

Abhilash C. Singh

☎ (44) 745 933 4955

✉ [abhilashcsingh@gmail.com](mailto:abhilashcsingh@gmail.com)

*An (Academic) Life Worth Living* 🌐 <https://abhilashcsingh.github.io>

I was hyper-enthusiastic about getting into an IIT when I was 16 (for those unfamiliar with the phrase IIT, here's a *western-oriented* [video](#) of what IIT means to the world). As a young kid from a tier-2 city in India, IITs seemed to me as the only choice to obtain the best engineering education. Once inside IIT Bombay (henceforth referred to as IITB or merely "college"), I quickly realised that I wasn't the smartest one around (and anyone who tells you differently about themselves while on the IITB campus are fooling themselves). However, my life wasn't sorted. I didn't do well in my first two years with a CPI (Indian version of GPA system) of 7.5 out of 10. The campus vine made me believe that I wasn't tech-oriented and I should definitely go for non-core. Hence, I gave up on my core branch and started reaching out to IIM/TISS profs for internships. I spent the summers working in non-core research and training positions.

The third year of college came with surprises. The academic year started with an exchange stint at The Cooper Union School in New York City. Here I met Civil Engineering students who were juggling studies and full-time work. This somehow sparked a fire in me which I didn't know existed. I started taking my civil engineering core curriculum seriously, and returned with an invigorating desire to my IITB campus a semester later. For the three semesters that followed, I consistently performed well in my classes, actively juggled internships with Hindustan Construction Company Mumbai, University of Alberta and others, and managed to secure a top job at a big-pharma consulting firm. Simultaneously, I had also applied to the top Civil Engineering graduate programs in the USA and EU. Towards the end of my college life in 2016, I had managed to secure two full-time job offers and five fully-funded graduate fellowships. I chose the graduate fellowship at UT Austin, Texas!

I had planned everything.

I would do my Masters and my PhD within 5 years, graduate in 2021, secure a tenure-track position and lead a happy fulfilled academic life in the US. Oh, and I would get tenure by 2025.

Life was now research.

I had my whole life planned out for the next 10 years.

You would notice that as a 22 year old, I had effectively extrapolated 50% of my life. It was, to put it mildly, naive! Of the big 5 career stages I envisioned, I did a total of 1 (Masters in Civil engineering).

You'd notice that I said that I had my whole life planned for the next 10 years. The reality

was that I had only planned my career, not my life. In my young head, life equaled career. But life was much bigger. While the story of my graduate education at UT Austin is one that deserves its own write-up, essentially it left me a broken young man full of doubts, challenges and a dwindling fire.

Once I left UT Austin (and the US), I began to question for the very first time, "What do I want my life to look like?" I first realised that sustainable relationships are important. My decision to get married fresh into my PhD was nothing short of extraordinary for a still-surviving young research enthusiast. My decision to stay in academia and get my PhD was driven not just by my continued faith in an academic-life but also a desire to create a life that I can be proud of. In the words of my science idol Dr Richard Feynman, "Science is the understanding of the behaviour nature. It is fundamentally about contributing to the improvement of the human condition." Well, back to my story, I started my PhD at Imperial College London. A new place, new challenges, and a completely new life to establish from scratch. This was my 3rd attempt at starting from scratch, after Mumbai and Texas of course.

Life was now research and relationships.

A couple years into my PhD, COVID happened. It disrupted my academic life substantially, but also gave me (and my father) and big death scare. There was another aspect I may have overlooked, health!

Life was now research, relationships and health.

As I turned 30 last year, I have finished my PhD, gotten over my academic stresses of the past, rebuilt myself yet again and oh, started another new life from scratch in Ireland. Let me see, this is the 4th time around I guess.... Life is now about *impactful* research and not motivated towards churning out a yet another marginally-improved probit model (those who know, they know ; ) ).

Life was now impactful research, relationships and health.

As I have grown older, my circle is much smaller than when I was 18. It is enriching! I live a life devoid of social media, live in the present, workout a few times a week, and would rather watch *The Office* with wife at supper on Friday at 7 pm, than literally anything else. I don't think I would have gotten here if my original plan had worked out. We will never be in complete control of our lives. But perhaps that's what life is all about, giving ourselves that extra space to grow. Or, as my fellow choice modellers might say, *allow for stochasticity in a rather deterministic system*.

I am constantly discovering and re-discovering myself. The biggest lesson yet has been to allow for changes in life, go with the flow, and be passionate about getting to live this life. And yes, never be afraid to ask questions. After all, that's just how you learn.