watch the inter-hostel matches which was played in two rooms on the same wing. I still recollect **Sunderram** who used to raise his cards like a toast on every deal saying he was practising how to show the cards

to kibitzers as that was how kibitzers saw the cards in nationals – no vugraph or CCTV. Players used to play and there used to be a mini-stadium around the players and they had to raise their cards and show it before every deal.

While we had our differences on how the deal should have been bid or played, it was fun and here is a list of anecdotes from the good old days:

- Everyone was so engrossed with the game that it was always a “top of the mind” item. Bridge players ordering “**singleton**” and “**doubleton**” omelettes used to be so common that the mess staff started using the terminology to the amusement of non-bridge players
- People were named on bridge terminologies – **Rajkumar**, a player of great stature was and is called “Kibitzer” as he more often than not kibitzed and did not play. “Bridge in the menagerie” by Victor Mollo used to be a very popular book in those days – we used to name players based on characters from the book. I recollect a player from T-Nagar club who used to be a permanent kibitzer who was called “Oscar the owl” who would say that if you had finessed the 5 of spades, you would make the contract and before he could continue, everyone piled on to him saying how he always commented after seeing all the four hands
- Our only transport to tournaments used to be IIT bus to gate and then public bus service. On return from tournaments, we would normally miss our last IIT bus and would have forgotten to tell for late dinner in the mess. The result was a 2 KM walk to the hostel from the gate. We used to buy a lot of “**murruku**” (chakli) from Chandran’s shop at the gate and the 2 KM walk used to involve heated discussions on the goof-ups of the day with broken pieces of “murukku”)in your mouth. I met Chandran (yes, the shop is still there but much bigger now) when we went for our silver reunion and he remembered us and gave us free “murukku”. He said that students don’t patronize him as much as we did in those days
- Even staff and faculty of IIT used to play bridge. It was common for students to encounter their professors as opponents at the bridge table and the dilemma was whether the result of the match will impact grades – it actually was the contrary – the staff encouraged us to play bridge and we actually became friends with each other.

What is the reason why this analytical-logical-fun game died down at IITs? Primarily, competition has become much more severe and hence more focus on academics. Students want to focus more on outdoor sports and have little time for mind sports. Those who are interested in cards prefer to play Poker as it can be played online and it increases their pocket money. Alas, the king of card games is no longer the King – not even the Queen or Jack in the priority list of students.

We need to move forward and re-invigorate the game of Bridge in what used to be the most fertile land of Bridge. We are in the world where people need to be taught the game through formal class room training, practical training and supervision of play. Efforts are being made to bring rain and plant the seeds so that the nursery of Bridge is booming with green plants and flora again.

And finally, a sweet young thing asked me my unforgettable moment in Bridge at IIT. After a little pause, I said, “It is the first non-Mumbai person I met on my second day at IIT – **Sriram Srinivasan**. He was ex-Lovedale and used to play Bridge at Burnpur club and he introduced the game to me and within a week we played Panicker system (south Indian version of KD Joshi) at a staff club tournament and actually won the pairs event. That got me hooked on to this game which is now my passion for the rest of my life.