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It's a feeling that very few high school science students are strangers to. The dream of getting into the IITs is handed over to all plus two science students like a noose that tightens around their ability to look beyond, with every passing day. Several tuitions, mock tests later, just a handful cracks the entrance. What follows is a bout of depression that prevents you from weighing your choices smartly and getting on in life. Reason why several IIT aspirants take the entrance tests more than once. Neeraj Chhibba had been through the grind too – the preparations, the tests, the endless wait for results and finally failure to get into the IITs. The idea for his debut novel, Zero Percentile – Missed IIT, Kissed Russia probably traces its roots to that experience. "I too was very depressed for a long time. I couldn't snap out of it immediately," says Chhibba. However, soon after, Russia came calling and Chhibba went on to study mechanical engineering at Volgograd. "Before this, IIT has not been written about from the point of view of someone who aspired to get through but failed to do so. My book intends to tell its readers that there is a life beyond the IITs and you just need the courage to get on with life," says Chhibba. The semi autobiographical book revolves around its protagonist Pankaj who fails to get into the IITs and is left battling an alien culture and destiny in far away Russia.

Chhibba spent around 6-7 years in Russia starting from 1990. "This was also a time when USSR was disintegrating. Its change into a capitalist state from a communist state affected the immigrant students' community to a great extent. I have tried to capture the turbulent times in a chapter in my work," says Chhibba.

Also, he has tried introducing his readers to the threat of AIDS 'without being preachy'. "I wouldn't say Chetan Bhagat's success inspired me to write the book. But he has given confidence to a lot of people from non-literary backgrounds to go ahead and pursue their literary dreams," says Chhibba.



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