

The Vibes Haven't Changed

Returning to campus, fifteen years later, with family and a heart full of memory

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It began before the campus had fully woken. Eyes closed, sitting beneath a neem tree in the early morning quiet, I let the birds do the talking. I had expected birdsong to be background — pleasant, forgettable — but something about this particular morning, in this particular place, made me listen differently. The sounds were not noise. They were presence. A gentle insistence that we are never truly alone, that we are stitched into something much larger than our daily concerns, connected to a cosmos that hums along quietly whether or not we have the stillness to notice it. I thanked the campus, inwardly and sincerely, for what it had made of me. And then I simply sat, trying to absorb what I could — the wisdom embedded in the old trees, the energy that still rises from the soil here, the particular quality of silence that Roorkee has always known how to hold.

There is something about returning to a place that formed you. It is not quite nostalgia — nostalgia is passive, a kind of pleasant aching — this was more active, more reciprocal. As if the place remembered me too.

"The campus has changed considerably. The vibes have not shifted even slightly. Some things, it turns out, are not made of brick and mortar."

I had come back to walk the grounds I once called home — four years of machine drawing deadlines, solid mechanics headaches, long evenings spent worrying about submissions and longer ones spent forgetting about them entirely, friendships forged in

the particular crucible of shared struggle, and the sort of education that no syllabus fully captures. I came this time with family: my wife, my five-year-old son with his inexhaustible questions about everything, and the quiet, perhaps irrational hope that some of what shaped me might speak to them too, might give them some sense of the place that, in ways I am still discovering, gave me to myself.

✦ **The Tree That Held a Story**

Curiosity, it seems, never left me at the campus gates — I simply packed it into storage for the working years and found it waiting here, intact, when I returned. A small QR code affixed to the neem tree caught my eye, and what it led to genuinely stopped me still. The campus had published a beautifully compiled book cataloguing its flora — not merely botanical names and classifications, but mythological and historical stories woven through each entry, connecting these old trees to the long, continuous river of Indian civilisation. I stood there and read about the Kadamba tree, beneath whose branches Lord Krishna once played on the banks of the Yamuna — catching its round, fragrant fruit with the easy grace of a child who happens to be the divine, fully absorbed in the simple joy of the moment. The same tree grows here, on this campus, quietly ancient and entirely unassuming, carrying stories the institution never thought it necessary to announce.

It was one of those discoveries that reframes something you had walked past a hundred times. These were never just trees. They were witnesses, archives, living chapters of a story far older than any of us who have studied beneath them.

✦ **What Has Changed, and What Endures**

New bhawans have risen, and they are impressive. Departments have multiplied — interdisciplinary programmes, modern research centres, branches of knowledge that didn't exist as fields of study when we were here — all of it occupying space that was once open green, as if the institution has been quietly, steadily growing into the full scope of its own ambition. The physical footprint is considerably larger than most alumni will remember. Students I spoke to mentioned that Ravindra Canteen is no longer the

gravitational centre of campus social life it once was — that role has apparently been claimed by VK, a newer building, and a constellation of cafés and eateries that have appeared across campus. The UG Club has shifted from its old central location to the गांव end, near the bhawans of Ganga, Cautley, Rajiv and Rajendra, with CCD operating nearby.

And yet. Walk past the lawns surrounding the Main Building — the James Thomason heritage structure, white and serene and unapologetically itself against a March sky — and the essential Roorkee reasserts itself with total conviction. It was flowering season, and the grounds were brilliant with colour, different varieties in bloom all at once, surrounding the old building like an offering. My family, who had heard me speak about this campus for years, fell quiet in front of it. Some buildings do that. They speak without needing to be introduced.

I was fortunate to meet, briefly and unexpectedly, a couple of the professors who had shaped my time here — the DORA, and the professor who had guided my BTP. Their warmth was immediate, their enthusiasm for their work and their students entirely undimmed by the years. This institution does not merely employ its teachers. It keeps them, in the fullest sense — it keeps something alive in them that many workplaces quietly extinguish. That, perhaps more than any ranking or infrastructure, is the truest measure of what Roorkee is.

♦ A Five-Year-Old and the Sundial

My son stood in front of the sundial and stared at it with the focused intensity that children reserve for things they sense are important before they fully understand why. I explained it to him as carefully as I could — how the shadow moves as the earth turns, how our ancestors read time from the sky with the same ease we now read it from a screen, how something as vast and indifferent as the sun can be made to serve something as human and specific as knowing when to stop working and go home. He listened. He gave it the slow, considered nod that is his highest form of approval. Then he asked if he could touch it. Of course he could.

We also walked to the Ganga canal ghat, which has been transformed over the past fifteen years into a properly developed space — steps, open views, room to breathe and to reflect. I was told that a Ganga Aarti has begun in the evenings here now, lanterns and chanting rising from the same water that once simply flowed past our rushed, preoccupied student lives. We took photographs on the ghat, and it felt like the right thing to do — some moments deserve to be marked, to be held against the light and kept.

"The jeera aloo at Snack Point near the Century Gate. I cannot explain in rational terms what it does to you, except to say that it takes you back — not as memory, but as physical fact."

♦ Flavours That Collapse Time

The Milk Bar lassi — cold, creamy, deeply familiar, and precisely the same as it has always been. After the long days of machine drawing sessions that left the mind wrung out and the body heavy with fatigue, this was the reward we allowed ourselves, a cold glass that seemed to reset everything, to remind you that there was a world outside the drawing hall and that it was worth returning to. One sip, standing there with my family, and I was briefly, completely, twenty years old again. Not the way photographs make you feel twenty — distant, slightly foreign — but from the inside, viscerally, as if the years had simply stepped aside for a moment.

And then the jeera aloo from Snack Point near the Century Gate. There are foods that are technically simple and entirely irreproducible in any other context — this is one of them. We had spent years tolerating the mess food, making our peace with the aloo that appeared in every other preparation in forms we had long stopped questioning. And then there was this. The very same seasoning, the very same texture, producing the very same involuntary response — eyes closed, the specific satisfaction of something that asks nothing of you except that you be present for it. I watched my family eat it and could not quite explain why I was smiling so widely. Some pleasures are personal in a way that resists translation.

♦ Bhawan Day, Murals, and the Philosophy of the Hostel Room

RKB Bhawan was decorated and electric when we passed — it was Bhawan Day, and the air near the hostels crackled with the particular anticipation of students preparing to put themselves on display, to cook for the campus and perform for it and show it what their community is made of. I could see the sparkling eyes from a distance. That energy — the excitement of collective belonging, of a bhawan pulling together and presenting its best self to the rest of the institution — is one of those things that cannot be manufactured or designed into a curriculum. It simply arises, year after year, from the fact of people living together closely enough to become, briefly but genuinely, a family.

At Ravindra Bhawan, the murals at the entrance stopped me completely. Joker and Batman stared from the walls, and below them the caption: *Tumse na ho payega*. Hostel irreverence is a very particular art form — simultaneously self-deprecating and defiant, a joke that is also a battle cry — and this campus has always practised it with flair. The gym nearby has improved significantly; students were playing volleyball and football in the lawns between the wings in the late afternoon light, and the whole scene had the unhurried quality of a place that knows how to be itself without effort.

We found a room. The current inmate had spray-painted the wall in a design that was genuinely quite good, had removed the bedsheet from the bed in a gesture of sovereign freedom from convention, and had distributed his clothes across the chair and the bed in that specific arrangement that is less a mess and more a philosophy — a declaration that he is here to think, not to tidy. My children looked around, uncertain. I looked around and felt, unexpectedly and completely, at home.

We left as the evening softened into gold. March clouds rolled gently across a sky that was improbably blue for the end of the month, and the temperature held at that rare, generous midpoint between too warm and too cool that feels, when you're standing in it, like a small grace. God was kind with the weather, and with everything else about that day.

My son declared, on the long walk back through the campus, that it would take "many, many days" to see all of this. He said it as a fact, without complaint, as a statement about the sheer scale of what surrounded him. He was right. Four years was barely enough. But it was enough to be changed by — enough to instil something that has not diminished with distance or time or the accumulating demands of adult life. Returning, even briefly, even as a visitor now where I was once a resident, is enough to feel that change again — warm and certain and entirely real.

*Roorkee didn't simply teach me engineering.
It taught me how to pay attention — to trees, to birds, to sundials,
to the particular taste of something that matters.*

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