

A BRILLIANT MIND

An Assistant Professor of Information Science at Simmons College in Boston Massachusetts, USA, Naresh Kumar Agarwal's work entails studying informed minds in the age of information. But to most, he is best known as the boy who gave TNA Gangtok its highest academic achievement in 28 years of establishment

Exceptionally tall and the brightest mind to emerge through the portals of Tashi Namgyal Academy Gangtok (TNA) in its 28-year history – that is how his juniors and peers from school remember Naresh Kumar Agarwal.

In the early nineties, Naresh made a history of sorts when his Class X and Class XII board examination performances shattered all previous records to take academic aspirations at his alma mater to an all-time high – a feat which rightfully earned him the school's highest honour, the Founder's Medal for Best All-Round Student 1994. He was also the school captain, and the only second non-Nepali/Bhutia/Lepcha to bag the position in the school's history.

One look at his resume post-school and you will find that he was only getting warmed up!

Hailing from one of the oldest business families of Gangtok, Naresh is the son of Marulal Agarwal and Durga Devi Agarwal of New Market in Gangtok. Currently based in the United States of America where he lives with his wife who's a physician and 2 ½ -year-old daughter Eesha, he is an Assistant Professor at the Graduate School of Library and Information Science, Simmons College in Boston, Massachusetts. He holds a Bachelor's degree in Applied Science (Computer Engineering) Honours from Nanyang Technological University (NTU) Singapore and a PhD in Information Systems/Science from the Department of Information Systems, School of Computing, National University of Singapore (NUS). Apart from teaching and research, Naresh is also currently working on the initial stages of two books - an illustrated synthesis of the Bhagavad Gita and 'Choices', a book which is being developed from a paper on 'Theoretical Model of Happiness' that he is working on at present.



Being associated with a field which, in this age of Information & Technology, is as cutting edge as it can get, Naresh finds himself forever competing with each of his own new accomplishments. In an email correspondence, Talk Sikkim found out that the 33-year-old certainly has what it takes to not only shine but outshine in a job as challenging as his.

School: 'The brains of TNA'

Ever since he joined Tashi Namgyal Academy Gangtok in 1982 as a 4-year-old, Naresh never knew what second position felt like. In LKG (Lower Kindergarten), he got double-promoted to Class I. He went on to stand first in class all the way to his twelfth standard. In 1993, he set his first

historic academic record after scoring 91.8% in the Class X ICSE board examinations. Following close on its heels was his second historic feat in Class XII ISC board examinations when he topped the school with 91.75% score. The school captain was named the Best All Round Student for the year 1994.

“In a student survey which I conducted for a school publication and which eventually never got published, I was voted ‘The brains of TNA’. My friend Siddhartha later chided me for including the question when I knew what the answer would be!” recalled Naresh of his unofficial title in school.

Apart from academic feats, Naresh also bagged several prizes for his performance in elocutions and debates in both Hindi and English. Sports however was not his forte and the annual cross-country races and marathons summed up the extent of his participation.

“I did learn to swim though,” he added.

After his brilliant performance in school, the only way for him was forward.

College: Sikkim to Singapore

After school, Naresh won the coveted SIA/NOL (Singapore Airlines/Neptune Orient Lines) Scholarship, a 100% scholarship for undergraduate studies which is awarded to about 50 students all over India for two universities in Singapore – the National University of Singapore (NUS) and

the Nanyang Technological University (NTU). Naresh joined the latter where he pursued his Bachelor of Applied Science (Computer Engineering) – Honors from 1995 to 1999.

“At NTU, I was surrounded by school toppers and I became just one among many. In 1999, I graduated with Honours (Upper Second Class). This was considered good, but I regretted not having secured a First Class Honours,” shared Naresh. He did his six-month internship with Hewlett Packard.

Since the scholarship came with a six-year bond to work for a Singapore-registered company, after his graduation, Naresh worked in the corporate sector from 1999 to 2004. He worked in various domains such as Voice-over-IP, Telecom, BioInformatics and Digital Cinema Technology, largely in Singapore but also for some time in the Bay Area California as well as a few months in Hyderabad. For two years, he worked with Mediaring.com, a Voice-over-IP company where he was part of a 5-member team that designed and developed solutions to allow people to make calls between computers and between computers and phones.

“This was much before ‘Skype’ became a common word,” he added.

At Innova Solutions, Naresh was based in Santa Clara, California where he analysed technology gaps and identified solutions and helped build prototypes which were then handed



With Helen Drinan, President of Simmons College during the all college Convocation in September 2010.



During the ICIS 2008 (International Conference on Information Systems) in Paris, December 2008

over to a team to be developed in full.

“In my role in BioInformatics, I worked with Helixense, a small start-up in Singapore where I worked with genomics databases. In GDC Technology, I helped design and build solutions for digital cinema. I spent a couple of months in Mumbai in Goregaon, Filmcity where my company was working with Manmohan Shetty to set up digital cinema servers in 400 theatres across India. I travelled to small villages in Maharashtra setting up and configuring digital cinema servers in movie theatres there. I also went to Los Angeles and worked with Technicolor, which is where they process most Hollywood movies, and with Disney and Warner Brothers among others, in coming up with new standards for Digital Cinema,” he informed.

In 2005, Naresh decided to go back to studying and enrolled for a PhD in the Department of Information Systems, School of Computing, National University of Singapore (NUS). The title of his thesis is ‘Information Seeking Behavior and Context: Theoretical Frameworks and an Empirical Study of Source Use’.

This time, he worked to get a perfect score. In the 8 courses he had to take, he got five A+s and three As – securing a perfect GPA of 4.0/4.0.

“I finished my data collection in 2008 and then worked on my thesis in New York City for a few months, during which time my daughter was born on September 26 2008, two days before my birthday! During that time, I also went to various conferences and interviewed for faculty positions in the US.

My wife was then doing her 3-year medical residency at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine/Jacobi Medical Center. I went back to Singapore for my pre-thesis submission defense in early 2009. In July 2009, I joined Simmons College, Boston and began teaching in Fall/September 2009. I was formally awarded my PhD in April 2010. As we were just moving to Boston, I had to miss my convocation held in Singapore in July that year. I did have the opportunity to wear my graduation gown as a faculty member during the Simmons College convocation in September,” he informed.

Teaching: An informed mind igniting minds

He has three primary duties as a professor – teaching, research and service.

On the requirements of being good at what he does, Naresh emphasized, “For teaching, you need to be able to communicate well enough with the students to help them make sense of what you are teaching, especially the more difficult topics. For research, you need to be good at connecting, synthesizing, creating, studying, reading, writing and critical thinking. Finally, for service, you need to work with people towards a common goal.”

His research efforts have won him travel and research grants and his works have been published in reputed journals and conference proceedings. Early this year, a paper based on his PhD work was accepted for publication at the Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology – a primer journal in the field of Information Science. On March 1, his work entitled “Ram’s Search for Sita in the Ramayana: Information Seeking Behavior in an ancient Indian Epic” was accepted for the First Annual Conference on Information and Religion, which he’ll present in Kent, Ohio in May this year.

Talking about the two books that he is working on which have stemmed from his research interests, Naresh explained, “I like to bring together diverse points of view – synthesizing contradictions and various points of view and putting them together in conceptual or theoretical models and frameworks. I am working on a paper on the ‘Theoretical Model of Happiness’, something which stems from my seven commandments in life. Last year, I also started work on writing an illustrated synthesis of the Bhagvad Gita, which brings together the commentaries on the Gita from various perspectives – Bhakti, Vedanta and modern day life. The paper on happiness may translate into a book which I have titled “Choices”, where I will talk about the various options we exercise in life and paint scenarios upon going either way. Another topic that interests me is ‘Identity’. I have a working paper, ‘Towards a theory of expanding circles of Identity’, which was accepted at the Doctoral Students Conference in Kyoto, Japan in 2009.”

Hailing from a small town and making it really big in the dream job destination of the world, how did he cope with the huge disparity in people and culture?

“I think my small-town upbringing in Gangtok has helped me tremendously. Firstly, the diversity in Gangtok has helped me appreciate the diversity I see all around wherever I go. I

believe you get what you want – you just need to decide what you really want. I became financially independent when I was 18. I didn't need to take any money from home right since I passed Class XII. I think life, by its very definition, is difficult. We just have to learn to be happy with what we have and what we don't have, while constantly striving to contribute and to make a difference. It really doesn't matter where you are from, to an extent, as long as you are ready to work and work hard for your dreams," he stressed.

His 'Choices'

So, was he always inclined towards this line of work, especially the academic part of it?

"I guess I arrived at PhD and life as an academic by a process of elimination. My years in the industry were great and required working with computers. Growing up, I wanted to become a Computer Engineer because it was one of the most difficult streams of engineering to get in. By the time, I completed my engineering and began working, there was an IT boom, and almost any Indian you'd meet outside India was perceived to be a Computer Engineer. People would meet me and say, "India? Good in Maths? Computer Engineer?" Thus, I became one of the many again. As I learnt more about the PhD and life as an academic, I realized it requires researching on areas which interest you, conversing with an audience, and working with people. All of these are activities I greatly enjoy. Also, here my work can tie very well to my life's mission. It need not be two separate things as in the industry, where you are working for an employer. Here, every publication you write has your name to it. This held true when I was a PhD student in the National University of Singapore and is true now, when I'm a faculty member at Simmons College. Also, the satisfaction of igniting minds when teaching is unparalleled," Naresh shared.

Other interests

There is more to Naresh Agarwal than just computers and information science.

With a passion for fine arts since a child, Naresh has participated in/held exhibitions in school and college and won prizes. He works with oil, water colour and pencil. Apart from painting, he has also tried his hand at sculpture. In 2007-08, he led a student team to sculpt in marble for the NUS School of Computing with the help of sculptor Chong Fah Cheong.

Another surprise up his sleeve is acting and modeling. During his Singapore days, Naresh bagged part-time roles in TV series such as Mediacorp Singapore Channel 5's True Files Seasons 3 & 4, Killer Waves and MTV Rouge. "My wife was the one who really helped me get into it", he shared. He painting process was once captured and featured as part of a TV series.

His debating skills have of course won him accolades since school. He was among the top 15 debaters at NTU Singapore (1996-99), while he was also a member of NTU Inter-Varsity Debating Squad and an AIDA-certified International Debates Adjudicator.

Languages are another area of interest. While he is fluent in English, Hindi, Nepali and Marwari, he has spent time trying to pick up a little of Tamil, French, Mandarin and Sanskrit.



Making an acrylic painting for ASEAN for the TV shoot, Travelling Palette in Philippines in October 2007

The road ahead

For now, it's getting the tenure at the college so that he can proceed to the next level of his profession – that as a tenured Associate Professor.

"The biggest challenge for a tenure-track faculty member or Assistant Professor is getting the tenure. Six years after you are employed, you are supposed to put together a dossier which shows you have made an impact in teaching, through excellent and consistent peer and student ratings, in research – through a stream of publications in peer-reviewed journals, conference proceedings, books etc.- and service – through evidence of service to the school, college, profession/community. We have an annual dossier we submit each year in October. Making it through the mid-point review (after three years) and getting the tenure is where I go from here. At that point, you become an Associate Professor. I think this is a good thing as it helps you work together things which are important to you. When I first interviewed at Simmons, I told my interviewers that I see myself getting old at Simmons. The vision is still the same." Naresh added.

"I do want to start an organization on identity where people vow not to stereotype. Along with my teaching, research and service, I also want to work on my two books – on the Bhagavad Gita and 'Choices'. And of course, continue making people smile," he added.

On plans to return to Sikkim and work here, if any, Naresh informed, "Sikkim is extremely dear to me. Since 1995, I have always made it a point to come back at least once a year, twice if I am lucky. My mission in life is to make a tremendous difference to humanity as a whole – both through writing and working with people. I do want to do some good work in Sikkim. I'm hoping to be able to do some work once I get my tenure, where I could use part of my summer months working on research and other projects in Sikkim. My wife who is a medical doctor and currently is a Teaching Hospitalist at Carney Hospital, Boston, wants to do some work in Sikkim and Darjeeling herself."