

Returning Home

Nobel Laurette Arno Penzias, the President of Bell Labs when I was an intern there, advised us students: “you learn best by experimenting and trying out different things, and you can do so without fear here because Bell Labs has the resilience and strength to tolerate the mistakes you'll make in that process.” But he warned us “But remember it'll be difficult for you to come back for a job here because we would remember all your mistakes!”

We got similar warnings from our NRI friends and peers in the US when we contemplated returning to Manipal (hometown) for good. “There are no jobs in India, let alone Manipal, worthy of your education, experience and exposure. You will have to start your own”, they said.

“But starting your own in your hometown will be very difficult. No one will have faith in you or your mega ideas. Why, your mother's obstetrician and your paediatrician have seen you butt naked. Your parents, your school teachers, your relatives, your schoolmates, your neighbors and your hometown community remember your every childhood fault and failure. They will treat you as they did when you were a child, and never respect you for the wise and experienced adult you now are”, they warned.

“Besides, your last name is just not suited for India. To be successful in India your last name must end in either the first or last letter of India, as in Gandhi, Ambani, Premji, Pai or Tata, Birla, Hinduja, Mallya. You are a Bhat, your last name ends in T, you are only suited for Tibet in the Himalayas”, they joked.

And then they advised: “Forget your parents, they are your past; think of your children, they are your future!” Brutal it may sound, but it was well meaning, and I'm sure your relatives abroad will hear likewise from their friends.

I did not heed the warning of the Nobel Laurette and chose to do my first job at Bell Labs. Neither did we heed the warning by our NRI friends and chose to return to Manipal.

We believe that culture and tradition, moral and ethical values imbibed in us when young, is fast dwindling everywhere and if at all there's a place that would continue to nourish it, it has to be our hometown community, that sowed it into us in the first place. Hometown is where there's love and caring, and our real well-wishers.

Ultimately, our health, our well-being, our mental peace and our motivation to live would all be at its peak only in the company of our loved ones and real well-wishers.

Asaukhyadalli Baruvaru Yellaru, Saukhyadalli Yaroo Illa
Saukhyadi Vottiddare Yellaru, Asaukhya baruvudu ati mella

Everyone visits us when we are ill, But not a soul when we are well.
If together we be when well, Much longer would we remain well.

One cannot prevent illness, nor avoid death. But a patient heals much faster in the company of loved ones, and death can be postponed if there's motivation to live. Death becomes easier to accept and easier on the conscience for the surviving, if they have spent quality time with the deceased much before the dying moments.

No doubt there is truth in the warning by our NRI friends and by returning home we'll have put our professional careers at risk and lose a lot financially. No doubt we may not easily earn the professional respect we would elsewhere. Perhaps that's the price to pay to be able to be with your loved ones when they are well instead of only when they are ill.

Perhaps it's also true that my paediatrician still remembers my secret mole. Maybe it's true we'll face more criticism from our relatives than anyone else. It is perhaps true that our hometown lacks confidence in our decisions and mocks at our grand plans. But it is my paediatrician, our relatives, neighbors and school teachers that take real pride in our success, and feel happy without any malice. It may be true that they have not forgotten any of our faults and failures, but the most important thing about our hometown is that they have forgiven, and continue to forgive, our flaws and let us learn and grow. To err is after all human, but you can expect to be forgiven only back home.

It is this big quality of forgiveness from those around them that the world's most successful have banked on..Consider the world's most successful, if you measure success by wealth.

World #1, Bill Gates, lives and works in his birthplace Redmond.

World #2, Warren Buffet, lives and works in his birthplace Omaha.

World #3 Carlos Slim Helu, lives and works in his birthplace Mexico City, and so the list goes on.

They all became extremely successful in their own hometowns, and not in New York, or Paris or London.

If you seriously think about it, this shouldn't come as a real surprise: If the good Lord chose to put you there, that's probably the best place for you! Who knows better than God what's good for you?

And that's what I believe in, and that's why I and my brothers are here with our parents, and that's the reason we started Manipal Dot Net. Not only to create jobs for ourselves, but also make it that bit easier for those willing to pay the price to come back home and be with their loved ones when they are well instead of only when they are ill.

We were prepared to take the hit financially and also willing to lose out on professional respect we would've earned elsewhere, but one thing we chose not to compromise on is technical depth. Our primary motive is staying on the forefront of technology even if it means slower growth initially. Right from the start, we've decided to work on projects that are technically very sophisticated, very challenging and worthy of our skill and expertise, very similar to the ones we would have worked on had we been abroad.

Like many others we brand ourselves to be a software company, although the kind of software we do is quite different. Unlike many others, we also brand ourselves a hardware company, the first in Udupi / Mangalore districts. We are starting that here on the terrace of our parents' house.

We wish to be a team of good human beings, people who value culture and tradition, who hold high moral and ethical values, and who respect and revere our elders. People who want to work on technology to make life better, and not on technology that gets fitted on a life destructing missile. People who believe in fairness in sharing rewards and who want to give back to the community that nourished us.

For the technically learned, wise and mature enough to want to pay the price to be back home, MDN would fit right into their long term plans. Such persons would have the technical skill and expertise to work on the complex problems we tackle. I'm happy to say that within a very short time, we've 4 PhDs, together having over 5 decades of research expertise of international repute.

For the young and ignorant, who lack the knowledge or experience to contribute to what we are doing, we provide an entry point as a trainee. An opportunity to learn these sophisticated skills that took us ages to acquire, entirely free of cost. Sometimes we offer a very nominal stipend too. We teach and train them and let them work on live projects in a guided manner. But they need to have the motivation, receptiveness and patience to learn. These are state-of-the-art, technically sophisticated tough things, not taught even in the most advanced universities, and take a while to acquire. Typically we find that the young are enthusiastic and want to learn such things, but they need their parents and relatives to support their decision. Unfortunately, community opinion makes the parents force their children to find immediate jobs in brand name companies, jobs that offer good remuneration in place of technical depth, jobs that are far away from home.

If the community supports us and blesses us, such opinions can change, and then truly nothing can stop us from aiming for the impossible: Saukhyadi Vottiruvuru Yellaru, To remain together when well!

It is your support, blessings and good wishes for MDN that I humbly seek. And for your forgiveness for mistakes we are bound to commit in the future, as we learn by exploring..

Oh, and about the last letter in our last name. We're working on it, just as a precautionary measure. We're thinking of either changing our last names to Bhatta, or changing India to Bharat.

For now, Jai Bharat!

About the Author: Dr. Narasimha B. Bhat is the founder and MD of Manipal Dot Net (<http://www.manipal.net>), a start-up in Manipal, South India. MDN was started in 2004 as a Software Technology Parks of India (STPI) unit, and in 2007 became the first Electronic Hardware Technology Park (EHTP) unit in Udupi and Mangalore Districts. Dr. Bhat worked at AT&T Bell Labs Murray Hill and Synopsis Inc, USA before returning to India. He has a PhD from U. C. Berkeley, ME from IISc Bangalore and BE from MIT, Manipal.