

## **MY FRIEND MADHAVAN**

### **A Personal Remembrance**

*By Prof. Samir Barua*

We were neighbors residing in adjacent houses on campus, with the front and the backyards, separated by a hedge. As I shut my eyes and remember Madhavan, memories flood my mind.

We were contemporaries at D16, the dormitory that housed the doctoral students at IIMA. We belonged to the same area, known those days as Production & Quantitative Methods (P&QM) Area. Madhavan was my senior, having joined the doctoral program a year before I did in 1976.

My interaction with Madhavan were limited in student days. In addition to being a wizard in statistics, I knew him as a person who managed the students' store on campus largely by himself. On numerous occasions I would see him get down from an autorickshaw and carry heavy bags filled with goods up the path and the stairs to the store on the first floor of a Dorm. He would never ask for help to lug the bags but would accept help offered with a smile, gratitude written all over it. Words were so unnecessary.

We joined the institute faculty in 1980, within months of each other. While I joined the P&QM Area, Madhavan initially joined the CMA (Centre for Management of Agriculture) and later took a transfer to the P&QM Area, where he truly belonged. My first professional association with Madhavan came when we served on the Admission Committee for the PGP (Post Graduate Programme) in Management. Madhavan and I were put in charge of framing questions for the Quantitative Methods and the Data Interpretation sections of the CAT (Common Admissions Test). In no time I realized that Madhavan was a fountainhead of ideas. He would conjure up questions that would truly test the understanding of the candidates. My contribution to the process was soon relegated to one of wording the questions and the suggested answers properly and removing some questions that I felt tested the understanding of the candidates a little too much! The two years I worked with Madhavan on admissions added to my ability to see the world through quantitative reasoning.

Though we were neighbors, we would rarely run into Madhavan. He came home only to eat and sleep. Rest of the time, he would be either in his office or minding the students' store or helping some hapless students with intrigues of Mathematics and Statistics. We will have to coax him to join us sometimes for a meal. He would come punctually, have his meal, and leave immediately. There would be little socialization. On occasions I would try to hold him back by requesting him to sit for a while. However, I soon realized the futility of holding him back. He would sit with me due to my insistence but say nothing. Finally, I asked him why he was in a rush all the time. With a disarming smile, he said, 'There is so much to do and so little time.' We soon accepted him as a wonderful person, with a charming smile, and with little conventional social skills.

As neighbor, I vividly recall one episode. Early morning one day, we heard Madhavan scolding someone loudly enough to be heard by us. As it was so unusual, we (Alka and I) went out and found that the newspaper boy was being scolded. After the boy was permitted to go, we asked Madhavan what had happened. We learnt that despite instructions to the contrary, the newsboy had stopped delivering Economic Times (ET) as the boy had realized that Madhavan was away (on his annual summer vacation). The newsboy's defense was that after being able to shove the papers under the front door for several days, he was unable to do that any further as the papers inside had clogged the opening under the door. Madhavan's argument was that instead of stopping delivery, he should have shoved the papers under the huge backdoor to the living room or the kitchen door. I was curious about why Madhavan wanted to ensure uninterrupted delivery of Economic Times. When asked

Madhavan confessed that he rarely read the paper. He however subscribed to the paper as a repository of primary source of data on stock prices and companies. Surprised, I asked, 'But why would you need that data? You have no interest in stock market or finance.' He said, 'I store them as the editions of Economic Times kept in the library are frayed and are difficult to extract data from. I can supply the old ET to anyone who may need them.' He invited me to see his stockpile of neatly stacked editions of ET that occupied the living room, part of the kitchen and the bedroom! As I worked on capital markets, I knew where to go if I was looking for data on companies and stock prices. I benefited on several occasions from Madhavan's stockpile.

In the eighties, I worked with Madhavan on two large advisory assignments. One was in the co-operative textile sector and the other was in the Petroleum sector. The assignments were difficult, particularly the latter, where it was necessary to work with large data. In those days, handling and processing large data was not as easy as now. We were building a large optimization model. While formulating the problem and interpreting the results was my forte, it was Madhavan who coaxed MS Excel to manage the data and make it ready for input to an optimization program (CPLEX, if I recall the name correctly). We would work closely, to try out various modelling options. It took us several weeks to complete the assignment. I realized that the assignment was worth converting into published work, an applied paper, and a case on optimization. I even wrote up the initial drafts of the paper and the case and gave them to Madhavan for his comments. I never got any response from Madhavan. Once the assignment was over, the commitment had been fulfilled. He had no interest in publishing as that did not matter to him in the least. I too lost interest after some time. Before I retired from the institute in 2016, I casually asked Madhavan whether he had the clearance letter we had received from the organization to publish, based on the assignment. In less than 48 hours, Madhavan mailed to me the scanned copy of the permission letter. The unpublished drafts are still with me – somewhere in the pile of papers I carry – as reminder of a great academic, who never hankered for conventional academic glory.

The year was 1988. We were headed to the US, where I was to work for a year as visiting professor in a university, on leave from the institute. I had gone ahead; Alka and Dumpy were to follow. One evening while I was away, Alka ran into Madhavan who asked Alka, 'When are Dumpy and you planning to leave for US?' In a mood to have fun with Madhavan, a (jokingly) serious faced Alka told Madhavan, 'I have to arrange for funds to travel to the US.' Madhavan looked a little nonplussed and did not say anything in response. The next morning, there was a knock on the door and Alka found Madhavan standing on the threshold. She had forgotten entirely about the conversation she had with Madhavan the previous evening. He came in and very solicitously whispered to Alka, 'I can give you whatever funds I have, to help you travel to the US.' Alka immediately recalled the conversation she had with Madhavan. It took a while for Alka to convince Madhavan that there was no funding problem and what she had said was said in jest. That is how Madhavan was. Always ready to help, unasked, with everything he possessed.

The nineties witnessed addition of a new compulsory course, Mathematics and Statistics for Management III (MSM III), in the first year of PGP. The 15-session course was on classical statistics that covered probability distributions and statistical inferencing. Madhavan and I were to offer the course. Madhavan was to be the lead and I the rookie instructor. I had never done a formal course on statistics. My exposure to the subject was through its application to decision making and quality control. The dozen years I co-taught the course with Madhavan were game changer for me. I started studying statistics to prepare myself for the course. As I progressed in my understanding of statistics, with help from Madhavan, I realized the mastery he had over the subject. He would be able to derive the most abstruse results, starting from first principles. I had never found anyone with that kind of thorough knowledge of the subjects they taught. The learning from Madhavan while teaching MSM

III was the foundation for my comfort with statistics that proved of immense value to me as an academic. And the knowledge was imparted to me through an unobtrusive process of osmosis by Madhavan.

The year was in the second half of nineties. I had lost my dad. And mom had chosen to live alone at Nagpur. Madhavan and I were travelling to Nagpur for some data collection. I was planning to stay with mom. Madhavan readily accepted my invitation to stay with her too. He was going to be in Nagpur just for two nights. Mom was happy to not only have her son stay with her, but also a friend of his. The first thing she wanted to know was what would he like to eat. Madhavan simply said, 'Whatever you cook is okay with me.' I suddenly recalled that Madhavan preferred not to eat cauliflower. I told mom that other than that and of course no non-vegetarian food, he was okay with all items. The evening dinner on the first day was a feast as mom prepared a range of items. Madhavan ate everything he was served, without saying a word. My mom could not help asking him whether he liked the food. Madhavan said yes with a smile and added that he had particularly liked the raita she had made with grated carrots. Mom was happy to share the recipe with him, as he told her that he would make that item in Ahmedabad too, as he cooked his own food. By the time Madhavan left, recipes for several items were exchanged between mom and Madhavan, with Madhavan telling her how he cooked his rasam and sambhar. In those less than 48 hours, Madhavan developed a bond with my mom that would last forever. Later, whenever mom would visit us at Ahmedabad and Madhavan came over for a meal, carrot raita would always be on the menu.

The year was 2000. Dumpy had Sanskrit as a subject. The school did not have a Sanskrit teacher. The kids were asked to study on their own. As the marks in Sanskrit were not included in the mark-sheet, no one paid much attention to the subject. A couple of weeks before the exam, Dumpy happily informed us that he would probably get a zero in Sanskrit. And while Sanskrit did not figure in the final marks-sheet, passing was necessary. Neither Alka nor I had studied Sanskrit and therefore were in no position to help Dumpy at such a short notice. Madhavan was the answer to the problem we faced. I called up Madhavan to find out whether he could accommodate spending some time with Dumpy on Sanskrit over the next few days. He readily agreed and set up one hour a day from the very next day. As arranged, Dumpy would hop across the hedge with his Sanskrit book to Madhavan's house every day. On return, the first day, he informed us that the book had not been opened. Instead, Madhavan had recited several 'shlokas' in Sanskrit and translated them into English for him. He also told him several stories with Sanskrit words and phrases woven into the story telling. I got worried by the fifth day, when I was told by Dumpy that the book had still not been opened. Dumpy told us, 'I feel very spiritual after spending time with Madhavan uncle.' The lessons continued till the day before the exam.

On the last few days before the exam, Madhavan asked Dumpy to open the book and read the chapters, which he could quite easily. Dumpy could also understand on his own what he read. He could also answer the questions posed at the end of the chapters in Sanskrit, with a few mistakes that Madhavan corrected, explaining to him why he had made those mistakes.

Madhavan's parting words to Dumpy, on the eve of the exam were, 'You are ready'. Dumpy scored 94/100 in the exam, vindicating the circuitous process of instruction Madhavan had adopted. That was Madhavan's style of teaching, often to the exasperation of students, parents and colleagues who looked for quick solutions and answers.

I became Director of the institute in 2007. Madhavan was still with the institute, post retirement, as visiting faculty. He continued to teach Statistical Method and Data Analysis (SMDA), a course that trained generations of students to draw inferences from data for practical applications and academic research. I was happy to continue the arrangement as Madhavan was an invaluable asset to the institute. A couple of years into my directorship, I started receiving disquieting feedback on

Madhavan's classes. Apparently, his hearing was compromised, and students found it difficult to deal with that in the classroom as he would not hear the questions asked or the answers given. I requested Madhavan for a meeting. He came. I asked him whether he had any hearing difficulty. He could not hear my question, sitting across the table, as I had asked the question softly. On repeating the question, a little loudly, he replied that he did have some difficulty, but it was not serious. I suggested that he should think of using hearing aid. He looked at me and conveyed that he was not inclined. I said, 'Madhavan, wearing a hearing aid is no different from wearing specs, which you do.' I informed him that there had been complaints from students on this count. I suggested that he should think about using a hearing aid. He did not reply. I also told him that he should see me more often. He said, 'No. You must be so busy now. I would not like to disturb you.' I told him, 'Madhavan, you are always welcome. No matter how busy I am. Do see me, whenever you have the time.' I had to let him go when he turned 70.

Madhavan had become an institution in his lifetime. With his dissociation, the institute lost an institution that epitomized the best the institute offers. After 2011, my meetings with Madhavan became increasingly less frequent and more fleeting. I could see that age was catching up with him. The unstated affection for me had remained intact. The last meeting, I recall with him was when he informed me that he was writing a book with Dr. Mote. I was overjoyed. I said, 'Wonderful, Madhavan. You are finally doing what you should have done much earlier. You should next write a book on SMDA – convert your notes into a book.' A childlike smile lit up his face on my response. He appeared happy and at peace with the world.

I had not met Madhavan for over two years. The virus has made the world so insular that one does not meet even one's neighbors. Just a couple of weeks ago, as we took our morning walk, and went past the colony where Madhavan lived in Ahmedabad, I told Alka, 'I need to find out about Madhavan. Maybe he has gone back to Chennai.' And then I got the news that Madhavan was no more. I felt utterly shattered. Mysterious are the ways of the Almighty. Why was I not given an opportunity to say my final good-bye? The consolation I have is in the belief that wherever he is, Madhavan is at peace with himself while selflessly helping those around him.