

A Jump Over the Four-Foot Wall

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A story of Physics teacher in a college where unruliness is everyday occurrence.



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Sankaram, a physics teacher was known for his antics in his classroom. While teaching, he would stretch his hands back and forth; stand on his toes as if trying to reach the ceiling, tiptoe around his chair in well choreographed steps, and dance in circles like a chu-chu train, all these to make dull lessons in Physics more interesting.

One would learn about different plants in Botany. And a visit to the city arboretum to study the collection of rare and exotic plants could be exciting. Conducting chemical reactions by mixing various chemical reagents in the laboratory to make new substances is a thrill while learning Chemistry. Students are eager to visit a zoo to watch animal behavior and catch insects as part of Zoology. But Physics, a subject with no set boundaries is off limit to many students as is boring to listen to lectures and hard to understand. For example, why an apple dropped from a tree travels downwards but not upwards. Physics is full of such senseless questions and mathematical explanations. But, Sankaram's classroom antics to induce interest in students to listen to topics such as how sound travels in air or why light travels faster than sound or how people could stand steadily on the constantly rotating earth, made him a standout from the rest of the teachers.

The college where Sankaram taught was known for unruly and rowdy students. They went on strike for any cause, just to abstain from the classes. The students walked out of classes if the cafeteria food was not tasty, or if they were not allowed to cheat during the tests or teachers insist on timely submission of home work or if a train derailed hundreds of miles away as a show of sympathy to the victims. They heckled the teachers routinely, and every teacher was given a nickname that stuck for rest of their lives.

The Zoology teacher, a tall and lanky person was named after an aquatic organism with no limbs called Hydra. The Botany teacher's pants zipper was found inadvertently fly-opened on few occasions, since then he was named Venus fly trap, an attractive plant with a trap that opens and closes to catch insects. The Chemistry teacher was called H₂S for his body odor that smelled more like H₂S (hydrogen sulfide), a foul smelling chemical reagent. The Math teacher's over-bite earned him the nickname Dracula. Sankaram was referred to as Four-Foot not for his fancy footwork or other antics in the classroom but for other reasons.

The unruly students in the classroom routinely intimidated the teachers at the college; teachers could barely teach in the allotted one-hour class period. It was more of a livelihood for the teachers to be employed at the college than teaching the students. On the other hand, some students attended the college to please their parents, and some parents were proud of their children for simply attending college, no matter whether they benefited or not. For sincere students, it was hard enough to understand a tough subject like Physics and was particularly difficult to concentrate while some students disrupted the class at every opportunity.

The college was located on a hilltop next to the medical school. The wall separating the college and the adjacent medical school was around four feet high at the college level, but almost 20 feet above the ground level of the medical school due to difference in elevation. Practically, anybody that attempts to jump over the wall would be at risk of serious injury.

Scores of students took science courses (or pre-medical courses) at the college to get admission into the medical school and yet very few students, if any, eventually got admitted since the admission requirements for the medical school were very stringent.

A Jump Over the Four-Foot Wall

As a teacher, Sankaram was different; he stood apart from rest of the teachers. The unruly students did not bother Sankaram at all. When a student from back of the classroom tried to mimic Sankaram's voice to disrupt the class, "go ahead make noise but can you jump over the four-foot wall to get into medical school?" Sankaram would shot back.

In the physics class, Juggernaut sat in the first row to escape the wrath of Mr.Sankaram's barrage of questions to the troublemakers at the back of the classroom. He picked on those students who disrupted his class with mimicry and other make-believe noises. One day during the class, Sankaram unexpectedly hurled a question at Juggernaut "can you jump over the four-foot wall?"

Juggernaut shook his head and murmured "no, sir, I couldn't jump over a one-foot wall, let alone a four-foot wall."

Sankaram satisfied with the response, waived his hand at Juggernaut to sit down.

Students routinely made animals sounds from back of the classroom. "Why don't you jump over the four-foot wall and prove that you were a real jackass," Sankaram snapped at a student who growled like a donkey from the back of the classroom.

When students made sounds of mating frogs using metallic toy frogs, "yeah, I heard a sound of a frog kicking its hind legs to jump over the four-foot wall," blasted Sankaram.

The students would provoke Sankaram into a verbal duel knowingly he would jump into an animated show of mock jumping over the four-foot wall in the classroom.

There were stories abound on Sankaram's past history. As a student at the same college years ago, he went into severe depression for some time when he couldn't get into the adjacent medical school. In confused state of mind, apparently he walked back and forth along the four-foot wall talking to himself and sometimes cried over his failure. According to another story, he would jump up and down from the wall (on college side) ridiculing the entire medical profession. These stories whether true or fabricated, were circulated on the campus and passed on from year to year. Later on, he ended up as a physics teacher in the same college and with haunting memories of his failure to get into medical school he began challenging the students' ability to jump over the four-foot wall to get into medical school.

The students instantly found an appropriate nickname "four-foot" for Sankaram, ever since; he was stuck with the nickname. His antics in the classroom to make physics more interesting earned him respect among the students and his colleagues but his own failure to get into medical school constantly reminded him of the four-foot wall that separated the college from the medical school.

Over the years, the four-foot wall deteriorated exposing the weathered red-clay bricks from the daily impact of students urinating on it. During recess, the students lined up against the wall to urinate while others waited for their turn to relieve themselves. The entire length of the wall, several hundred yards, turned into a cesspool during recess since the college does not have adequate sanitary facilities to accommodate hundreds of students. The four-foot wall therefore served a purpose though not exactly what Sankaram made it appears to be in his daily reference as a wall that separates success from failure.

In 1964, the teaching staff at the college, for some unknown reasons have abandoned their responsibilities and allowed the students to cheat during the final exams. Several academically poor students scored good grades by cheating and got admission to the medical school. As a student and teacher of physics, Sankaram understood how the laws of physics operate in nature and yet he couldn't comprehend the large scale cheating incident in which the entire student body and a large number of his own fellow teachers were

A Jump Over the Four-Foot Wall

participated. The cheating incident was an insult to the injury Sankaram suffered years ago when he couldn't get into medical school. Since then, the disillusioned Sankaram kept asking "where was the outrage?"

There were several conspiracy theories abound on how and why such a wide spread cheating was allowed in 1964. However, it was clear that most students who benefited from the cheating were the children of the teaching staff at the college.

Let down by his fellow teachers' irresponsible actions, Sankaram toned down his anger in the classroom and stopped challenging the students to jump over the four-foot wall. Once in a while, he reverted to his old phrase "can you jump over the four-foot wall," but quickly added, "you could by cheating."

As a student Juggernaut failed at several attempts to get admission into medical school and years later ended up as a chemistry teacher at the same college. Within weeks after taking up the appointment, Juggernaut was slapped with the nickname chicken feet for his hand writing on the chalk board that resembled more like scratch marks left on the dirt by chicken using its feet while searching for food. Juggernaut knew then fully well that he would be referred to as chicken feet for the rest of my life both inside and outside the college campus.

When Sankaram passed away years later, his obituary was published in the evening edition of a local newspaper under the heading "Four-Foot Kicked the Bucket." He was praised for his uncanny teaching techniques such as dancing like a ballerina and other fancy footwork. Conspicuously missing was the reason that earned him the nickname Four-foot.

A Jump Over the Four-Foot Wall

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