



The Quiz catalyst

DR. NAVIN JAYAKUMAR- EDUCATION



“Passion doesn’t let go of any opportunity”, is the adage Dr. Navin Jayakumar lives by. His enthusiasm to learn something every day combined with a sense of adventure; to give that piece of data a pair of wings to go out and draw in associated bits of information and creating a canvas of knowledge, he explains is the most fundamental skill to be developed by a good quizzier.

Dr Navin Jayakumar is an ophthalmologist by profession, but his name is synonymous with The Landmark Quiz and The Murugappa Madras Quotient Quiz. He admits he had begun conducting quizzes even before he began participating as a competitive quizzier. He is also a pianist and an avid artist. With a drive to give his best, he makes a conscious effort to hone each craft every day.

“I could never look up a word in the dictionary without looking through numerous others before arriving at the word that I was searching for”, says he. He applies the same to quizzing stating that,

when he had a piece of information, he just had to dive deep into its various contexts before finally taking ownership of that piece of information in his own unique manner.

Being from a family of voracious readers, there were enough books and conversations going around to fire up the temperament that would soon make him a quizzmaster. Dr Jayakumar, a big fan of Neil O’Brien, Father of Indian quizzing, quotes the latter- the three Rs of quizzing- Read, Record and Recollect- are very important to develop the skill of quizzing. The whole family was in the habit of information-mapping with diaries filled with newspaper clippings and associated markings. His mother Sharanya Jayakumar was one of India’s first and prominent woman quizzers. Their forays into quizzing began almost together.

The first break came in the form of an opportunity to set and host a quiz as a student at Madras Medical College, followed by hosting quiz competitions at the Annual Madras Book Fair.

Being from a family of voracious readers, there were enough books and conversations going around to fire up the temperament that would soon make him a quizzmaster.



Before long, under the guidance of historian S Muthiah and under the aegis of the Murugappa Group, he got the opportunity to host the Madras 350 Quiz, to celebrate the 350th year of Madras. This would go on to become the Annual Murugappa Madras Quotient Quiz. This was in 1988-89.

In the past, and even now, most quizzes have a factoid and trivia-based format, wherein there is a direct question addressing a piece of data that one either knows or doesn’t. He likens quizzing to a sport, saying that if chess is played with chess pieces, quizzing is with bits of information. The strategy here is in being able to take

an answer and develop a question around it, based on all the knowledge that it is linked to, so that the participants might be able to work out the answer based on many different clues. Lateral thinking, he says, plays a very important part in this format of quizzing.

The Quiz Foundation of India formed the Chennai chapter in 1987. With hundreds of spirited individuals across generations, this unique style of quizzing evolved, quietly. The First Anniversary of QFI and First Anniversary of Landmark-the book shop, came together with great fanfare. In 1988, the Landmark-QFI quiz was held- the first ever quiz complete with Audio-Visual support. This was indeed a landmark year for the quizzing community in Chennai. In 1995, a decision to make it an annual event, led to the Landmark Quiz; held on August 15th of every year. The enthusiasm and fervour of the annual event made it survive through the pandemic. It opened up a great new genre of online quizzing.



Dr Jayakumar observes that it is not just the format of quizzing that has undergone an evolution, but also the patrons. He and his generation relied heavily on books and print media as the primary source of information. With the advent of the Internet, young quizzers have an ocean of knowledge at their fingertips in the form of podcasts, videos etc. He recommends older members to embrace digital platforms, and the younger ones to acquire and cultivate reading habits, especially lateral reading.

Post the pandemic; he has identified a whole new diverse group of spirited youngsters to help him set the quizzes. This would also resolve the disconnect between interests of older quiz masters and younger participants. He sincerely believes that the fresh minds will bring a fresh perspective to the mode and the momentum of the quiz. This new group was involved in setting the ClassAct 2022, The Hindustan Times Republic Day Quiz – a phenomenal success. With 50,611 participants from 32 countries, it has set a world record

for maximum participation in an online school quiz and has been entered into the Asia Book of Records and Limca Book of Records.

Today, it is possible to sit in one's own home and participate in quizzes in Norway and Finland. This has spawned camaraderie amongst quizzers in different countries, who now make time to travel specifically to meet their counterparts and take part in offline quizzes on an international stage. Perhaps this could be the start of quiz-tourism!

On the subject of women in quizzing, though the varied interests are there, women get engaged in other activities and quizzing is beaten by other priorities. He emphasizes that the way in which a woman's mind works is very different and it is important to bring in that flavour while setting the quiz. Hence, he has women on his current research team. He wishes to address their unique pattern of thinking and imbue it into the quiz. There are now forums, where the entire quiz is set by



women, the most prominent one there being a WhatsApp group called the HERd of Quizzers.

Language and content play a very important

part in the success of a quiz and these two aspects influence one another greatly. Around 80-90% of quizzes are in English. The reason for this is that, in the past, a General category Quiz always had more Western world-based knowledge/content. In recent years, he has been consciously including more India content especially into School Quizzes- upto 40-50% of the quiz- in order to nurture and propagate more knowledge about one's own country and heritage. He quotes the sheer enthusiasm of participants in the Covai Quotient Quiz that he had done recently as a marker; while children in metros are spoiled for choice, the schools in inner cities are hungry for this kind of exposure and a platform to showcase their talent. And they are brimming with aspiration. The next step should hence be to see more regional language quizzing.

He wonders over the possibility of using quizzing as a tool for rehabilitating differently-abled and neuro-divergent individuals, provided the condition is not too severe, or that it has been caught early enough. Especially in children, quiz-like stimuli can be used to develop and strengthen synapses from an early age.

Coming to education in a conventional sense, books and web-based knowledge apart, guest lectures by experts could be made a part of the curriculum in schools. Interactions replete with endeavors, success and failures, wow-moments and real time human response would enrich the academic skills, convey the relevance of the subjects taught at school, help students identify their own strengths and weaknesses, and open up a whole new passion that they never knew existed.

On the pleasure of setting a quiz, he says, however difficult and challenging it may be, the reward is in seeing the joy of arriving at an answer, the high-fives of victory and enabling knowledge. And it is for this he is truly a champion!

Aruna Suresh