

The story of entering CS fraternity in senior citizen age and in COVID-19 times

CS Lalitha Sitaraman*

The Company Secretary (CS) course attached itself to my to-do things in the year 1996. Our elder daughter entered college in that year and she simultaneously registered herself in CS course after passing the Foundation examination. I glanced through its guidelines, syllabus and study materials. I came to understand that as a Cost Accountant I was eligible for exemption in certain papers. It was tempting for me to join the course since I needed to write only four papers in Intermediate stage and six papers in Final stage. The papers I had to write were also familiar for me. I immediately registered myself in the course.

I owe my Cost Accountancy qualification to my employer Indian Overseas Bank (IOB). They introduced a Promotion Policy in the late 1980s which encouraged clerks to get immediate promotion on passing certain professional examinations of which Cost and Works Accountancy (CWA) course was one. Though I am basically a Mathematics postgraduate, Commerce subjects had become familiar to me when I passed CAIIB (Certified Associate of Indian Institute of Bankers) examinations as a bank employee. Inspired by the Promotion Policy of my Bank, I enrolled myself in the Institute of Cost and Works Accountants of India in the year 1987. The institute has since been renamed as The Institute of Cost Accountants of India. I successfully completed the CWA course and got promotion to Supervisory cadre in the year 1993.

Registration in CS course seemed to be an impulsive act done in over enthusiasm. In IOB, I was working in Computer Policy and Planning Department (CPPD), which was later renamed as Information Technology Department (ITD). Our bank had the unique distinction of developing of all banking software, including ATM and Core Banking Solutions software, in-house. (Our legacy software was catering to all up-to-date requirements until the year 2016 when it had to give way to vendor software to fall in line with other banks.) I had registered myself in MCA (Master of Computer Applications) course of IGNOU along with some of my department colleagues in the year 1995. I hadn't given much thought before registration in CS as to how could I find time to prepare for both the courses amidst my over stretched work and home schedules. I prepared for MCA course in what little time I could find late in the night and in the weekends. I was the first to acquire MCA degree in our department in the year 2000.

*Retired Senior Manager, Indian Overseas Bank

CS registration, being valid for five years, expired in the year 2001. I had passed only one of the two groups of Intermediate stage by that time. I had to do De Novo registration. In the meantime, the syllabus had been revised and in the new combinations of papers, my passing of one group just vanished. I had to write both the groups again. I passed one of the groups of the revised syllabus in first attempt. But before I could appear for the other group, I got extremely busy with our daughters' weddings, amidst my already tight household and work life. The registration expired again in the year 2006 without my passing the Intermediate stage. So I was back to Square One for second time! Thereafter I didn't dare to extend my registration in CS course while in service.

I had taken voluntary retirement as Senior Manager from the services of IOB in the year 2010. Like CS, MA Hindi was another course which I had abandoned midway while in service. With the grit that I had to complete the tasks I had started, I registered myself in MA Hindi course in the Distance Education program of University of Madras in the year 2013 and finished the course successfully in the year 2015. When I was about to complete MA Hindi, I registered myself in CS course in January, 2015. I had to register like a new student, as I had not extended my earlier registration in time. The syllabus had undergone a thorough change in the meantime. This time the stages have been named as Executive and Professional instead of the earlier nomenclature of Intermediate and Final. I could pass one group again in first attempt in December, 2015, thus passing one group of CS first stage for the third time. Then, when the results of December, 2017 examinations were declared in February, 2018, thank God, they carried the happy news of my passing the other group and thus the Executive stage.

I enthusiastically enrolled for all the three groups of Professional stage immediately. I had to write six papers of which two papers, viz. 'Information Technology and System Audit' (ITSA) and 'Banking Law and Practice' (BLP) were my cups of tea, thanks to my career in IOB for thirty years of which fifteen years were in ITD. The other papers were Secretarial Audit, Compliance Management and Due Diligence (SACMDD), Corporate Restructuring, Valuation and Insolvency (CRVI), Ethics, Governance and Sustainability (ESG) and Drafting, Appearance and Pleading (DAP).

My goal was to clear all the six papers in first attempt. For the familiar two papers I just gave a glance. I dedicated myself to the preparation of other four papers as if I was doing an Aaradhana (worship). Over the years my sleep had stabilised at five hours a day at the maximum generally and I do not need an afternoon nap. Throughout the study time, I would

have a pen and a scrap book in my hand, to underline, to take notes, to recollect, to compare and contrast and to summarise. Also, internet came in handy to refer to bare acts in Ministry of Corporate Affairs (MCA), Government of India and Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI) websites. I studied the monthly student bulletins and the Chartered Secretary journals thoroughly. My reading of the journals of Management Accountant of The Institute of Cost Accountants of India and Bank Quest of Indian Institute of Banking and Finance helped to supplement my knowledge regarding Governance, Sustainability, Banking, latest FINTECH developments etc. I kept pace with latest amendments and case laws by following them closely in the columns of the daily newspaper, The Hindu. I used to cut relevant and important news updates and paste them in a diary. I downloaded previous years' question papers from the ICSI website and tried to answer them at periodic intervals.

For inspiration, I read the success stories of Rank-holders of June 2018 Professional examinations. I tabulated the marks of first three Rank-holders subject wise in my diary.

I appeared for the model tests conducted by SIRC, ICSI, in November, 2018 as a prelude to December, 2018 examinations for four papers coded as SACMDD, CRVI, ITSA and DAP. My confidence was reinforced as I passed in all the four papers with an aggregate of 55 percentage. Examiners had recorded special words of recognition in the answer sheets of second and third papers in which I had obtained 60 percentage and above.

After writing the December 2018 examinations, I thought that I could get 45 percentage for sure and that there was some scope for getting the required 50 percentage too. But alas, when the results came on 25th February, 2019, I was disappointed that I hadn't passed in any of the groups and that my aggregate percentage was only 36. The insult added to injury was my getting marks much below my expectations in the papers which I had been thinking as my cups of tea.

I was so intrigued by the marks that I applied for verification of marks first and then for copies of the answer sheets in two papers where my marks went below 40 percentage. I could only see where my marks went low but did not have any further remedy.

I prepared rigorously for the second time, this time giving a thorough go through to my familiar subjects too. The Companies Act, 2013 originally had 470 sections and subsequently some sections were deleted after the implementation of Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC), 2016. I took an unused diary and allotted each date page starting from January 1st, as per its

cardinal number, to the corresponding section number upto first 366 sections of Companies Act,2013 and some consolidated pages containing ten sections per page for later sections. Whenever I came across about a section in study materials or in journals or in Newspaper, I made a note about it in the corresponding page of diary. Since the diary contained a planner page for every month, I filled up the planner boxes too simultaneously to have a bird's eye view of about thirty sections at a glance! I enjoyed the preparations for the second attempt too as they helped to understand many nuances and the subjects became clearer. The study process produced a sort of Bhakti Bhava (feeling of devotion) in me. I appeared for June 2019 Examinations and thought that I could pass two groups or at worst one group at least. But results revealed that I got 39 percentage in the aggregate without passing any group.

My sincere preparations continued in a committed way for December,2019 examinations too. Printed study materials supplied by the institute were two years old by then and had become stale, as Companies Act, 2013 and IBC, 2016 were undergoing many amendments in their nascent stages. So I depended on the updated digital study materials available in the Academic Portal of the website of ICSI and also on Chartered Secretary, Student Company Secretary, Management Accountant and Bank Quest journals for latest updates. Legal World portions from Chartered Secretary were cut and preserved for future references too. Each IBC case reported in the business page of the newspaper, The Hindu, was thoroughly gone through by me for its nuances at adjudication and at appeal levels. Important verdicts were cut and preserved.

After writing the examinations I was sure about getting not less than 40 percentage individually in each paper and at least 50 percentage in the aggregate meaning that I was sure of passing the course at that time. But the results were disappointing at that time too. I had obtained 40 percentage in the aggregate without clearing any group. Marks were lesser than those of previous attempt in most of the papers! Our children who used to take pride even for my small successes seemed to sympathise with me and started telling me that I didn't need to strain myself in that way. My husband didn't tell about foregoing the course but cautioned me that I shouldn't strain myself a lot at the age of sixty plus. I felt like being in cross roads without knowing the direction. After a brief brooding, I decided to feel optimistic about having improved the average by 1%!

I couldn't help wondering had I not understood the subjects well enough for scoring a 50 percentage. The one culprit for my marks going lower than my expectations might be my not-

so-good handwriting. I decided that I would not appear in all the groups together any more as that was very exhausting towards the end of examination schedule.

I had not enrolled for June,2020 examinations originally as we had planned our travel to USA to visit our children between April and August. But COVID-19 caused by novel coronavirus started assuming proportions of a pandemic by March,2020. Governments were asking people to avoid unnecessary travels and the airlines started cancelling their scheduled flights. Our son rescheduled our travel to June second week. As there was still time for enrolling for June examinations, I enrolled for the first two modules of the examinations so that I could finish the examinations with June 9th before proceeding to USA. I was thankful to God that he was giving me an opportunity to write the examinations before I forgot the subjects much.

It is generally said that 'knowledge is that which remains even after one has forgotten what one has read'. In my senior citizen age, I have only knowledge of what I read but not exact memory which is necessary for writing examinations. I have a thorough working index of the knowledge of the contents but there is a need for a recent visit to the contents for writing them in details. I wonder whether this is not enough for a professional in a practical way given the volatile situation of amendments in Laws. But professional examinations demand more!

The June,2020 CS examinations were first postponed to July, then to August and finally they were merged with December,2020 examinations, due to lock downs and precautions in COVID-19 situation.

When unlock conditions as of September 1st 2020 unfolded, I observed that there was a general extra caution about people of sixty five years of age and above leading a normal life. There was an advisory by Tamilnadu Government against letting them inside temples and in Public Libraries. Also, there was a general caution about the possibility of onset of a second wave of COVID-19 after monsoons. Under the circumstances I was not sure whether the December,2020 examinations would take place as scheduled and what would be my personal chances of appearing for the examinations. I fantasised for ICSI to revisit the December,2019 valuations of answer sheets of senior citizen candidates like me and do some moderations in genuine cases! I fantasised that ICSI at least made arrangements to conduct the examinations online.

I was watching a serial interview program , ‘Vaaliba Vaali’ in Pothikai TV at that time which was a re-telecast of the late poet’s earlier program. Tamil Cinema lyricist and poet Vaali, who was in his eighties at the time of those interviews, was sharing his rich experiences in the episodes. To celebrate his youthful spirits the program had been named as ‘Vaaliba Vaali’ meaning ‘Young Vaali’. In the concluding episode, he said, “There is no point in making a superficial attempt. You have to go to the roots to learn and do anything. That will give good results definitely. Even if it does not give good results, we will have the satisfaction that we did it”. That had been my motto too always. I used to get lost in studies and had felt like doing a penance during those times. I had the satisfaction that I sincerely prepared for the Professional stage of CS examinations and I enjoyed the preparation times thoroughly. The words from our spiritual Gurus that all our desires will be fulfilled, if not in this birth at least in successive births, seemed to warn me. I became very wary of my desire of completing the CS course! Who would want another birth for fulfilling that desire! I started praying, ‘Oh, God! it’s ok if I do not pass the CS course. I am not disappointed. I am just satisfied with my efforts’.

The volatile nature of the Acts was brought out well in the article, “Regulatory Reformation in India – Catalysing Commerce?” in the April,2020 issue of Chartered Secretary by Shri Suresh Viswanathan, FCS when he picturised the trend with figures as, ‘According to the MCA Annual Report 2018-19, the ministry during the period, had issued 77 Notices and 10 General Circulars as part of the administration of Companies Act, 2013, approximately 1 change every 4 days on an average’. Practising CS Smt. B.Chandra, formerly Indian Company Law Service Officer had stated in her article, “Highlights of Companies (Amendment) Act, 2020” in the November,2020 issue of Chartered Secretary that, ‘Not only the act was amended, orders issued for removing difficulties in first 5 years, changes in the rules, clarifications, FAQs on various matters and circulars which had so far been issued crossed 567 in number’. The frequent updates and occasional reversals were proving difficult not only for corporates and practitioners but also for students. The COVID-19 times were adding to the Law by means of relaxations, exemptions and extensions due to lockdown restrictions and reduced mobilities of people. ICSI’s website contained all such notifications.

Since there were uncertainties about the whole things in COVID-19 times, I had set aside my preparations for CS examinations for a few months and engaged myself in other activities. Lockdown restrictions put more time and energy at my disposal and also persuaded me to look inward. I learnt Machine Learning for about a month from an online book of O’Reilly with the

help of basic Python knowledge I had secured in the previous year in my younger daughter's home in USA. Then I decided to write my memoirs in four parts, finished the first part and published it as an e-book in Tamil in Amazon. Then I developed a website of my own with the help of WordPress platform and published my articles there.

It started becoming obvious by the first week of December,2020 that December CS examinations would be conducted for sure as per the timetable. I attended the webinar conducted by the institute on 5th December, regarding the December,2020 Examinations. It was very useful to listen to the inspiring and patient address by the President of the Institute. The requirements for entering the examination hall, the declarations to be given, the various remedies available to the students and as to how the Institute was willing to consider favourably specific requests from students for opting out from December,2020 examinations and carrying forward the fees credit to June,2021 examinations were covered in the webinar. They had also made arrangements for more examination centres so that travel time is reduced.

I felt reassured and turned to studies. The Institute had made available all Guideline answers in the academic portal for free. It was very handy to have a quick and comprehensive revision. I made a table of my coverage of Guideline answers to make it systematic and to serve as a record for future preparations. I updated myself with Chartered Secretary and Student Secretary journals. On the examination days I thanked my stars and Gods as I neither had COVID-19 nor had any quarantine requirements. Only a maximum of ten people had been allotted in each room with sufficient gaps between people. But, per-room-attendance was only three or four in some rooms. I wrote the examinations reasonably well and thought that I stood fair chances of clearing both the groups. Results came. I had got only 46% in the aggregate and lost both the groups narrowly. For my satisfaction I applied for verification of marks in three papers but there was no change in the marks.

I was not disappointed at all then because I knew what was the task ahead of me. I paid the examination fee for all the three groups and started preparing for the course right from the day of fee payment. Guideline answers were available for eleven examinations between June,2015 and December,2020 for each of the six papers I had to write. I printed each answer before reading, for convenience and for ease of cross references. Came April,2021, coronavirus cases started rising again and the uncertainties about the examinations started. The second wave of virus was much pronounced in May. The original schedule of examinations was postponed and it was announced that new schedule would be announced later, giving at least 30 days gap prior to the examinations. Had the examinations been conducted as per original June,2021 schedule,

I could not have appeared for them as my mother, husband and I were all down with coronavirus since the last week of May. Thanks to our earlier vaccinations, we recovered without need for hospitalisation. Our quarantine periods ended in second week of June. The institute had announced the revised schedule of June,2021 examinations to be held between 10th and 20th August,2021. Optout facility had been given this time too. It was not easy for me to resume preparations after recovering from COVID-19. The ultimatum that new syllabus was going to be made mandatory very shortly was the only driving force which enabled me to aim at finishing the course with current syllabus. This time too the attendance was thin in many examination rooms. The instant and concise answers that emanated out of my preparations helped me in time management in writing the papers. I did my duty and left the rest to God. On October 13th,2021, my accessing the internet for results through my laptop coincided with our son calling us from USA in the cell. I was thrilled to see three 'Pass' in the laptop and exclaimed the results instantly to my husband and son who were in the video call. The joyous news was immediately shared with our daughters through Whatsapp. The joys of family members knew no bounds. I thanked God for making that rare event of passing all the three groups together a reality for me!

The one month online Corporate Leadership Development Program (CLDP) conducted by ICSI, Centre of Excellence, Hyderabad with 50 participants between August 2nd,2022 and 4th September,2022 was a lovely experience. The structured training program, the variety of topics, committed faculties and interactive co-participants made me forget that it was an online program and I felt like as if I was attending the program directly in a lively environment. Successful completion of CLDP paved way for application for CS Membership.

Thus I passed Professional stage of CS in October,2021 in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic period and joined CS fraternity in my senior citizen age with Membership Number ACS 69922 w.e.f. 12/09/2022 with the Grace of God.