



IITian debuts as author with Penguin

By **Suneetha**

Creative Indian techies are on a roll these days. Every few months, we hear of a bright techie hitting the limelight with his artistic or creative pursuits. Joining the bandwagon today is Paritosh Uttam, an IIT M alumnus, and a practicing techie. His debut novel with none other than Penguin Books is out this month.

Techgoss spoke to Paritosh and here is our conversation.

Techgoss (TG): Tell us about yourself, your education, your career so far and currently what do you do, where are you located?

Paritosh Uttam (PU): By profession, I am a software engineer based in Pune. My present designation is "Technical Architect". I have around ten years of IT industry experience in all, in software companies in Bangalore and Pune. The domain I am currently involved in is routing protocols. I have worked in various domains and technologies including image processing, multimedia, wireless messaging, etc. I do like to get a handle on as many domains as I can. And I probably also get bored of working in the same domain for years together!

By educational qualifications, I am an Electronics & Electrical engineer. I did my B. Tech in Electrical Engg. from IIT Madras (1994-98) and my M. E. in System Science & Automation in IISc Bangalore (1998-2000). I am 33, and married.

TG: You have an impressive background in academics, and your alma maters are the best places, you have worked in different domains and technologies including image processing, multimedia search engines, wireless messaging, and routing protocols. How did the transformation into a writer take place? What sparked your interest in writing?

PU: My father has been a scientist in ISRO, and my mother a language teacher with MA in English, Hindi and Sanskrit. So there always was an atmosphere of academics and books and literature at home. Reading was always encouraged and that led me to devour books right

from my childhood, from my 5th standard or so. In my 9th standard, I had written a humorous article about a debating competition in school and my parents encouraged me to send it to Young World (a weekly supplement for children), The Hindu. The article was published and appreciated by friends and elders alike. That bit of success probably sparked off the belief in me that I had a flair for writing.

But it remained a hobby, something that I liked to do "on the side" until college. Only a few years after I began working, I realized that I might be good at academics and work, but it wouldn't be unique or something memorable. If there was a talent I had that could give me the satisfaction of achieving something special, it had to be writing. I had never left off reading, so the influence of literature never left me, even when I was not serious about writing.

TG: Many Indians study to be doctors, engineers and MBAs only because their parents want that. How many IITs do you know who landed up in IIT just because their parents wanted them to 'do well' in life?

PU: Probably everybody I know! We land up at IIT at the age of 17. I would think that at that age, barring some rare exception, no one would be clear in his or her mind what he actually wants to do later in life. I would even be frightened of someone that age with that kind of clarity about life :-). We seldom discussed why we landed up in IIT when we joined it. That time it was heralded as the biggest success of life, so someone questioning why he is there would be considered abnormal.

Later perhaps, at the time of passing out or starting your career, you might think: is this really what I want to do? But the IIT tag does help; it opens a few doors that might otherwise be closed. Most people tend to assume that you must be exceptionally intelligent, if not a downright genius, if you are from IIT. In some cases, perhaps you would be better off not raising other people's expectations :-)

TG: As a techie as well as a writer, do you have to switch off one side of the brain to do the other? Or does it flow effortlessly?

PU: Well, it's not as easy as switching a button on or off. It happens gradually. Usually, I try to give my mornings and weekends to writing and the conventional office hours to the techie side. The switching can be difficult either way. If I am excited by the reading/writing side, it takes some time to go back and concentrate on the techie work, and also conversely, if there's something I find exciting there, then I have to force myself to put on the writer's cap when I come back. That's why I do my writing in the mornings, since after the night's sleep you are starting tabula rasa. Once I feel I have done satisfactory writing for the day, then I can guiltlessly devote the day to my technical work.

Sometimes, they merge subconsciously. At times, I have referred to a "reader" as a "user"!

TG: Tell us about your writing successes?

PU: I have focused on short stories mainly. Poetry is not my cup of tea. Over the years, I have had short stories published in newspapers like The Statesman or magazines like Femina. Also, several e-zines. You can find the details on my website paritoshuttam.com. But my successes were not regular, and too few and far apart for my liking. That's what pushed me to take up longer works, and hence this novel, which is of course, my biggest success so far.

TG: Why have you not thought of Science-Fiction although you are a man with a lot of background for that?

PU: I used to read science-fiction a lot earlier, during my high school days; Isaac Asimov and his laws of robotics and all that stuff. Later, in IIT, I had taken a humanities course in my

final year, and the professor in that course talked a lot about serious literature. Somehow, it was that conventional definition of literature--writing about humanity--that appealed to me most. In conventional literature, you are bound by the constraints of real life. Any reader can say, "Hey, this cannot happen." And yet, the writing has to be interesting and convincing. For me, that kind of writing is more challenging.

In sci-fi and fantasy, the writer creates his own worlds, his own rules and conventions. The writer decides the constraints and the reader has to accept it. I am not putting sci-fi down, but it doesn't appeal to me as much as realistic fiction.

TG: What do you think of the Chetan Bhagat style of writing? Is your writing akin to this style?

PU: Let me put it this way. I am envious of Chetan Bhagat's success and readership, but I am not envious of his writing. Envy in a good way that I wish I could sell as many copies as he does, or be as well known. My book "Dreams in Prussian Blue" is part of a new Penguin series called Metro Reads, which probably targets a similar readership, the "reader on the go", but maybe readers with a little more discerning taste. The common part would be the objective of writing a breezy and accessible novel. But I hope that can be done through different styles of writing as long as you can create identifiable characters and situations. That does not imply that your prose has to suffer or that the characters have to talk only in Hinglish or sms lingo. So my style would be different, but that's how it should be. You wouldn't want all writers to write in the same style, would you?

TG: Do you plan to continue writing?

PU: Yes, definitely, as long as I can.

TG: Are you active in the literary world of the web?

PU: As I mentioned earlier, I have contributed to quite a few webzines. That was mainly with the intention of enhancing my web presence, so that people searching for me on the web get a taste for my writing.

TG: Which writers do you like? Any one who has helped your understand the world more than other writers?

PU: V. S. Naipaul, Nabokov, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy. This is one more reason why I prefer realistic fiction to sci-fi because the former helps you understand the world you live in, either the present or the past. Again, a great many writers from different countries, but if you ask me to pick one: V. S. Naipaul, his non-fiction in particular.

TG: What is your next book?

PU: It's too early for that. I am working on one but it's in the plot outline stage. Hopefully, finding a publisher will be quicker now.

Check out Paritosh Uttam's [website](#) to read more about him