



CONFESIONS OF A CAPRICIOUS CHARACTER SUTIRTH DEY

I was born in Kolkata, India in 1978 and grew up in the ancient cities of Pataliputra (present-day Patna) and Indraprastha (present-day Delhi). After obtaining a doctorate in population dynamics in 2007, I joined the Biology Division of the Indian Institute of Science Education and Research, Pune as an Assistant Professor. Professionally, I teach ecology and evolution to undergraduates and try to unravel how population sizes change over time and space. In my spare time, I listen to traditional Indian music, read poetry and watch movies of all kinds. – Address: Biology Division, Indian Institute of Science, Education and Research, Central Tower, Sai Trinity Building, Pashan, Pune, India 411021. E-mail: s.dey@iiserpune.ac.in

*“Where shall I begin, please your Majesty?” he asked.
“Begin at the beginning,” the King said gravely, “and go on till you come to the end: then stop.”*
Chapter XII, Alice in Wonderland, Lewis Carroll

A circle has no end.
Second Foundation, Isaac Asimov

So what were you trying to say in this report?

I am not very sure.

Come on ... you wrote it!

So what? I often have no idea of what I am doing. This was probably another example of that.

But you must have a feel for what you were trying to express.

Not entirely. They wanted me to write about my stay at the Kolleg, describing my work, my interaction with other colleagues, and my experiences both for better and for worse in Berlin. I did not know what to write. I asked them if they were expecting a scholarly article, they said no. I had nothing noteworthy to contribute. So, I simply ... wrote.

Good God, was it that bad an experience?

Certainly not. It was one of the best things in my life to date. As a fellow Fellow remarked, it was like a second childhood.

Then ... what? Why can't you write about it?

The problem is that it was also one of the most remarkable things in the life of forty or so other people last year, and another forty the year before, and another forty ... all the way back to 1981–1982. Between them, these people have exhausted all that I could have said, and that too, in far better prose. There was no point in my repeating all that stuff.

I think that you are being ridiculous here. No two people ever experience the same event in exactly the same way. And in this case, the events are not even the same. OK, Tuesday colloquia probably always happened on Tuesdays, and the trees in Grunewald probably have not been replaced in the last 20 years or so, but what about the rest? New Fellows arrive every year, the relative representation of different disciplines in the Kolleg changes, and well, even the Permanent Fellows at Wiko are constantly being replaced by other Permanent Fellows. Above all, Berlin constantly reinvents itself ... and that too at a frightening, maddening pace. So it is almost certain that you saw some things in a way that the others did not, felt something that was unique. How difficult is it to write about those experiences?

It is not at all difficult to write about things that I feel are important. But how do I know if these will interest my readers? Worse, what if I am pretty certain that these will not interest anyone?

Come on ... you do not have to know anything. Just talk about all the things that had an impact on you and leave it to the readers to draw whatever conclusions they want to.

But that would be mind-numbingly, skull-crackingly boring!

What?

Talking about impressive things. To speak about how I relished the discussions at the lunch table ... loved walking in the Grunewald ... marveled at the excellent support staff, wishing that I could steal them for my institute ... I mean ... I did enjoy each of these things immensely, but not in a way that I suspect is sufficiently different from what has already been written about.

I do not think that, barring the Wiko staff, too many people would have read a large number of old yearbook reports. And even if somebody did read them, why should that bother you? You were not writing for Science or Nature where novelty and marketability are among the major things that count. Nor were you trying to win a Pulitzer with your prose. You just had to write an honest piece about whatever it was that you wanted to convey.

That was the key point. I honestly did not want to write about things that have already been described in the past. But I had no interesting account of my own, which meant I did not know what I wished to write. That more or less sums it up for me.

Hmm. So you have ended up writing something, and you have no idea of what it is or what it says. And now you are worried about ... what?

Nothing. The piece is done, I just need to mail it to them now. It is for them to decide whether it is worthy of publication or not.

And what if they object?

I will write a regular “Wiko was amazing” piece for them.

Interesting ... Incidentally, you did seem to be worried, or let us say eager, about being different from the previous articles in the yearbooks. Any success in that?

I hope so, at least in terms of form. Now whether the content makes any sense or not would be for the readers to decide.

I see. So ... what form have you used?

A dialogue between me and myself. Nothing novel probably, but I hope that no Wiko Fellow has done so in the past.

Are you sure? I vaguely remember someone telling me ...

I think I know the articles that you refer to ... one of them is in the form of a dialogue between two people, the other uses some dialogues to make a point or two. Mine is sort of an aimless, self-referential chit-chat with some pontification thrown in here and there. It is probably closer to coffee-table prattle than the kinds of stuff that you typically expect in a Wiko yearbook.

Is it? And what kind of “stuff” do you normally see in a yearbook?

All the pieces that I have read were written like regular articles. You know ... a nice beginning, solid middle and a skillful end. In terms of content, some authors talk about how exciting the trip was and how they could accomplish a large number of things, how Wiko changed their life, etc. Others write on some piece of work they did at Wiko or before coming there. And of course, some do a combo.

And I assume that you did not expound on any of these matters in your article.

None whatsoever. Wiko affected me pretty much the same way as it did others: it was a liberating one-of-a-kind experience ... I am happy that I went there ... I came to know a lot of new things ... met a large number of very nice people whose company I enjoyed ... loved every moment ... got some work done ... did not do a lot of what was planned ... did a lot of what was never planned ... and so on. In short, the final outcome was memorable.

Uh-huh. So you had some kind of plans! Intriguing. I always thought that you took life as it came by. Tell me ... why did you go there?

Several reasons actually. For full five years, I listened to my Ph.D. supervisor, an ex-Fellow, extolling the virtues of Wiko and Berlin. I needed to put some visuals to all those descriptions that I had collected in my head. Also, I guess that I wanted to interact with the social scientists. This was the time when I was trying to figure out practical ways of integrating natural sciences and social sciences in the undergraduate curriculum of our institute. I felt that Wiko would be an ideal place to discover what the other culture did, how they thought, how they reasoned. Of course, I also had a fascination about social scientists as a group ever since I had read that comparative account of natural scientists and social scientists. The possibility of observing so many of them at such close quarters was too good to be missed.

Yes, I remember you pondering upon that piece. Social scientists prefer to deliver their talks sitting, generally read from written notes and tend to quote profusely, whereas natural scientists typically talk standing, do not use written notes and hardly use quotations. Right? I never understood why that article fascinated you so much.

Neither did I, to be frank. Let us say, it was plain curiosity.

Anyway, what did you find?

Well, my sample size was much smaller and, unlike the original author, I am not a professional behavioral ecologist. So I have a lot less data to base my observations on. But within the limits of my experience, I think that the author was spot on in terms of reading from notes and extensive quotations. All the social science talks I attended at Wiko, and thereafter, corroborated those two observations. However on all these occasions, the speakers were standing.

What?

They delivered their talks standing, contrary to what the previous author had said.

Maybe Wiko forgot to provide chairs!

Not really. As a matter of fact, the chairs were provided, but the social scientists preferred to stand at the podium and seemed completely at ease. Nobody began with an apology or an explanation either.

So you have data conflict.

Right. Now, the simplest reconciliation would be that one of the two observations is wrong, in which case no further explanation is needed. An alternate would be that there really is no pattern to it, and social scientists speak in whatever conformation they want to – the data obtained are merely sampling artifacts. However, there exists a third possibility, which is a tantalizing one for me.

You mean if both observations are correct? But hang on ... that would mean, all else being equal, a major behavioral shift in a span of about three–four years! That is rather hard to imagine if the sitting behavior of social scientists is indeed maintained by drift and history and not by selection, as the previous author thought.

Exactly! If you consider the average biological age of the speakers who delivered those colloquia, it is clear that they can not belong to a different “generation” from the ones described by the previous observer. Therefore, assuming that a behavioral shift has happened, the only thing that could have caused such a change in so short a time would be selection, and a fairly strong one at that. But what kind of a selective pressure could it be? The influence of natural scientists? Unlikely, to say the least. Willingness to conform to a common way of delivering talks! Why, and more importantly, why now? This is the stage after which I cannot think of anything. I simply do not know enough of what is happening in that coterie!

You had three months of pristine time in your hand and all you could do was to wonder why some academicians sit and others stand while delivering talks! And after all that you could not even develop a proper theory out of it! This is wastage of time ...

Maybe ... but it was a lot of fun. I figured out that this might be the only occasion in my life when people around me would not care too much about what I was doing. So I had to utilize the opportunity to the fullest ...

Yeah, I wanted to ask you about some of those things that you did. I remember that you never gave a talk at Wiko, although several people requested you time and again to speak about your work.

True.

Why?

To be honest, I cannot give a proper answer, although I have thought a lot about it. In some sense, I guess, I experimented with an alter ego – one of the many that I would like to live through. You see, I normally like delivering talks ... public speaking is my hobby ... but I just did not want to give a talk at Wiko. Similarly, I like cooking and I can cook. But I refused to cook for myself at Wiko. In fact, to digress a little, I did not cook even for a single day, which led the nice lady at the dining hall to believe that I did not know where the kitchen was. So about two months after I landed at that place, she came up to me and apologized profusely for not showing me the kitchen, explained to me that I was expected to use the kitchen and almost proceeded to give me a guided tour of how to use the kitchen appliances. It took me some time to convince her that I knew where the kitchen was and how to use the gadgets in it.

Lazy.

I don't think so. She was a very nice lady who was concerned that I ...

Not the lady! You. I think that you were being lazy and were simply goofing off.

Ummm ... unlikely. You see, I was walking about 2–3 km or more every evening to get food whereas the kitchen was about ten meters from my room. It would have been far easier and timesaving for me to cook. And if you are referring to talks, like most natural scientists, I too have a set of PowerPoint presentations ready on different aspects of my work. I think we can rule out laziness.

But then why didn't you give the talks? I am sure that at least some people must have thought that you were arrogant; others probably felt you were shy or unsocial or both.

True. In fact I vividly remember the last Thursday that I was there. Typically, departing Fellows make a small farewell speech at these Thursday dinners, and I had anticipated that I would be requested to make one. So I got something ready in my head even before I reached the dining hall. As the dinner was about to end, the person who generally made the announcements came to me quietly and asked whether I would be comfortable making a farewell speech. Now although that shows what other Fellows thought of me, I must say that I loved that gesture ... that concern. In fact, that moment was the high point for me at Wiko ... to see that people cared sufficiently about the feelings of a person to put it above conventions. I have given many talks in the past and will probably give a few more in the future, but this small speech that I did not give, will certainly remain as one of the most memorable ones.

You prepared a speech and then you did not deliver it! Why, what did you gain from this?

My gain was that I said goodbye to Wiko the way I wanted to, and that was important for me.

Is this the post-ultra-modernist way of saying goodbye? By keeping mum at a farewell?

Actually it is a pretty ancient way. You know, every year there is a fair of the *bauls*, a group of religious/folk singers from Bengal, at Shantiniketan. Incidentally, this is the place where Rabindranath Tagore founded his university. They used to have a tradition at that fair ... nobody in the audience claps after a song is finished, they just stay silent and then the next piece begins. Apparently, they think that clapping destroys the atmosphere and trivializes the emotions that an artist is trying to convey.

So were you under the impression that these farewell speeches are emotional affairs?

No, but I felt that, at least for me, this was a better way of saying goodbye than proclaiming "I am going to miss you all."

But what good does it do if people do not even realize that you are saying goodbye to them?

I admit that it does not serve the purpose of my audience, but then I say goodbye because I feel happy saying so. Therefore I claim that I have a right to bid farewell the way I want to.

Come on, this is not mathematics where you specify your axioms, state your inference rules, and everything else follows. This is a social interaction and you can not unilaterally define the way it should be conducted. There are established norms of every society, which must be followed.

Correct. But I already stated that I was trying out a different persona and hence was not doing anything that I would routinely do in my life. So it fits.

No it does not. It is one thing to be a little eccentric, completely another to behave like an unsocial moron. You had a chance to interact with some of the best minds in the world, and all you could do was to sit silently in a corner and observe who was standing and who was sitting!

Not entirely. I was also trying to uncover deep mysteries of Wiko ...

Why do I have a strange feeling about this?

Because you are trying to rationalize everything in a frame of reference that is different from mine. Anyway, before going to Wiko, I was browsing the list of Fellows when I noticed that there were no mathematicians in the group. After arriving there, I checked the list of past Fellows for a few years and found that mathematicians were sort of under-represented. I found that to be rather unusual since the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, on which Wiko is supposedly modeled, always placed a rather high premium on mathematicians. So obviously I had to figure it out. I put the question to one of the Wiko administrators, whose answer did not really satisfy me.

What was the answer?

To be frank, I forgot. But I remember that it made no sense at that time, which of course made me more curious. Anyway, I put the question to another Wiko administrator over lunch, and his answer was much more intriguing. He claimed that mathematicians are so absorbed in themselves that they do not seem to need the social/cross-fertilizing component, which is the essence of Wiko, and hence, mathematicians as a group are underrepresented at that place.

That's interesting.

Yes. In fact, the administrator recounted the story of a certain mathematician, who never spoke to another senior mathematician at the Kolleg, but was simply happy that the greater mathematician existed at hand. I was about to proclaim that I have probably found a soul mate and would be highly obliged to get the name and contact details of the junior mathematician, when I realized that it was meant as an example of the kind of non-interaction that the administrator thought was unfruitful!

But you said that Wiko leaves people on their own, then why should it bother about whether the Fellows mingle or not? Moreover, you can always find introverts among academicians or creative artists and hence it is not possible for Wiko to predict anything about the interaction among people. They can just bring everybody together and hope for the best!

As a matter of fact, that's what they do. I can vouch for their no-interference policy – they left me strictly alone, even when I was spending a lot of time confined to myself! Also, as I was told, it is untrue that they do not call mathematicians; it is just that they invite fewer of them. As far as why the lack of interaction, if true, bothers them ... I must confess that I did not figure that out to my satisfaction.

So, you failed again!

In doing something meaningful? Yes. But then, that's my insight from reflecting on my experience at Wiko. Everything has a meaning for someone in some context. Problems start happening to *you* when *you* fail to comprehend either the meaning or the context.

You almost sound like a sensei in one of those martial art movies. But honestly, do you feel that this is a profound insight? Lift any old Zen text and you shall find similar thoughts.

The concept might be old, but the realizations are my own. The Zen examples were gained by the respective Zen masters; the concept of an undelivered farewell speech resonates with me; the uninvited mathematicians make sense to Wiko. Hence their existences are justifiable.

The babbles of a lunatic and the actions of a tyrant might be completely meaningful and justifiable to themselves, so why not accept these as well?

If you do not add a value or ethical judgment, then at least I do not see any problems. If you decide to involve ethics, then we have to judge these actions in the context of their impact on others. The babbles of a lunatic distress those around them and the activities of a tyrant typically bring sorrow to a large number of people. Hence such actions are not permissible, even if they are meaningful in some context.

But what if I have low tolerance levels for incomprehensible sound waves? The babble of a lunatic is not different from a talk that I do not understand ... music that does not touch my soul is noise to me. So why should this piece of Zen matter to me?

What matters is not my evaluation of the thought or the piece of music, but my perception of the speaker or the musician. The moment I ascribe meaning to everything, what I do not understand or appreciate is defined to be *meaningful-outside-my frame-of-reference* and not *meaningless-in-my-frame-of-reference*. In other words, I lose my right to call anyone a fool, and that, for me, is the definition of humility.

So is that what you have to show from your stint at Wiko, realizing a not-so-new definition of humility?

Maybe, but even this is incomplete. The deeper problem is how do I realize that I have realized something and not merely glanced at it? For instance, I feel that I have realized this particular piece of Zen. But is that really true, or have I merely thought about it, without internalizing its full implications?

There we go again! But then tell me ... if you cannot even be certain about realizations of your own mind, how can you be confident about the impact of something on other people's minds? To take a concrete example, you were fairly positive that you have not said anything worthwhile in your article. But can you really be so sure about that, if you are not even sure about your own realizations?

Ummm ... I think that you've got me there. There always remains a possibility that some one might find something interesting in my report, although, my feeling is that the chances are rather slim. But then I can comprehend only a part of my thoughts and it is possible that somebody else might be able to extract more meaning from my piece than what I felt I had put in. After all, isn't that part of what a commentator or a critic is supposed to do – highlight the unstated components of a creation?

I think that will depend at least partly on what you said and how you expressed it.

True.

So what were you trying to say in this report?

I am not very sure.

Come on ... you wrote it!

So what? I often have no idea of what I am doing ...

Epilogue

The (amateur) playwright in me decrees that this epilogue is superfluous; the (non-existent) historian in me compels me to document the references and all the factors that influenced this piece. I wanted to capture some aspect of the soul of Wiko in my contribution to the yearbook. When I had browsed through the previous reports, most of them seemed to have imbibed the spirit of either the Tuesday colloquia or the Thursday dinners: scholarly/delightful but always formal. Therefore I chose to focus on something that was a more endearing feature of the place for me: the freewheeling conversations that happened anywhere, often went nowhere, and yet were interesting and left some kind of an indefinable impression. If you are a Wiko Fellow/staff and this piece reminds you of one of those playful yet passionate chit-chats, then I have done my job.

This piece is dramatized and should be considered as such. However, every incident mentioned in it did happen during my stay at Wiko, although the spins that I have put on them are obviously my own. The article on comparing scientists and social scientists that I refer to so extensively was written by Raghavendra Gadagkar and appears on page 167 of the “25 Jahre Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin 1981–2006”. Several copies of this book existed in the Wiko library when I left the place. The sentence “They wanted me to write about ... my experiences both for better and for worse in Berlin” is paraphrased from a letter by the Rector to all the Fellows of 2008–2009. Many thanks to Angelika Leuchter for pointing out the three other yearbook reports that use dialogues. In terms of the other people mentioned in my report: I know who they are, and they will hopefully recognize themselves. I like it that way! Finally, this article is my own little tribute to the two master craftsmen whose skills I can only admire with awe. Messrs. Maurits Cornelis Escher and Michael J. Frayn, here’s to you!