

FROM SCIENCE TO SCIENCE COMMUNICATION

Chetna Krishna

A female branch manager at a local government bank changed my life.

“Will you make your parents proud?” she asked while enquiring about my student loan application.

My father was a retired government officer then and was oblivious to my offer letter to study in Germany. My mother and I visited several banks before finally meeting this branch manager. She saw something in me, even when I didn't match all the criteria for a background that a bank wants. She accepted my student loan application, which later became my wings for a life in Europe.

I had received a competitive rank in the IIT-JEE exam, yet it was not sufficient to get into the govt-funded engineering institutes. That meant the other route was slightly more expensive, private engineering colleges. I tried that and left it. Then, I went to the National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT) in Kangra, Himachal Pradesh, as a fashion technology student. All this time, I had an offer letter from Germany, which I did not take seriously because I was afraid it would be too expensive and too far. Sooner or later, I realised I wanted to take the leap of faith. I called my mother, sharing these feelings. We visited my friend who had informed me about studies in Germany. We used to play table tennis together back in high school when, after many years, I found out from his Instagram stories that he was studying in Germany. Both he and his father guided me in finances. No tuition fee for education in Germany was one of the biggest reasons I allowed myself to dream a little big. He convinced me that the biggest cost I have to manage is the living cost.

I embarked on my first flight outside India, from New Delhi to Moscow to a city I had never heard the name of before: Düsseldorf, en route to a beautiful, small town called Aachen. Leaving the comfort of my home and homeland at the age of 18 was honestly speaking, very exciting. Little did life know, that wasn't it.

In a short time, I made friends from around the world who were also away from home, from Indonesia, Vietnam, etc. But I wasn't happy. I realised I didn't want to become an engineer. I felt lonely and burdened and couldn't bring myself to share this thought with anyone, including family, as it was an expensive thought. I had come this far.

German engineering is known to be world-class, be it examples like BMW, Mercedes Benz, or Volkswagen.



Hosting live sessions from CERN's underground tunnels to show the world's biggest scientific experiments like the Large Hadron Collider

“We don't want our engineers to make bridges that collapse,” were the words of my physics professor when students protested why only ten students cleared the exam in a class of 110 students. That was a defining moment for me. I would have become a very good engineering student on books because I'm Asian and competitive, but did I really want to become an engineer? Whether out of trend, interest, or hope to have a better socio-economic life like in many emerging nations, most students with high school science subjects are prepared for either medical or engineering colleges. I didn't realise that I also ended up in a rut and had side-lined my creative interests and skills. But sometimes, many of us do not have the luxury of choosing, as the circumstances define those decisions. It wasn't easy for me either.

Since I had come to Germany as an international student, my study visa explicitly stated that I would be studying natural sciences or engineering. I couldn't switch to another study programme, like Communications or International Relations like my interests, in that semester. Spending six months on something that I knew I did not want to continue felt like a burden, financially and emotionally.

I am grateful to have found a study programme at another university that matched my odd interests, a mix of Bachelor of Science in Bionics and Science Communication. Professors of this programme strongly believed that interdisciplinary disciplines like science communication should be a part of engineering faculty and science communicators should have a basic understanding of natural sciences. I enjoyed studying bionics as I knew I could enter the real world as a professional science communication specialist. My scientific background is now my strength, and I'm not limited by it.

The programme is no longer offered at the university, making some of us the only science communication graduates with 4-years of experience in studying science communication in practice and theory at an undergraduate level. While many 1 or 2-year-long science communication Master's degrees exist, choosing science communication as my primary domain of education stood me apart and equipped me with an understanding of the social sciences of communications and