

**Book
Preview**

Foreword by **REHAN YAR KHAN**
Managing Partner, Orios Venture Partners



SHORTCUTS

Faasos
Freshworks
Unacademy
Zerodha
Ather Energy
SlideShare
Aspiring Minds
Wingify
Pulse
Akosha
Instablogs
Fashiate
LikeaLittle
GreyB
Madhouse

Rare Insights From
15 SUCCESSFUL
Start-up Founders

**NISTHA
TRIPATHI**

 **SAGE**


Response
Business Books

Advance Praise

Nistha's first-person stories make vivid the effervescence that characterizes entrepreneurship in modern India—the twists and turns, the ups and downs, the creativity and sheer exhilaration. Read and enjoy!

Tarun Khanna

*Jorge Paulo Lemann Professor, Harvard Business School;
Director, Lakshmi Mittal South Asia Institute, Harvard University*

Entrepreneurs rarely open up as candidly as Nistha has gotten them to. Kudos to her.

Allwin Agnel

Founder/CEO at PaGaLGuY.com

Indian start-up ecosystem needs relatable inspiration, and this book brings that. While it is fascinating to read about Jobs, Musk, Gates and Zuckerberg, our entrepreneurs can learn more from home-grown entrepreneurs whose challenges and approaches are more relevant to our business models. I was especially fascinated to read the story of Girish Mathrubootham.

Balaji Viswanathan

CEO at Invento; Most followed writer on Quora

A fascinating peep into the struggles and successes of varied start-ups that lucidly brings out the diversity of experiences and provides a nuanced introduction to entrepreneurial processes.

Rakesh Basant

Professor of Economics, IIM Ahmedabad

This is a 'must-read' for all entrepreneurs. Nistha has truly captured an authentic perspective of what it takes to build companies in India!

Prashant Mehta

Partner, Lightbox

I worked with Nistha for several years—she has a tremendous intellect and a fearless entrepreneurial spirit. This will be a fun read!

Ken Wilson

CEO, Tower Research Capital Markets

The Indian flavour of entrepreneurship is as creative, vibrant and colourful as the country itself. Part textbook and part tour guide, *No Shortcuts* captures that flavour in a way that delivers both generalizable lessons and insights into the unique character of Indian entrepreneurs in their environment.

Stuart Read

Professor, Willamette University

Entrepreneurship can be a lonely journey, and while every entrepreneur learns valuable lessons each day, not everyone's story comes out to inspire others. These stories are important for all aspiring entrepreneurs in the journey. Nistha has done a great job there. A must-read!

Ashish Tulsian

CEO at POSist

Introduction

You know start-ups have become a mainstream phenomenon when Indian families start looking for a son-in-law who is an entrepreneur. We have come a long way from terming it ‘doing your own business’ to calling it a start-up in India. For me, a ‘start-up’ is the ultimate expression of who the entrepreneur is and what he values. Although many institutes study the *science* behind building a successful start-up, I was curious about the *art* behind it. So I decided to understand it from those who were committed to building something irrespective of the outcome. For this, I picked 15 courageous, willing and patient founders from India. I am sharing their stories in this book.

What makes me think that I can attempt a book on such a fuzzy subject? What traits do I have to qualify as a worthy writer of such a book? Amidst these valid doubts, a tiny voice in my head speaks up. I realize that I have a very important qualification for writing this book—I tried creating three ventures that bombed. *I tried and failed.* I had read *The Lean Startup*, *Zero to One* and many other famous Silicon Valley books. See, I did validation by running Google ads for a fashion rental business in India, and there were people who gave me their email addresses. Then why did my venture die before finding those customers? I knew what questions to ask a successful entrepreneur precisely because I had failed many a time before finding a glimmer of success in the fourth one. I had that hunger and curiosity, and I had the courage to fail. But clearly, I did not have something that had made other people succeed. And that itself was a motivation to write this book. So here I am, my dear reader, venturing on this journey on your behalf and, of course, my own.

I did interview after interview, or rather, conversations. These founders are used to giving interviews. But I wanted the real story, so

we chatted. And some gems, hidden even to their own self, fell out. I gathered those and placed them on these pages. Being well aware of the perils of the narrative bias, I refrained from tainting these conversations with my interpretations. There is another reason why I eschewed coming up with a ‘how-to’ framework for start-ups—these interviews show how contradictory different approaches have been.

Prasanna Sankar (LikeALittle) makes a convincing case as to why lean start-ups and growth hacking do not work, abetted by Tarun Mehta’s (Ather Energy) disbelief in over-pivoting. Amit Ranjan (SlideShare) and Paras Chopra’s (Wingify) success, on the contrary, shows what good pivoting can do. Varun Aggarwal (Aspiring Minds) and Girish Mathrubootham (Freshworks) lend their authority to the belief that fundraising is important, while Sameer Guglani (Madhouse) argues as to why it can be dangerous. Rather than being disappointed that I cannot find a common thread, I take delight in these apparent contradictions for that is what reality is—*messy*. In fact, this delicious messiness, lack of a framework, subjective nature of stories and individual convictions that clash with each other add to the final feeling of awe that I experienced upon finishing this book. I have every hope to transfer this feeling to the reader.

As Truman Capote said, ‘Failure is the condiment that gives success its flavor’; how can this book be complete without talking about failure? So we have the nail-biting story of Prasanna from LikeALittle that did not end in a successful exit. What it shows is... well, I would rather have you read it to find out! Plus, the word ‘success’ is subjective. Sameer Guglani (Madhouse) considers Madhouse to be a massive success in terms of learning, albeit the financial returns were trivial.

As I started gathering the stories, it took a long time before I found Tarun Mehta (Ather Energy) for talking about hardware start-ups. In my conversation with Mr Sanjeev Malhotra, CEO of the Nasscom CoE-IOT (Center of Excellence for IOT [Internet of Things]) product accelerator, he highlights government efforts in this direction including a state-of-the-art lab for testing hardware products, discounted consultancy for how to design or manufacture

your product, networking/mentors and a structured curriculum for IOT training in colleges.

Further insights came from Vikram Rastogi who runs Hacklab that provides incubation and business assistance to hardware product entrepreneurs working on solar tech, intelligent systems, sensor networks, IOT devices, etc. While some hardware founders have managed to get strategic partners such as Amruth Puttappa for his solar grid-tie inverter, there are others who are frustrated with the lack of support and investment in India. For a country that built the Mars Orbiter Mission, Mangalyaan, in just 11 per cent of the cost of NASA, one expects more. The potential is still untapped.

Another category I struggled with was a woman-led start-up. I wish that in my next book, I would have the pleasure of interviewing strong business women and that the set of choices would be significantly larger.

My search then led me to Indian founders in Silicon Valley, and I interviewed two of them—Prasanna Sankar (LikeALittle) and Ankit Gupta (Pulse). During the book research phase, I also encountered other serial entrepreneurs who had tried a couple of ventures in India with decent commercial success before deciding to head to London and Silicon Valley. I cannot help wondering why, in so many cases, does the founder discover his true passion or talent in a foreign land?

Can we improve entrepreneurship in India by fortifying our academic hallways? Can we nurture Stanford's and Harvard's entrepreneurial ecosystem in Indian universities? Professor Rakesh Basant from IIM Ahmedabad shares how the A-league consortium (including the premier business, design and technology institutes in Ahmedabad and Gandhinagar areas) is inspired by the culture of Silicon Valley schools. The idea is to facilitate multidisciplinary collaboration among students—which is what the essence of entrepreneurship is. The role of good design in the success of the Pulse app, which was developed on Stanford campus, is evident. Perhaps, by encouraging students from NID (National Institute of Design), IIMA, IIT Gandhinagar, etc., to come together and work as a team, we can take baby steps towards a similar culture in India.

All in all, this book tells stories of intellect and audacity. These stories have a lot to be read between the lines, for what is left unsaid is as critical as what is said. These entrepreneurs, so disjointed in their backgrounds, journeys and even motivations, are unsurprisingly united in their doggedness. What catches one's attention is how similar these stories are to something that you may have heard about a classmate or neighbour who nearly made it but didn't. If not for the stubborn tenacity, a few fortuitous turns of events or a flash of inspiration, many of the people featured here would remain on the reader's side.

As Paul Graham said,

'In fact I suspect if you had the sixteen-year-old Shakespeare or Einstein in school with you, they'd seem impressive, but not totally unlike your other friends. Which is an uncomfortable thought. If they were just like us, then they had to work very hard to do what they did. And that's one reason we like to believe in genius. It gives us an excuse for being lazy. If these guys were able to do what they did only because of some magic Shakespeareanness or Einsteininess, then it's not our fault if we can't do something as good.'¹

The crux is not to undermine what these individuals have been able to achieve but to feel encouraged that others can reach there too. *You can reach there too.*

During the writing of the book, I got to see the personal side of these founders for which I am grateful. It was an honour to take them down the memory lane and get them to recount what it was like in those days when they did not know what would happen with their ideas or ventures, when they were simply trying to survive and then thrive. In sharing such candid details about their ventures, they have undoubtedly shared the wealth of their hard-earned lessons. Their wisdom and perspicacity were expected to shine through, but it was their humility that made this book-writing exercise extremely gratifying for me.

¹ What You'll Wish You'd Known (Jan 2005). Available at <http://www.paulgraham.com/hs.html>, accessed on 8 August 2018.

In the end, I am an education counsellor who advises students to understand their career goals first and then chalk out a path to get there. Entrepreneurship, on the other hand, works in the reverse. As effectuation principle² and few seers imply, it is better to start with what you have, leverage what you know and work towards the best option. In the process, learn and keep the company of smart people. But I am not going to oversimplify it. After all, I know how hard it is, and that is why instead of some smartass advice that means only a little, I offer you this book and stories of people who got something right in their own words. What you get out of it is determined by your own state of mind. A poet seeks *sahrdaya* (having their hearts with it) in her readers. I seek *sahmanas* (having their mind with it) in the readers of this book.

May it find a place in your bookshelf for an inspiration, repeated reference and, above all, a reminder of your own possibilities. *Remember, you can reach there too!*

² See http://www.effectuation.org/sites/default/files/research_papers/what-makes-entrepreneurs-entrepreneurial-sarasvathy_0.pdf, accessed on 24 May 2018.

A Note on the Interviewees

The diversity among the founders selected for the interviews is, perhaps, a good representation of the demographics of Indian entrepreneurial founders (refer to Table 1). Most of them hail from engineering, and that too computer science backgrounds, but have gone into more varied professional streams. Majority of the founders started their ventures when they were in their early 20s. However, the founders who started later appear to have better leveraged their experiences and showcased more polished leadership and decision-making.

Having some domain experience did put the founder at an advantage as is evident in the case of Nithin who had 10+ years of trading experience before starting Zerodha, Tarun who had significant prototyping experience before starting Ather and Girish whose Zoho product management experience was pivotal in Freshwork's success. The notable exceptions here are Jaydeep who chose the food industry and has thrived in a domain in which he had no experience but endless passion to compensate with, and Sameer Guglani who was a movie lover but had no operational experience. The bottom line is that the founders chose an area which excited them and kept them inspired to keep working even when the chips were down.

Most of the founders also highlighted the greater satisfaction they felt in building the business irrespective of the financial outcome. Notably, when Prasanna saw that LikeALittle had stopped growing exponentially, his motivation flagged—an outcome of having chased the idea of success instead of something that fundamentally excited him. It is the only commercially unsuccessful story included in the book because the lessons coming out are more powerful than some of the success stories.

In the end, it is hard to discount the luck factor as almost every founder admitted how things fell in place at a certain point in his journey. When Nikhil calls himself lucky for getting acquired within four months of thinking of an idea behind Fashiate, I feel that ‘timing’ would be a better explanation. Instablogs could have been a bigger success if the founders had hung on to it a bit longer, and Madhouse’s premature exit can be attributed to the entry of a heavily funded competitor.

Nearly everyone hailed from a middle-class family with no heavy-weight business background. So it appears that the entrepreneurial drive is not a function of upbringing alone. The itch to start was mostly innate and became irrepressible when exposed to a certain kind of environment either physically (Ankit in Stanford, Tarun in IIT and Sameer in his start-up job) or through books (Prasanna, Ankur and Paras).

Finally, I cannot help noticing a heightened sense of self-awareness in all the interviewees. The founders were acutely aware of what they lacked, and found a way or partner to compensate for it. Varun knew his limited understanding of the business and sales, and had Himanshu in his team. Ankur found a tech arrangement by trial and later through Morpheus to compensate for his non-tech background. In the cases of Deepak and Sameer, they were able to learn the missing skills. So if you think that you do not have that one factor required to succeed, don’t worry—you are already halfway there. You now know what you lack. Go figure out a way to overcome that and create your own unique path to success. Who knows, my next book might feature you!

PART 1

Ideation, Validation and Pivoting

*We did not know that we will get venture capital or not.
We did helpdesk because that is the only thing we knew.*

— Girish Mathrubootham (Freshworks)

*Every moment is a trade; you are trading whatever you believe in.
Zerodha itself is a trade to me. I am playing because I believe in my odds.*

—Nithin Kamath (Zerodha)

*Google Website Optimizer is very complicated and I struggled using it
myself. That was a mini light-bulb moment there. If I was finding it
difficult, other marketers must be finding it even more difficult.*

—Paras Chopra (Wingify)

*Our novelty was not in coming up with this idea.
But I feel what we got right was the timing and
the application of the technology for the right product.*

—Nikhil Rasiwasia (Fashiate)



PART 2

Traction and Virality

I was thinking that if three people can be so effective that we were getting a million views a month, imagine if more learned people start sharing their lessons.

—Gaurav Munjal (Unacademy)

*Paul Graham asks, 'What makes you think we would want this?'
Evan replies—'Because we have two million users.'
They were shocked.*

—Prasanna Sankar (LikeALittle)

We realized that the real growth came from long-term page views and therefore we should invest in content which has longer shelf life.

—Ankit Maheshwari (Instablogs)



PART 3

Business Model and Fundraising

We thought US\$2 million is what we need to start production.

Today, we have raised US\$43 million and that is what it takes OEM to start functioning.

—Tarun Mehta (Ather Energy)

One of the mistakes I see Indian companies making is premature concern about business models.

—Amit Ranjan (SlideShare)

When you buy a version 1 iPad which is a US\$600 device, it doesn't do much! If you really want to utilize your iPad or show it off to people, you wouldn't mind paying US\$4 for this app.

—Ankit Gupta (Pulse)

The whole idea of raising external money is to accelerate growth.

Otherwise, being profitable itself may not be that difficult.

—Ankur Singla (Akosha)



PART 4

Sales and Marketing

We explained to all companies that if one GRE test can work for millions of students, one test can work for all the companies.

—Varun Aggarwal (Aspiring Minds)

Business does not happen between companies, it happens between real people.

—Chakshu Kalra (GreyB)

I believe bad product and good marketing can work but good product and bad marketing will never work.

—Deepak Syal (GreyB)



PART 5

People, Operations and Customer Service

We were looking for six to seven guys who would do everything like running operations, running supply chain. There were only two conditions—one, you cannot be from food industry because we were frustrated with those people. Two, you cannot send us the CV.

—Jaydeep Barman (Faasos)

Many a times, start-ups grow from 5 to 500 in no time and there is no time to build the culture.

—Sameer Guglani (Madhouse)



About the Author

Nistha Tripathi is the author of a spiritual novel, *Seven Conversations*, and a popular reference book, *Smart Engineer's Guide to MS in USA*. She is the founder of Scholar Strategy which prides itself in guiding hundreds of young professionals into MIT, Harvard and other top international engineering and business schools and leading more fulfilling careers.

With 38,000 followers and 6 million views on her answers on the popular Q&A-based website Quora, Nistha writes extensively on careers, entrepreneurship and pursuing one's passion. Her articles have appeared in *Entrepreneur*, *The Times*, *DailyO*, *DNA*, *The Tribune* and other leading media outlets.

Previously, she studied computer science at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and dropped out of the MBA programme at NYU Stern School of Business where she organized Stern's first entrepreneurship summit inviting the likes of Seth Godin and Chris Dixon. She worked on Wall Street and with fast-growing Manhattan start-ups before returning to India. Apart from running Scholar Strategy, she conducts aspirational talks for students and writing workshops for bloggers.

She is currently known for her travelling-six-months-a-year lifestyle, working from Southeast Asia. You can reach her on <http://nisthaonweb.com>.

Don't forget to check out our companion website. Sign up to download extra resources from the book on <http://startupbookindia.com>.

All feedbacks and suggestions are welcomed, and you can tweet the same to @NisthaTripathi.

How to Use This Book?

This book is a collection of interviews that cover the journeys of some of the most interesting and successful founders from India. The focus is leaning a tad bit towards the early one to four years of the start-up. Founders share their thought processes and actions as they built their first business. Rather than talking in hindsight, the narrative follows the sequence of events that unfolded and decisions that were taken—what, how and why. For the reader, this can act as a compendium of the start-up advice and the cautionary tales. Not meant to be an end-to-end read, this book is best studied interview by interview in your preferred order. And then, keep it as a handy reference so that you can pick it up again when you are contemplating your own venture or for advice around a specific business problem you are facing.

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