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# IIT Is Just The Door

## *The Complete Truth About Degrees, Skills and Success in India*

A Research Study of 50+ Real Founder and Executive Stories

Compiled 2026 | Based on Publicly Available Data | For Students, Parents & Educators

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## Executive Summary

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**IIT is a powerful launchpad — not a guarantee, not a requirement, and never sufficient alone.**

- IIT brand opens doors faster — but the degree alone has never been the deciding factor in any major success story studied in this report.
- Every single global winner — IIT or non-IIT — stacked a Masters degree or MBA on top of their undergraduate education. That post-graduate layer is the real common denominator.
- Field of study matters more than college brand for salary. A CS graduate from NIT will out-earn a Mechanical graduate from IIT Bombay for the first decade of their career.
- 90% of startups fail regardless of whether the founder went to IIT. TinyOwl, Housing.com, PepperTap — all IIT-founded, all failed. Paytm, OYO, Zerodha, Nykaa — all non-IIT, all succeeded.
- The school board — CBSE, State, or NIOS — has zero impact on IIT admission outcomes, campus placements, or career trajectory once inside a top institution.
- What truly separates winners from everyone else: execution discipline, business model thinking, people skills, ethical conduct, and resilience through failure. No degree teaches these.

*The smartest path for a salary-first goal: any good engineering college with CS focus → corporate career 5–7 years → aggressive savings → build your own venture with ₹50–80 lakh capital and zero investor dependency.*

# Section 1: What IIT Actually Gives You

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## The Real Assets

The educational syllabus at IIT is nearly identical to good regular engineering colleges. The true value lies in the ecosystem, not the classroom. Think of the IIT tag like an IPO for a career — it provides premium initial capital and networking leverage.

### 1. The Peer Network — The Single Biggest Asset

IIT brings together the top 0.1% to 2% of analytical minds in India through the JEE filter. Being surrounded by this cohort forces a compounding effect on work ethic, problem-solving speed, and baseline ambition. Your batchmates will become founders, VCs, CXOs, and researchers at top global firms. That network compounds over 20–30 years and is worth more than any classroom learning. An IIT WhatsApp group from 2028 will have more deal flow than most incubators.

### 2. The Brand — A High-Trust Signal

The IIT tag instantly communicates rigorous analytical capability to employers, investors, and clients — reducing the friction of proving basic competence. Resumes get read at Google, Goldman Sachs, McKinsey, and top startups without cold outreach. Visa officers, foreign universities, and investors all respond differently to 'IIT'. This brand value is most powerful in the first 5 years of a career. After that, your work speaks louder.

### 3. First-Mover Access to Opportunities

Elite firms — HFT companies like Jane Street, Graviton, and DE Shaw; MBB consulting; FAANG — recruit exclusively from IIT campuses, offering premium starting packages. Top IITs averaged ₹22–28 LPA in 2024–25 placements, with CSE and quant roles hitting ₹30–40+ LPA. Highest offers reached ₹1–3.67 Cr. Regular colleges average ₹4–10 LPA, with good private colleges at ₹10–20 LPA. The gap is 2–5x higher starting pay and faster promotions.

### 4. Entrepreneurship Infrastructure

IIT campuses have dedicated incubation centres — SINE at IIT Bombay, CIIE at IIT Ahmedabad — along with seed funding, alumni VCs, and direct connections to India's startup ecosystem. 68 out of 108 Indian unicorns have at least one IIT founder, according to available data. Regular colleges rarely offer this infrastructure.

### 5. Alumni Network for Funding and Mentorship

IIT alumni networks fund IIT founders preferentially. Press covers IIT founders more readily. Enterprise B2B clients trust IIT founders faster. Hiring top talent becomes easier. This advantage is most valuable at the startup stage, not the job stage.

## The Honest Limitations

- IIT alone does not guarantee success. The majority of IIT graduates live ordinary ₹15–30 LPA careers.
- In 2023–24, over 7,000 IIT and NIT students went unplaced due to market slowdown — the tag did not protect them.
- Skills are not automatically developed by attending IIT. Real growth happens after college.
- Many IIT students burned out after JEE and never reached their potential inside the campus.
- The IIT tag is a multiplier. If the individual lacks emotional intelligence, adaptability, or work ethic, the multiplier effect is zero.

## Section 2: The Real Success Formula

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Stripping away the college brand from every major success story in this study reveals one consistent pattern. The undergraduate degree — IIT or otherwise — is only the starting point. What follows determines everything.

**Engineering Degree → Masters/MBA → 15–20 Years Deep Corporate Experience → Right Opportunity + Strong Character = Global Success**

### Three Proven Education Patterns That Lead to Success

#### **Pattern 1: Engineering → Corporate Experience → Skills → Growth**

The most common pattern. Use the degree to enter a strong company, build real skills through work, grow into leadership. Examples: Narayana Murthy, Satya Nadella, Leena Nair.

#### **Pattern 2: Engineering → MBA → Business Leadership**

Pivot at Masters level from technical to business. MBA provides the framework for scaling, capital allocation, and leadership. Examples: Indra Nooyi, Shantanu Narayen, Ajay Banga.

#### **Pattern 3: Self-Learning → Build → Execute**

Bypass formal post-graduation entirely. Learn through building. Accept failure as tuition. Examples: Ritesh Agarwal (OYO), Nithin Kamath (Zerodha), Byju Raveendran.

### The Critical Post-Graduate Pivot

The single most important educational insight in this entire study: Satya Nadella studied Electrical Engineering as an undergraduate, then pivoted to Computer Science at Masters level. That pivot — not his undergraduate degree — is where his career direction was set. Sundar Pichai studied Metallurgy at IIT Kharagpur, then layered Materials Science at Stanford and an MBA at Wharton. None of his three degrees are directly Computer Science. He joined Google as a Product Manager, not a coder.

The undergraduate degree proves analytical ability. The Masters or MBA sets the career direction. The work experience builds the actual skills. In that order.

### The 'Golden Handcuffs' Warning

One of the most practical risks for anyone following the high-salary-first path: inflating lifestyle to match a high corporate salary. This kills the ability to take the entrepreneurial leap later. A ₹50 LPA salary spent like a ₹50 LPA lifestyle leaves zero seed capital. Treat the corporate phase as a savings mission, not a lifestyle upgrade.

## Section 3: People Who Succeeded Without IIT

### Non-IIT Founders and Global Leaders

Name	Company / Role	Undergraduate College	Post-Graduation	Key Insight
Satya Nadella	CEO, Microsoft (\$3T)	Manipal Institute of Technology	MS Wisconsin + MBA Chicago Booth	Could not clear JEE. 22 years at Microsoft before becoming CEO.
Shantanu Narayen	CEO, Adobe (\$200B)	Osmania University, Hyderabad	MS Bowling Green + MBA UC Berkeley	Regular state university. MS + MBA combination did the heavy lifting.
Indra Nooyi	Former CEO, PepsiCo	Madras Christian College, Chennai	MBA IIM Calcutta + Yale	Physics graduate, not engineering. First Indian woman CEO of a Fortune 100 company.
Leena Nair	CEO, Chanel (Global)	Walchand College of Engineering	MBA Gold Medallist, XLRI	No IIT, no foreign degree. 30 years at Unilever before becoming global CEO of Chanel.
Ajay Banga	President, World Bank	St. Stephen's College, Delhi	MBA IIM Ahmedabad	Arts college graduate. Runs the world's most powerful financial institution.
Sanjay Mehrotra	CEO, Micron; Co-founded SanDisk	BITS Pilani → UC Berkeley	MS Electrical Engineering, Berkeley	Started at BITS, transferred to Berkeley. Built and sold SanDisk for billions.
Vijay Shekhar Sharma	Founder, Paytm	Delhi College of Engineering	None	No IIT. Pure product hustle. Built India's largest payments platform.
Byju Raveendran	Founder, BYJU'S	Kannur University, Kerala (Tier 3)	None	Tier 3 college. Built India's most valued edtech on teaching skill and timing.
Ritesh Agarwal	Founder, OYO	College Dropout	None	Never finished degree. Billionaire at 25. Vision + speed + execution.
Falguni Nayar	Founder, Nykaa	IIM Ahmedabad	None (former investment banker)	No engineering degree at all. Built a multi-billion dollar beauty company.
Nithin Kamath	Co-Founder, Zerodha	Dropout/Non-IIT	None	Bootstrapped entirely. Zero investor money. Built India's largest stockbroker on transparent pricing.

Girish Mathrubootham	Founder, Freshworks	SASTRA University, Tamil Nadu	None	Non-IIT, non-metro. Built a global SaaS company serving customers in 120+ countries.
Kunal Shah	Founder, CRED	Wilson College (Philosophy degree)	None	Not even an engineering graduate. Philosophy major built one of India's top fintech platforms.
Sabeer Bhatia	Co-Founder, Hotmail	BITS Pilani	MS Stanford	BITS + Stanford MS. Created Hotmail, sold to Microsoft for \$400 million.

## Section 4: IIT Founders and Executives Who Failed

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This section is not about mocking individuals. Every fact here is documented public record. The purpose is to demonstrate that the IIT credential alone cannot compensate for business model errors, ethics failures, leadership problems, or external events.

### IIT-Founded Companies That Failed

#### **TinyOwl — 5 IIT Bombay Graduates**

Founded in 2014 by five fresh IIT Bombay B.Tech graduates aged 22–24. Raised ₹150 crore. The CEO's primary job became fundraising while operations, finance, marketing, HR, and technology were split among the other four co-founders with no clear accountability. They relied on deep discounts to attract users — unsustainable economics. Employees reportedly held founders hostage during layoff disputes. Shut down 2016–17. Their only profitable unit — Homemade, an amateur chef aggregation business — was dissolved instead of being scaled. Zomato and Swiggy, who had corporate experience and owned their delivery infrastructure, won the market.

#### **Housing.com — Rahul Yadav, IIT Bombay**

Rahul Yadav, an IIT Bombay Metallurgy dropout, co-founded Housing.com with batchmates. Raised over \$100 million. The product had excellent UI/UX. However, erratic leadership, public fights with investors on social media, massive capital misallocation on flashy marketing rather than deep market integration, and severe governance issues led to Yadav being ousted in 2015. The company limped along and eventually merged to survive.

#### **PepperTap — IIT Kanpur**

Grocery delivery startup. Flawed asset-light model that failed to properly integrate inventory, repeatedly breaking consumer trust. Over-expanded on discounts before fixing unit economics. Shut down in 2016 alongside multiple other hyperlocal grocery startups of the same wave.

#### **Koinex — IIT and BITS Graduates**

Major cryptocurrency trading platform. Shut down when the Indian government declared war on cryptocurrency. External policy change killed the business. Credentials could not protect against regulatory risk.

### Executives With Strong Credentials Who Still Failed

#### **Parag Agrawal — Fired CEO, Twitter (IIT Bombay CS + Stanford PhD)**

JEE rank 77 — top rank in India. IIT Bombay Computer Science degree. PhD from Stanford. Arguably the strongest possible credential stack in Indian tech. Became Twitter CEO in 2021. Fired by Elon Musk within months after Musk's acquisition of the company in 2022. The lesson: credentials cannot protect against a hostile ownership change.

#### **Chanda Kochhar — Forced Resignation, ICICI Bank CEO**

Bachelor's from Jai Hind College, Mumbai. MBA from Jamnalal Bajaj Institute. Harvard Advanced Management Programme. Became CEO of India's largest private bank. Forced to resign in 2018 amid a loan controversy involving her husband's business dealings. Credentials built her career. Ethics failure ended it.

#### **Vishal Garg — Better.com CEO, Valuation Collapse**

IIT Delhi graduate. Built Better.com into a \$7 billion valued mortgage startup. Infamously fired 900 employees over a Zoom call in December 2021. Investors revolted. Company valuation collapsed. The IIT degree and the unicorn valuation became irrelevant overnight. People skills — which no degree teaches — became the fatal gap.

#### **Malvinder and Shivinder Singh — Ranbaxy and Fortis**

St. Stephen's College plus MBA from Duke University. Inherited the Ranbaxy and Fortis empires. Lost their entire business due to severe capital allocation failures and corporate governance collapse. Elite Western MBA could not substitute for ethics and sound judgment.

#### **Rana Kapoor — Yes Bank Founder**

SRCC Delhi plus MBA from Rutgers University. Built Yes Bank from scratch. Bank collapsed due to aggressive high-risk lending and complete failure of risk management. Currently serving prison time. Another case where credentials built the institution and character destroyed it.

#### **Nikesh Arora — Resigned from SoftBank**

B.Tech from IIT Varanasi. Master's in Finance from Boston College. MBA from Northeastern University. Was Google's highest-paid executive. Moved to SoftBank as President with over \$1 billion pay package. Resigned in 2016 amid investor concerns over investment judgment. Highest credential stack. Still failed at the next major role.

## Section 5: Same Credentials, Different Outcomes — Why

### The TinyOwl vs Zomato vs Swiggy Forensic Comparison

All three sets of founders went to IIT. TinyOwl had IIT Bombay graduates. Zomato had IIT Delhi graduates. Swiggy had IIT Kharagpur graduates. IIT was clearly not the differentiating factor. What was?

Factor	TinyOwl (Failed)	Zomato (Won)	Swiggy (Won)
IIT College	IIT Bombay — 5 founders	IIT Delhi — 2 founders	IIT Kharagpur — 2 founders
Corporate Experience	None — went straight to startup	Bain & Company — 2.5–4 years first	Philips Research + Myntra experience
Previous Failure	None	Failed with foodlet.com first	Failed with Bundl startup first
Leadership Structure	5 leaders, no clear CEO	1 clear CEO — Deepinder Goyal	Clear division of roles
Delivery Model	Outsourced delivery	Own technology platform	Built own delivery fleet — key differentiator
Growth Strategy	Discount-led cash burn	Network effect model	Network effect + logistics ownership
Outcome	Shut down 2016	₹1.5 lakh crore market cap	Dominant market leader

**The single decision that decided the food delivery market: Swiggy owned its delivery fleet. TinyOwl and others outsourced it. That business model choice — made by a 25-year-old with corporate experience — had nothing to do with which IIT they attended.**

## Section 6: Field vs College Brand — Salary Reality

This is the most important practical section for anyone whose primary goal is high salary. The data is clear and consistent across multiple sources.

Field	IIT Starting Salary	NIT / Good Private College	10-Year Ceiling
Computer Science / AI / Data Science	₹20–50 LPA (quant/HFT up to ₹80L–5Cr)	₹8–20 LPA	Unlimited — FAANG, startups, quant
Electronics / ECE	₹12–25 LPA	₹6–12 LPA	Good but narrower than CS
Mechanical Engineering	₹6–10 LPA	₹4–7 LPA	Slow growth in India
Civil Engineering	₹5–8 LPA	₹4–6 LPA	Government or infrastructure only

### Age-Wise Salary Progression (CS + Strong Skills Path)

Age	Expected Salary Range	What Gets You There
22 (Fresh Graduate)	₹10–25 LPA	College brand + CS fundamentals
25	₹25–40 LPA	Skills + performance + company choice
30	₹50 LPA+	Experience + leadership + specialisation
35	₹1 Cr+ (top performers)	Domain expertise + network + execution

**Key Verdict: A CS graduate from NIT Trichy will likely out-earn a Mechanical graduate from IIT Bombay for the first 10 years of their career. Choose the field first. Then aim for the best college within that field.**

### The JEE Reality Check

JEE preparation builds genuine problem-solving ability, analytical thinking, and discipline under pressure. These are valuable life skills regardless of the result. However, JEE does not directly teach coding, business thinking, or product building. The exam proves you can handle complexity — what you build on top of that proof is entirely your own work.

## Section 7: CBSE vs State Board vs NIOS — Full Comparison

### Legal Standing — The Bottom Line First

The NIOS Secondary and Senior Secondary certificate has the same recognition as CBSE and State Board certificates. NIOS students are fully eligible for JEE Main, JEE Advanced, NEET, government jobs both central and state, and admission to all universities and technical institutes across India. This is not a grey area — it is established government policy.

Once inside IIT, no company recruiting on campus — Google, Microsoft, Goldman Sachs, or any other — asks which school board you came from. Tie-breakers in corporate interviews are communication skills, technical tests, and real-world projects. Never the school board.

Factor	CBSE	State Board	NIOS (Open School)
JEE Eligibility	Full — Yes	Full — Yes	Full — Yes
IIT Admission	Accepted	Accepted	Accepted
IIT/NIT Placement Impact	Zero	Zero	Zero
Daily Flexibility	Low — fixed schedule	Low — fixed schedule	Very High
Time for JEE Prep	4–6 hours max (after school)	4–6 hours max	8–10+ hours daily
Peer Competition	High — motivating	Medium	None — you study alone
Built-in Discipline	Yes — external enforcement	Yes	No — must be self-imposed
Social Development	Strong	Good	Weak — isolated study
Marks Flexibility	Strict evaluation	Varies by state	Can retake specific subjects
Foreign University Perception	Well recognised globally	Less known	May need credential evaluation
Coaching Compatibility	Tiring to manage both	Same	Perfect fit — full day available
Cost	Higher (school fees)	Moderate	Low — saves money for coaching
Private College Fallback	Smooth	Smooth	Occasionally questioned
Burnout Risk	High if JEE prep added	High if JEE prep added	High if isolated without structure

## **The Strategic Reason Serious JEE Aspirants Choose NIOS**

NIOS allows clearing up to four board subjects by December, freeing the crucial January to June period entirely for JEE preparation. This is why many Kota coaching students switch to NIOS — they can attend full-time coaching without managing school attendance alongside it.

CBSE student: School 8am to 2pm + homework + board exam preparation + JEE preparation = split focus across competing demands.

NIOS student: No attendance requirement + full day for JEE coaching + board exams scheduled on your timeline = single sustained focus.

## **Disadvantages of NIOS — Honest Assessment**

- Self-discipline is entirely on the student. No teacher checking attendance, no peer pressure, no daily structure. Many students waste the freedom rather than use it.
- Social development gap — regular school teaches teamwork, conflict resolution, group dynamics, and handling pressure socially. These are soft skills that matter enormously in corporate life and entrepreneurship. NIOS provides none of this.
- The parent must have a concrete alternative plan to build communication and teamwork skills outside the school environment — sports academies, debate clubs, group coaching classes.
- NIOS without serious coaching and a proper home study environment is not a shortcut. It is a risk. The combination of NIOS plus a top coaching institute is what makes it a winning formula. NIOS alone, studying from YouTube at home, rarely produces JEE results.

## Section 7B: Self-Tests — Is NIOS Right for You?

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### For the Student — 5 Tests (Run for 2 Weeks)

#### Test 1 — Discipline Without External Push

For 2 weeks, study without anyone watching. Set your own target. Check if you hit it more than 8 out of 14 days. NIOS suits you if yes. Stay in CBSE if you needed reminders or pressure to open the book.

#### Test 2 — Handling Loneliness and Isolation

Can you sit alone and study for 6–8 hours without needing social energy to keep going? If you feel demotivated when studying alone compared to studying in a group or library — NIOS will hurt your JEE prep, not help it.

#### Test 3 — Time Management

Write your daily schedule for one week. Follow it without anyone telling you to. Followed 5 out of 7 days — NIOS ready. Followed 3 or fewer days — you need external structure. Also run the 'Distraction Audit': can you use a laptop for video lectures without drifting into social media or gaming within 20 minutes?

#### Test 4 — JEE Subject Clarity

Open any JEE previous year paper. Attempt 10 questions. Do you at least know what topics those questions are testing even if you cannot solve them? If yes — you have started the journey. If you are still figuring out what JEE covers — build the foundation in regular school first.

#### Test 5 — Motivation Source

Is this your dream or your parents' dream? NIOS requires intrinsic motivation — from inside. There is no teacher scolding, no classmate competing, no report card shame. The only engine is your own desire. Also check: when you get a poor mock test result, do you analyse it immediately and return to study — or do you shut down and avoid the subject for days? The latter is a red flag for NIOS.

## For the Parent — 5 Things to Check

### Check 1 — Unstructured Holiday Behaviour

Watch during summer or Diwali break without announcing you are watching. Does the child pick up a book or study material on their own even once in 10 days? Or do they need you to sit next to them? This single observation tells you more than any test.

### Check 2 — Quality of Self-Awareness

Ask casually: 'What do you think your weakness is in studies?' and 'What would you do differently if you had more free time?' Specific, honest answers show NIOS readiness. Vague or 'I don't know' answers indicate the child needs imposed structure.

### Check 3 — Consistency Not Intelligence

The right filter is consistency, not IQ. Does your child finish what they start — projects, books, hobbies, not just studies? A moderately intelligent but highly consistent child will thrive in NIOS. A very intelligent but inconsistent child will waste the freedom.

### Check 4 — Social and Emotional Maturity

Does the child have 2–3 close friends they interact with regularly? Can they handle failure or criticism without shutting down for days? If your child already shows signs of social isolation or anxiety — NIOS will worsen it. Also ask yourself: do you have a concrete alternative plan to build their communication and teamwork skills outside of school? Sports academy, debate club, group coaching? If not — NIOS is premature.

### Check 5 — Home Environment and Screen Control Readiness

Is there a dedicated, quiet study space at home free from TV, younger siblings, and interruptions? Can you arrange serious JEE coaching — Kota residential or a reputed local institute? Most importantly — can the child manage screen time independently without constant monitoring? NIOS + a smartphone + no accountability structure is a recipe for wasted years. The backup plan also matters: if JEE doesn't work, what is the fallback? NIOS has weaker fallback options than CBSE for average private college admissions.

## Section 8: Practical Roadmap — High Salary → Save → Build

This roadmap is designed for a student whose primary goal is high salary first, aggressive savings, and then building their own business. It is the lowest-risk entrepreneurship path available — work, earn, save capital, then bet on yourself.

Phase	Action	Target	Salary / Outcome
Phase 1 College (4 years)	Target CS at any IIT or CS at NIT/BITS/good private. Field matters more than brand. Build coding skills — DSA, system design, real projects.	IIT CS best case. NIT CS more than good enough.	₹8–50 LPA starting depending on college + skills
Phase 2 First Job (3–7 years)	Join Google, Microsoft, Amazon, Flipkart, Zepto, top fintech, or quant fund. IIT brand gets resume read first. Skills close the deal.	₹25–80 LPA range. Quant/HFT up to ₹80L–5Cr.	Live well below your salary. Save 40–60% of income.
Phase 3 Save Aggressively	Avoid lifestyle inflation — the Golden Handcuffs trap. Every salary increment goes into savings, not upgrades.	Target ₹50–80 lakh saved by year 5–7.	This becomes your seed capital.
Phase 4 Build Your Business	Launch your own venture with zero investor dependency. You own 100% from day one. IIT network useful for first customers, mentors, partners.	Own business funded entirely by your corporate savings.	Unlimited ceiling. No dilution. Full control.

**MBA or Not? If you want corporate leadership — IIM MBA adds ₹30–50 LPA jump. If you want to build a startup — skip MBA, save the 2 years and ₹25–30 lakh in fees. Many top earners in tech skip MBA entirely today.**

## Final Conclusion

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**IIT is a great starting point. What you do after is everything.**

- IIT alone does NOT guarantee success. 90% of startups fail regardless of founder background. Most IITians live ordinary careers.
- Every global winner — IIT or non-IIT — stacked a Masters degree or MBA on top. That post-graduate layer is the real common factor across all success stories.
- Field beats college brand for salary. CS from NIT beats Mechanical from IIT for the first decade. Choose the field first.
- Corporate experience before founding dramatically increases success rate. Zomato beat TinyOwl because its founders worked at Bain first, not because they had better IIT pedigree.
- Resilience through failure beats credentials every time. Ankush Sachdeva failed 17 times before ShareChat. His IIT degree did not prevent those failures — his refusal to quit created the success.
- What kills even the best credentials: ethics failures, people skills gaps, wrong strategic bets, and external events. No degree protects against any of these.
- The school board — CBSE, State, or NIOS — has zero impact once you enter a top institution. Choose it based on your child's self-discipline, not societal perception.
- Non-IITians built Paytm, OYO, Infosys, Nykaa, BYJU'S, Zerodha, Freshworks, and Hotmail. The door to success has many entrances.

*The complete formula: Any decent engineering college in CS → Masters or MBA from a strong institute → 15–20 years deep corporate experience → right opportunity at the right time → strong ethics and people skills → resilience through failure = global success. IIT makes the first step slightly easier and faster. It does not write steps two through seven. **Those are entirely — without exception — on the individual.***

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