

W

STORIES *of*
UNCONVENTIONAL
18 CAREERS

My
LIFE
my
RULES

SONIA GOLANI

westland ltd

MY LIFE, MY RULES

Sonia Golani has a BA (Hons) in History from Lady Shri Ram College and a Masters degree from the University of Delhi. An entrepreneur, she manages her firm, Management Consultants Group which specializes in recruitment of professionals (MBAs and CAs) for Banking, Financial Services, Insurance and FMCG sectors.

At school, in Jaipur, she had the

distinction of securing a second rank in Rajasthan State in class X Board exams. Later while pursuing ISC from Maharani Gayatri Devi Girl's School, she topped her school. In college, she was elected as Treasurer, Students' Union.

Her first book, *Corporate Divas* was published to much acclaim in October 2011. Passionate about life and its nuances, she plans to write several more books, play golf, help people make better careers for themselves—and hopefully do all of this with equal fervor!

PRAISE FOR *CORPORATE DIVAS*

‘The language is crisp. Golani’s prose is almost journalistic reportage punctuated with personal recalls and hard facts, which virtually speak to readers from the pages.’—*The Times of India*

Those wishing to attain success in their own lives should buy the book and get acquainted with these women, usually seen and talked about on TV channels and in top business magazines, seeming normal as the girl next door, but with that little extra foresight and fortitude, and that

willingness to strive for what they
have believe in or envision for the
larger benefit of the organizations they
work with or head.’—*Afternoon
Despatch & Courier*

‘The book is an instant resource.
Ambitious Indian women—either
rookies or in their mid-careers—can
always learn a few tricks mom it on
their paths to the top.’—*The Times of
India*

‘Their achievements in the corporate
sector have only gone on to prove
how these determined women have
balanced the home and the
boardroom with equal aplomb, setting

standards for all to follow. A new book 'Corporate Divas' by Sonia Golani offers inspiring insights into what motivates and sustains India's 18 leading corporate women. Through a series of in-depth conversations, this book deals with the unconventional styles and the secret mantras they use to achieve phenomenal success in their professions.' —*The Financial Express and The Indian Express*

'They feature on the Forbes "World's 100 Most Powerful Women'list". They are dynamic and determined decisionmakers. They sit pretty at the top of banks, business houses and corporations. And most important,

their rise to fame has inspired many to follow suit... Meet some of the most powerful Indian women in this compilation.’—*The Hindu*

‘Here’s to the billion dollar ladies... *Corporate Divas*, takes an insightful look at 18 women who have changed India’s business landscape.’—*Hello!*

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First published in India by westland ltd 2012

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN: 978-93-82618-27-0

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For
Dilip

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*Managing Director & Corporate Executive
Chef, deGustibus Hospitality Private Limited*

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Cricket writer & Commentator

LIFE'S A PARTY

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MAKING OF A STAR AND A

GENTLEMAN

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THE NON-CONFORMIST

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OF THE PEOPLE, BY THE
PEOPLE, FOR THE PEOPLE

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LEARNING

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AUCTIONEERING

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ACKNOWLEDGEME

Thank you Dilip for being the ideator of this book and for being a constant source of inspiration and happiness in my life.

Varun—thanks for being the first reader and editor of the book and being my window to the young and bright world. I am blessed to have you in my life, my son.

Subhash and Harish Motwani, Radha and MV Golani, your benign presence and blessings mean the world to us. However, words will never be

enough to express what parents mean to children. A special mention for Subhash Motwani, my mother whose entrepreneurial spirit and positive outlook has besides her children, inspired many others around her.

Anu (Madhavi), Prashant, Vikram, Anil, Muskaan, Ashok, Madhvi, Pushpa, Jai, Tara, Anil, Mahesh, Bhavana :thanks to my gorgeous family for their boundless love, affection and best wishes for me always. The book, I am sure will resonate with my brother, Vikram who graduated from St. Stephen's College, Delhi and tried his hands at entrepreneurship and modeling before

finding his calling in banking.

Anupam and Shubhra Verma, Rajiv and Sangeeta Sabharwal, Jyoti and Sanjiv Singh, Sonia Gauba, Harsharan, Disha, Priya, Aparna and Maninder Juneja, Arti and Vivek Sood...life would be so boring without you all. Thanks for all the good cheer you bring in my life my dearest friends!

Devyani, Vivek, Reenu, Praveen, Manjiri and Girish—your good wishes are much valued and the times we have spent together truly cherished.

A big thank you to the wonderful team at Westland.

Renuka Chatterjee—for your warmth, friendliness and valuable inputs.

Sudha Sadhanand—for your acumen, promptness and infectious enthusiasm.

Lastly, I would like to thank all the eighteen amazing people featured in this book without whose coopeartion it couldn't have come to life. Thank you, friends. I hope you find many more rainbows along your fascinating journey and our paths cross again!

Finally, my apologies to a few who could not be covered as their profiles did not completely fit into the scheme

of this book. I do hope to work with them sometime in the future.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

I am delighted to present my second book, *My Life, My Rules: Stories of 18 Unconventional Careers*. Let me make a disclaimer right at the beginning. It is not a book that tells you how to take up offbeat careers or become successful entrepreneurs. Nor will it provide you with mantras for “instant gratification” or of any such nature. This book is essentially a celebration of work and life.

Work fills up a large part of our lives. To be happy, it is imperative that we like what we do. Most of us are

guided into a career by our parents, families and surrounding environment largely on the basis of time-tested conventional careers. Some step out of the charted path along the way and choose what they want to do and there are some whom the work chooses, what is usually termed as destiny by people. This book is focused on those who listened closely to the bidding of their heart and set sail on that path, freeing themselves from the shackles of clichéd social parameters of success, etc.; choosing inner peace and happiness over what others expected of them. This book is a celebration of that independent

minded attitude. As it were, for all the people featured in this book, the maxim “fortune favours the brave” has proven to be true.

Interestingly, most of those featured in this book have impeccable educational and professional qualifications from reputed institutes in conventional areas like engineering, medicine, management, arts, architecture, etc. but chose to pursue professions very different from what they had trained for. Also, all of them were the first ones in their families to venture out on their respective paths. Today, they have carved out a niche for themselves and are currently

leaders in their chosen fields which are not considered conventional careers in our society.

Through their stories, it is my endeavour to challenge the idea of choosing conventional careers as a measure of success and happiness in our society. Without internal happiness, success does not mean much. Happiness eventually is more than a career, money and fame and is different for different people. What works for an individual can only be ratified by him or her and after thorough soul searching.

I believe that stories of people within our milieu have a wonderful

way of exerting huge influence in shaping the thoughts and values within our society and communities. It is my attempt to broaden the way our society thinks by presenting diverse perspectives through these success stories. Such stories, I reckon, liberate the mind and free the human spirit, the state in which we can best enjoy this beautiful gift of life. They give us insights into human minds and hearts, learnings about life so profound that no school can impart.

My books (the first being *Corporate Divas*) focus on such socially relevant information weaved into the lives of people with a particular emphasis on

the environment in which they have grown, their thoughts, attitudes and decision making process. That context alone, I feel, brings forth the complete perspective and success story of any individual. At another level, the book is more than people's stories for me. It is a medium for me to capture the ethos of our generation which hopefully will be relevant for current times as well as for future.

I cannot conclude the note without giving due credit to the fabulous person with whom the idea for this book originated. It is my husband Dilip who came up with this concept and had the conviction that a book on

this theme was timely. Besides being the originator, he has, with his invaluable inputs and immense proficiency in time management, driven the whole project towards completion on time by getting me to have the meetings lined-up in advance to avoid any lull and helping me to move steadily towards the goal. My son Varun contributed significantly by keeping my enthusiasm high throughout by way of providing encouraging feedback and youthful perspective on each story. His personal favourite stories happen to be Rahul Akerkar (partly influenced by “Masterchef Australia” which is one of

his favourite shows!) and R Madhavan's.

While selecting people to feature in the book, I have tried to be as diverse as possible. So, the book has participants with varied qualifications and experience in different walks of life. Through both my books the more I got to know the minds and emotions of people from our milieu, the more snug I felt in my environment. The overwhelmingly impersonal character of city life started to seem less cold to me and this factor is personally, besides the pure joy of working on a creative engagement, the most fascinating aspect of writing

for me. Every wonderful note I get from my readers, who find my books informative, inspiring and or entertaining, my joy multiplies and my satisfaction deepens with the realization that my work has been able to make some meaningful contribution.

Each of the participants in the book opened to me a new world of thoughts, information and insights about life and living, making the last one year of working on the book one of the most amazing years of my life. Thank you, Rahul (Akerkar and Ram), Rashmi, Rajeev, Aditi, Madhavan, Ashish, Praveen, Nalin,

Harsha, Latika, Kris, Amish, Ingrid, Minal, Nikhil and Mr. Chief Minister, Manohar Parrikar for being a partner in this vision and for your wholehearted co-operation without which this book could not have been possible.

I hope the readers have as delightful an experience reading *My Life, My Rules: Stories of 18 Unconventional Careers* as I had writing it, drawing their own insights as they read through these stories of enterprise, passion and providence.

Sonia Golani



A CULINARY ODYSSEY

RAHUL AKERKAR

*Managing Director & Corporate Executive
Chef, deGustibus Hospitality Private Limited*

Rahul Akerkar is the man behind a clutch of Mumbai's high-end, super successful restaurants like Indigo, Indigo Delicatessen, Indigo Café, Tote on the Turf, and the fine catering venture, the Moveable Feast. With the opening up of his flagship restaurant Indigo in 1999, Mumbai's first standalone fine-dining restaurant, Rahul created waves and set the city's gastronomic scene abuzz.

His daringly original and innovative takes on international cuisine

combined with chic ambience and warm hospitality instantly made Indigo immensely popular among Mumbai's well-heeled "dinnerati". Very soon, Indigo achieved critical acclaim and Rahul's fame as a culinary genius spread far and wide.

In the year 2000, Indigo made it to *Condé Nast Traveller's* "World's Hottest 60 Tables" list. Rahul was featured in *Asiaweek's* survey of "Kitchen Gods" in 2001 which put him on an elite top-5 pedestal in Asia. Later, Indigo was listed in *Travel & Leisure* magazine's, "Top Reasons to Visit Mumbai". In January 2006, it was named one of India's best restaurants by *Time*

magazine. In 2007, it ranked seventy-fifth in the San Pellegrino “World’s Best Restaurants” awards in London, recognized around the world as the most credible indicator of the best places to eat.

What makes Rahul’s achievements all the more remarkable is that he did not study to become a chef—he used to be a PhD student in Biochemical Engineering. He put his engineering qualification aside to don chef whites and pursue a profession in which his heart lay. This was in 1989 and Rahul Akerkar has not looked back ever since.

How did he change tracks? What

triggered it? Weren't there family pressures against his decision? What has his journey been like?

I met Rahul, where else, but at Indigo, which is located at Colaba just behind the majestic Taj Mahal Palace hotel, in a beautiful large colonial style bungalow. Its 4.15 in the evening. The restaurant is quiet after lunch hours. The staff is gearing up for the evening buzz. The bar looks very inviting and justifiably so as Indigo enjoys the enviable reputation of having the finest selection of wines. The place is cozy, done in chic earthy hues and exudes a totally European feel.

It is in the stylish Yellow Room on the left, a dining space for twenty people, where we settle down to converse. Rahul is relaxed and very courteous in his bearing. The story unfolds.

Rahul was born to a Maharashtrian father and an American mother who met at the University of Wisconsin. His mother, Jinx, now eighty years old is perhaps the oldest American living in Mumbai and has had a remarkable life. A German Jew, Jinx's family fled the country during the Second World War, then travelling through France and Cuba settled in New York for sometime before she finally made

Mumbai her home. Rahul's father, now eighty-seven, was a senior Public Relations professional. When Rahul tells me that Jinx can speak eight languages including Marathi and Hindi, I cannot resist expressing surprise especially about Marathi!

Rahul did his schooling at the prestigious Bombay International School in South Bombay of which his mother is a founding member. His father belonged to the first batch of students at Doon School. Rahul followed suit and completed his high school from Doon. He did a year at junior college in Mumbai and headed to New York to join Franklin and

Marshall College at Lancaster in Pennsylvania as a pre-medical student.

After completing the four years' bachelor degree, he did a second bachelors in Chemical Engineering from Columbia University in New York and then acquired a Masters degree in Biochemical Engineering before enrolling for a doctorate.

So, how did cheffing happen in the midst of all this academic rigour? How did a Biochemical Engineer end up in the kitchen when he should have been in a research laboratory?

While in the second year of his PhD programme, Rahul fell out with his advisor as his observations and

theory were rejected by him. Around the same time, a visiting delegation from Imperial College in London highly appreciated his work and asked him to be in touch about the progress in his research work.

However, his advisor's attitude proved to be the final blow in Rahul's growing disillusionment with academics. Even while completing his Masters, he had begun to lose interest in it and felt academics was alienating him from the real world.

Recalls Rahul, 'Those few years were perhaps the lowest point of my life. Alongside completing my Masters, I was working full time in New York

kitchens—40 hours a week, 7 shifts. I was simply going with the flow. I had no direction and was drifting whichever way the wind went.’

I ask him whether at that point did he try to make a switch from academics to the corporate sector?

He shares that he wanted to do something that was an interface between research and industry—maybe a technical marketing assignment that involved such liaising. However, the bio tech industry in the late Eighties was very nascent and all the jobs were mainly in research. His father would send him leads for jobs in leading pharma

companies but he did not follow up on any. But he did try his hand randomly at various occupations like working with a computer consulting firm, selling Indian jewellery in a flea market, real estate work with a friend in Philadelphia, etc. and cooking!

‘All through my student days in the US, the only constant that I enjoyed from my heart was working in restaurants,’ he affirms.

On one such listless day, he just woke up and told himself, ‘I enjoy cooking...why don’t I pursue it?’ This thought liberated him and he decided not to analyze the consequences any longer. He wanted to get his life going

and mustered up all the courage to drop everything else and do what he really wanted to. What followed became the key turning point of his life.

His parents were visiting him in New York at that time and Rahul decided to let them know of his intentions. He felt such intensity and determination that he had never felt before. This was a sure sign that he was being true to himself. The very thought about cooking lit a spark in him and he simply felt good about life and living. Rahul was ready to answer his heart's calling. Unafraid of the consequences, he announced to his

parents: 'These degrees and everything aside, your son is a cook. I don't know whether it's right or wrong, that time will tell.'

Were they stunned to hear this? Any attempt by them to impress upon you to rethink and change your mind?

On the contrary, they seemed relieved and said, 'At least you have made up your mind.' Rahul continues, 'All my growing up years they had always said that the only thing we can give you is a good education and a life experience. It's for you to choose whatever you want to do, only make something out of it. If you want to be a plumber, carpenter,

whatever, do so but apply yourself well to it. They were really cool with my decision.'

So, did you switch to a full time job as a chef in New York?

'No,' he says. 'I had got tired of being an employee in the US. I wanted to open my own restaurant. I wanted to rise above mediocrity, have my own systems, stop taking orders and be my own boss.' Rahul then makes a candid confession, 'I did not have the guts to do it in New York. I felt I could do it in Mumbai.'

Finally, after staying in the US for thirteen years, he came back with this dream of opening a restaurant in

Mumbai. The only comforting factors at the time were his supportive parents and their home. He had to start everything else from scratch.

Since his parents were not from a business background, they could neither fund his venture nor guide him about it. Rahul too had no idea of finance and didn't know anything about getting funds to start the restaurant. What he knew however was that in case he tried to spell out his vision to a bank to get a loan, he would surely be asked, 'Who the hell are you? You have studied engineering and you want to open a restaurant?'

He therefore rested the thought for a while and made a beginning by catering from home for private parties.

‘I was focused, just did my job and I did it as professionally as it should be done. I was also very correct about the business—a principled professional which I still am,’ says Rahul with immense pride.

He goes on to share some interesting anecdotes of those early days in business. His catering firm was hired to organize a family dinner for a big industrial house. About eighty to ninety people were expected to turn up. However, only twenty showed up and large amounts of food was left

over. At the time of payment, he was given a cheque for catering to only twenty people. This was absurd, he felt. He asked his client whether they were in any way dissatisfied with the food or arrangements? No, he was told. Rahul explained his position. The discussion went on for a few minutes but the client insisted on paying only for twenty. Rahul walked off saying to their face ‘You know what, you need this cheque more than I do!’

On another occasion, a client wanted to sample some food before hiring his services. There wasn’t much lead time for sampling and Rahul

assured the client to trust him. Later it turned out that he had misjudged the taste as few people ate that evening. The food was too subtle, made more to suit the European palate. At the time of settling bills, Rahul refused to take a penny from the client. 'He trusted me and I did not deliver what I was contracted for. I did not take a single *naya* paisa from him.' This client eventually went on to become one of his best customers.

Then, for some time, in 1989-90 Rahul got into a short term, unstructured partnership with his friend, A D Singh the well known restaurateur and owner of Olive Bar &

Kitchen and they set up Just Desserts together. This joint venture lasted just a few months but what was to last lifelong was a relationship with one of the clients of Just Desserts. The client was Malini Vachani. Rahul and Malini got married and she has been in step with him through his entire journey ever since.

The first restaurant Rahul set up on his own was Under The Over at Kemps Corner in Mumbai. Since he had sufficient local experience in the business by now, the venture was financed by Saraswat Co-operative Bank. The concept behind his new venture was to “cook local eat

global”, and it offered an assortment of Greek, European, Japanese and other international cuisines. As was expected, some of Rahul’s friends and well wishers discouraged him saying that this kind of food will never work in India. He should instead go for the regular Chinese or Mughlai food that people were used to. Rahul however held fast to his belief. ‘We offered international cuisine as we were convinced if people had a choice they would go for it. And they did go for it,’ recalls Rahul about the success of his first venture.

‘I remember the night we opened; the first party we had was a “soft

opening” for my family and close relatives. I broke down. It was sheer joy. I was overwhelmed. It was a huge moment!’ The year was 1992.

After a successful run of three years, the lease for Under The Over ran out. The landlord made it so difficult for Akerkar that he decided to shut the business.

Malini and Rahul singlemindedly decided to restore their first dream venture and began scouting for an alternative location to house Under The Over. However, the spiralling cost of real estate in Mumbai left them no options and the couple decided to relocate to Bengaluru which was a fast

growing city due to the IT boom. Around this time, as a wonderful coincidence, Protima Bedi (Kabir Bedi's late wife) was in the process of setting up her dream project, the Kuteeram Retreat, at Hesarghata, forty kms away from Bengaluru. She offered Rahul and Malini to run the place and they readily signed up a two-year contract with Protima.

Being involved right from the construction phase, Kuteeram proved to be a great experience for them. 'Working with Protima gave me the confidence that if you have the vision, finance is not going to be a problem,' acknowledges Rahul. For the next

two years, Rahul, Malini and their daughter Shaan lived like “gentle farmers”. By the end of it however, they started missing the buzz of city life. A move was also necessitated because of Shaan’s education as she had started her kindergarten by then.

Although Kuteeram gave Rahul a sense of satisfaction at that time, he couldn’t let go of his dream of setting up a fine-dining restaurant. He and Malini deliberated again on the issue of whether it should be in Bengaluru or Mumbai. One of his friends was advising him on the finance part and highlighted the fact that there was a huge difference between prime real

estate rentals in Mumbai and Bengaluru. The calculations finally summed up like this—for renting a 3000 sq ft place, the effective difference between the two cities was working out to three lakhs. Assuming it was a 100-seater restaurant, the cost differential per person roughly translated to the price of an extra Coke in Mumbai than in Bengaluru. The question was whether they could get the customers to spend that much more in Mumbai? Yes, they could, they decided.

‘I had observed the consumption pattern in different cities. It was interesting to see that people

consumed more in Mumbai and Delhi than in Bengaluru. In Bengaluru, people loved to go out and mingle but they nursed their drinks and consumed much less. So without over analyzing, I decided that Mumbai would be the place,' narrates Rahul.

Back in Mumbai, they started looking out for a serious place with a character. Even after a long stretched exercise of about a year in which they looked up some 30-40 places, nothing worked out. Either the place did not appeal or it was embroiled in litigation or some such complication.

In the meantime, Rahul and Malini went to attend a family wedding in

November 1998 in California. Rahul had also been quietly putting together a project to start a restaurant in San Francisco. Things moved fast and within a week, a bank was ready to finance them and they also found a suitable place to start. Apparently, Rahul's American citizenship and a vast and relevant work experience, made it easy for him to procure the loan in such a short span of time.

But then he developed cold feet. It had been ten years since he had been away from the food scene in the US. He knew it was easy to set up a restaurant in the US but difficult to sustain while it was the reverse in

India. They decided to give themselves time till 31 March and if things did not work out back in India, they considered moving to the US. Malini and Shaan meanwhile returned to Mumbai as schools were reopening. Rahul stayed back thinking he'd call his old chef friends and start work again and get a grip on current palates and trends.

Soon after Malini's return to Mumbai, a beautiful bungalow in Colaba came up on the market for sale. Malini met the landlord and immediately signed the MOU. Rahul was still in the US but things started moving for him back home. After his

return Malini and he put their heart and soul for the next one year in singlemindedly doing up the space. They were personally involved in every tiny detail not just related to the food and menu but also carpentry, interiors, etc. 'It took us a long time to get going. We had no clue of keeping a timeline or the concept of rapidly doing things,' remembers Rahul.

Indigo finally opened its doors to the public in 1999 and shot to instant fame as Mumbai's first standalone, fine-dining restaurant with an unmatched class and quality. It quickly went on to become a favourite haunt for the city's A list crowd.

‘Once again, I had tears of joy flowing when we did the coconut breaking ceremony on inauguration,’ Rahul says nostalgically. What his heart had wished for, and his soul had believed in, was nurtured by him for years with hard work and dedication. His dream had now finally turned to reality.

The rest as they say is history. Rahul and Malini’s focus on giving a delightful experience to their clientele has worked wonders for Indigo’s impeccable reputation, winning it rave reviews and several awards year after year. Even a decade later, Indigo consistently continues to charm its

patrons. Gradually their business expanded and today in addition to Indigo, their company deGustibus Hospitality manages a wide bouquet of restaurants.

Has Rahul ever regretted that his academic labour of twenty-seven years went waste?

He has interesting views on this subject: ‘I don’t think that what I studied was a waste. To me it’s all an experience. I never look at it this way that a process needs an ending. It’s not like—“Oh I am studying engineering...I must continue to do engineering.” It’s not a finite journey. You do things, experience and

discover what really interests you and see where the journey takes you.'

What about those times when he saw his peers going ahead in life while he was still to make a start?

Sharing his state of mind at that time, he says, 'Quite a few of my friends were working at Wall Street, earning well, while I was still a student. I did feel a little awkward in a way when I hung with them at the bar and they talked stock markets and real life. It intrigued me. I was however never really uncomfortable about it. It was an interesting time. It was kind of a state of being, perhaps because of the internal strength I had

developed in me.'

Rahul continues, 'What I am going to tell you about myself now, not many people know.... I had a violent stutter all through childhood until I finished college. I couldn't say my name, couldn't speak clearly. It was Dr Schwartz at the New York University Medical Center who helped me get over it. Because of the stutter, I was more of an observer than a partaker. As a result, I am very comfortable and happy being on my own. I have to be with people but I am very much alone,' he concludes.

While conversing with Rahul now, no one can figure if he ever had

speech difficulties. He is articulate, absolutely fluent and a real pleasure to hear!

When he started catering from home, was it not awkward? His parents were after all part of South Mumbai's elite social circle.

‘I have never been bothered about what others think. There were many times when my school and college friends from industrial families hired my services. I was always comfortable in my own skin. It is others who weren't comfortable with it. It's like you can't scold an employee with whom you are very close. So, to avoid any such embarrassment to my friends

I would stick to the kitchen while my staff served. I have always been a maverick in that sense. Those days I hung out with artists, photographers, advertising professionals and others from softer and creative areas rather than with business guys. I found a niche for myself and was comfortable in that.'

What about the risk factor when he set up Under The Over with a loan and later Indigo at a whopping cost? Did the bigger loan amount put huge pressures on him?

'I have always gone into anything with a very positive mindset, without thinking any other way. There is a

constant tussle between restricting and overextending yourself. The risk of failure is very high when you over extend. It's a perverse kind of relationship. If you are safe a lot of times, then you don't see the success you want. I usually don't sit to analyze. Most times I react viscerally, with gut feel. In the process I have fallen too. Engineering was one such instance. But that's what is life's experience. Starting with Under the Over, every restaurant I have done, has always worked well.

‘I also believe that when your product and delivery is good, the costs of business always sort themselves out.

We have never done any market research or anything of the sort. We have always gone to people with conviction in our product and by delivering with complete honesty. When we present a menu to the customers, it has a price and it describes the food. Our job is to provide tasty food, well made, hygienic, in a clean and conducive environment with good service. If we don't deliver on our promise, we don't expect the customers to pay the bill. If a customer has not had a good experience for some reason, the bill is on us. Our work ethic has always brought us good returns.'

What about competition from other established players, especially the five stars?

‘I don’t lay much emphasis on competition. I focus on what I do. As long as we are our best critics, resolve our problems properly and fix our own issues, we’ll do fine. More the restaurants, the better it is. People will have newer places and a wider choice to eat.’

What does the future hold for you?
I ask.

‘I don’t visualize what lies ahead. What’s the point?’ He laughs and says ‘Frankly I don’t know. I have always gone with the flow and I suppose I

will continue to do that.'

A man who values experience more than possessions, Rahul continues, 'What I do think sometimes is that one day I will have a four-five tables restaurant where I will cook and clean myself. As and when I want to watch a movie or do anything else, I would lock it and go. Of course, it will not be for business. It will be for joy. I would like to just do that some day.'

Rahul's dreams for the future continue to be around food and cooking. While others may be trying to figure out their passion, Rahul had this figured out way back and is busy nurturing his company and living the

good life with his wife Malini and two daughters, Shaan and Amalia.

After this meeting with Rahul Akerkar, the experience of dining at Indigo will always be more personal and special for me. I have an open invitation from the “Kitchen God” himself—it couldn’t get better than this.



MASTER OF

THE MIC

HARSHA BHOGLE

Cricket writer & Commentator

Harsha Bhogle does not really need any introduction. His smiling face, gentle demeanour and that inimitably mellifluous commentary with perfect voice intonation and wealth of information have won him multitudes of fans in this country where cricket is like a religion.

We were to meet on his return from England at the end of India's

forgettable tour to England (July to September 2011). However, due to his broadcasting commitments during the West Indies tour of India close at heels, followed by India's equally dismal performance in Australia, the meeting got postponed. Finally, on this pleasant early afternoon in March, I look forward to meeting him at the chic Atrium Lounge at hotel Taj Lands End in Mumbai. He is returning from Kolkata after attending a function hosted by Sourav Ganguly and driving straight to the Taj for our meeting. A conversation with someone who is a magician with words surely promises to be an

enthraling one!

At one end of the lounge, a popular Bollywood starlet is in discussion with a group of people and at the other end a famous fashion designer is holding court immersed in deep conversation. I take a table for two at the centre from where I get a good view of the entrance and the calm waters of Arabian Sea in the distance. Clad in a white shirt and jeans, Harsha walks in. A buzz from his newly-acquired Nokia Lumia (unfortunately stolen that night after our conversation) helps him to locate me and he breezily joins me. A cappuccino for me and a black coffee

for him, the order is placed with a pleasant looking steward before our conversation gets underway.

Harsha hails from Hyderabad. Though in his commentary, the regional influences get diffused, while talking, he uses several Urdu sayings and refers to the way things are done in Hyderabad and instantly establishes his connection with the state. Harsha's father, A D Bhogle had moved to Hyderabad from Aurangabad in the late 1930s to join the strong Marathi community in pursuance of better opportunities and education. After completing his Msc in Chemistry, he took up teaching at the Department of

Chemistry at Osmania University. Later, due to his flair for languages, he was selected by the university to go to France to do a course in French language and on his return was asked to set up and run the department, which he did. Harsha and his elder twin siblings, Srinivas and Svati have inherited their love for languages from their father and the grit from their mother, Shalini who was also a professor of Psychology at the university.

The family shared another common passion and this didn't come as a surprise—cricket. Harsha's mother tells him that even as a young kid, as small

as four or five years, he would imagine he was Buddhi Kunderan (a cricketer from Karnataka who played in the 1960s), or some or the other cricketer. He remembers reading up the famous sports magazines of those days from cover to cover and has distinct memories of some of the pictures on the cover pages, particularly that of Tiger Pataudi after he captained India's first ever test match win overseas against New Zealand in 1968 and Dilip Sardesai who played a crucial role in India's win over England at the Oval in 1971 which resulted in India winning the series. Those days, recalls Harsha, there used to be a programme

on radio which asked people to name their ideal cricket team to see how close it was to what the selectors finally picked. Harsha's father encouraged the children to draw up their own selections. Thus through reading, discussions or actual play on the field, cricket remained an integral part of Harsha's life since the very early years.

After Harsha passed junior school, his mother resumed teaching, bringing an end to the long break she had taken after Srinivas and Svati were born. Her going back to work meant a second salary coming into the household. With extra funds at hand,

his parents decided to shift Harsha to the more upscale and prestigious Hyderabad Public School from St John's school where he had completed his primary schooling. Luckily, a good performance in the entrance test made him eligible for a scholarship that halved the school fees. Throughout the rest of the years at school, Harsha maintained that scholarship through academic excellence.

The school had two sprawling cricket grounds. Participating in sports was compulsory in the school and when the selections were being conducted for the junior school cricket team, Harsha also presented

himself. He considers himself fortunate to have made it to the team. The school timings stretched for long—from 7.45 in the morning till 5.45 in the evening. Those in the school cricket team practiced and played matches on Saturdays and Sundays too. ‘I went to school all seven days of the week,’ chuckles Harsha. Even after coming back home, everyday, there would be more cricket to play with neighbourhood friends. As part of the school team, Harsha played several lower division and A1 league tournaments (highest league in Hyderabad). He also played many informal tournaments as part of the

“cork ball team” put together by one of the local guys passionate about cricket.

When it was time to join college, Harsha was keen to pursue a Bachelors in Arts as he was not particularly confident of his mathematical abilities. His father instead persuaded him to take engineering exams as those who pursued Arts were not perceived to be bright students. If after qualifying in engineering, he still wanted to graduate in Arts, he could do so, he was told. Harsha followed his father's advice and cleared the engineering entrance examination.

So why did he not pursue Arts as he

had initially planned, I ask?

I gather that finally his decision to continue with engineering was centered around cricket. He realized that if he pursued Arts, he would have to join Nizam College in Hyderabad which had a sports quota and thus also boasted of a top notch cricket team. The best of players were joining Nizam College in hordes and in such a scenario he would not stand much of a chance to make it to the college team. Instead if he joined engineering, the odds would be heavily tilted in his favour. That was that. Harsha decided he would opt for Chemical Engineering from Osmania University,

a relatively softer engineering stream he found comfortable. ‘There are three things which came very naturally to me—Chemistry is one of them, the other two being fielding and getting along with the Aussies. I loved fielding and hitting at the stumps. I think I would still be able to do it well,’ proclaims Harsha confidently.

The second year of engineering was the most memorable for him—sort of a “hat-trick year!” He not only topped his class and got the advanced diploma in French that he was pursuing but also captained the college team!

Due to constant encouragement

from his father, he participated in several other activities in college. If an opportunity to participate in a youth programme on radio came up, his father would push him to be part of it. When a trade fair took place in Delhi and they needed French language interpreters, Harsha worked as one for a company that made coupling joints. And then at nineteen years of age, in the middle of his third year engineering exams, he got the opportunity to commentate on a Ranji Trophy match on All India Radio (AIR). ‘There was a grade system then. Whether you got 76 or 95 marks, you would get the same

grade. So without fretting over the exams, I grabbed the opportunity,' said Harsha. It was a wonderful learning experience for him. In those days, just below the commentary box which used to be a temporary structure, there used to be a swarm of people. If any commentator made the slightest mistake, people would look up and start abusing. It made a significant impact on Harsha as he realized that he had to be thorough with his facts or else '*neeche se gaali padegi*' (There would be abuses from down below the box.)

As the engineering course drew to a close, Harsha skipped a college

“industrial tour” to play the finals of the inter college cricket tournament and also began preparing for the Common Admission Test (CAT) and Graduate Aptitude Test in Engineering (GATE) which was being held for the first time that year for admission into M. Tech programmes.

‘Those days were more relaxed. I prepared for all of ten to fifteen days from just one book which was the *Barron’s Guide*. Some twenty-five thousand odd students wrote CAT then compared to several lakhs taking the examination these days after rigorous systematic preparation over a long time,’ quips Harsha.

The results came and stumped Harsha and his family. He had made it to the topmost management institute in the country—IIM Ahmedabad (IIM A).

Around the same time, Anita Kulkarni had also qualified for the same institute from Mumbai and landed up as Harsha's classmate. Here was a confident, mature girl who knew how to be on her own. Anita's father was in the Indian Police Service (IPS) and even as she was finishing college, he was deputed to Delhi. Anita's elder sister was married by this time and when her parents moved to Delhi, Anita managed the household

along with her studies while continuing to stay on in Mumbai with her grandmother. Harsha on the other hand had ventured out of home for the first time. What struck him about Anita was her self assuredness. His admiration for her that began from the IIM campus has grown with time. They got married almost more than twenty-five years ago and even today Harsha is dependent on her more than ever before and considers himself fortunate to have Anita in his life, bringing him all the luck and love that he could ever ask for.

Even though the academic rigour at IIM A was difficult to cope, Harsha

managed to find time to occasionally commentate on Doordarshan (DD). At that time he never imagined that this would get him his first big national break in broadcasting. His proficiency at commentary got noticed and he was put on the panel of commentators for a test match that was being broadcast by DD. While the break was phenomenal, its timing was not. The match fell in the middle of his first year exams at IIM. Prof Bakul Dholakia, then PGP chairman, and later Director of the institute from 2002-2007, got Harsha out of this tight spot by allowing him to take the exams on his return. This kind gesture

from the institute has made Harsha reverential towards it for life. 'Till date when I enter the portals of the institute, I feel I am in another world and I can never thank much for all that the institute has done and meant for me in my life,' he says with deep respect.

Harsha remembers vividly those days of television broadcasting when DD was the only channel. When he listens to or sees some of those old tapes, they appear to be in stark contrast with the far superior quality of presentation these days and a reminder of how far the industry has travelled in terms of look and feel.

Meanwhile at the institute, the placement season approached. Harsha was very keen to get a job in advertising, particularly with Rediffusion. Surprising as it may seem, the reason was because most of the advertisements that he admired during his engineering days happened to be by this agency. When someone told him that the name of the advertising agency is usually mentioned below the advertisement, he noticed that most of the advertisements he liked were done by Rediffusion. He particularly remembered one advertisement the agency had done for Wiltech (a blades company that was later acquired by

Gillette). It was for one of its brands named Savage. It said ‘The dawn in every man’s life is touched by the savage experience.’ Harsha found this line very interesting. Some more such instances of creative advertising made him firm up his mind that he would work in advertising and preferably only with Rediffusion. So during placements, he applied to Rediffusion, Lintas and Clarion.

And not to the much coveted companies of those days on campus like HLL, Food Specialities (Nestle), Citibank and Bank of America, I ask?

‘No, not to any of these companies even though I knew that they paid

better and commanded great respect. It was because I was simply in love with advertising. While at IIM A, I had read every book in the library on advertising whether it was Rosser Reeves, Ogilvy, etc. I did my summers also in advertising. I was enamoured with advertising to such an extent that on one of the trips when I came for a test match commentary to Mumbai, I called up Ajay Shrikhande of Lintas and asked him if I could meet him. This was because *Business India* had featured Ajay Shrikhande in one of its issues. I did get an audience with Ajay and still remember what he said. He told me in Marathi,

“Advertising is not all glamour. Can you sit on the floor and eat pithla (a humble Marathi dish made of chickpea flour) if you have to? If yes, then you can have a career in advertising.”

With more than a two decades long and successful career behind him and having observed several other successful people, Harsha strongly believes that hard work is the key to success. This is what Ajay had meant when he made that statement to Harsha and that has had a tremendous impact on him.

Around this time, Ajit Balakrishnan and Ashok Bijapurkar of Rediffusion

visited IIM Ahmedabad routinely for guest lectures. Harsha would make it a point to ask them questions on advertising purely with a view to impress them. Later when they came for campus interviews, Harsha somehow ended up messing his chance and thought that he had lost the opportunity. However, he was fortunate. They called him and asked him ‘What happened today? You were too keen or too nervous? You are getting the job but never do an interview like this again.’

Anita also chose advertising and joined Contract straight from campus. She later moved to FCB-Ulka where

she spent a large part of her sixteen years' corporate career before quitting to start Prosearch Consultants. Run by Anita and Harsha, Prosearch is a sports-based communication consultancy that has conducted more than three hundred successful corporate workshops based on the theme: "Learnings from Sport for Managers".

After a stint of two and a half years with Rediffusion, Harsha moved to Professional Management Group (PMG), a sports marketing company run by the veteran cricketer Sunil Gavaskar and stayed with the company for roughly the same period

of about two and a half years. And then one day, Harsha got an offer from Trans World International (TWI—the largest independent distributor and producer of televised sports, a division of IMG worldwide), and he decided to take it up. Later, ESPN offered Harsha an exclusive two-year contract. It was unheard at the time as never before had an Indian broadcaster signed up talent under such a contract. From 1998 till 2009 Harsha presented live cricket from all around the world for ESPN and STAR Sports and remained the anchor for all their prestigious television shows.

What made him leave advertising which he was so passionate about? I ask Harsha.

‘My advertising career was coming in the way of cricket, my first love,’ states Harsha as the primary reason for this defining decision of his life, one which would go on to give him his identity as the much loved voice of cricket.

With the liberalization of the broadcast media in the early Nineties, global sports and media companies like TWI and ESPN made an entry into India and a good career in television broadcasting seemed possible as well as promising. Harsha realized

that becoming a fulltime commentator and television presenter was now financially rewarding and also held out the prospects of turning his favourite pastime into a long term career. Therefore when the opportunity arose, Harsha instantly took the plunge with TWI and later went on to sign the contract with ESPN.

Harsha considers the period from 1999 -2009, the decade he was on contract with ESPN, as the high point of his career and attributes it to the wonderful producers at ESPN who were able to bring out the best in him. 'I am not a person with great vision and strategy. Whenever someone has

visualized a great programme for me, I have delivered. It holds true for the shows at ESPN, for the travel show I did that was broadcast on the Discovery channel and TLC where the producer was an American who divided his time between Hong Kong and Mumbai, and also holds true for all the corporate workshops we do at Prosearch which are, by the way, all Anita's visualization.'

If cricket was so close to your heart, did you ever think of being a professional cricketer and drop out of studies as is the trend these days? I ask Harsha.

'By the time I discovered I could

play well, it was already too late. If I was sixteen again, I would look at my cricket very differently. At that time, I never really gave it a serious thought in terms of a profession, never analyzed things that way. There were no aspirations attached to it. That's the reason, I believe, that my memories of cricket are more of fun than any regrets,' explains Harsha.

Being a commentator equipped with a management degree gives you a niche positioning in the world of sports broadcasting. It's perhaps a good way to have the best of both worlds, I further suggest.

‘On the contrary, I would say that

what I do is no longer sustainable. I doubt there will be another one like me in this profession. In today's times, if you are not a former cricketer, you won't get the job. So someone like me or a Tony Cozier (Anthony 'Tony' Cozier—West Indian cricket writer and commentator) or an occasional one in New Zealand or South Africa, who are non-cricketers doing cricket commentary, are going to be a thing of the past. There will be sports anchors who are not former players but there isn't likely to be a commentator who is not a former player,' says Harsha.

I think to myself that revelation of

this bitter truth may probably dash the hopes of many youngsters who would have dreamt of walking in his tracks.

Harsha and Anita's two sons have also for the time being not followed in the footsteps of their parents. Whether their elder son Chinmay who is an MBA from Symbiosis Institute of Business Management (SIBM) and currently works with Tata Motors, or the younger Satchit who is pursuing law in Kolkata will have a future "offbeat" career in broadcasting or marketing like their parents, time will tell. Harsha and Anita have not imposed their views on them and have fully supported them in pursuing what

they desired.

At this time, Harsha believes that he is going through a new phase in his career. When he started doing commentary, and was growing in his career, most cricketers were also charting their growth trajectory. There weren't many players who did commentary at that time. He feels the kind of relationship he has had with veteran cricketers like Rahul Dravid, Anil Kumble, etc., he possibly may not be able to have with the younger generation of players. Younger players like Virat Kohli, Irfan Pathan, Gautam Gambhir, etc look upon him as an older guy whom they can trust but

perhaps not someone they can relate to and vice-versa. However, Harsha considers himself fortunate that whenever in the past cricket tapered off, other engagements have kept him satisfactorily occupied such as workshops with Prosearch, columns with newspapers and magazines, his travel show, of late his very popular video blogs with Samsonite and Twitter. Within a brief period of opening his twitter account, Harsha had followers in excess of three and a half lakhs! And that amongst several other things is an indication of his popularity and the respect he commands. Anita and Harsha have

also co-authored a bestselling book titled *The Winning Way*.

In his typical modest style, Harsha says, ‘I don’t understand why people have this interest in me. There are many more hugely talented people out there. I believe in what Navjot Singh Sidhu once told me—“*Tuney pichle janam mein kuch achhey karma kiye honge*” (You must have done some good deeds in your past life.)

Things just happen to me. What I do is only approach them with the attitude that okay, I am going to give my best to whatever comes my way. I may not be good enough on a particular day but then it’s not a crime.

Given the circumstances of the day, I try to do the best I can. So if someone has been nasty to me minutes before I am suppose to go on air, I can't say that I am hurt or I'll not do the show. If Sachin is not upto his best on a particular day, he can't say he won't play. The world doesn't want to know how you are feeling. They only see whether you are good or not. I try to do my best for the day and don't let the stress show up in the way of performance. This is what we tell the managers in our presentations too. You must always try to bring a winning attitude to work,' concludes Harsha before dashing off to keep his

word of being on time for lunch with Anita.

There are several more winning ways that Anita and Harsha talk about in their book which is a compilation of their experience of holding workshops in the corporate sector. It's an inspiring book which throws up several new aspects each time you read it.

Another book, another tweet, another blog, another broadcast. I am sure people are tuned in for more from the one and only Harsha Bhogle!



LIFE'S A PARTY

NIKHIL CHINAPA

MTV VJ, RJ & DJ

It was not serious planning which led Nikhil Chinapa to become an architect. Neither did he plan to be a Radio Jockey (RJ), a Video Jockey (VJ) or DJ, Disc Jockey. It's simply called "going with the flow" to which all these tags in his life can be attributed to.

Born in Bengaluru, Nikhil and his elder brother were brought up by loving parents who let their sons grow up with a lot of independence and individuality. As a paratrooper with the Indian army, Nikhil's father moved around the country before

finally settling down in Bengaluru by the time Nikhil reached class seven.

Nikhil always managed to come at the top of his class but after moving to Bengaluru, his academic focus got somewhat diluted. He joined St Joseph's High School and developed a passion for two diverse things: love for fiction and for shooting as a cadet with the National Cadet Corps (NCC).

His love for reading got him a place in the "library squad" at St Joseph's and the privilege of issuing any number of books and he fully utilized this special status. 'Most library squad members had read every possible book in the library ranging from all of

Alistair MacLeans to P G Wodehouses, Enid Blytons and the Hardy Boys, etc. It used to be hugely exciting when any of us found a book that we had not read. Books helped me to grow my imagination and expand my learning of places and people around the world as a result of which I reckon no situation in life really ever surprises me,' says Nikhil about what a tremendous boon his avid reading habit proved to be for him.

So far as his other passion went, Nikhil represented Karnataka in rifle shooting both at the junior and senior division levels, and was awarded the

gold medal as a senior cadet. In hindsight, he thinks that attending a series of NCC camps and living under tough physical conditions made him resilient as an individual, a training which came very handy in later years by way of making him a good team player and by instilling in him the ability to rough it out, if the job so demanded.

He was in second year of Pre University (class twelve) at St Joseph's college when he won the NCC gold medal for rifle shooting. As a result of this honour, the Rifle Association of India shortlisted him as one of the candidates who could be further

trained and saw the potential in him to represent the country. However, the final shooting trials kept getting delayed. It was already February and with exams round the corner, his father called him back to attend college. He returned and prepared for the exams in a span of two and a half months and managed well in all the subjects except Mathematics which he failed and as a result ended up losing a year. Though disappointed, knowing the circumstances under which it had happened, his parents were quite supportive and after one major discussion, it was agreed between them that the topic would never be

brought up again.

In this year, Nikhil veered towards music and dabbled in it seriously which eventually put him at a significant advantage later. Looking back Nikhil believes that these events in his life unfolded as though there was a bizarre plan in place for him. Having to study only Maths in this year, he joined AIESEC (a global youth organization) to make use of the spare time. AIESEC's weak financial condition at the time turned out to be an opportunity for Nikhil; they decided to raise funds by organizing a carnival and Nikhil volunteered to run the music stall at this event. He put his

ingenuity to use and ran the music stall like a radio station—giving it a frequency, announcing to invite requests like it's done on a radio station and most importantly, played the kind of music people wanted. It was almost as if he was making a debut as a Radio Jockey without really being aware of it. Needless to mention, he garnered a lot of appreciation for his imagination, confidence and flair for communicating.

About a month and a half later, the person who had supplied cassettes to AIESEC, approached Nikhil and asked him if he would like to be the

Master of Ceremony (MC) for Rodeo, the cultural festival of Mount Carmel College (Bengaluru's premier college for girls). Nikhil was delighted to get such an opportunity and agreed readily. While Verhnon Ibrahim, then lead vocalist of the Millennium Band was the DJ at this event, Nikhil was the MC and together they created a magic that Bengaluru had never experienced before. 'The entire basketball court had turned into an open discotheque and the place was filled with an amazing amount of energy and fun,' recalls Nikhil.

Nikhil therefore had managed to establish quite a reputation for himself

while he was still a teenager and more work started pouring in for him. He remembers one particular gig that was held on new year's eve at a five star hotel in Bengaluru for which he was paid 1000 rupees for two-and-a-half hours which amounted to quite a large sum of "pocket money" about twenty years back! 'It was an amazing feeling to get paid so much for work which did not even feel like work. It felt as if I had arrived in life,' he says recalling the excitement during the early years of his thrilling association with music.

When the time came, he cleared the pending Maths paper. By now,

however, he had come to detest the subject. Inspired by his grandfather who was a doctor and by his biology teacher, he made an attempt at pursuing medicine. When that did not work out, without analyzing any further or involving his parents in the decision, he finally opted for Architecture. He did not have the slightest clue that he was choosing a stream that had a whole lot to do with Maths and sketching, the subjects for which he had absolutely no aptitude and inclination!

So, the first two years of college were spent more outside the class than in it. Life centered around the

canteen, going clubbing, hanging out with friends and most of all with his girlfriend. Gigs continued to be a good source of earning more than sufficient pocket money for him. Nikhil was in a happy space but this didn't last too long. Towards the end of the second year, his girlfriend broke up with him and moved on. It hit Nikhil badly and he was left completely distraught and plunged into a soul searching mode.

Around this time he came across the bestselling book, *Illusions* by Richard Bach. Considering the melancholic state he was in, it was just what he needed. The book had a major impact

on him and helped him to develop multi-dimensional thinking rather than being pigeon holed with a particular outlook. Filled with optimism, Nikhil resolved to take charge of his life, move on and do something to fill the empty spaces within him. He saw that Architecture was the ready option that could engage him at the time and he resolved to devote himself whole heartedly to academics. Here he was in the third year stacked up with seventeen subjects! After mulling over, he decided to drop sketching, which he knew was his Achilles heel but went all out for the rest. The dedication yielded good results and he

fared very well.

In the fourth year of Architecture, which involved training with an architect, he interned at the office of one of his lecturers who commanded the reputation of being a hard task master. However, within four months, Nikhil was rated as one of the better people at the firm. Another significant part of the fourth year course was submission of landscape design. Still not completely out of the habit of bunking classes, he came to know of the design submission requirement barely two weeks before the due date. He had however mastered the art of delivering under pressure by now.

The students were asked to design the landscaping of only the three internal courtyards of a nearby commercial complex. But Nikhil understood it as landscaping the entire commercial complex and therefore he did—not just the three courtyards but the entire commercial complex including the parking lot and the park outside the parking lot too. He topped the design course that year!

While he did well in all the papers in the fifth year, he also managed to clear the much dreaded sketching paper which he had dropped for the previous two years. Now, the only thing that remained between him and

the degree was submission of the design thesis. Even as majority of his classmates opted for regular topics, Nikhil wanted to do something different. He opted to design a centre for herpetology and stayed for a couple of weeks at the Crocodile Bank Trust at Chennai and also spent some time at the Bannerghatta National Park in Bengaluru to understand what it took to build a place for the fascinating creatures. However, he missed the date for submission of the thesis and had to wait for an entire year.

Well, so be it, he thought and decided not to take even an iota of

stress due to this delay. There was anyways a lot happening in his life. He had started doing radio by now and was involved as a sound engineer with Arjun Sajnani's (well known in Bengaluru's theatre circuit) theatre productions. Clubbing with friends thrice a week and being a regular at the gym became sacrosanct engagements. It was during this period that he realized that dance music and discovering new tracks for it worked as a very powerful motivational force inside him. 'It was not about alcohol, women or drugs but it was all about being with friends and enjoying the fascinating world of rhythm and

sound,’ explains Nikhil.

Since there was enough time to work on the thesis, he tried more avenues—anything that came his way which seemed interesting to him. He auditioned for “Namaste India”, a show on Zee TV and got selected; tried his luck with modeling at the renowned fashion designer, Prasad Bidapa’s firm; experimented with some ideas and concepts for parties which did not work out; auditioned for a movie which too came a cropper. That done, he finally realized that he had a natural talent as an MC and focused on that.

Around this time, MTV India

announced its VJ hunt. Nikhil found the contest interesting and in his usual way decided to give it a try. Cyrus Broacha, one of most talented and earliest VJs on the circuit, had already broken into the big league. Although Nikhil was sure of his talents, it did make him nervous when he thought of established VJs who seemed far more accomplished than he was at the time. To his delight, he was shortlisted from Bengaluru and was called to Mumbai. As luck would have it, there was a change in MTV's plan and they were now looking for VJs who had the "girl/boy next door" charm and not just people who looked great and

glamorous. Nikhil's "cool quotient", experience with radio and rather quirky sense of humour appealed to the channel honchos and he made it through the selection process; the other two selected along with him were Maria Goretti and Amrita Arora. MTV signed a three month contract with him after which it was extended for another year. The Hindi he had picked up in his early years in North India came pretty handy for him as a VJ when MTV later went completely in Hindi.

One year at MTV flashed passed quickly. MTV was a lot of fun and fame but he still hadn't finished his

thesis and had to submit it in order to get his degree in Architecture. 'Being from a middle class background, that piece of paper was quite important for me,' accepts Nikhil. He decided to go back and complete his thesis but MTV would not let him resign. By this time, they had found him promising and had spent substantial time and energy in building his image on the channel. The then channel head, Natasha Malhotra came up with a solution for the problem. It was agreed that Nikhil would go to Bengaluru for twelve days, come back to Mumbai, shoot furiously for two days and then go back to Bengaluru again for twelve

days. This went on for a period of three months. He changed the thesis topic from herpetology to hospital design as that involved minimal creativity and imagination and could be completed quickly. With the submission of his thesis, Nikhil earned his degree with distinction and came back to MTV with renewed enthusiasm.

Nothing could stop him now from living the DJ life to the hilt. It entailed partying, clubbing and exploring Mumbai night life in the company of friends. However, soon fatigue set in and he started missing the progressive music which the clubs in Bengaluru

used to play. As opposed to that the clubs in Mumbai, Nikhil sensed, had settled into playing the stereotypical routine and repetitive popular music which in comparison was very uninspiring and dull. The trend in Bengaluru was that usually the clubs played popular music in the early part of the evening and towards the latter half, up until the wee hours of the morning, it was wildly experimental and progressive.

Then on one of his trips to Delhi, destiny threw Nikhil into yet another interesting situation. He met Shweta Miglani better known as DJ Pearl through some common friends.

Shweta was a flight attendant with KLM and after having clubbed in Amsterdam, had met her “DJ mentor” there. She would carry music from Amsterdam and play it at a club in Delhi where she had started DJing. A mutual love for dancing and music brought Pearl and Nikhil together and years later they married.

After a couple of months of knowing each other, they went on a month long dancing holiday, spending a week each in Amsterdam, Barcelona, Ibiza and London. What they experienced at Ibiza were amazing nights, fantastic DJs, awesome sound systems and clubs, nothing like they

had seen before. But they missed having their friends around. Seeing people enjoying fabulous dance music on the beach and also having playful fun with hula hoops, maracas, streamers, beach balls, jump ropes, etc left them with the thought of bringing some of this to India.

Almost a year after that trip, Nikhil and Pearl booked the first DJ from Amsterdam to India who was quite happy to come for the experience. Bacardi Limited, the well known spirits company, covered the cost for the event and everybody had a great time at this party.

Around this time the “*Kaliyon ka*

Chaman” track had released in India and every club in the city played this number repeatedly. Nikhil, Pearl and their dear friend Harmeet Sethi better known as Hermit (Nikhil’s closest friend and stylist at MTV) found this quite wearisome and frustrating. They began talking and found a solution which was that they would take charge and bring the latest global music to people like themselves who were tired of listening to repetitive music. In the next few days, Nikhil and his friends floated a concept called Submerge which promised the best in electro, house and progressive music.

The first Submerge party was held

at Rock Bottom, a night club at Ramee Guestline hotel, Juhu in Mumbai. The club was managed by their close friends with whom they decided to try out the idea on Thursday nights as Thursdays were usually dead days as far as clubbing was concerned and the discotheque was available for experimentation. A party that started with forty-two of their closest friends in the first week, went on to attract over 650 people in its third week and then grew bigger to play to a full house of 800 people week after week.

At this point in our conversation, live piano music wafts right behind

where Nikhil and I are sitting at Atrium Lounge in Taj Lands End. Nikhil swiftly picks up the recorder and holds it like a mike as he continues to narrate the further unfolding of events. The comfort and the increased alacrity in his voice, as soon as he holds the mike (even if makeshift!), clearly displays his love for his craft!

Explaining the concept behind Submerge, Nikhil continues ‘The sense of joy of going to a night club in India where you could listen to music that is not normally played and where there was this DJ who would take you on a journey with his sound and

music was phenomenal. We didn't realize that there were so many other people like us who were tired of the repetitive music and wanted to hear something different. We had two rules at Submerge. You could not tell the DJ what to play. As an artist and a professional, the DJ was responsible to take you on a journey. The second was that the DJs were encouraged not to use the mike. Their music was to do the talking for them which meant we invited DJs who we felt had achieved a certain level of competence and proficiency in their field which in turn meant that it became a status symbol for a DJ to play at a Submerge

night,' shares Nikhil.

Gradually, Submerge became like a movement amongst the DJs in the country and travelled to other cities as well. Alongside, Nikhil continued doing shows for MTV like “MTV Select”, “Record Tod”, etc.

‘The good part about working with MTV was that it allowed me sufficient time to develop concepts like Submerge as well as engage with events like Bacardi Blast and Smirnoff Experience to grow the cult of electronic dance music in India. The recognition and brand equity I had because of MTV, helped me to promote the music I enjoyed,’

acknowledges Nikhil.

He became a sort of music evangelist promoting DJs from all over India that nobody had heard of. For one of the big Submerge nights, he invited DJ Sanjay Dutta from Kolkata to Mumbai. Sanjay's cool and cutting edge music performance cast a spell on people and made them sit up and notice that there was great talent outside Mumbai too. Buoyed by the success of this experiment, Submerge started inviting more DJs from all across the country.

One of the things that Nikhil and Pearl had liked about Ibiza was that some of the shacks or beach clubs

there just played music out to the ocean. It didn't matter whether anybody was listening or dancing to that music. They had found it to be a very zen like state of being and decided to hold such a party in Goa at a friend's shack called Zanzibar on Baga beach. In the beginning, there were only eleven people in the shack. He and Pearl played every single record from both of their record bags for six and a half hours for eleven people. 'It was wonderful,' remembers Nikhil. The following year they had 150 people in the shack. The year after that, Smirnoff sponsored them and it became like a mini festival.

Within three years of doing Zanzibar parties, Percept (one of India's leading media and entertainment conglomerates) came knocking at their door as they wanted to do a music festival and asked Nikhil to be a partner. For Nikhil and Pearl, it was like a deja vu moment that reminded them of their own wish in Ibiza—'if they could bring some of that music to India!'

'This was my opportunity to bring to India the DJs we had heard in Ibiza and so my first question to Shailendra Singh, the Joint Managing Director of Percept was if we could book the DJs we wanted,' narrates Nikhil. Yes, said

Percept.

Next came up the question of naming the festival. Percept suggested India International Dance Festival. However, it sounded too official and drab to Nikhil and he suggested Sunburn, just a random name that popped into his head, out of some kind of fixation he has with the letter S, he believes! Everybody at Percept loved it and Sunburn it was.

When it came to executing the festival, most people suggested doing it on one stage. Nikhil however preferred multiple stages as his point of view was that a single stage would make it more like a music concert

than a music festival. Using his design abilities to the fullest, Nikhil put forth his vision of erecting three stages with an obstruction in the line of vision of the audience so that the festival opened to them like the pages of a picture book, one layer at a time! With Nikhil's vision and Percept's fantastic abilities in executing high quality events, the first Sunburn festival held in 2007 at Candolim beach, Goa, was a huge success.

The year two of holding Sunburn was round the corner when the country was shell shocked by the 26/11 bomb attacks in Mumbai in 2008. Recalling that difficult moment,

Nikhil says, 'It goes to Percept's credit that they decided to go ahead with the event. I too had made up my mind that one way or the other I would execute a dance event that year. This determination was due to a conversation I had with my mentor, David Levy (one of the first ever DJ agents, head of the Electronic Division of William Morris Endeavour Entertainment, UK). David gave me the example of another electronic dance music festival called Creamfields Buenos Aires held for the first time in Argentina in 2001, at a time when Argentina had gone through the worst economic meltdown in its history. In

the midst of all the risk and uncertainty regarding the festival's success, they went ahead and did Creamfields and it became a rallying point for the youth there, as something to hold on to while everything else was falling apart.

‘That’s exactly what happened with Sunburn in Goa in 2008. At a time when the country was enveloped with fear and insecurity, we went ahead and did a music event in Goa that united so many of us in a way that is so difficult to describe!

‘However, at one point in the festival just as it was building up, it seemed that after all it may not go

through,’ continued Nikhil, ‘on day two of the festival just as the finale DJ came up on stage at 8 pm, the noise pollution law was brought against us and at 8.10 we were asked to shut down the festival. I felt as if the rug had been pulled out from under my feet. We had made all the preparations for the festival knowing full well that we might not get the permission to even start it. Finally the government had given us a go ahead. Then, just as it was reaching its peak, this law was used against us to shut it down. We made a series of phone calls that took us about an hour and a half. In this hour and a half, not a single person

from the festival misbehaved or created any commotion which is what normally happens on such occasions at these events. Not a single person left the festival. They all sat down. Some of them wandered off to the beach. They all knew what was in the press leading upto Sunburn. There was no complaining.

‘We got permission to restart the festival at 9.30 pm. John Fleming was the DJ. I have always booked John for every single festival at Sunburn because he is my good luck charm. He started off the music on my stage and within thirty seconds the second stage started up. John started with a

track that had a muted kick drum sound, not going bang but starting slow. Standing on stage we could see people running from all across and gathering in front of the stage. The build up in the song lasted from 40 seconds to one minute and at that one minute mark the track kicked in with all of its elements and energy. The roar that went up from that small crowd of people that had gathered in front of the stage in that one minute is something that makes everything in my life worthwhile. That sense of “we will survive” and “we will prevail” was just phenomenal. And since then there has been no looking back.

‘To me, to see those people sitting down on the beach and saying we are not going anywhere, we still believe—for that I will always be involved with music in this country. While it’s important that Sunburn travels to other countries and goes across the world as a brand, but for me the music for my people and for my country—there is nothing greater than that,’ ends the passionate monologue through which Nikhil reveals his diehard commitment to music.

While Sunburn is running as successfully as it is, Nikhil is using various platforms to promote India as a music destination in the world. He is

a regular speaker at international music fora. 'Unlike other countries, the music scene in India is fuelled by people's enthusiasm and not by drugs or recreational stuff. People here have a real heart and real passion for music. It is therefore much more fulfilling to play to such a crowd as people in their full consciousness respond to you as an artist. That's why most DJs love coming back to India.'

An unknown DJ, a new representation of music, or discovering a new song gets him as excited now as it did in his teenage days. He constantly wants to share that amazing track on the dance floor and see it fill

the people with a surge of happy emotions.

The only other thing that makes him happier is when he is able to make Pearl laugh or get a compliment out of her.

Even after nearly ten years of marriage? I quip.

That makes it all the more difficult, he chuckles as we walk down the steps of Atrium Lounge into the lobby leading to the revolving doors to exit.

Partying with charming DJs who spin music and beats on which the feet dance and the soul rejoices...all we can say to them is, DeeJay.... let the music play!



Ms BEAUTIFUL
FACE, BODY

AND MIND

ADITI GOVITRIKAR

Model & Actor

Aditi's mother told her that even as a small child of four or five years, she would tell her that she wanted to be a doctor. Later, Aditi did qualify as an MBBS from the prestigious Grant Medical College in Mumbai and even secured the very difficult and coveted seat for MDship in Obstetrics and Gynaecology. Then one day she suddenly gave it all up for a career in

the world of showbiz. In the midst of rigorous medical studies, Aditi Govitrikar decided to walk the ramp and later trapezed her way into the world of Hindi cinema.

On a lovely Sunday morning, Aditi and I meet at the Atrium Lounge at Taj Lands End in Mumbai. It is my third visit within a week to this place and I realize that I am quite falling in love with this classy, lively but unobtrusive lounge. Aditi is dressed in a pair of fitted jeans and a sleeveless spaghetti top in pastel yellow with a trendy long chain around her neck that ends in a knot. She looks casual and chic.

Aditi, the eldest of the three siblings—five years older to her younger sister, Arzoo and nine years older to the youngest, a brother, Alpan aka Mausam, was born in Pune. Perhaps her father's job with pharma companies had some role to play in shaping her childhood aspiration to be a doctor. Her father first worked with National Chemical Laboratory (NCL) and when Aditi turned three, he quit to join E-Merck India's plant at Taloja on the outskirts of Mumbai. The family shifted to Panvel, about twenty-one kms from Mumbai. Aditi remembers spending her childhood years in the beautiful, open and green

surroundings at Panvel which is also known as the gateway to the picturesque Konkan region.

Steadfast on her goal of becoming a doctor, she studied diligently and was a topper throughout in school. In the tenth standard board exams, she stood second in her district, missing the first rank by only two marks. The next two years were crucial for her. Her father counseled her that not only did she need to work hard if she wanted to be a doctor, she had to do it on her own merit and should not expect admission through donation to any of the private medical colleges. He also made it clear to her that if she did not

qualify the medical entrance exam, it would mean that she would have to do a BSc course from Panvel. 'I simply could not imagine not being a doctor. So I worked with complete focus to get into medicine and was overjoyed to get admission at the Grant Medical College,' recalls Aditi. Just in case she did not make it to medicine, her father had also made her apply for engineering as that would have become a fall back option for her. Aditi also made it to Maharashtra's leading engineering college, Veermata Jijabai Technological Institute or VJTI.

A shy, introverted Aditi was excited to be in the city of her dreams,

Mumbai. Did she secretly aspire that by being in Mumbai she could have a career in the field of fashion and Bollywood? People around her must have made her conscious of her beautiful green eyes, a flawless complexion and great looks by this time?

Reveals Aditi, 'As a child I was actually conscious of the colour of my eyes as it made me look different from other kids around. Coming to Mumbai from a small town like Panvel was exciting for me as I liked the idea of being in a big city with all its hustle and bustle. In school most girls who were inclined towards

glamour aspired to become air hostesses. I was however never one of those, as my single-minded focus was on medicine. I was never told by anyone that I looked good (read beautiful). In fact, even at the medical college, I was not discovered, not ragged for one and a half years till the new batch joined. The seniors thought me to be a part of the new batch and tried to rag me with them!’ narrates Aditi and reiterates how detached she was from the idea of beauty and glamour till she was well past her teens.

However that was soon to be over as the Gladrags Supermodel Contest in

1996 brought Aditi into the limelight. She had almost completed her internship after finishing four and a half years of MBBS programme when she participated in the first ever beauty pageant of her life. How did Gladrags happen? I ask.

It was a trip to Lonavala with friends which initiated her into the world of glamour. Himanshu Seth, who is now a commercial photographer based in Mumbai, and his sister happened to be a part of that group of friends and had recently got acquainted with Aditi. Himanshu told Aditi that she had a great body language and advised that she should

make a portfolio. Aditi laughed it off thinking he was just pulling her leg. But Himanshu was serious and insisted that he shot her portfolio. 'It was quite sweet. Himanshu's sister did the makeup for me and we shot a few pictures,' recalls Aditi about the casual way in which her first portfolio was made.

Himanshu's father worked with an advertising agency and when he saw Aditi's portfolio he remarked that Aditi had great potential to become a model. Nothing much was discussed after that day and everyone got busy with their lives.

A few months later, some hoardings

came up in the city announcing the Gladrags Super Model Contest. Aditi was once again cajoled by her friends to participate in the contest, and she sent her portfolio to Gladrags. Till this point it was all fun. However when she got the call that she had been shortlisted for the event, she felt some nervousness setting in. While in school and college she had participated in some plays and cultural activities but not in anything that was on such a big scale. How would she handle what lay in store for her as a participant in this mega event? The only thing that she was sure of was that if any challenge was thrown at her she always gave it

her hundred percent and this spirit gave her the confidence to take on this challenge too with a quiet sort of aggression.

Whenever she got time off from studies, she practiced walking with high heeled shoes in college corridors. She started paying special attention to posture and poise, voice modulation, body language, diet, nutrition and fitness as per the instructions given in the training sessions for the event.

How did she manage to give time to an event of the scale of Gladrags when the academic schedule at medical college usually involves long strenuous hours, I am curious to

know.

‘Luckily Gladrags did not take much time as the duration of the pageant training and grooming sessions was just about four days prior to the event. So, it was manageable,’ clarifies Aditi.

She had gone into it for fun and was looking at it just as a onetime activity. Her parents knew casually that she was taking part in some beauty pageant. Aditi’s ex-husband Dr Mufazzal Lakdawala who was her boyfriend then, his sister and Arzoo attended the event.

However, soon after being crowned the Gladrags Supermodel of the year

1996, the importance of winning the pageant started sinking in for Aditi. She hadn't visualized that her life would change after winning the pageant. Within two days of being crowned, Ponds signed her for its Facewash commercial. Acting offers from big Bollywood banners started pouring in and overnight she became a highly sought after model for fashion shows. Suddenly, life had truly changed for her. From a pocket money of three hundred rupees out of which one hundred and fifty went towards meeting the hostel canteen expenses, fifty to the dhobi and the rest one hundred towards watching

films and spending on entertainment, there was lots of money at hand now as prize money from the contest as well as from advertising assignments and fashion shows.

As part of the reward for winning the contest, she along with the runner up was sent on a trip to London, Milan and New York and a whole new world opened up for Aditi. Although Aditi has travelled extensively around the world, she still cherishes exquisite memories of her first trip abroad. At London, Maureen Wadia, President of Gladrags Beauty Pageants, joined the girls briefly and took them out for lunch. Later

Maureen arranged for photo shoots for the girls with some ace Italian photographers while they were in Milan. Aditi's hair was dyed red for these shoots and the photographs came out absolutely brilliantly. Experiencing New York for the first time was the most fascinating part of this trip for her, a city Aditi would visit several times later.

The year 1996 was lucky for two other girls besides Aditi who made it big in the glamour world in the coming years. Bipasha Basu won the Ford's Godrej Cinthol Super Model competition the same year and Ujjwala Raut who rose to become a super

model on the international circuit won her first title, Femina Look of the Year at the Femina Miss India 1996 contest. Aditi, Bipasha and Ujwala later went on to do many high-end fashion shows together. On most such occasions Aditi and Bipasha ended up being room partners. Sangeeta Chopra, an alumna of NIFT who has successfully combined fashion designing and choreographing, was the first choreographer Aditi got to interact with. Sangeeta later continued to refer Aditi for several shows throughout her modeling career.

What happened to medicine in the midst of all this glitz and glamour, I

ask? How did she manage to complete her internship and get the MBBS degree?

Aditi said that despite the hectic schedule due to her new found engagements with the world of glamour, she was very certain that she had to complete her MBBS and get the degree. Later when her younger sister, Arzoo went through the same dilemma and wanted to quit engineering mid way, she advised her against it and also persuaded her to complete her studies. In Aditi's case however, Gladrags happened towards the fag end of her internship. She thus completed the internship, got the

MBBS degree and also went on to get the much coveted seat for pursuing MDship in Obstetrics and Gynaecology in the hospital of her choice which was the St George Hospital in South Mumbai. There were only six merit seats available for this specialization for which two hundred doctors had applied but perseverance favoured Aditi and she bagged the seat.

It was a great situation to be in. Aditi had the best of both worlds and for some time she juggled with both professions. She would request to have the shoots in the afternoon. Before that, as a houseman, in the mornings

she would do the rounds of the hospital wards, take care of cleaning, suture removal etc of new mothers as well as other patients who came for hysterectomy or with other ovarian and gynaecological problems, handle patient discharge, issue discharge cards etc and then would run for the shoots which normally took place at the other end of town, mostly in Andheri or at the studios in film city in Goregaon. After coming back from shooting, quite a few times she had to stay up all night to handle deliveries. Every day on an average the hospital had some five to six babies being born.

Carrying on like this for a few months, there came a point when it became extremely exhausting for her to keep up with both. In retrospect, Aditi gives full credit to her boss and Head of the Department, Dr Rekha Davar who was quite supportive of her. She encouraged her not to give up her assignments in the glamour world as she felt that only one in a million people got such opportunities. But increasingly it became difficult for her to sustain. She did not feel comfortable that her seniors had to do her part of the work and the thought nagged her that her peers might feel that while they slogged, she went off

to have fun.

However, the photo shoots were not exactly all fun for Aditi. They were more like another job she had to complete. She felt she was just rushing about from the hospital to location and back like anyone would while keeping two jobs. Since she was young at that time, appearing fresh and fit for the shoots was not so difficult but it did require some amount of effort after a hectic schedule at the hospital.

Soon, coupled with the sheer physical strain, she started feeling a lot of mental stress too. On the one hand were these women from the

surrounding slum areas who came for their deliveries to St George's hospital and for many it was their fourth or fifth baby. On the other, when Aditi reached the sets, she would find herself amongst people who were beautiful, fit and enjoyed perfect health. Balancing these contrasting environments started taking a toll on her. She had always believed in giving her all to anything she took to do. Slowly she started getting a feeling as if she was cheating on both the professions. It was time for her to take a call.

When Aditi discussed her situation with her parents, her father advised

her to stick to medicine as this was a field they had some knowledge about while the other field of modeling and acting was completely new to them. She had proved herself worthy of a seat for MDship and should not give it up, felt her father. Also, glamour is not only shortlived, it is also extremely fickle and never ever courts the unsuccessful, her parents advised. However, they left the final decision to her assuring her that whatever she decided, they would stand by her.

The way Aditi looked at the whole situation was like a challenge had been thrown at her. She felt driven to prove a point that even if glamour was

a new field, she would make a success of it. She finally decided that she would devote herself exclusively to it for a year and then would go back to medicine. The MD seat could wait for a year.

That however was never to happen. She didn't realize the speed with which that one crucial year passed. In 1997, Aditi went to Singapore to participate in the Asian Super Model Contest and won both the Best Face and Best Body titles. With ramp shows, television commercials and offers for serials and music videos pouring in, her career was on a roll with no time to think where life was

headed. Medicine had conclusively become a thing of the past.

In 1999, Aditi got married to her long time boyfriend, Dr Mufazzal Lakdawala and the couple had a baby girl called Kiara in 2000. Within a few months of Kiara's birth Aditi was back on the ramp looking as ravishing as ever while her mother and ex-mother-in-law took turns taking care of the baby.

Meanwhile the Mrs World 2001 contest was announced and was to take place in Las Vegas. Maureen Wadia called Aditi and asked her to participate in the contest. Having mothered a child, this offer came as a

surprise to Aditi but as always, spurred on by challenges, she agreed to participate in the pageant and flew to Las Vegas in December 2000.

I tell her that in popular perception, she is the quintessential Mrs India. The immediate association of this title is only with her. So was she the first ever Indian to win this title?

‘It’s true,’ affirms Aditi. ‘No one from India had participated in it earlier even though the contest had been taking place since 1984.’

It was Aditi’s third visit to Vegas. The experience at the pageant was memorable. Wives and mothers from around the world had come to take

part in the contest. There were two contestants who have particularly stood out in her memory after all these years—a forty-nine-year-old woman who won the Best Body title and a young, stunning looking girl from Russia who had been married for just three months and had borrowed gowns, other clothes, grooming kit and money, etc from friends and made it to the pageant. But it was Aditi who won the crown and returned to Mumbai as the first “married beauty queen”.

Around this time Hrithik Roshan’s first movie *Kaho Na Pyaar Hai* had released and he had become an

overnight sensation and was the only actor to bag the 2001 Filmfare awards both for the Best Debut Actor and Best Actor. Soon there was yet another exciting offer for Aditi as she and Hritik, the successful and popular youth icons, were chosen for the prestigious Coke commercial shot at Mauritius which went on to become an instant hit amongst the masses. Of the several commercials Aditi has done till date for brands such as Philips, Ponds, Clinic All Clear, etc, the Coke TVC remains her favourite.

Although films and television had beckoned Aditi a long time ago, she waited her turn and then took them

up gradually. Some of the popular TV reality shows in which she participated are “Khatron Ke Khiladi” and “Bigg Boss Season 3”; and then there were the movies like *16 December*; *Baaz: A Bird in Danger*; *Dhund* (The Fog); *Paheli*; and *Soch*, etc. After the birth of her son Zhiaan in 2008, her kids became the centre of her life. She quit the runway completely and took up only select projects in both television and films.

Aditi believes that modeling as a long term career option, which in any case is a maximum of ten years if one starts as early as sixteen, doesn't really exist anymore. The lines between modeling, advertising, films and sports

have almost merged. Most of the plum advertising assignments today, feels Aditi, either go to filmstars or cricketers and even on the ramp, the showstoppers today are invariably filmstars or sport celebrities. Compared to her generation, most young girls however are much focused today and know that modeling is only a stepping stone for a career in television or films. 'It's always good to think through and have a plan B in mind when you step into the world of glamour. Nothing can guarantee success in this field. The best of looks, acting talent, contacts, right script or right banner may not help

one become a star. So it's important to keep oneself grounded and not get carried away by fame for the simple reason that it may be here today and not there tomorrow. Tomorrow younger and better people will come and the limelight will belong to them. Life is a lot more than fame and one must have options to fall back on without which it is easy to fall prey to frustration, insecurity and depression in this field,' come forth the words of wisdom from Aditi.

What has been your experience of dealing with diverse sets of people, one group that belongs to the medical fraternity and the other to the world

of glamour which appears somewhat unstructured to many?

‘While the doctors, engineers and other academically oriented people are supposed to possess high IQ levels, I would say that the people associated with fashion and film world have relatively very high EQ levels and social skills. In terms of professionalism and structured work environment too, unlike what is the popular perception, I would say that all successful people from this field are also highly focused, have clear thinking and are very structured. You have to report on time and deliver quality. If anyone throws tantrums, they are simply

replaced as there are many more people who are waiting to get a break. Those who are able to sustain at the top, girls like Deepika Padukone are extremely tenacious, focused and very hard working,' opines Aditi.

Do you ever think of getting back to medicine because the profession provides long-term security?

Aditi laughs and says, 'I would have loved to go back to medicine. However, just with an MBBS degree, there is not much I can do. I would have to study MD Gynaecology for which I would need to spend at least three years on campus and put in dedicated work. I am not willing to

make that sacrifice. My priority at the moment are my children. I could not spend enough time with my daughter when she was growing up. Today I have the freedom to choose the work that fits in with my priorities and I am very happy and content with that.'

She shares that at the moment, she is more focused on signing for talks and appearances such as the one she is currently involved with sponsored by Cadbury's and the *Times of India* to promote awareness about vitamin D consumption amongst women. She is happy in her space hearing scripts in Marathi and Hindi and exploring the possibility of foraying into film

production. She and Arzoo are also partners with their brother Alpan, who is a chef by training, in a franchise of “Kobe Sizzler” in Thane.

Aditi is a firm believer in the power of yoga and is a regular practitioner. One of the most stressful periods of her life was when she went through the divorce with her husband. The Art of Living and Vipasana sessions helped her to bring back the serenity in her life. She believes in surrounding herself with people who have positive vibes and who are her well-wishers.

What would she want her children to be?

‘Kiara wishes to become a fashion

designer while Zhiaan says he wants to become a doctor. Whatever they choose to do, I would not like to impose my views on them and my only wish for them is that more than anything else I want to see them grow into happy and healthy individuals,' expresses Aditi.

Aditi now dreams of travelling to fifty countries. She has already reached the thirty-two mark and is looking forward eagerly to tick off more in the coming years. In the meanwhile, the greatest joy of her life is to spend time with her children, to get a warm hug from them, bring them up well and be engaged in creative work which

makes her continuously learn and grow too.



ROMANCING THE MOUNTAINS

NALIN KHANDURI

*Managing Director, Great Indian Outdoors
Private Limited*

A young Chemical Engineer and management graduate, who loved nature and enjoyed the company of people, found himself out of harmony in the midst of corporate urban life and claustrophobic uninspiring factories. The one thought that nagged him constantly was whether he should compromise and learn to make adjustments or listen to the call of his heart and set out on an uncharted journey to find his peace? Back in 1999, Nalin Khanduri yielded to the

irresistible urge of his heart by giving precedence to his love for the mountains over a well paying career with a large organization and has not regretted his decision even for a moment ever since.

The mountains have a special place and deep connection in Nalin's life. Born in Chandigarh, he was brought up in Dehradun where his father was transferred in his job with an insurance company when Nalin was two years old. Nalin and his elder brother studied at Cambrian Hall, a reputed private school in Dehradun. The family outings invariably comprised picnics, cycling trips or walks upto

Mussoorie or visiting relatives almost all of whom lived in the Himalayan State of Uttarakhand. Trekking in the serene mountains and its lovely valleys and being treated with smiling and unrestrained hospitality by relatives and local people was what the family enjoyed the most.

Like most others his age, Nalin too went with the flow and wrote the engineering exams in the final year of school and was happy to make it to Harcourt Butler Technological Institute (HBTI) at Kanpur, known for its course in chemical engineering. 'The choice of Chemical Engineering stream was not because of my love for

the subject. One of my maternal aunt's son had done Chemical Engineering and had landed a good job, so it was decided that I too should pursue Chemical Engineering,' recalls Nalin about the similar illogical way in which many others like him took such decisions at that time.

'It was surprising that all through my school days, I was never really good at sports but at HBTI, I discovered my aptitude for it and went on to even become the college sports captain,' shares Nalin about his most significant personal achievement during college.

Luckily, he was the first one to get

placed amongst his batchmates and that too with Hindustan Unilever (HUL), then called Hindustan Lever Limited (HLL) which was a dream company on the campus. Hindustan Unilever had several levels of screening and along with academic performance also used other criteria for selection. 'I was not the topper, I was amongst the top 25-30 percent in my batch and yet I was the only one to get placed with HLL. It was indeed a confidence booster,' narrates Nalin.

But this initial euphoria did not last long. Nalin's industry experience started with HLL's vanaspati factory in Ghaziabad. During the engineering

days, he and his batchmates had no exposure whatsoever to the industry environment. The learning that was acquired through books was far removed from what the job demanded. Straight from college into a full fledged working schedule suddenly threw many challenges before him and brought a major paradigm shift in his life. He found himself terribly ill at ease. 'I did not enjoy the work, not even for a day. Somehow having pulled through for a year and in the meantime having secured admission in Narsee Monjee Institute of Management Studies (NMIMS) in Mumbai, I finally

decided to call it quits and pursue MBA,' he says.

The single most important difference NMIMS made to his life, which till then had really no high points, was to infuse boundless confidence in him. 'In hindsight, I feel this is where my life turned,' he remarks and continues, 'it was a combination of factors that worked for me. The environment at the institute, the diversity and smartness of the peer group, the curriculum, the presentations we were required to make— all of it developed enormous confidence in me. I became aware of a whole set of different skills and

capabilities which I had not realized existed in me. The two years in Mumbai were great fun too with enough partying also thrown in.'

Nalin joined as a Management Trainee in marketing with Reliance Industries, and re-entered the corporate world with youthful energy and optimism. But soon, the harsh realities of working in a mega metropolis like Mumbai showed up with all the accompanying stress. He started to sense the same feeling of *déjà vu*. It was as if he was reliving the HLL experience all over again. A couple of experiences of having felt extreme stress during those days are

pretty vivid in his memory. Once he spent some fifty hours at a stretch in office to complete an urgent project. Finally when he reached home in a state of complete exhaustion and sleep deprivation, strangely he did not hit the bed. He just stood next to a window and smoked continuously for some 6-8 hours totally disoriented and disillusioned with life!

However, life went on with the same daily grind for some more months. 'I told myself to stop thinking and analyzing and just devote myself to doing what I was asked to do—whether it made sense or not, whether I agreed with my boss or not, whether

it was the right thing to do or not. My office was at Nariman Point. I would see the beautiful marine drive everyday but would never have the time to “stand and stare” or take a stroll on the charming walkway,’ he recalls.

One of those Saturdays, during the monsoons, he left early from office so that he could be with his friends for the batch get together they had planned for that evening. Mumbai downpours are notorious for putting the city out of gear at least a few times during the monsoon season. It happened to be one such day. The trains had come to a halt. But he was

determined to make it to the party. He started walking from Churchgate station. For some sections of the approximately thirty kms stretch, from Churchgate to Oshiwara where he had to reach, he was able to get a cab and some parts he covered by walking.

He was drenched to the bones and his brand new clothes and shoes were completely soaked. It was literally his “long walk to freedom”. During this journey he thought hard and tried to justify to himself why he was doing this crazy walk in the monsoon.

‘I wanted to break free of the dull and drab office routine and every time

I had felt this way in the past, the predominant urge I had was to get back to the serene calm of the mountains. Yes, that is where I wanted to be all my life. The more I reflected on it, the more I became convinced that there was no way I should be away from what I loved most,' says Nalin.

It was during this walk that he started developing the idea of doing something related to the mountains, in his mind. He remembered one of his uncles who used to stay with them when he was in school and worked with the Uttaranchal tourism department. He used to conduct

adventure treks and Nalin had seen him bring home his work sack and mountaineering equipments and had also accompanied him a couple of times on treks.

‘I thought why can’t I set up something similar? It would mean leaving the current job. So be it. I was not scared to do so. I felt a surge of confidence within that if things did not work out and I had to take up a job again, I would get one anyway which would be enough to survive,’ Nalin remained continuously in conversation with himself during this long walkathon.

It was well past midnight when he

finally reached the party venue. He was happy to meet his buddies and to have sorted the entire muddle in his head. After downing a few drinks, he made the announcement that he was starting a company and whoever wanted to join could raise their hands. The others were also equally sloshed and there were quite a few hands that went up that night.

On the following Monday, he had an important early morning meeting with his boss. He reached earlier than usual, typed out his resignation letter and handed it over to his boss before the meeting. His boss tried to suggest that he could be put in a different role

or posted to a different location, if that is what he wanted. But it was the outdoors where he wanted to be. He was sure; he did not want to rethink. He had taken the first step towards setting up his own enterprise and became a pioneer in his family where no one had ever either done or even thought of setting up a “business”. ‘I think a management education helped me to develop that perspective,’ reflects Nalin.

So did any of your friends join in too, I ask.

‘I called all those friends who had raised their hands on that heady night. Most of them dropped out citing one

reason or the other. A few said they would be able to join after a year or so and I had the trust that some of them would. I have always had a very good equation with my friends and colleagues as I never saw them as competitors, was always around for them and vice-versa. Even though they did not join in, they supported the venture wholeheartedly offering their time, ideas, encouragement and even financial support,' acknowledges Nalin.

Great Indian Outdoors (GIO)—how did you finalize the name for the company?

‘This happened in a very informal

and fun way,' he narrates. 'Some of my close friends who were working with advertising agencies cajolingly said, "*Chal company ka naam sochte hain.*" (Let's think of a name for your company.) What would be the USP (unique selling proposition) of the company, they asked? I said it's the great Indian outdoors that I want to sell to our people. Doesn't that sound cool, someone said. Yes, it's the name all liked and I had a name for the company.

'Even the logo was finalized in one such meeting with my close friends, Yogesh and Jayashree while we were sitting at their office in Tardeo in

South Mumbai. They are into making corporate films and designing corporate brochures. Yogesh is very spiritually inclined and we used to spend a lot of time together discussing music, books and several other things. I asked him if he could do something about the logo. They were excited about the business and began by suggesting the use of bright colours for a young new company. In no time they came up with a beautiful creative logo. I had a company name and a logo and the business was now ready to be launched.'

For about a year Nalin operated from Mumbai. A friend gifted him a

computer. Another friend from Dehradun who was working with PWC in the US remained in constant touch with him to know if he needed any money during the start-up days.

He began by conducting adventure workshops for school children as he felt strongly that such workshops could instill a lot of confidence in children by helping them to work well in teams and by developing problem solving and leadership skills in them. But the starting point was not at all encouraging. The unprofessional approach and unfair expectations of school management and teachers soon led to huge disillusionment and he

decided to completely drop schools as a target group.

Nearly a year passed with such trials and errors and gradually a clear focus emerged which was the corporate sector. By then, one of his friends from NMIMS, R Balakrishnan was ready to quit his job in brand management with Geoffrey Manners and join up with him. They decided to shift base to Delhi to be closer to the camping locations in Uttarakhand.

‘We had a one room office with only one computer and a table in a nondescript location in Delhi. Between the two of us, I was a 100% mountains guy and Bala was excellent

with computers and general office affairs. In Dehradun, I operated from my residence. Our first set of clients were international tourists and our first camp for corporate clients was at Rishikesh. I think I was a horrible engineer but as an outdoors person, people could see my overflowing love for it. Some called it passion while others called it a gift of God.

‘Looking back I feel a huge amount of hard work went into setting up the entire infrastructure, spotting locations for the camps, setting up base there, rushing to Delhi to make presentations and check out the regular office work, going back to the campsite to be with

the clients, shuttling in the state buses between Delhi and the mountains at a frenetic pace, keeping really crazy hours. There were times when there would be barely any money with me. I remember travelling within Delhi on a scooter my brother had given me to meet clients and how I would be bogged down with the pollution, heat and grime of the city and wanted to rush back to Dehradun,' recollects Nalin about the travails of a new set-up.

What was your family's reaction when they saw that your income was nowhere close to what you were earning a good three years back with

HLL?

‘My elder brother was well settled as a Chartered Accountant so even if they were worried, they never let it become obvious to me. I would not tell anyone in the family about the initial financial difficulties. But my mother knew and she would quietly put some money in my pocket. It was a tough phase but never for a moment did I regret my decision to pursue the path I had chosen. I could manage with very little. There was a time when my batchmates were buying flats and cars, while I was still roughing it out. But I never competed with them. Rather, I celebrated all of

their successes with them,' shares Nalin.

Soon, Nalin's relentless labour of love started bearing results. The corporate side of GIO started gaining momentum. The MNCs and other organizations showed a lot of interest in doing off-sites with GIO. They identified with Nalin and Bala as they spoke the language of the clients, could well understand their fears and inhibitions with adventure and outdoors and could address them easily. An outdoor experience by a riverside or a trek in the mountains became an interesting, educative and fun experience for people in their

company. When such clients went back happy, GIO gained a lot through their word of mouth advertising. Once again, GIO started with workshops for school children, the difference this time being that they did not approach the schools but invited participants directly through advertising. 'Workshop with school children is something that is very close to my heart and I don't like to miss it at any cost. It's called Kshitij and I make sure that I lead this weeklong trip myself that happens every summer.'

The company was growing at a consistent pace, and in a couple of

years' time, a certain structure and framework to the business started emerging. All that Nalin and Bala had studied in their management courses started making real sense—whether it was the marketing mix—the four Ps (Price, Promotion, Product and Place), branding or entrepreneurship. 'We loved to see ourselves as entrepreneurs taking all decisions for our business and working towards its growth. Whatever revenue we generated went back into the system,' says Nalin. In due course, another friend, Bhaskar Thyagarajan, an ICWA and MBA from NMIMS, left his job in marketing with ESPN Star Sports

and joined them as a Director.

Since its formation in 1999, GIO today has become one of the fastest growing outdoor recreation and adventure companies in India. Where exactly does the business stand today?

‘At present, we are a team of about 120 people with our head office in Dehradun and other offices in Mumbai and Delhi. Over the years, more than 30,000 people have been through the GIO experience ranging from school kids to corporate groups to adventure seekers and mountain lovers.

‘With a view to get more people to opt for the outdoors, we are now

focusing on family adventures trips designed around our Himalayan Eco-Lodges located at spectacular locations. Keeping in mind the preference of Indians for soft instead of extreme adventure, the activities we offer at these locations range from sightseeing trips, walks, hikes, village visits, visits to ancient temples and shrines, etc. These lodges are aesthetically designed and are well equipped with all basic modern comforts and hygiene. We follow high safety standards in our choice of infrastructure and equipments to ensure great experience for our clients. At the moment we have seven lodges which have become

operational with the first round of funding from our venture capital partner. Before we go for another round of funding, we would first like to consolidate this set up and create a fully functional model which can be replicated very easily. If everything goes well and as per plan, we would scale up to about fifty lodges in the next five years.'

Besides having been able to channelize his passion to set up a successful business, there is something that is a pure offshoot of the business and brings even greater joy to Nalin.

'The social aspect of our business is very close to my heart. We have set

up camps in remote locations. When we did so some years back, many people asked “*Yahan kaun ayega?*” (Who on earth will come here?) Today, GIO has created employment for many people in this region and has also helped blur caste differences through training and employment to people across the caste hierarchy. Over a period of time, the villages in the vicinity of our camp sites have seen remarkable transformation in their way of thinking and having been on that track for an extended period of time, they have almost forgotten the divisive old track,’ claims Nalin proudly.

Encouraged by this achievement at a socio-economic level, he wants to create more ecological models and wealth for the native population. He says, 'I am aware that initially people came to us because we were young guys who spoke good English, were familiar with corporate culture, etc. But gradually, we want to promote the local talent, people who may not know English but who know the mountains intimately, who have grown up in the region and can navigate every river and tough terrain. We will ensure that they are polite and that our clients have a delightful experience.'

Nalin also wants a direct control on transportation by creating a transport co-operative for his employees. This will ensure that the clients don't suffer any unpleasantness due to vehicle break down or driver's misbehaviour etc, and have a great experience from the moment they leave home till their return. According to Nalin, the co-operative would provide vehicles to GIO at a discounted rate and the profits earned will be distributed amongst the members.

Having overcome the initial challenges, do you still feel the same passion today as when you started, I probe.

‘Yes and perhaps even more. There is no doubt that the line of work I have chosen for myself is a difficult one in India’s context. Trying to sell outdoors in India is as difficult as selling a comb to a bald man. There are a miniscule number of people in India who are actually interested in the outdoors. If we had put the same amount of work and dedication into some other business or in the outdoors business itself in some other country, we would have had much more success than we have had in India. But it’s a challenge from which I don’t want to step back. It’s not about money. It’s about making the dream

come true, making the vision a reality.'

And what does the future hold for GIO?

'Our assessment is that the business is going to see exponential growth in the next few years. We are hopeful that along with the trips abroad which are considered prestigious and fashionable today, people will start taking an interest in what their country has to offer. We will try to position our trips as cool and even better than the trips abroad, particularly emphasizing on the health benefits and also the fact that they cost 1/5th of the European trips. We are

not dissuading them from taking vacations abroad, what we are trying to say is that make some trips in your country too and see what magnificence your own backyard has to offer. Internet is making a huge difference to our sales. We have standardized products that are selling well through our website and channel partners like Yatra and MakeMy Trip, etc. Yes, there is a challenge in selling to this difficult market but we are determined to stay put and scale up. It's a matter of pride and ego—*bechna hai to yahin bechna hai* (if we got to sell, then we got to right here.)

‘The whole idea is to be big in

India as the first adventure corporation in the country.

‘We are hopeful that India will go outdoors in a big way in the coming years,’ concludes Nalin in a booming voice full of confidence as he gets ready to lead the white water rafting expedition in river Alaknanda, standing on the banks of which he has been on a long call with me. His two-and-a-half—year-old daughter Sukanya is happy that her father is finally getting off the phone, ready to take the group, of which she is the youngest member, to experience the thrill and excitement of rough waters.

Nalin was keen that his kids grow

up with the grandparents. His wife Nandini gave up jewellery designing to take care of the interiors at the Himalayan Eco-lodges. Being from the region, she brings the required aesthetics and sensibility to the task. Nalin feels fortunate enough that his work cannot be done from Delhi but requires him to be right here in the lap of the mountains with his family, both being his refuge, his peace and his solace.

I know where I am heading this summer... to explore my own country's serene beauty with GIO, with Nalin, Bala and Bhaskar, with my family and friends, to experience thrill,

rejuvenation, harmony, peace and
solace—the ultimate possessions.



RIDING THE

WAVE OF CRICKETAINMENT

LATIKA KHANEJA

*Founder & Director, Collage Sports
Management*

Worldwide there are very few women in sports management and India is no exception. Latika Khaneja is perhaps the only prominent woman sports agent India has seen so far. In June 2001 she founded Collage Sports Management and during the last decade maximized the endorsement

revenue of her clients by pitching their talents to the biggest advertising names in the country and bagging mega buck contracts for them.

Collage catapulted her into limelight as the well-turned-out manager of several sport stars, the most notable amongst them, also her first client, the hard hitting cricketer, Virender Sehwag. How did she get into an offbeat profession? How have her experiences been in this field? How does she view the future of sports marketing in India? I have several such questions in mind as I begin my conversation with Latika whose glamour quotient perfectly fits

the image of a super slick sports agent in Hollywood films and television dramas.

Little did Latika know that she would one day choose sports management as her profession. An alumna of the prestigious Sri Ram College of Commerce, Delhi and IIM Calcutta, Latika was born in Canada. Her family moved to Delhi when she was about nine years old. Latika Chopra joined Delhi Public School, R K Puram where she completed her schooling. Her friendship with Sumit Khaneja, from the renowned Som Datt Builders family, which began in school culminated in marriage years

later after they both completed their management programmes; Sumit studied in the US.

Immediately after, Latika and Sumit moved to Iraq as the Khanejas had business interests in the ongoing civil engineering turn-key projects there. With no knowledge of the Iraqi official language Arabic and given the restrictions on the sectors in which women could work, Latika had little to contribute to the civil engineering business. She occasionally got involved with some work in the purchase department and otherwise enjoyed setting up her home and her marriage with Sumit.

So, what brought them back to India?

In 1990, Saddam Hussein ordered the invasion of Kuwait accusing it of stealing Iraqi petroleum leading to a full fledged war between the two nations. Looking at the volatility of the situation, with some serious bombing happening on both sides, the Khanejas packed up from Iraq and came back to India. By now, Latika was pregnant and it was a comforting move for her to be back in Delhi with the family.

Around this time, the Indian economy was also going through a crisis. The balance of payments

problem that started here in the mid-Eighties worsened after the Gulf War. India's oil import bill swelled, exports slumped, credit dried up and investors took their money out. The trade deficit resulted in an external payments crisis. By the end of 1990, India was in serious economic trouble and had to pledge tons of gold to the Union Bank of Switzerland and the Bank of England as part of a bailout deal with the International Monetary Fund (IMF). As per the conditions laid out by the IMF, India was required to undertake a series of structural economic reforms. Thus, under the Prime Ministership of P. V. Narasimha

Rao, a series of breakthrough reforms were set in motion by the then Finance minister and now Prime Minister, Dr Manmohan Singh. The liberalization policies included opening up the economy for international trade and investment, deregulation, initiation of privatization, tax reforms, and introducing inflation-controlling measures. The government rolled out several schemes to encourage exports. Spotting an opportunity in the area, Latika and her friend first started a leather exports business and then Latika decided to diversify and set up a garment exports business on her own. Sumit devoted

some time to working in the infrastructure space with his father and the rest to the newly set up garments business.

A baby girl arrived in Latika and Sumit's lives in due course. Things were fine, until after a year, the child was diagnosed with autism. It was a very difficult emotional period for the family, particularly for Latika who couldn't come to terms with the reality of the situation. Her mother-in-law proved to be an immense source of strength for her in these extremely distressing and disturbing days and till date Latika acknowledges her support with deep appreciation. To lessen the

pain of seeing her child suffer, Latika immersed herself in work and devoted long hours in office.

With all the attention and hard work, Latika's garment exports business flourished. In a couple of years, they were running about five factories and employed over a thousand people. Latika made occasional trips to New York to market and promote the company's clothing line.

As time passed by, Latika's maternal instinct began to resurface and she decided to have another baby and this time around as well a beautiful baby girl was born to Sumit and Latika who

filled their lives with boundless joy.

The coming of the new baby and the special needs of the older daughter required Latika to spend more and more time at home. Her work had to take a backseat and Sumit took complete charge of the business. Intermittently, Latika taught apparel merchandising at the Pearl Academy and National Institute of Fashion Designing or NIFT as a guest lecturer. She also dabbled in TV during this period and did a show on books with the renowned TV presenter, Karan Thapar on the BBC.

How did a totally unrelated area like sports management come into the

picture in the midst of garments, construction, teaching and television?

Towards end-Nineties, the Khanejas' garments business fell on bad days. The business on the whole was proving to be tedious and unviable. For instance one of their biggest customers was J C Penny and they had to contend with a whole lot of sticky issues related to stocks and inventory clearance with them. With mounting financial losses, they finally decided to close it down.

However little did Latika know that a whole new business opportunity in celebrity management was just around the corner for her. Sumit Khaneja was

a cricket buff, and had formed his own cricket club, called the Collage Cricket Club. Several players, rookies then but who later went on to wear the India cap, like Virender Sehwag, Ashish Nehra, Nikhil Chopra, Dinesh Mongia, etc were part of the Collage team and amongst other tournaments also played in the super A league organized by the Delhi and District Cricket Association (DDCA). Sehwag was barely sixteen and others too were almost as young when they joined the Collage team. So, long before they became celebrities and household names, the players shared a relationship of mutual trust and confidence with

Sumit and Latika.

In 1999, Sehwag was selected for the One Day International team. A certain company offered him an endorsement for a couple of lakhs for carrying its sticker on his bat in his debut match against Pakistan at Mohali. However, it was a debut that Sehwag would not like to recall if ever. He got out cheaply, just for one run at the hands of Shoaib Akhtar. The company went back on its promise of endorsement. Sehwag who was already distressed at his performance also shared his disappointment with the Khanejas regretting that he should not have

entered into the deal without a written contract.

Later, in 2001, Sehwag was presented with the option to join one of the Public Sector Undertakings or PSUs. This has been a norm with several cricketers wherein they join a PSU and get a fixed and secure salary from the organization. But in return, they pledge all their endorsements to the employer. Sehwag approached Sumit and Latika for their views on this arrangement. By this time, there was another revenue model that was well documented and firmly in place amongst ace cricketers like Sachin Tendulkar and Sourav Ganguly. A

professional sports agency was already taking care of their sponsorships and endorsements. It was common knowledge that these players were earning revenues in excess of several crores through this medium; Sachin's earnings was the highest reaching close to about a hundred crores through endorsements alone.

Convinced of Sehwag's tremendous potential, Latika and Sumit advised him to go the Tendulkar and Ganguly way. Now the next question was who should Sehwag appoint as his manager? They did not have to labour much on this aspect. With the closure of the garments export business, Latika

was looking for an alternative opportunity. She signed Sehwag as Collage Sports Management's first client on 16 June 2001. Their contract was based on a simple revenue sharing model. A certain percentage of the total endorsement income was fixed as Collage's fee with the clause that the company was liable to ensure a minimum income of one crore over a three year period to Virender Sehwag.

When Dinesh Mongia and Ashish Nehra came to know about the newly floated outfit, they too came on board. Latika immediately got on to the task, putting her marketing, networking and PR skills together to

promote her clients by positioning them to the big advertisers. However, till the cricketers performed on the field, the advertisers weren't excited about having them endorse their brands.

In the meantime, on the suggestion of Siddharth Shriram, Chairman of Siel Limited, Latika got the opportunity to work with Brandon D'Souza, CEO and MD of Tiger Sports Marketing, event managers for the prestigious Honda-Siel PGA India Tour event, the biggest tournament on the circuit. The experience equipped Latika with significant skills in sports marketing and she had begun

learning the ropes.

A few months down the line, Collage made its first breakthrough by bagging a contract from Reebok for Dinesh Mongia. Collage Sports Management had finally got off to a fine start and Latika was well poised in the business with a clutch of promising clients, a contract in place and unparalleled excitement and revenue potential lying ahead of her. Sehwaag was a gem waiting to dazzle the world with his batting prowess.

In the final match of the limited over tri series between India, Sri Lanka and New Zealand in August 2001, India played against New Zealand

with Sehwag as the opening batsman due to Sachin's injury lay off. Sehwag seized the opportunity and scored his maiden century from sixty-nine balls. He became the third Indian cricketer after Mohammad Azharuddin and Yuvraj Singh to have achieved the fastest hundred and this century went on to win the match and series for India. Sehwag was the obvious choice for the Man of the Match title. This performance also secured him a regular spot in the ODI squad.

The advertisers were now keen to sign Sehwag, the new darling of the cricket crazy Indian masses. Latika was now busy with negotiations,

examining the legal side of contracts, closing the deals and signing contracts for Sehwag who began by endorsing Boost, the energy drink. Besides being on the field together, he was now sharing the onscreen space with none other than the God of cricket, Sachin Tendulkar. Hero Honda too signed up Sehwag for their Team Ambition campaign that featured four other cricketers including Ganguly. Sehwag was slowly but firmly making his place amongst the big boys of cricket.

He made his test debut in November 2001 and in the first test against South Africa at Bloemfontein scored a scintillating 105. Although

India lost to South Africa, soon after the team's return, Coke, Samsung and Colgate signed Sehwag for endorsements. In September 2002, at the ICC Champions Trophy in Sri Lanka, Sehwag left a mark with his brilliant performance which ensured a place for India in the finals and won him Man of the Match awards twice. Adidas and Mayur Suitings fell in line to sign him up as well. The ICC Cricket World Cup was scheduled to start in February 2003 and this meant more brand endorsement deals like Britannia which eventually came his way.

With big monies coming in, the

minimum target of one crore for a period of three years, that was decided in the beginning in 2001, was surpassed very easily and many times over. In early 2004, Sehwag became the only Indian to score a triple century in Test cricket, with 309 against Pakistan in the first test in Multan, beating V V S Laxman's previous Indian record of 281 against Australia and helping India to a total of five for 675, the highest ever against Pakistan. This feat made it inevitable that the Sultan of Multan would become the King of Cricketainment. While Sehwag continued to concentrate on delivering terrific

knocks at a consistent pace, Latika scouted for more and more endorsements for him with equal vigour and expertise.

Over the next few years more cricketers viz., Gautam Gambhir, Sanjay Bangar, Dinesh Karthik, Ravinder Jadeja, Ishant Sharma, Cheteshwar Pujara, Iqbal Abdulla and Pradeep Sangwan signed up with Collage. Latika was able to get a few contracts for most of them. But it wasn't all easy. There were issues of inconsistent performance with some, frequent injuries with others and also diffidence to sign smaller contracts as in the case of Gambhir; none could

match up to Collage's star, Virender Sehwag.

In an effort to expand the scope of the company beyond cricket, Latika signed up India's star shooter, Rajyavardhan Rathore, India's first Olympic silver medal winner after his victorious return from Athens in 2004. Abhinav Bindra became a client much before he was crowned as India's only Olympic gold medallist at the Beijing Olympics. Latika's efforts resulted in securing contracts from Hero Honda, Sahara and Coke for Rajyavardhan Rathore and he became the first serving armed forces officer to endorse brands! She tried to get contracts for

Abhinav much earlier but all deals came to fruition only after his Olympic win in 2008. However, soon after Abhinav's return from Beijing, Latika's relationship with him turned sour ending up in litigation over the issue of the timing of termination of the contract between them with both sides accusing each other of professional misconduct.

Through all these years, Virender Sehwag continued to remain the backbone of Collage's business ensuring a steady and escalating revenue flow through his endorsements. Latika enjoyed the attention she was getting as his high

profile manager and the perks that went with it including close interactions with celebrities, the best seats for a tournament, being sought after by media and management institutes for her expert views on sports marketing and such like.

She is frank in acknowledging that while she pretty well understands the business of cricket, she does not know much about the game of cricket. In the last decade of getting to know the cricketers personally, she has come to have a lot of respect for Sachin and Rahul Dravid for their sheer brilliance at the game, Anil Kumble for his talent and accessibility, Sehwag for his

fearless aggression, humility and affection and Gautam Gambhir for his dedication and simplicity.

Besides being a tremendous source of revenue, Collage also proved to be the medium for self actualization for Latika. She got ample opportunities to test her abilities and to grow as a person which she claims is more important a factor besides earning money.

All seemed to be going well until 2008 when the sports marketing juggernaut—the Indian Premier League (IPL)—rolled in and altered the dynamics of the cricket marketing industry in India. The players under

IPL virtually became a property of the teams they belonged to. Many players who were once extremely uncomfortable facing the camera for endorsements or with the obligations that came with advertisements were now happy with the fat salaries which spared them the effort to go through the rigmarole of endorsements.

Post IPL, most advertisers started signing an entire team rather than individual players and in this scenario it became difficult to market an individual player with exclusivity. There were typical difficulties that a sports agent now faced. For example, if the agent succeeded in getting a

contract from Coke for the player, the team he was playing for would sign up with Pepsi leading to a clash in the player's obligations. Obviously, he would let go of the individual endorsement and fulfill his obligation towards the larger deal involving the team. The net result of this changed paradigm was that very few players renewed their contracts with the older agents on expiry. The role of the agent became completely marginalized when pitted against the collective might of an IPL team owner or others who were willing to offer a hefty amount as a guarantee and security to the players which was impossible for

an individual agent to match.

Before the ICC World Cup 2011, there was frenzied activity amongst sports marketing agencies to sign up promising players. Around this time, Sehwag's contract with Collage was also nearing closure. He expressed his desire to move over into the new system based on guarantees and sign up with Sunil Gavaskar's sports management agency, the Professional Management Group. Latika had always wished well for Sehwag and knew that was best for him and finally parted ways with Sehwag amicably, ensuring their personal relationship remained unaffected by these

professional developments.

The market dynamics had obviously changed and hence Collage diversified its portfolio and signed renowned artists like Sarod maestro Ustad Amjad Ali Khan, his sons Amaan and Ayaan Ali Bangash and the famous Sufi singer, Zila Khan. But with Bollywood and cricket taking away a major chunk of the advertising pie in India, there was not much promise that the celebrity management business could hold out. The other downside that always remained in this business was that once the endorsement deals came through and became steady, the celebrities normally appointed their

relatives as their agents to keep the large sums of commission fee within the family.

After having been on top of the business curve for several years and gauging the pulse of the current times, Latika thinks it is the right time for her to move on and away from this business. With this thought in mind, she is completing the remaining contracts Collage has on hand and does not intend either renewing them or signing any new ones. She has now shifted her focus to a new and emerging opportunity in the mall management vertical which forms a significant part of the construction

business managed by Sumit. Latika has a keen interest in positioning, promoting and ensuring a steady footfall in the malls built by the Collage Group and looking into other aspects like leasing, operations, etc. The first of these malls has opened in Jalandhar recently and there are three others which would follow in Bhopal, Kanpur and Dehradun in the coming years.

She is happy to devote the rest of her time in improving her golf handicap from an already impressive 17 to lower, reading and being with the family. Her favourite book happens to be *Pride and Prejudice* and she

enjoys Jane Austen on any good day.

A believer in the power of hard work, she says that with a realistic vision one has to make things happen, they don't happen on their own. Boredom is the biggest curse that one must stay clear of. Her basic philosophy of life is therefore very simple, 'You never know what lies ahead in life. So we should be grateful for all that is wonderful in our life and should enjoy when nice things happen. We should do as much good as we can for people.'

What's her view about the future of sports marketing in India, on sports management education and the

opportunities for young people in this field?

She believes that sports marketing in India will mature over the next five to ten years. Cricket marketing, she firmly believes, is by and large going to remain an IPL domain. For other sports to get a share of the marketing pie, the sportspersons will have to perform well and build a fan base which would get brands interested in associating with those sports, she feels. It's happening in tennis, badminton, shooting and wrestling but it is still at a nascent stage as compared to the highly developed and complex sports marketing world of Europe and

America.

So, for the coming years, the opportunities in sports marketing will largely be available more internationally than in India in areas ranging from conceptualization of properties like the IPL, to sports event management to broadcasting, journalism, etc. Besides Europe and America, there are many large sports marketing companies in China too.

As far as a sports management qualification is concerned, her opinion is that looking at the considerably long period of time involved for sports market to mature in India, at the moment, it will be advisable to do a

regular MBA than a sports focused one which some universities have started to offer now.

Will Latika's foray into mall management bring her greater success? With FDI in retail opening up in India, the sector will indeed witness a high growth trajectory in the next few years.

And Latika Khaneja may well be riding a new wave again.



MAKING OF A
STAR
AND A

GENTLEMAN

R MADHAVAN

Actor

R Madhavan aka Maddy has an enviable body of work in the film industry and is well known for his performances in films like *Alaipayuthey* in Tamil and *3 Idiots* and *Tanu Weds Manu* in Hindi. Unlike regional superstars, Madhavan cuts across geographical boundaries and enjoys a huge fan following both above and below the Vindhya.

Born in Jamshedpur to a Tamil Brahmin family, Madhavan had a typical middle class upbringing which laid premium on education. His father, Ranganathan was a management professional with Tata Steel and his mother, Saroja worked with Bank of India. With working parents, Madhavan used to have a field day on returning from school. While most other children were disciplined by their mothers to follow a routine like that of taking a nap in the afternoons, Madhavan sneaked out and played with servants' children, chased after butterflies or watched tadpoles in the nearby pond. Life

outside the classroom seemed extremely fascinating to him. 'I reflected the same enthusiasm as given to me by a person. The way teaching was done seemed totally drab and uninspiring to me,' he shares. His sharp mind would work up many imaginative ways to bide time in class. One such way, rather presumptuously, was practicing his autograph!

Expectedly, his grades remained quite average, much to his parents chagrin. Like most parents, Ranganathan and Saroja also believed that the only way for their children to succeed was to become engineers and then go and settle in the US or join

the Tatas to which the family loyalty was deep and abiding. Madhavan won several prizes in debates and elocutions as well as played basketball at national level but that didn't matter either to Saroja or to Ranganathan.

If this wasn't giving them enough heartburn, the ultimate ignominy awaited the duo round the corner. In class eight, Madhavan failed in Hindi and if he was to continue in the same school, he would have to repeat the year, as was the norm. To salvage the situation as best as they could, his parents admitted him to another school which was willing to place its trust in his capabilities. The

Ranganathans heaved a sigh of immense relief, at least for the time being!

Madhavan passed his class ten exams and got one crucial milestone out of the way. By now, he had a theory firmly in place. It was that each year, people would say: ‘This is the most crucial year of your life, study and you can enjoy later.’ He found this absurd and felt that if he towed this line, he would never be able to do what he liked. “The future when he can enjoy” would never be. He had to do all that he liked *now*! So, while his achievements in the extracurricular activities kept piling up, he wondered

how he would face the upcoming monster of an examination which was the class twelve board examination and the dreaded Joint Entrance Examination or JEE for admission to IIT.

Around this time, his school was assessing students to send one amongst them for a year to Canada on a Rotary exchange programme. Madhavan, who had excellent public speaking skills, acceptable levels of academic performance and also a charismatic personality, cleared all rounds and was chosen to go.

Going to Canada meant missing the crucial class twelve examination and

losing a year. The family tried hard to dissuade him but to no avail. When his father asked him if he *really* wanted to go, he gathered the sincerest wish from the core of his heart and replied, 'Yes.' That small word conveyed his deep conviction and had such an impact on Ranganathan that he relented. His parents bid him farewell at the Kolkata airport from where he had to travel all alone and manage everything on his own. The year was 1987 and Madhavan was all of seventeen!

I interrupt him at this point and tell him that I cannot believe that there was no teacher or any adult

accompanying him. Appreciating my astonishment, Madhavan says that today he too cannot imagine sending his son, Vedant alone on such a journey and that too without a phone! 'On that day when my usually stringent father gave the cheque for the programme, he saw in my eyes that this was all that I ever wanted to do and he couldn't refuse. It's something that remains inexplicable till date. It was my destiny at work.'

From flight cancellation, to delays and dealing with a number of inter connections, Madhavan experienced it all and finally boarded the plane from Detroit to Canada. Interestingly, it was

the same hour when his friends back home were writing the most important examination of their lives which was the class twelve Maths paper! Delighted to have escaped from it, Madhavan toasted his first and only glass of wine for the next several years with the air hostess.

He finally arrived at Stettler, a sleepy Canadian cowboy town with all of five thousand people. 'What was only a fantasy in my mind through books and movies about cowboys, a western life and blonde girls, all of it came true. I could hardly believe that I was experiencing the western dream so early in my life,' recalls Madhavan

about the brimming joy he felt at the time.

His one year's stay at Stettler was to become the most defining period of his life. In this year, he lived with five families who treated him like their own; two months with each from a different profession. First was a cowboy's, second a lawyer's, third a musician's, fourth a dentist's and the last a veterinary's. From a warm to a freezing climate, a conservative home to a very liberal one, a whole new world had opened up before him.

'Thus started my evolution as a completely different person. What was liberating was that I was not pre-

judged. I was looked at for what I was.

‘With my blond “brothers” and “sisters” I played basket ball, rode a horse to school, went to the rodeos, milked and fed the cows, lit firewood, skied, shoveled the snow, etc. In my enthusiasm to soak in the new experience, I did not feel homesick and adapted rather well. This was beyond doubt the greatest year of my teenage life,’ declares Madhavan.

He continues, ‘One key consequence of this trip was that I realized that there was no way I could do the jobs my parents were doing. They were in the same office, with

the same people for nearly twenty years. However, what I wanted to be, I still did not know.'

Soon after returning home at the end of the eventful stay, with just a couple of months' preparation, he appeared for the class twelve examinations and was delighted to pass with fifty-nine percent marks. Had he secured just one more percent, he would have been eligible for admission to some decent engineering college. Madhavan's parents reluctantly accepted the fact that he would pursue graduation in some subject and alongside prepare for admission to IIT. With his father, Madhavan did visit a

few colleges at Pune, Nasik and Nagpur but in none could he get the course in Electronics which he wanted to do.

A very close friend of Saroja belonged to Kolhapur. On his suggestion they came to Kolhapur, hoping to get admission into an engineering college. As they walked along the railway tracks in the morning, on the way out from the station to the friend's house, Madhavan saw that his father was almost moved to tears and wore a despondent expression on his face that seemed to say, 'What is it that you want? What have I done wrong with

you to deserve this?’ He consoled his father and told him to have faith in him and that everything was going to be alright. Kolhapur is known for the famous Goddess Mahalaxmi’s temple and even auto rickshaws in the city blare only Mahalaxmi shlokas and not other popular music. Madhavan chuckles and says, ‘This gave a lot of comfort to my father and he felt this would be the right place for me where I would not get distracted!’ Madhavan finally joined the undergraduate course in Electronics at Kolhapur’s Rajaram College.

So, how did it feel to be in Kolhapur within three months of

returning from Canada?

‘It was indeed a culture shock once again! Not too long back, I was driving cars, celebrating Valentine’s Day and all that. Here, if I said hi to anyone, they would in reply ask, “*kai?*” (meaning what, in Marathi). I felt miserable initially to be dumped like this.

‘But very soon I saw a ray of light. It was the NCC. I had met some college students from India in Canada who had come on an exchange programme through the NCC. I had decided that I too would join the NCC in college.’

Madhavan joined the NCC and

became part of the 1 Maharashtra Artillery Battery unit. This unit had achieved nothing worthy of mention in the last several years and ranked last in India. A new Commanding Officer, Col Sarkar also joined the unit at the same time and he identified Madhavan as the guy who had the capability to bring laurels to the unit. Madhavan's immediate target was to get selected for the prestigious Republic Day (RD) camp. It was also the medium through which he could get to go for exchange programmes.

However NCC rules did not allow cadets to participate in the RD parade in the first year. Col Sarkar trained

Madhavan thoroughly in this one year and the results started pouring in. Madhavan was chosen as the college best cadet, then Kolhapur district's best cadet, going on to become the best cadet for South Maharashtra. Eventually, he was crowned Maharashtra's best cadet. His victory march continued and he was decorated with the Best Turned Out Cadet Award at the RD parade and was selected to give the guard of honour to the President of India. He also found a place amongst the top eight cadets of India who would go to England a few months down the line to train with the Royal Army, Navy

and the Air Force. On Col Sarkar's advice, he gave up the pursuit for Canada and accepted this dream opportunity.

In a short span of time, from being the last unit in India, 1 Maharashtra Artillery Battery Unit catapulted to rank number one in India. 'It was a truly emotional moment for all of us,' says Madhavan and expresses deep gratitude for Col Sarkar, 'There came people like Col Sarkar in my life and swung it in a completely different direction. Without them, there was no way I could have designed my life better.'

Madhavan's public speaking abilities

also brought accolades for him and honour for his college. It had become a rule that if he and one of his close friends, Arjun Padle participated in any competition, the others could compete only for the third place! One of the memorable competitions he won was organized by the Indian Junior Chamber of Commerce which carried a cash prize of a lakh of rupees and a trip to Japan. He visited Japan before leaving for England.

Madhavan had become a virtual rock star in Kolhapur. He had come far from the days when parents in Jamshedpur would warn their children if they mingled with him. Everyone

now wanted their children to be like him!

Yet another lesser known fact about Madhavan is that he first became a popular teacher before becoming a popular actor. I ask him what that was all about?

When he returned from England, the placement season was approaching for final year students in his college. One of his seniors asked Madhavan to coach him for facing an interview so that he could land a job with a well known organization. Madhavan readily obliged with tips on how to speak well in English, dress appropriately for the interview, extend

a proper and firm handshake, etc. Next day, five students turned up in his room to learn the same. The number went up to thirty-five and the venue shifted to the hostel terrace with the numbers going up each day. Several of his students managed to get jobs with coveted organizations like Kirloskar and the Tatas.

The demand for his classes grew and the students were even willing to pay him for it. Madhavan rented a room and started his coaching classes, initially with one batch, going up to three batches a day and the fee increased from three hundred to eight hundred rupees per person. Soon the

ladies who came to drop their daughters also wanted to learn English from him. When their husbands learnt of it, some of them who ran small scale businesses in the region, they too engaged Madhavan to conduct workshops for their employees.

Money and fame aside, the classes became significant in Madhavan's life for one more special reason. Through these classes he met his future wife, Sarita Birje. Sarita was visiting her cousin in Kolhapur from Mumbai and went with her to attend Madhavan's classes to better equip herself to face the interview for becoming an airhostess. Later, when Madhavan was

invited by one of his students to teach in Mumbai, it was reason enough to be with Sarita, and he readily agreed. Meanwhile Sarita not only fulfilled her career ambition, she also ended up marrying her charming tutor after a courtship of nine years. Once Madhavan moved to Mumbai, he never went back. His classes had become very popular in Mumbai too.

What did his parents think of all this? I ask Maddy.

‘With all the money at my disposal and my trips abroad, at first they got worried whether I have fallen into wrong company. They came to Kolhapur to see my classes. Impressed

with what they saw and the respect with which my students treated them, they were happy and relieved. However they expressed their disappointment with the fact that I was not preparing for IIT. I tried to calm them and assured them that I would do an MBA from a decent institute.'

From teaching to acting, how did the transition happen?

On one of his student's suggestion, he sent his photographs for the much advertised Graviera Man of the Year contest for which the prize money was one lakh rupees. He got called for the preliminary round and then made

it to the final six. 'I had never modeled before. I went into it just to enjoy the experience, without a care in the world, whether I qualify or not. While I did not win the competition, what this process did was that I started being recognized as the show was telecast on TV,' recalls Madhavan about his first brush with the glamour world.

Now, another suggestion came forth from one of his students that he should take to modeling seriously which would help him make some quick money to hire a permanent place to hold his classes and spare him the trouble of having to travel to

various locations. He liked the idea and left a few of his pictures at the Zee TV office nearby, not realizing that a television office had nothing to do with modeling. It was certainly providential as future course of events proved.

Soon, Madhavan got a call from the noted TV executive Vivek Bahl, who was then making a serial titled “Love Stories”, to screen test for the protagonist’s role which was that of a convict. With his crew cut rugged look and a confident demeanour, Madhavan bagged the role. Deeya and Tony Singh, owners of DJ’s Creative Unit were at the time producing and

directing a serial “Banegi Apni Baat” and saw ‘the graviera guy with a charming smile’ on the sets of “Love Stories” and signed him up for their serial as well. Later, during one of his visits to the Zee TV office, he met the director of the game show, “Tol Mol Ke Bol” who put him through a screen test first and then signed him as the anchor of the show. It just so happened that all the serials and shows he acted in were aired on TV within a week in December 1994 and Madhavan shot to instant fame. More offers came his way and in no time he became a busy television star, signing autographs, being mobbed, flying

business class and enjoying the new found fame. He became a huge favourite with his father's boss's family too. When they expressed the desire to meet him, his father immediately summoned him home!

Madhavan is one of the few actors who has been able to transcend successfully from television to films. The events around this time heralded his journey into the celluloid world.

Just before leaving for Jamshedpur, he completed an ad shoot with Bharat Bala productions (renowned for their short film "Vande Mataram" featuring A R Rehman), where he was noticed by Santosh Sivan, Mani Ratnam's

Director Of Photography at the time. A couple of days later, on a lazy afternoon when he was still at Jamshedpur, he received a call from Mani Ratnam's office. Initially Madhavan thought his friends were playing a prank on him and put the phone down. The phone rang again. At the other end was a voice which in chaste Tamil said that it was a call from Madras Talkies (Mani Ratnam's film company) and the director wanted to speak with him. Madhavan's sleepy tone vanished and he sat up in attention on the couch. Indeed it was a call from Mani Ratnam and he asked Madhavan if he

could fly down to Chennai in a day or two. Filled with excitement, Madhavan could barely sleep that night.

On meeting him, Mani Ratnam realized he looked far too young for the role he had in mind. He told Madhavan this and also added that they would surely work together in the future. Madhavan went back to his television career in Mumbai. He would sometimes hear from his mentors that he was good but so over exposed on television that it was almost impossible that any director would sign him for a film. It did not affect him as he had never, in the first

place, even imagined acting as a career for himself. He was quite content and happy with the way his television career was progressing.

A year later, Madhavan got a call from Mani Ratnam again. He was chosen this time to play the lead role in the Tamil romantic film called *Alaipayuthey* (remade as *Sathiya* in Hindi). The crew comprised industry veterans like A R Rehman, Farah Khan and P C Sriram. It made for the best possible launch, one that even the biggest directors and stars cannot give their sons.

Remembering the memories associated with this precious moment

of his life he recalls that when the film released on a Friday, there were mixed reports. He had staked too much on the film's success: he had put his television career on standby after some eighteen hundred hours of work to his credit translating to some three hundred odd films; Sarita and he had got married a few months before the film's release. He had been advised by well wishers that the film being a romantic comedy, he should keep his marriage a secret to ensure his popularity amongst female audience. However, in the very first press conference, Madhavan revealed his marital status. When asked if he didn't

fear that this may affect his popularity, he answered, 'I have to respect the fact that I have a woman in my life. If my hiding her from public life is only going to guarantee me a life in the limelight, then I don't want that. I just don't think that I have the ability to disgrace a woman by not acknowledging her in public just because I want your affection for my acting.'

He wondered whether his forthright attitude had anything to do with the reports of a slow opening for his film. Even if it was, he wouldn't do it any other way.

The next evening, which was a

Saturday, he decided to go and check the public reaction himself. On reaching the theatre, he called the owner. The guy simply jumped out of his chair and ran hysterically towards Madhavan's car, all the while telling him not to get out of the car. Madhavan was confused. He was made to wear a cap that hid his face and was escorted carefully to the back of the theatre. The movie hall was jam packed with more than 2,500 people. The film started. The credits appeared, music started and as the first shot came up on screen, a close up of Madhavan with earphones riding a bike, there was a spontaneous explosion in the

theatre. All the girls in the theatre went ecstatic, throwing notebooks in the air and screaming his name. The message was loud and clear—Madhavan had become a star! His debut film had a dream run and was a huge hit.

The rest as they say is history. With a filmography that runs into several blockbuster movies in Tamil, Kannada, Telugu, Hindi and four more languages, he has made a formidable reputation for himself as an actor winning numerous prestigious awards along the way. *Guru*, *Rang De Basanti* and *3 Idiots* are amongst his super duper Hindi hits. He has

recently shifted his base back to Mumbai from Chennai to concentrate on his career in Hindi films.

Madhavan feels supremely blessed that he has had the opportunity to work with some of the best known stars especially with his idol Kamal Hassan and with the iconic Amitabh Bachchan. He says, ‘When I was growing up in Jamshedpur, to have these legends just a phone call away was simply unthinkable. I look upon my journey in a more philosophical way than an outcome of any ambition. One part of me thinks that I have a lot to give as an actor and the other part is in awe of what I have

become. There is a constant fight within me to figure out who I am.

‘I guess, at the end of the day, I continue to be a decent guy who loves new experiences and still follows the three golden rules taught by my parents—never cheat anyone, never intentionally hurt anyone and never owe any money to anyone.’

I ask him how can others who are aspiring to join the film industry ensure similar spectacular levels of success like his?

‘It is not in the will and desire of a person to be a part of this industry. It is the industry that chooses and decides whether they will become a

part of it. The best looks, best connections, best acting skills and everything else right on paper cannot guarantee anyone that s/he will be successful as an actor,' proclaims Madhavan profoundly.

‘This said, there are other things that one can ensure. My strong recommendation to anyone wanting to join the industry is that live your life before you start your career as an actor.

‘The diversity of your experiences will make you a fine actor. Early in life one needs to be exposed to swimming, travelling, dealing with friends, getting into a fight, getting out

of it, falling in and out of love, getting betrayed, making mistakes, the entire gamut that cannot really be planned. The experiences shape the soul of a person and the camera peeps into the soul. It portrays the depth of one's life's experience on the screen. That's why it is said that you cannot cheat the camera. I had no training as an actor. But what worked for me is my real life experience of being in different situations and ability to manage those. Good etiquettes also take one far. Ultimately however, it is more important to be an honest and nice person. It doesn't matter whether one is successful or not,' he says

conclusively.

All popular actors are supposed to have the X factor that makes them charismatic. Conversing with him for some good four hours in his vanity van at Tulip Star in Mumbai where he was shooting for *Jodi Breakers*, I can vouch for that palpable X factor in him. “Destiny’s child” and a “decent guy” as he describes himself, Madhavan will continue to win over many more hearts through his brilliant performances on the silver screen.



THE NON –

CONFORMIST

RAHUL NARASIMHA RAM

Bass guitar player & Vocalist, Indian Ocean

Someone who has a PhD in Environmental Toxicology from an Ivy League university like Cornell in New York is usually expected to work in academia, research foundations, consulting or chemical or pharmaceutical industries. That would have been the normal path for Rahul Narasimha Ram too. Then how did he end up being a part of a leading

rock band? Curious to know his atypical story, I look forward to a conversation with him.

Rahul's is a family of academicians; his father taught Botany in Delhi University and his mother taught the same subject at Miranda House in North Delhi. Though his father originally hails from Mysore and mother from West Bengal, they have been settled in Delhi for long. It's the North Delhi campus where he and his older sister, who now teaches Science Education at the Jesus and Mary College in Delhi, were born and brought up.

Was music a major part of his life

since childhood?

While in school at St Xavier's, though inclined towards music, it was theatre which engaged him. He participated in a total of six plays in the last six years of school, to be precise. In fact, what he regrets the most about school days is that he missed being part of a very innovative program called the Music Theatre Workshop because of an injury he suffered in his left eye during Dussehra when he was just eleven years old. Between eleven to eighteen years of age, he had to undergo a total of six eye operations, first three in the first year itself because of this accident. He

took to playing the guitar when he was in class nine and whenever possible played with his school friends. They would usually play the western music covers of those days like the Beatles, Rolling Stones, Deep Purple, Abba, etc.

Rahul's involvement with environment related issues had also begun in full steam when he was in high school and he enrolled with a student environment action group called Kalpvriksh. As part of this, he visited Sunderlal Bahuguna's Ashram in Garhwal and walked over 250 kms through the hills visiting villages that were part of the Chipko Movement[★].

His passion for environmental causes, conservation and advocacy that started from Kalpvriksh continued through college and later years.

Like most science students, Rahul also took the familiar path of preparing for the IIT-JEE exam and dutifully joined coaching classes. However within a month of joining, he found it too tedious and just quit. Fortunately, his class twelve board results were pretty satisfactory and he was amongst the top quartile in his class. This landed him a seat in the B.Sc. Chemistry course at the prestigious St Stephen's College in Delhi University. While he

appreciated the quality of teaching at college, he found its atmosphere extremely snobbish and practically spent the entire first year hanging out at nearby Hindu College which he thought was more egalitarian and to his liking.

Around this time, life offered him ample opportunities to increase his involvement with music. Every day after college got over in the afternoon, he would get together with a group of friends to practice and would get back home late in the night. Soon, their group started playing professionally at different college festivals and at other gigs which won them substantial prize

money or fee and recognition amongst the student community. 'I was introduced to a lot of good music in rock, pop and jazz by my friends during college. I heard the band "Weather Report" (pre-eminent American jazz fusion band of the 1970s and early 1980s) for the first time in college. Living in North India, it was impossible to escape the influence of Bollywood and I enjoyed that music too,' recalls Rahul about his early musical influences.

By the time he was in second year of college, his friendship with his neighbour, Amita had turned into a commitment and several years later

they tied the knot in a rather unconventional way.

Meanwhile Rahul continued to be involved with Kalpvriksh during his college days too, and travelled every summer to different national parks, sanctuaries and ecosystems such as the Rajaji Park in the Himalayan foothills, Parambikulam Tiger Reserve in Kerala and the Amarkantak plateau in Madhya Pradesh where the Narmada River, the Sone and Johila emerge. ‘Music, environment and girlfriend—college years more or less plotted out what my future life would revolve around,’ chuckles Rahul.

Rahul finished his graduation from

St Stephen's and applied for M.Sc. Chemistry at IIT Madras and Kanpur as they both were the best of the lot in the course he desired. Rahul got admission in both but chose Kanpur over Madras as it was closer home and more importantly, it would make it easier to remain in touch with Amita. He, along with five of his batchmates from St Stephen's, finally joined IIT Kanpur.

Academics was far more rigorous at the post graduate level; the semester system meant frequent and regular exams. To be away from home was also a learning experience for Rahul even as music remained his constant

companion in the midst of the newness. At IIT Kanpur, he started playing not only with an Indian music band and a western music band, but also with a Bengali group who performed for festivals like the Saraswati and Durga Pujas. Hindi film songs too inevitably remained a part of any function that took place. With interhostel competitions twice a year, the annual cultural festival and occasional sneaking away to Delhi to perform in some gigs, a lot of eclectic music found its way into Rahul's life even in the midst of a busy academic life.

Most people from his batch were

now planning to pursue a PhD from universities in the USA. Rahul too decided the same but with a difference. He was not keen to study Chemistry anymore, and chose to apply for courses related to environmental sciences. His small group of twelve friends managed the admission process with a systematic joint effort so that they could maximize the offers from universities. They wrote to their seniors who were already in the US and gathered relevant information and even financial help in some cases. 'The application fee for each university cost about \$ 35 which was quite a bit of

money to expend for many of us. Our mess bill for the month used to be less than \$ 35 then. We wrote to the universities, each one of us detailing our father's income and asking for either waiving or deferring the application fee. You will be surprised to know that many universities waived off the application fee!' narrates Rahul.

Rahul had a Grade Point Average of 9.96 out of 10 at IIT and a GRE score of 2380 out of 2400. He got admission in as many as eight universities with full scholarships. What however clinched it for Cornell University was his interaction with an animated and inspiring Professor at the

school and he decided to join there.

The British Airways flight to New York was Rahul Ram's first plane ride. Awestruck at seeing eight lanes of traffic just after leaving JFK and the buzz and energy of New York on the way to Ithaca, home to Cornell University, Rahul quips that he had for company the Simon and Garfunkel song, "Counting the cars on the New Jersey Turnpike" playing in his head.

One of his batchmates from IIT Kanpur, Gautam Basu who is now a Professor at the Bose Institute in Kolkata, had already arrived a week before and rented an apartment. He

was there to receive Rahul at the Greyhound (the largest North American intercity bus company) bus station, making the induction into the campus life rather easy for him.

There were quite a few other senior Indian students who were staying in the same complex and it therefore came to be called Gandhi Bhawan. With help from seniors and through recipe books, they learnt basic cooking and set the house in order. It was interesting to mingle with students from all over the world, learn the social ways and culture of the place, as well as get an exposure to a variety of music and its appreciation, etc. The

scholarship amount at the time used to be 850 US dollars a month which was quite sufficient to take care of the fees, rent, clothes and to run the house. The department was a twenty minutes walk from the apartment. 'It was a sort of new adventure in life and more like an extended holiday,' exclaims Rahul.

Rahul found academics at Cornell quite easy compared to IIT and most importantly, he was fortunate in having a good advisor. It was liberating to be in a system which encouraged inter-disciplinary approach and where one could choose courses from divergent streams and even modify them. Rahul chose

Toxicology as his major subject and his two minor subjects were Development Sociology and Ecology. He managed to finish his PhD at a breakneck speed in just four years whereas people usually took five to six years for completion.

In his third year at Cornell, Amita also arrived there to pursue her PhD programme in Development Sociology. They got married soon after her arrival mainly to avoid people talking about them back home. Rahul recalls the simplicity and speed of the wedding ceremony, ‘I cooked two kilos of “keema mattar” for the wedding feast myself, and other

friends cooked up the rest. It was too far and too expensive for anyone from family in India to come. With all our friends we went to a nearby Unitarian Church, got hold of a Minister to marry us and in no time we were declared married.'

With a Doctorate degree in hand, Rahul applied for an intern's job to various environmental groups in the US, like Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace, etc. To his surprise, not one of those organizations got back to him making him wonder if it was contacts more than qualifications that really mattered. He had also applied for a Chemistry teacher's job to some

high schools in the Caribbean as he wanted to experience life there and play some reggae. He might have seemed overqualified for teaching in school, so there was no response from the Caribbean as well. Meanwhile, Amita was going back to India to do fieldwork with Narmada Bachao Aandolan (established by Medha Patkar in 1989) in order to study the alternate model of development. Disgruntled but not disheartened, Rahul also decided to come back to India for good.

You could have got a job in academics or consulting in the US, I state. Why did you return?

‘I was not interested in teaching or consulting, though the latter would have been a lucrative option,’ he replies.

But when you pursued a PhD, you would have known that it would lead to being a Professor?

‘It was weird really. I had no notion of a career in my mind when I joined the PhD programme. I was simply going with the flow.’

And the reason to come back for good when you could have persevered a little more to get an internship with environmental organizations?

‘I perceived that I did not like the

work environment there and felt like a second class citizen. I did not know the social code of the country well. I knew I would never be able to know it well in the future too when I didn't understand something as basic as their accent and conversation properly. Another reason was that *mujhe chole bhature khane thay* (I missed eating chole bhature.) So in a way, I wanted to eat my kind of food and enjoy everything else that comes with being in your own country. So, I came back,' reasons Rahul.

Back home, he too joined the Narmada Bachao Aandolan's support group in Delhi as the campaign's co-

ordinator at a paltry salary. For all practical purposes, the association with the Aandolan remained more like voluntary service as even that measly salary would usually be delayed by several months.

With the launch of the Sangharsh Yatra by Medha Patkar in December 1990 from Madhya Pradesh to the Sardar Sarovar dam site on the Narmada river, the movement reached its peak. Rahul and Amita participated in this solidarity march. 'It was life transforming and a very inspiring experience to march alongside the displaced Adivasis and farmers, large number of social activists,

environmentalists, human rights activists, scientists, academicians and other groups,' says Rahul recalling about how the passion for the cause had stirred people across social strata and geographical boundaries.

Till the mid-Nineties Rahul remained fully involved, virtually on permanent call with the movement, handling some of its communication and co-ordination work like press releases, lobbying with MPs to raise questions in Parliament, etc., making frequent trips to the Narmada valley and was even jailed in 1993 when he was visiting a remote village in the valley.

He remembers being imprisoned in the house of a local tribal chieftain—Chitu Bhil—which had been turned into a police station. A few days ago, Rahul had learnt a song about this same chieftain, composed by a local tribal activist. The activist had done this song after learning from Amita about the local Bhil heroes, material she had picked up during her archival research. Rahul and a fellow activist sang the “Chitu song” in Chitu’s house, along with other songs. The jailer enjoyed their singing so much that he treated them to a good home-cooked dinner. However, the same jailer under compulsion from his

superiors, demeaned and ill-treated them the next morning! Spending nearly a week in the tribal jail, Rahul closely experienced how the government apparatus worked at grassroots level.

While the Aandolan work occupied major part of his time till the mid-Nineties, whenever possible he got together with his college friends for some occasional gigs, new year concerts and other parties at hotels, etc., to earn some extra bucks. And then there was this friend of his from school—Susmit Sen who had started a band in 1990 with another friend, Asheem Chakravarty and named it

Indian Ocean. He approached Rahul to play the bass guitar with them. When Rahul heard the Indian Ocean demo that Susmit had recorded, he was impressed and joined them in 1991. In the first five years of Indian Ocean's existence the band did only seven concerts, missing out on a few opportunities due to Rahul being away with Aandolan work. Anyway the money they earned through concerts did not amount to anything substantial for the band members. Indian Ocean released its first album in 1993 under the HMV label to critical acclaim, but it still did not lead to either more concerts or increased

income.

Additionally, Rahul also became part of a music group that performed at jagrans(all night devotional singing sessions) and weddings. A doctorate from Cornell University performing at jagrans and weddings—it flummoxes me! To Rahul this did not seem odd. Besides some money that he was able to make as part of this music group, he thinks that this also proved to be a great training platform in music for him as there were a few others in the group who came with a very good grounding in classical music. The group was expected to deliver variety in their performances and that

contributed to upping the music quotient of the members.

There was more to the mixed bag of activities he was involved with. For nearly four years, he worked at a book shop called People Tree at Connaught Place in Delhi which was started by young designers from the National School of Design or NID who were also associated with the Narmada movement. People Tree was one of the best alternative book stores in the country and Rahul sourced books for it.

During these years, he also taught to supplement his income. For six years, he was a visiting lecturer at two

institutions, required to take one class per week. One was at the Department of Environmental Biology at Delhi University where he taught a course in Toxicology and Risk Assessment and the other was at the School of Planning and Architecture where he taught masters level student's course loosely termed as Politics of Environment, but officially called Natural Resource Management. Admission to the course at Delhi University was through an entrance exam which was quite competitive and Rahul would also take this exam every year and had decided that the year he did not qualify, he would stop

teaching. 'It was fun. It would keep my brains polished and also give me the moral authority to teach these kids. I realized that I enjoyed teaching,' remarks Rahul.

Since you enjoyed teaching, did you think of taking it up full time with a long term view of it being a steadier source of income for the family too, I ask.

'I never thought that I should stop doing other things to earn more money. I had no problem in living the way I was as internally I had no expectations. However, what I knew for sure was that there were two things I never wanted to do. One was

never to wear a suit in my life and the other a nine to five job. I am happy that so far I have managed quite well to avoid both.

‘As far as family is concerned, Amita and I were very clear that we did not want children. We just wanted to enjoy doing whatever we did, to feel free, to be free. We were comfortable with not becoming a part of traditional success structure, the notion of a career being practically nonexistent with us. That was my thinking at that point. All of it was so “unthought” out. It could have turned out to be a complete failure as well. Luckily it didn’t. It’s quite

paradoxical that I was invited to be the keynote speaker for IIT Delhi's Foundation Day this year. If I had been teaching at any of the IITs, I wouldn't have been invited for it.'

How did your family react to your involvement with the Narmada Bachao Movement and music and to the fact that your income was nowhere close to what your peers from Cornell employed in academia or industry might have been earning?

'My parents never nagged me. They knew I had the safety net of qualifications and I would get a job anytime I decided to do one. My grandmother and most cousins were

rather proud of me as they looked upon my involvement with the movement as *jurm ke khilaf ladai* (a fight against injustice) in the same way my paternal uncle had done by being part of India's freedom struggle. However, there were some relatives who were unhappy. They would say "You are a fool. You have wasted your life." I would look at what they were doing with their life and think that if I lived like them, I would hang myself out of sheer boredom. I was fortunate to have good friends who did not bother about what I earned but hung out with me for company.'

In 1995, Rahul stopped working

for the Narmada Bachao Movement as he realized that he had done five long years of being on permanent call and it was not possible to carry on like this forever. The next year he quit teaching also as his involvement with Indian Ocean started taking more of his time and he began to travel more frequently.

By now, Rahul, Susmit, Asheem and Amit, who joined them later, had conviction in the kind of music they were doing and in a future for Indian Ocean. Susmit and Asheem also left their jobs to be in the band full-time albeit without any concerts and contracts save optimism. All four kept

afloat by taking on various musical assignments—odd jobs composing music for serials, ads and documentaries.

The Sahmat concert at Mandi House, Delhi on New Year's Day in 1997 proved to be a landmark event for Indian Ocean. The band played to a resounding applause from the crowd that roared for more. The recorded concert was released as their second album called "Desert Rain". In 2006, it was no. 2 on the iTunes UK world music charts! Today, more than a decade later, it still continues to sell.

The enthusiastic audience response at Sahmat concert made radio, TV and

press take note of Indian Ocean. The band began to be known across the country. The gigs began to fall into place and the money also started getting better but still not substantial enough.

In 1998, Times Music signed on Indian Ocean and, the next year, the band went to Mumbai to record a new album. Recorded in the hi-tech studio, Western Outdoor, and released in March 2000, “Kandisa” went on to acquire a cult status, becoming one of the best-loved albums in contemporary Indian music.

Recalls Rahul, ““Kandisa” changed everything. The band became a

keenly awaited presence on the college circuit, with repeat invites from big cities and smaller towns all around the country. The international scene opened up dramatically for us.'

From their first concert in London in August 2001, they went on to play at the prestigious Edinburgh Festival Fringe (the world's largest arts festival), where they played eighteen concerts in fourteen days, and were nominated the Pick of the Fringe, returning to the Fringe in 2002 and 2003 respectively. This opened up several other avenues for them to play internationally. Ever since, the band has played countless concerts across

continents making Indian Ocean a leading global brand.

Although Indian Ocean plays what is called “alternate” music which many would say doesn’t appeal to the masses, film music beckoned them and they composed and even sang in movies like *Peepli Live*, *Black Friday*, *Gulaal*, etc. However, they do not want to shift base to Mumbai as they want to continue enjoying making music and not be driven by commercial reasons. As a band which made indigenous fusion music achieve cult status, Indian Ocean is inspiring several other young and upcoming bands in the country to proudly play

original music emerging from the local environment and fusion of unique individual influences.

Performing in more than fifty concerts each year around the world, clad in his trademark kurta and a colourful gamcha tied around the head, an accessory he sports since his Narmada days, Rahul is happy with what he does but at the same time detached from fame and success he has achieved. After the sudden death in 2009 of one of their key members, Asheem Chakravarty, there are new equations that have emerged in the band. 'Let's see where the future takes us. I would like to continue making

good music. It's quite possible that I may even like to do something else. All of us are not closed to anything,' are the concluding words from the man who has embraced life with a free spirit and an open attitude.

Dr Rahul Narasimha Ram exists at an unconventional plane of thought altogether. Perhaps that is the essential part of being a true artist!

*The Chipko Movement was a socio-ecological movement which followed the Gandhian methods of satyagraha and non-violent resistance through the act of hugging trees to protect them from being felled.



OF THE PEOPLE,
BY THE PEOPLE,

FOR THE PEOPLE

MANOHAR PARRIKAR

Chief Minister of Goa

I reach Goa a couple of days in advance before my meeting with the Chief Minister, Manohar Parrikar. Through my conversations, ranging from corporate head honchos to men on the street, it comes across quite clearly that Manohar Parrikar is seen as one amongst them, perceived as honest and admired for running an

efficient administration, rare and much valued traits in the vitiated political environment of our country!

From the scenic Taj Holiday Village in North Goa where I am staying, it takes me about twenty minutes to reach the Vidhan Sabha located at Porvorim, a few kilometers from the state capital, Panaji. The Assembly complex, which looks like an Indo-Portuguese villa, blends beautifully with the Goan culture. To the left of this central structure is the VIP block. The first floor of this block houses the Chief Minister's chamber as well as chambers of other ministers and the cabinet room.

It's 6 pm. When most other offices are wrapping up for the day, Manohar Parrikar's office is all charged up to go on beyond 10 pm. At least four days a week, his office follows these timings, I am told.

Tuesday, being one of the public days, there are a series of meetings with groups of people that have already taken place through the day. As I am escorted to the chief minister's chamber, he is winding up one such meeting. Next, a senior police officer and a senior bureaucrat who have just been deputed to Goa have a brief reporting-in session with him. As soon as that gets over, he has to rush to the

cabinet room to attend to some urgent matter. A few minutes later, he returns and finally joins me to share with me his professional and personal journey.

Born in Mapusa, about thirteen kilometres from Panaji, Manohar is the fourth of the five children of Parrikars, the eldest two being sisters, then a brother elder to him and one younger. The Goa of the 1960s that he remembers while he was growing up was a peaceful and quiet city with little traffic on the roads because of which the kids could easily go walking to their schools. In the serene surroundings of this Konkani region, Manohar grew up with very happy

memories of childhood years.

As a child, his favourite pastime was to kick a tin box or some such thing all the way to school without letting it fall off the road, park it near school and while returning bring it back home the same way. He believed that if he managed to do this well he would secure good marks! The “King of Ideas”, the epithet by which Manohar was known amongst his friends, would come up with ingenious tricks. One of his key preoccupations used to be to foil his maternal grandfather’s attempt of keeping away ripe mangoes from children meant for selling in the

market. He along with his friends would always manage to cleverly break into the safe keeping without leaving any clues behind. The gang then would enjoy the mango feast and feel jubilant that their mischief would never get traced!

Manohar learnt two cardinal principles of life from the way his parents lived their lives. These were—honesty and equality. He believes that passing over these values through their own example are the greatest gifts his parents have given him. His father was studying to be a doctor when he had to quit his studies due to the sudden demise of his grandfather. Being the

eldest in the family, the responsibility of taking care of younger siblings fell on his shoulders. The senior Parrikar duly took charge of the family business of distribution of imported milk products for which there was a huge demand those days. They were the biggest importers and distributors of milk products in Goa at the time and used to import a brand of milk powder called Cow & Gate meant for infants and some of Nestle's products too.

‘I still remember that the price of 2.5 pounds of Cow & Gate was Rs.13 and 63 paisa. Most others selling this product took advantage of high

demand and shortages and sold it for anywhere between Rs.20 and Rs. 25. But my father always insisted on selling it for Rs 13.63 paisa only, to the extent that he refused to take even 65 paisa. In today's world, we don't see a coin of 2 paisa. I have seen coins of one paisa and even a fraction of a paisa. He would return the 2 paisa coin to the customer. Even the customer used to be embarrassed to accept the change! But my father insisted on keeping the transaction fair to the last penny. He always told us to never cheat anyone and set an example for us through his own fair dealings and that has had a deep

impact on me,' he acknowledges.

Manohar's mother had not studied much. Yet, it is because of her innate intelligence that Manohar came to develop a strong belief in the fact that wisdom is not related to education and it is more important to be wise than to be highly educated. 'A lot of times people tell me that MLAs (Members of the Legislative Assembly) should be highly educated. However, I don't subscribe to that view. I would rather that they have high integrity and reasonable education so that they can lead in the right manner. It's integrity that counts for more,' he opines.

Manohar's mother had an egalitarian upbringing in an affluent zamindar family in a village near Mapusa. When her childhood friends, who belonged to different communities and social strata, came to meet her at Mapusa, Manohar saw how his mother treated every human being equally and with respect irrespective of whatever caste, community, creed or financial status they were from. He imbibed these values from his mother.

‘I think this approach gave me an edge when I came into politics. I have no hesitation in treating people as equal. That puts me on a different platform from others. In fact, I didn't

know about my caste till I went to IIT. The medical doctor at IIT was a Saraswat from Mangalore. When he saw my surname, he asked me—"Are you a GSB?" I asked him in turn, "What is GSB?" He said, "Ask your mother to answer this." It's then, at the age of 17, that I came to know what a GSB (Goud Saraswat Brahmin) was all about.'

Manohar's parents always placed a high premium on good education for their children. His father wanted him to become a Chartered Accountant as Manohar was good in Accountancy and Mathematics, but he was not interested in becoming a CA.

The next option his father suggested to him was to become a doctor. This was also not fine with him as he could not stand the sight of blood. After thinking about a few other options Manohar finally declared that he would pursue engineering. His father was left distraught by his decision as he did not hold a very high opinion about the engineering stream. Reluctantly however, he agreed to let him exercise his choice.

When Manohar began applying for engineering, he viewed the revered IITs to be just like any other engineering colleges. He would have almost not taken the IIT-JEE

examination had it not been for one of his friends. This friend had taken the form but realizing that he would not be able to afford the cost of an IIT education, decided to give it to Manohar. That year became a milestone in Manohar's life. He not only stood second in the inter-science (class eleven) examination, he was also amongst the eighteen boys who cracked IIT-JEE from Goa that year.

However, even after qualifying for IIT, he wasn't sure he would join, as his first preference was for VJTI, Mumbai. He knew that IIT Bombay was a good institute but was unaware that it was a *premier* institute. Set up in

1958, second in the chain of IITs, it was a relatively new institute at that time and somehow its reputation had not yet reached Goa.

‘On 18th June, I still remember the date, I went for the interview to IIT Bombay. I saw the campus and instantaneously fell in love with it. On that impulse, I decided to join IIT. Most of my decisions are rational and based on information. There are only a very few decisions I have made that are based on emotions. Joining IIT Bombay was one such decision,’ confesses Manohar. Of those eighteen candidates from Goa, finally Manohar and one of his friends from Anjuna (a

village in Goa), who is now settled in the US, joined IIT Bombay.

Being on his own at IIT was a huge learning experience for someone like Manohar who was not used to even fetching a glass of water for himself at home. There were students from all over India on the campus and also from countries like Fiji, Iran, etc. Mixing with an eclectic set of student community not only exposed him to different cultures, it also taught him to adjust with people from other backgrounds.

Manohar narrates a memorable and funny incident of his student days at IIT to me. As it happens with most

students, IIT gave them a new found freedom, the feeling of being away from home and a friend of Manohar's, who was rather naïve and simple, learnt how to smoke and drink in the first semester itself. One fine day, as this guy was sitting and smoking in his room in the company of a friend who was a non-smoker and a teetotaler, his father and mother walked in suddenly. A glass of whisky was on the table and and a half-smoked cigarette balanced on the ashtray. As the parents walked in, the other boy acted brilliantly. He immediately picked up the glass and the cigarette and walked out of the room. Behind him, he could hear the

parents telling their son '*Aisey logon ke saath sangat mat rakho!*' (Don't keep the company of such people!) For several months after this incident, it became a daily ritual for people in the hostel to tease that fellow with the statement '*Aisey logon ke saath sangat mat rakho!*'

At IIT, Manohar usually bunked classes and relied more on studying by himself—an unusual approach but it worked quite well for him and resulted in a belief that studying on your own is better than being taught, if one can manage to. He spent 4-5 hours every day in the library. 'I used to sit with all the reference books, so my studies as such were not impacted,'

explains Manohar and goes on to narrate, ‘Recently I met someone who asked me—“Do you recognize me?” I said no. He said, “I was your librarian in IIT.” He had retired but he remembered me!’

Continuing with the same old habit of being self-reliant, he claims he doesn’t feel constrained in clearing files when he sits late in office and in the absence of officers. He is able to navigate his way through alone. ‘That quest, I call it Q, is already created. It helps me to solve the problems independently. In most of the cases, I can solve nearly all problems without any assistance,’ he reasons.

Coming back to his engineering days, the five years of his IIT programme were coming to an end. Manohar would soon graduate as a Metallurgical engineer. The Students' Union elections had taken place before the end of the semester and the elected office bearers would then take charge in the new session. The interesting outcome of these elections was that Manohar Parrikar became the only student in the history of IIT to be elected the General Secretary of Students' Affairs in his passing out year. Not only was this against the rules, it was illogical to elect someone at a time when he was passing out of

the institute. Manohar's was the only case in IIT where the General Council, the student's body, passed a special resolution to permit him to contest, subject to one condition that for post graduation he would come back to IIT. Manohar gave that assurance and kept it. Although he made it through IIM Calcutta and NITIE, Mumbai, he chose to join IIT Bombay and honoured his undertaking.

I ask him what was it that made him so popular with the students that they opted to bend the rules to elect him as General Secretary?

‘Good food at cheaper price,’ he

replies crisply.

Did you contest elections right from the first year? I ask.

‘No, I had decided not to contest. It was however sabudana wada which forced me to contest.’

Bewildered, I ask him for more.

‘There were Kerala cooks in our mess. Keralites may be great cooks as far as sambhar, aappam and such preparations are concerned. But they definitely could not make sabudana wadas properly. What they made, turned out like small spring balls. Our mess co-coordinator, Manmohan Kerkar loved these wadas. So, every alternate day we had sabudana wada in

the menu. We simply hated it, to the extent that even today I don't touch sabudana. We requested him, forced him, cursed him and tried everything possible but he would not budge. Finally, we realized that the only way to get rid of that sabudana was to get rid of Manmohan Kerkar. So I contested. That is how I entered the political scenario in IIT in the second year. For the next two years, I got elected unanimously as mess co-coordinator and then in the fifth year I contested for the General Secretary position.

‘We could manage to organize good food at a cheaper price. We

started the system of purchasing for the whole of IIT's requirement from Dana Bazaar, the wholesale food market. The result was that all the mess bills went down from a high of Rs.180 per month to a significantly lower amount.

‘During those years at IIT, I saw at close quarters how people indulged in adulteration of food items.’ Manohar goes on to quote an example of how cheating was done with eggs. ‘Of the two varieties, layer eggs (English) and gowti (local) eggs, the gowti ones are smaller, brown in colour and more expensive due to their higher protein content. Some of the vendors would

collect the smallest of the layer eggs and put them for a couple of hours in a big drum containing tea powder. This would give the eggs a brown-pink colour and the shopkeepers would then push these eggs as gowti eggs. In this manner, from the lowest grade product they were able to extract the highest price.'

Time flew and by now Manohar had spent seven years at IIT and enjoyed every bit of his life so far. This included a year and a half of post graduation that was in progress with one semester left for completion. Around this time, the mess workers at IIT went on a strike and the hostels

had to shut down for some period. Manohar came back to Goa and was by now itching to get down to real work. He decided to take a break from studies and complete the remaining part of his post graduation after a year or two. That however never happened as he liked the real world much more than formal academics. With his past experiences, his belief gradually grew stronger in the fact that degrees are of no value, knowledge is. That is another reason, he claims, why he didn't eventually complete his post graduation and decided to work.

His first job was with Mukand

Limited. Within four months of being into the job, he realized that he could not work with someone who tried to boss over him. At Mukand, when he was held accountable for something he had not done, he reacted sharply and then quit his job. He subsequently went on to set up his own business of manufacturing hydraulic equipment at Tivim Industrial Estate, about five kilometers from Mapusa city in Goa.

Alongside focusing on the newly set up business, Manohar's tryst with politics continued. He had joined the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) during his school days when he worked as a volunteer for several

community welfare projects of the Sangh. He remained a dedicated party worker of Jana Sangh (RSS' political offshoot), as and when he could manage, during his student days. Around this time when he set up his business in Goa, Jana Sangh was in a transition phase and finally metamorphosed into the Bharatiya Janata Party or BJP in 1980. Manohar had since been a member of the party.

While managing one of the projects for the BJP, the then All India General Secretary of the party, the late Pramod Mahajan, noticed his organizational and leadership skills and identified him as one of the key people who would

play an important role in shaping BJP's future in Goa. And Pramod Mahajan couldn't have been more right!

Initially a bit reluctant to enter into active politics but later swayed by the emotional appeal of the ability of a political office to bring about large scale transformation, Manohar agreed to take the plunge. Entering into active politics was another one of those very few emotional decisions he has taken in his life, he confesses.

Manohar proved himself worthy of the trust reposed in his capabilities by his mentor and went on to become one of the strong pillars as well as the architect of BJP's rise to power in

Goa. In 1991, he contested his first Lok Sabha elections from the North Goa Lok Sabha constituency. Even though previously both the BJP candidates had lost to the Congress, the sizeable vote percentage garnered by BJP in these elections reflected its potential to emerge as a new force in the newly created State of Goa (declared India's 25th state in May 1987).

Under Manohar Parrikar's astute leadership, BJP fought the 1994 assembly elections in alliance with the Maharashtrawadi Gomantak Party (MGP) which had ruled Goa since the first assembly elections in 1963 which

were held after Goa's liberation from Portuguese rule. This alliance with a well entrenched party was an intelligent move that yielded rich dividends. The year 1994 heralded BJP's debut in the Goa assembly with four seats and there was no looking back. Manohar was able to create a progressive image for the BJP in the state by focusing on issues related to development as well as clean and efficient governance. This approach yielded appreciable results and BJP returned with increased strength of ten in a forty member house in the 1999 assembly elections.

In October 2000, Manohar Parrikar

astutely toppled the coalition government of Francisco Sardinha and became the first BJP Chief minister of Goa, and also the first IIT graduate in this position. However, Manohar's government was also not spared by defections and the unstable nature of Goa's coalition politics. In early 2002, with many party members abandoning the ship, the BJP lost its majority and the Goa assembly had to be dissolved. Fresh elections were announced and Manohar returned with sizeable seats and once again formed a coalition government. But short of an absolute majority, Manohar's government found it difficult to achieve stability

and soon the reins of governance slipped into the hands of Pratap Singh Rane of the Congress Party for a very brief period. This was followed by the imposition of President's Rule in the state after which Rane returned to power again for two years till June 2007. In the assembly elections held in 2007, BJP was defeated by the Congress led by Digambar Kamat who went on to complete a full term of five years in office.

The recently held 2012 assembly elections resulted in a victory for BJP and the anointment of Manohar Parrikar as Chief Minister of Goa for the third time. In the backdrop of a

massive anti-incumbency wave, Goa's electorate gave a clear mandate to the BJP and the BJP-MGP combine trounced the Congress by securing a thumping majority—26 out of 40 assembly seats. The BJP was clever in the distribution of tickets and not only nominated many Christians, they also supported some independent Christians (Christian community forms nearly thirty percent of the population in the state) many of whom later got elected. Manohar's focus on development initiatives, his simplicity and forthrightness as well as adroitness in taking diverse communities together has culminated in this historic

win for the BJP in Goa. From an irrelevant political entity, Manohar Parrikar successfully steered the party to a commanding position it holds today in this beautiful tourist state, the smallest state in India by area but the richest in the country by way of per capita income.

‘I don’t like politics, I like administration,’ claims Manohar. Having come to power after trouncing the Opposition, the astute CM has in all earnestness set about his key task of nurturing Goa as one of the model states at the forefront of development. People have huge expectations from the son of the soil,

the boy from Mapusa who occupies the seat of power a few kilometers away at Porvorim. This is a golden opportunity for him to prove that he can walk the talk and deliver. Would he succeed in steering Goa as the next poster state for the BJP? Manohar Parrikar is being closely watched and perhaps he knows it well.



SPREADING THE JOY OF LEARNING

ASHISH RAJPAL

Founder & CEO, iDiscoveri Education

Why are children taught only through books when true joy of learning comes by seeing, experiencing, and in discovering knowledge? Isn't every child unique and shouldn't all children be given the environment that unleashes their true potential? When

these questions became increasingly persistent in Ashish Rajpal's mind, he knew it was time to pay heed to his heart's call. He quit a top dollar job in Paris as worldwide Marketing Director with Groupe Danone to pursue his vision of making quality education accessible to every school going child in India. The year was 2001.

Ten years down the line what does he think? Has it been a worthwhile journey? Does one's passion really result in giving one true happiness and fulfillment? I met Ashish at Hotel Trident at Bandra Kurla Complex during one of his trips to Mumbai. He had just returned with his venture

capital team member, Sean after visiting the American International School, housed in the vicinity of the hotel, to be in time for our meeting. The moment I saw Ashish, I knew it was going to be a great conversation. He somehow looked driven and passionate and I wanted to hear it straight. It's post lunch hours and the coffee shop offers a perfect ambience for his story to unravel.

Did he have an orientation towards education and service to the community through his school and college years too; I shoot my first question to a dapper looking Ashish.

Ashish had a regular middle class

upbringing in Delhi. He is the eldest of three siblings, the sister in the middle who is a doctor and the youngest brother, an investment banker. His father, an IIT graduate, worked as an architect and his mother worked as a leadership and management trainer. Ashish went to an all boys Jesuit school, Mount St Mary's in Delhi. His initial career ambition was to become a fighter pilot and he appeared for the Common Defence Services examination and made it to the fourth place in the merit list. Beside himself with joy, he was all set to join the National Defence Academy (NDA) at

Khadakwasla. Life was good till he met his cousin, who was also in the NDA, and was visiting on vacation. Ashish was all set to leave the next day and even as the cousins began to talk, Ashish realized that NDA was perhaps a mistake; defence services wasn't quite the area that suited his temperament which questioned every convention and rebelled against set norms. He decided to drop the idea of a career in defence services. The chapter was closed even before it could get started!

Ashish's father was rather happy with the way events turned out as he could now get his son to appear for

the IIT examination and fulfill his heart's desire to also see him graduate, like he had done years ago, as an engineer from the topmost institute in the country. But he was soon to be disappointed. Ashish couldn't crack the exam in the first attempt; not even at the second attempt, after he had dropped an entire academic year. 'It was pure trauma to prepare for IIT the whole day, the whole year with no time for other activities or social life,' says Ashish reminiscing about the slog routine of those days.

With engineering finally ruled out as a career option, he joined Economics Hons. at Kirori Mal

College in Delhi University. More than academics, he remembers the college years for the fulfilling experience he had during vacations in community service in the hills of Uttarakhand working with NGOs engaged in education and other rural development activities like water conservation, etc. Mountaineering and trekking in the hills are also some of his most cherished memories of those days. His association with AIESEC during his college years brought him close to the woman in his life, Rachna. Academics, trekking and Rachna—all became an integral part of his life. A few years after college,

Rachna and Ashish got married.

During the second year of college, Ashish had a particularly unusual experience. He was “recruited” by an agency in Delhi to work in a summer camp in America. The deal was that the air ticket and living expenses would be borne by the organization conducting these camps, but there would be no other payment or stipend for the services rendered by the individual. He remembers going to the US for this camp by one of the cheapest flights of Aeroflot via Moscow. Reflecting on it now, he says the camp was nothing but a way of acquiring cheap Indian labour for

the activities that take place on a large scale in America every summer! Though not the best and most desirable way, this was his first brush with the western world which did lend him a set of unique experiences and learnings.

As the college tenure was nearing completion, pursuing management seemed to be the natural progression for Ashish and Rachna. Ashish made it to XLRI at Jamshedpur and Rachna joined IIM Ahmedabad. What were his observations, thoughts and experiences as a management graduate and young professional?

Being far away from home at

Jamshedpur seemed a truly liberating experience for Ashish. He specialized in marketing and was offered summer internship by P&G at the end of the first year. Impressed with his work, P&G offered him the job of Assistant Product Manager which waited till he completed his MBA. With a secure job in hand, the second year at XLRI just breezed past him.

Recalling the experience of his first job with P&G, Ashish says, 'It was the first place where I felt I really learnt something worthwhile like how to make business proposals and presentations, how to bring people around, working in a team and a

whole host of such practically relevant things. There were people like Ravi Chaturvedi, Nayantara Bali, Shireesh Joshi, etc. from whom I learnt immensely.

‘I can safely say that neither school, nor college and not even the management education came any close to the quantum of learning I experienced in the job with P&G.’

Rejoicing in the magnificent experience of working with a systems and processes driven multinational company and getting enough recognition for his initiatives and out of the box ideas, Ashish thought he would have a long tenure with the

organization.

Then why did he switch to a family owned company after two years with P&G?

One of his friends was working with the investment division of the SUN Group owned by the Khemkas in Mumbai. He told Ashish that the Group was scouting for a suitable person to head marketing for their brewery business in Russia. The Khemkas had recently acquired a few breweries in the Russian cities of Perm, Yekaterinburg, Kursk, Saransk and Ivanovo and were putting the team in place for marketing and distribution. The opportunity seemed

interesting to Ashish and he agreed to meet the promoters thinking there was no harm in checking it out. One meeting with Ashish at the Belvedere Club in Mumbai was enough for the father-son duo of Nand and Shiv Khemka to realize that they had found their man for the job. They left no stone unturned in presenting the job in such an attractive package deal that it became impossible for Ashish to let go of the opportunity.

He was flown to Russia and was given the treatment deserving of top management professionals. The prospect of heading the marketing function, which otherwise, in an

organization like P&G he would have gotten to do only after a decade of experience, living in a new country, experiencing the multi-ethnic cultures in Moscow, its freezing temperature at minus 30 degree Celsius—all of it appealed to Ashish's adventurous heart. He had made up his mind to accept the offer and announced to his family that he was quitting P&G, getting married to his long time girlfriend, Rachna, and moving to Russia! This is how Ashish's Russian sojourn got underway in the beginning of 1994.

Russia in the early Nineties was in the throes of a socioeconomic and

political upheaval. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, it was no longer the super power it used to be. People in the newly-formed Russian Federation were experiencing rapid change while transitioning from a statecontrolled economy to a market-oriented one as a result of the radical liberalization reforms announced by Boris Yeltsin, the first ever directly elected President in Russian history. Living in Moscow, with Russians, Americans, Europeans and Canadians for company, Ashish and Rachna closely witnessed the society in transition. The disparity in incomes, a fall out of newly opened

liberalized economy, was quite glaring. On the one hand there were people who had every conceivable luxury and on the other were those who lived an impoverished life on the streets. Amidst all these complexities the newly married couple, Rachna and Ashish also realized that the Russians were genuinely affectionate and warm particularly towards Indians. Raj Kapoor was still iconic and his songs a favourite with Russians and could occasionally be heard in bars and public places, especially in smaller towns.

On the professional front, it was quite an uphill task for Ashish. Russian

beer was of poor quality, tasted bad and was packaged very shoddily, “in bottles which looked more like milk bottles,” he observed. His key task was to build a respectable brand image for the beer made at SUN Brewing. The company upgraded the machinery, streamlined operations and emphasized on keeping their product quality high and consistent. Soon SUN Brewing launched the company’s flagship brand called Viking under Ashish’s leadership.

Around this time, while stationed at Moscow, Ashish cofounded Youreka, an outdoor education company to conduct adventure-based summer

programs for school children in India, with a few of his friends from XLRI. Despite his hectic life with SUN Brewing, he not only found the time to conceptualize, he also provided ideological and financial support for Youreka with the long term objective of coming back to India.

After a couple of years with SUN Brewing, Ashish switched over to Groupe Danone, the French foods conglomerate. How did the assignment with Groupe Danone come about?

Ashish was approached by Groupe Danone, for a senior level marketing position based in Moscow. By now,

he could speak good enough Russian to get by and his two-year-old daughter Avni, who was born in Moscow, had also taken very well to her place of birth. Having mostly completed the work he initially came to do at SUN, taking up the offer from a renowned MNC like Danone seemed to be the right move and Ashish did just that.

He hadn't imagined that things would progress fast and in a positive direction for him in the new organization. At the end of a year's stint with Danone in Moscow, he was moved to Paris as its worldwide Marketing Director.

‘Those were heady times! I felt I had achieved everything I had set out for. I was drawing top bracket compensation package, we lived at a short distance from Champs Elysées (Paris’ the most glamorous shopping street), both our children, Avni and Kartik, went to a great school in Paris and we travelled the world.’

At the peak of professional success, why did he then take to academics?

Somehow India was always at the core of Ashish’s thinking; his mind constantly sought something more than just materialistic success, which he had in abundance. There was a deep-seated yearning in him to add value to

the community he belonged to. More than money, the big ideas of social change had always appealed to him.

‘Some of this inclination probably has to do with my mother’s Liberal Left beliefs, some with my maternal grandfather who was quite spiritual and some to my readings of Vivekananda, Aurobindo, etc. Deep in my heart, I knew that I would eventually come back and work in India. I would often ponder what would that cause be which would take me back home and keep me motivated on a long term basis. This thought pattern became more persistent since the birth of my

daughter, Avni.

‘Avni’s birth had a profound impact on me. She came a week earlier than we thought she would! My mother got on the flight at a short notice to be with Rachna. But her flight was delayed. I was beside Rachna in the Russian hospital throughout as Avni came into this world. The strong bond that I have with Avni goes back to all those fascinating moments around her birth.

‘I have always had a keen interest in child psychology. The birth of my kids made me go deeper into the subject. It has been my belief that each individual is special and s/he has

unique capabilities. The book *Frames of Mind* by Professor Howard Gardner and his “theory of multiple intelligences” ended up reaffirming my belief and left a deep impact on me. It set me off thinking. I realized that it was children and education that held my attention consistently and got me going. When the thought is constant with you, you have to do something about it.

‘I wanted to prepare myself well for the vision I had formed in my mind about working in the space of children’s education in India. For nearly a year, I researched and worked on which course would equip me best

to deliver well in the area. Comfortable in the knowledge that I had enough savings to support my family, at the end of 2001, I was finally headed to Harvard to pursue an Ed.M. in Mind, Brain and Education. Rachna and kids came back to Delhi.'

So, in your assessment, how was studying at Harvard different from your earlier education and how did it impact your future work in the educational domain, I ask, eagerly wanting to know the further unfolding of events in Ashish's life.

'Being at Harvard for that year was easily the most defining year of my life. To be a part of over 20,000 strong

student community across fifteen schools, the quality of professors, the flexibility not only in choosing courses but also the schools where one could pursue them, the teaching and assessment methodology, all of it was a hugely enriching experience for me. The atmosphere exuded tremendous intellectual energy. Talks by people of Prof Amartya Sen's stature or an art show or some such activity would take place on the campus almost every day. The most important distinguishing aspect was the complete authenticity of the process of delivering education. The assessment was based on different modules which

besides papers, included team work, group quiz, class participation, etc. The sincere effort the professors put in to give a detailed feedback on your work always propelled one towards betterment.

‘This was the first time in my entire educational experience that I was in a system which seemed genuine to me and aimed and assisted in unleashing one’s potential and thinking abilities.

‘The courses in human development and psychology, learning and teaching, school leadership, teacher education, technology, innovation and education were all extraordinary and imparted skills

which have been extremely useful to us in our day to day working in the pursuit of our mission.'

Ashish met Anustup Nayak, younger to him by several years at Harvard. Their ideals and aspirations matched and they decided to collaborate in making their dream a reality of renewing school education in India. This is how iDiscoveri came into being in 2002, headquartered in Gurgaon. iDiscoveri was set up with the primary hypothesis of focusing on teacher training programmes which would lead to enhancing the quality of education imparted to children.

They knew that the road ahead was

unchartered and full of hardships; they had anticipated some of the obstacles but there were quite a few others that took them by surprise. For instance, they had to wait for hours on end to get an audience with school principals, explain to them what they were attempting to do and then get them to sign up with the company. Changing the mindsets and the attitude that “this is the way we have been teaching for years and this is how it will continue to work” was the most difficult challenge.

Once that barrier was crossed, some practical difficulties showed up. The teacher training sessions would take

effect for just a few days and then the teachers invariably would go back to the routine way of teaching. Ashish decided to understand what made teachers diffident to accept new methods and himself took to teaching primary school kids and got a firsthand feel of what hampered the process. He realized that first, it was not easy to manage a large class of forty to fifty children and second, there was a need for a standard scientific measurable programme and tools by the teachers to enable them to teach in an experiential way on a long term basis.

For the first five years of its operation, iDiscoveri virtually

functioned like a research and development laboratory. Trial and errors and learnings from experience and observations during these gruelling years finally led to the development of an effective experiential learning system in 2007 which they called XSEED.

XSEED comprises eight thousand minute by minute practical lesson plans on different topics (fully aligned with the syllabi of CBSE, ICSE and other major state boards) for teachers to follow from nursery to grade seven covering four core subjects—English, Math, Social Sciences, and General Science. Each lesson plan consists of an

activity related to the topic. For example, for teaching the chapter on “Plants”, the teacher carries a plant with her to the class, shows the different parts of the plant to the classroom, gets the children to touch and feel the plant, and makes them understand what each part is and how it is different from the rest. The lesson plan further comprises questions for discussion in class, worksheets for reflecting on knowledge acquired and then finally formative and summative questions for assessment of lesson learnt. XSEED teacher and student material replaces the one-step telling approach traditionally followed in

classrooms with a five-step experiential learning method by focusing on action followed by reflection and feedback. XSEED also offers a complete school solution which includes teacher material, teacher training, student material, and assessment and monitoring material backed by handholding support by experts from XSEED.

This has been well received by schools and students across the country and has shown superior results in helping students build clear concepts, improve fluency in English and enhance their learning and understanding vis-a-vis regular

teaching methods.

Ashish waited for five long years to see his vision come to fruition and it tested both his perseverance and faith. All his savings had almost run out and there were enough family and relationship pressures as well, urging him to give up his "*junoon*" (obsession) and get back to a lucrative corporate sector job. Did the thought cross his mind too when the struggle had begun to put a strain at the seams and everything seemed to be falling apart?

‘No, never. I could never think like that. I still felt deeply for the cause to throw it out of my system. I had given a dream and a purpose to my team. I

could not leave them in a lurch. I felt responsible. What kept my conviction intact was that I could clearly see we were making significant progress. Even if monetarily it wasn't gratifying, on a conceptual scale we had covered enough ground to be proud of.'

It's true that it is always darkest just before dawn. After facing several challenges and despite a time when the very *raison d'être* of iDiscoveri had become questionable, the resilient team began with the successful implementation of XSEED in the first three schools where they had beta tested it, and after that started getting excellent feedback and encouragement

from schools across the country and particularly from schools in Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, and Maharashtra. More and more schools signed up with XSEED including prestigious institutions like Bombay Scottish, Maharani Gayatri Devi and Padma Seshadri in Mumbai, Jaipur and Chennai respectively. So far, close to 700 schools in India and abroad have successfully implemented and experienced the benefits of the XSEED learning system impacting over 2,50,000 children and 25,000 teachers.

iDiscoveri emphasizes and rightly so in starting early and has therefore set

up a chain of XSEED preschools as well. The infrastructure and learning tools used in these schools are at par with those used in the developed world. Three years ago, iDiscoveri launched an annual event called the School of Tomorrow, targeted at the K-12 education community. School of Tomorrow is a thought-leadership initiative that engages top educationists from India as well as abroad towards provoking thinking and demonstrating practically what future-minded schools could be doing. The group also runs a successful people development consultancy called iDiscoveri Leadership. Focused on training,

coaching, and assessment of organization leaders, the consultancy has won respect for its “boil & simmer” methodology which first creates self-awareness and then builds skills. It also continues to support Youreka.

A constant research and upgradation work on syllabus and teaching methodology is an integral part of iDiscoveri. It goes to Ashish and Anustup's credit that they have been able to bring together a fantastic team of individuals with multi disciplinary expertise and a passionate interest in education. Many of them are alumni of leading institutions like Harvard,

Cambridge, IIM, MIT, and XLRI and have played leadership roles in blue chip organizations.

What Einstein had propounded several decades ago—although the education system in India has still a long way to go to achieve that ideal state—‘The most important motive for work in the school and in life is the pleasure in work, pleasure in its result and the knowledge of the value of the result to the community. In the awakening and strengthening of these psychological forces in the young man, I see the most important task given by the school. Such a psychological foundation alone leads

to a joyous desire for the highest possessions of men, knowledge and artist-like workmanship.’

Ashish and his team are working relentlessly towards creating such an ideal environment. With the resolve of the founders getting stronger than ever before and flush with a funding of ten million dollars from its venture capital partner, US and India based Lighthouse Fund, Ashish is upbeat about iDiscoveri’s objective of eventually reaching out to each and every of the 300 million children in our country, making “every child a star”, helping “every individual reach his true potential,” and finally achieve

the broader social objective of “utilizing education to awaken our society, workplaces and lives”.

Teaching the right way and imparting value education is about respecting children and treating them as equals and as entities in their own right, says Ashish proclaiming his steadfast belief and life’s mission conclusively. Ask him when he is the happiest, he smiles and answers promptly and effortlessly ‘When I am with children and see them radiating the pure joy of learning.’



RAISING A

TOAST TO LIFE

RAJEEV SURESH SAMANT

Founder & CEO, Sula Vineyards

Traditionally, India is not a wine drinking country. But a young man was convinced that there will come a time when more and more people in India will take to this classy beverage. Today his name has become synonymous with wine. In 1999, when Rajeev Suresh Samant established Sula Vineyards in Nasik as the first winery in the region, little did

he realize that he was setting a wine revolution in motion. His venture became the catalyst in turning Nasik into India's wine capital with several new wineries following suit. Rajeev is truly a pioneer as he recognized the potential of Nasik, 180 kms from Mumbai, as a region suitable for viniculture on par with major winegrowing regions across the world. Today Sula has established itself as India's leading premium wine brand; in 2002 Sula became the first Indian winery to be featured in *Wine Spectator*, the world's leading wine magazine; Sula Vineyards is also a leader in sustainable winemaking, and has

created direct and indirect employment opportunities for thousands of rural youth.

Rajeev is a Stanford graduate. Before founding Sula, he was employed with Oracle Corporation in the US. What is it that can make a person leave a well paying job with an MNC, a comfortable and exciting life in San Francisco and head to a village in rural Maharashtra? What was his frame of mind when he took such a decision? What experiences and thoughts did he have as he traversed this unconventional path? I had several such questions in mind when I met Rajeev Samant in July 2011 at his

office in Lower Parel in Mumbai.

Clad in jeans and a white shirt, sporting a clean shaven look, well spoken and suave, Rajeev comes across as a cool young man who is clear about what he wants from life.

Born and raised in upscale South Mumbai, Rajeev did his schooling at the prestigious Cathedral and John Connon School. Growing up with an elder and a younger brother under the supervision of a loving and disciplinarian mother, Rajeev remembers the wonderful years which were about theatre, elocution, debates, sports and various activities at school. The afterhours were spent playing

cricket with friends in the neighbourhood or tennis, badminton and other sports at the Bombay Gymkhana.

Rajeev was a brilliant student, particularly good in Maths and English, and won several prizes in school for excellence in these subjects. Why did he not then take the conventional IIT-JEE path?

It turns out that Rajeev is a complete supporter of holistic education. He shares that even as a young boy, he was clear in his mind that he would not give up extra curricular activities for rigorous studying that was required for getting

into institutes like the IIT. 'The learning environment at Cathedral was oriented towards a complete personality development and was not merely academics focused. It was in many ways more suited for pursuing undergraduate studies abroad where the universities valued such approach to education.' There were quite a few of his batchmates who were applying to universities in the US. So, Rajeev also appeared for SAT and was the highest scorer for that year which got him a full scholarship to pursue undergraduate studies at a couple of Ivy League colleges in America. Rajeev chose Stanford University,

California and was now in the midst of an international community of top-of-the-line students, the cream of the academic crop.

Stanford had a transforming impact of enormous proportions on his life. 'It was like a whole new world had opened up before me. You had Nobel laureates, Olympic gold medal winners, concert pianists and such highly accomplished individuals on campus alongside you. Out of a total strength of 1500 undergraduate students, 42 of us were international students.

'Coming from a rather conservative Indian culture to perhaps the most

open society on earth that California is, it was indeed a culture shock at first. But I adapted to the environment pretty quickly. It opened me to new ideas and values and made me a more accepting individual. However, that said, I never lost my Indianness and never felt that I was turning American. But, in many ways, I do consider myself a Californian for my love of nature, love for the outdoors, openness, tolerance, willingness to experiment, etc. Those years were an incredible experience and will always remain the best years of my life.'

Like most Indian parents, Rajeev's parents also wanted their son to be an

engineer or a doctor. At Stanford, he did start out with the objective of becoming an Electrical engineer but very soon realized that History, Classics, Philosophy and Literature fascinated him more. He consulted his advisor and finally graduated with Economics as a major and Industrial engineering as a minor. He did another year of Industrial engineering to acquire a Masters degree in Engineering Management. From campus, Rajeev joined Oracle Corporation at San Francisco in Finance division, compensation group. He excelled at work too and within a year of joining, got promoted and

became the youngest manager in Oracle's Finance division.

Did he aspire to be the CEO of a leading MNC or a bank some day in those early days of his fast track career?

‘Frankly, doing my job well and making full use of leisure time was all that mattered to me those days. I had a general thought that I would follow the usual path which was to work as a financial analyst for a couple of years and then go to a business school after which join an investment bank. There was no serious thought or dream of eventually climbing to the top of the corporate ladder as such,’ he shares.

Life was good. He was living the

Californian dream. He had an apartment which he shared with a friend, drove a trendy car, drew a great salary, dated a couple of women and partied five nights a week. He had his own mountain bike as well and totally enjoyed biking, windsurfing and hiking. Being a trained pianist, California offered him enough avenues to indulge in his passion for music.

With everything seemingly perfect and so exciting, what led him to come back to India, I am curious to know about this turning point in his life. What I hear leaves me surprised about the unconventional demands one can

dare to make from life and risk a conventionally secure and successful life in pursuit of “real happiness”. While for the world, Rajeev was successful and in a coveted job, his heart yearned for something else.

‘What I did not like about my job was that we got only a two weeks’ vacation. In college, the vacation used to be for three months. Even in Europe, in the first job itself, one got a six weeks’ vacation. So, two weeks was ridiculous. I used to make full use of my college vacations. I had backpacked through Europe and Asia. I wanted to see the rest of the world. We have one life to live. I refused to

live by the two weeks' vacation thing. One must enjoy life first. If that is being compromised, it's not for me, such things have never been for me,' he proclaims his independent attitude, matter of factly.

There were other events which further aggravated the discontent in him. At the time when he returned to India in 1993, the US economy was slowly coming out of the grips of a severe recession. The year 1991-92 was the worst period before the major economic downturn of 2008. As a result, the H1 B visas were getting delayed or denied and the procedure was becoming rather cumbersome.

Even on the personal front, Rajeev was going through a heartbreak. It therefore doubly hurt to continue living in San Francisco.

On the other hand, in India, the economic reforms had started in the 1990s. There was great optimism and excitement about an open, market-oriented Indian economy. All these factors combined made Rajeev think, 'What is it that makes me continue to remain in this country?' He was convinced that he needed to return and pursue the entrepreneurial path in the promising environment back home. The thought of being his own boss and have the right blend of work

and fun thrilled him no end.

What about the pressure from family? Weren't they shocked with his decision? After all, he was quitting a promising career!

His family was indeed quite upset with his decision initially. But they knew that once he made up his mind, he does his own thing. Knowing it would be futile to pressurize him, they had no choice but to go along with him. Moreover he had taken personal decisions earlier and had steered through them successfully. They therefore trusted his judgement.

It would have been easy for him to straight away join his father's business,

Samson Group, which is into refloating sunken ships and such maritime services. Did he consider this easy option, I ask?

He shares that he couldn't as his elder brother Bharat had already joined the family business and the next in line was his father's partner's son.

There was another and actually the bigger reason. Rajeev was motivated to create something new on his own just like his father had done. His father had begun from scratch and set up a flourishing business by the dint of his own abilities. 'Up until I was about ten years old, I had seen my family go through precarious financial

circumstances,’ Rajeev recalls. By the time he left for undergraduate studies, his father had ridden over the difficult period and had become fairly successful. In his father’s efforts, he had seen firsthand what the struggles to set up a business in a completely new domain exactly meant. He realized he was equally fascinated with the idea of creating something new.

He could have opted for business options which required an “urban” base like IT or financial services. Why did he choose farming?

It so happened that a family wedding came up for which he went to Nasik. He had been to Nasik earlier

too when very young but for all practical purposes, this was his first visit to the place as an adult. Rajeev's father had some ten acres of land here which he had bought with the intention of reselling by sub dividing it into plots. However for the price he expected, he was not getting any buyers. On this visit, the moment Rajeev set his foot on this land, its picturesque surroundings and pleasant climate reminded him of California. Taken in by its serene beauty, on the spur of the moment, Rajeev decided this was the place where he wanted to do something. This was where he could live his dream which was drawn from

philosophical readings during college days.

What was the crux of this philosophy that influenced him, I am eager to know.

During his Stanford days, Rajeev had read Gandhi, Thoreau and Tolstoy. A common theme running through the writings of these philosophers was that they postulated a life lived both in countryside and city as the best. In the course of his travel around the world, particularly France, Rajeev had seen how people lived some months in the city and went away to their country homes during summer. He liked this concept and

wanted to live the same way. This was the perfect opportunity for him to realize his dream and he decided to cultivate the land in Nasik and restart his life.

It's easy to philosophize but difficult to have conviction and execute. There must have been struggles, both physical and psychological?

It was certainly not like he was successful overnight. It took long hours of hard work and years of patience. The land was overrun with weeds and grass. With much gusto, he got it cleared and began by planting mangoes on it. His idea was to do organic farming and sell branded

produce. In a way, he was trying to replicate what was already an established practice in the US. The organic movement had long begun there and most fruits and vegetables were sold under established brand names such as Dole and Chiquita, etc. Since, the first crop of mangoes would give fruit only after four years, in the interim he planted roses, teakwood, peanuts and tomatoes before finally planting grapes.

The struggle and experimentation continued for Rajeev. Mumbai to Nasik was a “bone rattling” ride on potholed roads that took nearly six and a half hours. Every Monday he

drove to Nasik in a Premier Padmini, his car at the time, stayed with his aunt and cousins at their home in Nasik, sharing a small room with them for the week and came back to Mumbai on Friday night. When he met his friends over the weekend, many of them thought that he was crazy. Others who knew that he was brilliant in school and college did not write him off so easily. They remained interested, curious and fascinated with what he was trying to do. In Rajeev's life, at this time there were no top of the line cars, no sanitized and aesthetic office surroundings, no glitzy parties. His love for nature and an abiding

desire to create something new in the community to which he belonged kept him going.

How did grapes and wine happen?

Rajeev soon realized that there was no money in traditional farming in India. One of his farmer acquaintances, Sharif Sheikh, told him that he could make a lot of money by planting Thompson seedless table grapes and he followed his advice. With the first crop of grapes in late 1996, Rajeev made some wine at home for instant consumption. It was made in a simple wine making kit he had bought from Crawford market in Mumbai. The simple wine making at

home set off a thought process in him and he wondered why no one made wine in Nasik when the climate was so ideal for growing wine grapes. Whenever he drank this homemade wine with friends, the discussions would roll on that India did not have any good wine. So why isn't someone making it? And then whenever he spoke to his friends in California mentioning that he was growing grapes, they also suggested he make wine! So somehow things were sort of converging in that direction. Rajeev was convinced that with easy access to information, exposure to international travel and a booming economy, India

will start drinking wine sooner rather than later and the market for it was bound to grow. Also, wine people are known to be cool people. He was indeed the right guy exactly in the right place to make wine. He had found his mission in life.

As an entrepreneur, you have to take care of a set of compliances too. How did he go about this boring but unavoidable piece?

Rajeev made use of his father's office at Churchgate in Mumbai as the initial base for securing all necessary permissions and compliances. No winery license had been given in Maharashtra for the last fifteen years.

‘My father and I used to go together to Mantralaya to talk with the ministers. He coached me in the ways of dealing with the bureaucracy. It was difficult to make a breakthrough as wine was looked upon as alcohol production. I had to work hard to change the perception and drive home the point that my initiative should be thought of as one that would benefit the grape growers and increase rural employment. That struck a chord with the government. Finally, it took more than two years to obtain the necessary license to make wine.’

And the capital requirement? How was that fulfilled?

‘The seed capital for the business came partly from equity participation by immediate family and friends and the rest as loan. To secure a loan for setting up a winery was also a challenge. Banks were not willing to lend as it was considered a risky project. My father’s bank, Saraswat Co-operative Bank, eventually extended the loan solely on the basis of his thirtyfive years’ of relationship with them.’

With all these travails, did he ever think about his life in San Francisco and doubt whether he had taken the right decision, our conversation continues.

‘Small self doubts yes but big ones never. I have to confess that when I went back to California to get our master winemaker on board, God knows I missed being around in California so much. But it was a passing feeling. My sense of purpose to succeed in the task I had undertaken had the stronger pull, I guess.’

How did your association with Kerry come about?

Alongside permissions and regulatory clearances, Rajeev had started the search for a good wine maker. He did not think of any other region but California where he knew he would find the key person he

needed. Californian wines had made a mark for themselves in the world market by now; Napa and Sonoma Valley in California commanded a formidable reputation in the business. He spoke with some of his Stanford friends in California and one of them introduced him to a renowned wine maker, Kerry Damskey. Kerry carried extensive consulting experience in wine making and his father was a vineyard owner in California. In him, there was a fantastic combination of someone who knew the art of growing grapes as well as making wine. Incidentally, he had just been to India when somebody else, totally

independently, had invited him to Nasik to see if the region was suitable for making wine. When Rajeev asked him what he thought, he said, 'The grapes grow well in the region, the climate is good. I see no reason why we should not be able to make decent wine there. I don't promise more than that.' Rajeev proposed to Kerry to be the master craftsman in his vineyard.

However, when Kerry quoted his fee, Rajeev was left aghast. He remembers that even the cost of flying down Kerry in business class from California to Mumbai was equivalent to their entire administration cost for three months! Rajeev was upfront in

stating that he could not afford what he was asking for. He could pay him half the amount as fee and the rest in shares. Kerry agreed to the proposal. He was on board as the principal consultant.

It was decided they would name their company Sula after Rajeev's mother's name Sulabha. Next came up the key question—what type of grapes to plant? Through informal research with parents, brothers, sisters-in-law, Kerry's wife Daisy, tasting a bunch of Californian wines, they tried to arrive at what they liked and didn't like. It turned out that they preferred whites. White grape varieties were also easier

to know, understand, plant and grow. India as a market would also respond more to white. So, white it was. They became the first company in India to plant the Sauvignon Blanc varietal and decided they would try the red grape varieties later.

Rajeev remembers the cherished moment when he opened their first wine bottle, Sauvignon Blanc in late 1999. Filled with emotions he says he will never forget that moment. ‘Kerry and I were sitting in my farmhouse in Nasik. We opened and tasted our first wine which was very nice. Kerry said, “Raj, we really got something here.” I was overwhelmed and told him, “This

whole journey has been well worth it for this one moment.”

Sula wines became profitable from the second year of its inception and because of a fast-growing market, has been reinvesting its profits every year. As planned, Rajeev has continued to experiment with new varietals. After completing a decade in 2010, Sula Vineyards emerged as India's largest wine producer making seventy percent of India's wine and is firmly positioned as India's leading premium brand. The wines are exported all over the world and feature on the wine lists of some of the world's finest restaurants.

Just like Californian wineries, Sula winery and vineyards are also open to the public for educational tours. The Sula amphitheatre on location hosts events and social gatherings and is available for bookings. Visitors can now spend a few nights at 'Beyond', Sula's exclusive accommodation on the vineyards with a beautiful lake view.

What a phenomenal journey! Rajeev dreamt like a philosopher and executed his dream like a businessman and has proved to the world that the two personas can co-exist simultaneously in an individual to create something meaningful.

What does the future hold for him, I ask.

‘The biggest challenge,’ he says, ‘is to grow the market. Currently we have one percent of the population drinking wine. What I would like to see is five percent over the next ten years. We have to also get the rest of the world wake up and take notice of Indian wine.’ With India poised as one of the fastest-growing wine markets in the world, things will only look further up for Sula Wines from here.

Rajeev meanwhile is living his passion. He has the kind of work which allows him to work hard and play equally hard. He loves to travel to

wine growing regions around the world to learn as well as enjoy the scenic beauty of these fabulous destinations.

Anything he wishes he could have done differently?

‘I feel where we have reached today as a team and family is beyond my wildest dreams. In a situation like this, how many regrets can you have—none really. At this point I feel may be it would have been nice to have started a family.’

Expect wedding bells to ring and lots of celebrations and flowing wine anytime soon at his Nasik and Dindori estate vineyards and a new home at

Goa. A believer in Buddhist philosophy, the happiest moment of the day for him is when he is running barefoot on the beach sand.

A final word from him?

Rajeev Samant is an ardent fan of western classical and rock music and may perhaps like to hum a line from one of his favourite songs by the Beatles, “Tomorrow Never Knows”: ‘Listen to the colour of your dreams...’



THE CHENNAI

SUPER KING

KRISHNAMACHARI SRIKKANTH

*Legendary cricketer & Chairman of the
National Selection Committee*

Krishnamachari ‘Kris’ Srikkanth has had a fantastic fortune with cricket. Within two years of making his Test and One Day debut in the year 1981, Kris achieved every cricketer’s ultimate dream—to be part of a World Cup winning team and make an unforgettable contribution towards

the team's victory. The year 1983 was a glorious year for Indian cricket when under Kapil Dev's exemplary captaincy India wrested the World Cup from the invincible West Indies at Lord's in London. As a top scorer in this momentous match, Kris's name has gone down in history as one of the heroes of 1983.

It took India twenty-eight long years to accomplish the same feat again. The whole country went into an ecstatic frenzy when in April 2011, Mahendra Singh Dhoni's devils lifted the trophy by winning the pulsating final against the Sri Lankans at Wankhede Stadium in Mumbai. India

dethroned Australia, four time winners of the World Cup, and also became the first nation to win the World Cup on its home soil. Kris played an important role in this remarkable win too, albeit as the Chief Selector and Chairman of the National Selection Committee.

Kris's entire life and career has revolved around cricket, something which he had never really planned. As a player, commentator, broadcaster, producer, anchor, coach, businessman, brand ambassador and chief selector, he has done everything possible that can be associated with cricket.

‘I played cricket for fun. Forget

India, I had never dreamt that I would even play for Tamil Nadu,' says Kris while narrating his story to me. He was studying to be an engineer when cricket just happened "by the way" for him.

Born and brought up in Chennai, Kris is the eldest of the three siblings and has a younger sister and a younger brother named K Srinath. Kris's sister, Srekala Bharath is a renowned Bharatanatyam dancer, a star in her own right. His father, himself an Electrical engineer from the reputed College of Engineering, Guindy in Chennai (the oldest engineering institute in India) ran a successful

business in electrical switchgears. He desired that Kris should also pursue Electrical engineering and after acquiring the degree should join him in the business.

As a student of Vidya Mandir at Mylapore in Chennai, the school which has amongst others the Davis cup tennis player Ramesh Krishnan and acclaimed film director Mani Ratnam as its notable alumni, Kris showed enormous promise as a sportsperson without letting his involvement in sports affect his studies. 'I had a natural inclination towards sports and enormous passion for cricket,' states Kris. He participated in

several other sports too like basketball, volleyball, tennis, etc. and excelled as a tennis player while at school.

Cricket has been his passion for as far back as he can remember, since class two or so. He remembers playing cricket more for fun with friends in the neighbourhood, on the road, in the garden, at home, in the living room and also breaking window panes in the process and getting pulled up for the damage caused. His father, however never discouraged him and let him have all the freedom to indulge in extracurricular activities as long as he performed well in studies. Therefore, even though he

participated in Tamil Nadu inter-school cricket tournaments, he did not intend taking it up seriously as studies always remained the basic focus.

In the mid-Seventies, schools in Tamil Nadu were only till class eleven after which one either joined professional courses or pre-university colleges. To get into engineering, a score upwards of ninety percent used to be the requirement and Kris honourably secured admission in Electrical engineering at the College of Engineering, Guindy and by doing so fulfilled his father's expectations.

‘There wasn't much money in cricket those days. Hence in college

too, cricket remained more of a passion for me. We couldn't possibly look at it as a serious career option then,' reasons Kris. He however was like any other young cricket enthusiast who had great admiration for ace Indian cricketers of the Seventies like Gundappa Vishwanath, Srinivas Venkataraghavan, etc., and for West Indian legends like Vivian Richards. Little did Kris imagine then that a few years down the line, he would soon be part of the team that would dethrone the mighty West Indians from the invincible stature they commanded in the Seventies and early Eighties.

When Srikkanth was in third year of engineering, he was selected as Captain for the India Under 19 team which was to go to Pakistan. He was in fact the first captain of the Under 19 team. This was the moment when he realized that he had the potential to go up the ladder and represent his state and country. The tournament in Pakistan was a phenomenal learning experience for him. This was the first time Kris played against players like Rameez Raja, Salim Malik, etc., who would go on to become formidable international players in the later years. Others with him in the Under 19 India team who went to Pakistan and

made it to the Indian national team later were Kiran More, Chandrakant Pandit, Gopal Sharma, etc.

In the fourth year of engineering, Kris played his debut Ranji Trophy match and represented the South zone. In those days, every zone played against the team visiting India at that particular time. As part of the South zone team, Kris was selected to play against the visiting Pakistani team at Hyderabad. The Pakistani squad was led by Asif Iqbal and comprised star players like Javed Miandad, Abdul Qadir, and Imran Khan. Kris notched up a prolific score against Imran Khan's fearsome bowling attack. In

one of the matches, India was all out for 153 and Kris alone scored 102 of that from less than 80 balls.

The same year he played the Deodhar Trophy inter-zonal tournament. Kris was at the top of his game once again and had a superb season. He scored two centuries and two 50s in four innings and in one of the innings notched up a score of 143 in 90 balls. This set him at a different level. The selectors started looking at him as an unorthodox, attacking opening batsman from Chennai. Talks about his inclusion in the national team started gaining strength.

When he came to the final year of

engineering, he almost played for India, just almost. He was in the reckoning to play for the upcoming India tour of Australia when around the same time he also got selected for the Rest of India team of Irani Cup (which is played between winners of the Ranji Trophy and the Rest of India Team) that was taking place before the tour. However, he did not score well in the Irani Cup and as a result, got dropped from being considered for Team India. 'It was a blessing in disguise as otherwise I would not have completed my fifth year of engineering. So whatever happened was for the good,' says Kris

appreciating in hindsight what was ordained for him.

How did he manage to play so much cricket along with engineering, I ask.

‘I used to ensure that one month before the semester exams, held in April and November respectively, I only studied. Whenever I missed classes, I would make up for those by working over the holidays. So, while I played all the Ranji Trophy, Irani Cup and Deodhar Trophy matches, I did not play a single Duleep Trophy (a domestic inter-zonal first-class cricket competition) match as these matches were always closer to the

semester exams,' reveals Kris.

In today's times, looking at the way cricket is played with back to back packed schedules divided between Test, ODI and T20 formats, it would perhaps not be possible for any of the new and upcoming players to acquire a professional degree alongside cricket, I state.

Kris does not agree with me on this. He firmly believes that, 'It's all related to what a person wants. It depends entirely on one's thought process, time management and will power. You have to make a good judgement of yourself, have self belief, positive approach and you need to be

passionate about what you do. I had the belief that I could do both together. What you believe in your mind is important at the end of the day. I was as much focused on studies as I was passionate about cricket. It is focused work which can make it possible even today for players to get a good education along with playing top class cricket,' he avers.

In April 1981, Kris completed his engineering. Subsequently he had a very good Ranji Trophy season and was selected for India Under 22 team which he captained against England. In one of the matches, he smashed a whopping 87 off 78 balls regaining his

top form. The same year in December he made his One Day International debut against England in Ahmedabad followed two days later by his Test debut against England at Mumbai partnering with Sunil Gavaskar as the opening batsman. He quickly established his reputation as an unorthodox batsman, quite like Virender Sehwag of present times, who loved to smash and slash the bowlers all around the field with his power hitting. Just as a fiery Sehwag got support from extraordinary copy book style batsmen like Sachin Tendulkar, Rahul Dravid and V V S Lakshman, Kris had Gavaskar, Dilip

Vengsarkar and Mohinder Amarnath providing the bulwark for him to indulge in his natural game which was playing aggressive attacking strokes. With his ability and talent, Kris earned an integral place in the team making the transition from engineering to the world of cricket quite smooth and seamless.

At the time, many corporate houses in South India used to sponsor cricketers. One such corporate house, the TVS group signed up Kris and he played for them for nearly twenty years. When he was not playing, he would go to some of their factories and dabble a bit into the engineering

aspects of the business. This however lasted only for a brief period as very soon a busy and steady cricketing career did not provide him many such occasions.

Recalling about this period when his life took a turn towards cricket, Kris says, 'Though I did not initially have any dreams related to cricket, the fact is that every year your desires keep changing. When you play for India, then you want to make a name for yourself and for the country. So after my debut in the early 80s, cricket inevitably and inadvertently became the centrestage of my life. A sort of a roller coaster ride began for me that

lasted the entire decade, the pinnacle of this journey being our World Cup victory over West Indies in 1983 at the Lord's in London.'

And what a dramatic victory it was! India, considered as an underdog then, had reached the World Cup finals for the first time. Before 1983, India had won only one match in World Cup, against another minnow, East Africa. So, at this time, no one including the team members themselves, had any hopes of going beyond the group stage. In fact many players in the squad, including Kris had booked flight tickets for United States as the plan was to watch the semi-finals and

finals and then fly to the US for a holiday.

The skipper, Kapil Dev however had different plans. He motivated the team members by reminding them that if they could beat West Indies as recently as 29 March 1983 at Guyana, they could do it again in their first group match against them at Old Trafford on 9 June 1983. Kapil's inspirational words worked magic and they won the match at Old Trafford. There was no looking back from here.

Kapil Dev led by example in the match played on 18 June 1983 at Turnbridge Wells against Zimbabwe. He played the skipper's knock in this

match, scoring an unbeaten 175 under the circumstances when India was tottering at 17 for 5. This was a match that India had to win to enter the semi-finals and Kapil ensured that it was not squandered away. When the team reached the finals, at the pre-match meeting infusing selfconfidence in the team, Kapil reiterated that it was possible to beat West Indies and the team should face them with this resolute spirit.

Remembering the historic day when Kris opened the batting with Sunil Gavaskar on 25 June 1983, he says, 'The West Indians seemed intimidating. A look at their batting

line-up and the fearsome four fast bowlers—Marshall, Garner, Roberts and Holding, will scare the best of the teams even today. It was Kapil Dev's inspirational captaincy that made us take on the mighty opposition head on. After a quick fall of Gavaskar's wicket, Mohinder Amarnath was my steady partner on the field that day. He encouraged me to play my natural game and I followed his counsel.'

Kris ended up as the top scorer with 38 off 57 balls that included a six. However, with the entire Indian team wrapping up at a meager 183 runs, the situation looked bleak for India. When West Indies opened their

innings with 50 for 1 and Viv Richards looked menacing and ready to take his attacking game further, the Caribbeans began the celebrations in anticipation of a certain win. India's defeat seemed not only inevitable but imminent too. Many in India, who were watching the match, switched off their television sets and went off to enjoy their Saturday in some other way rather than watch India face defeat. But it was a day when victory was ordained for those who firmly *believed*. Madan Lal and Mohinder Amarnath rose to the occasion and took three wickets each to dismiss a bewildered West Indies for 140. Kapil

Dev's outstanding catch of Viv Richards off Madan Lal's ball that day, the point from where India seemed back in the game leading to its miraculous win is now part of Indian cricketing folklore—remembered, repeated and celebrated many times over with much nostalgia.

Showering praise and admiration on the visionary and tenacious skipper, Kris proclaims 'There will never be another Kapil in this country and for that matter in the world.'

The year 1983 was special in Srikanth's life for a very personal reason too. In March 1983, three months before the World Cup, Kris

married Vidya who had just appeared for her class twelve examinations. Srikkanth had met Vidya through common family friends and fell in love with this charming Tamil girl settled in Delhi and it was not long before they got married. A couple of months down the line, Vidya accompanied Kris to England for the World Cup. She witnessed every minute of the historic match at the Lord's, even though some of the players' wives had left the stadium when Vivian Richards had begun thrashing the Indian bowlers. After Viv was dismissed and India steadily started marching towards the

unexpected victory, those who had left the stadium were not allowed to come back in! Vidya and Kris's dream journey is as old as India's proud moment in cricket, both cruising together through its highs and lows.

In March 1984, their first son Adithya was born. Kris was away on a tour and says that the way communication system was in those days, he got the news only after three days of Adithya's birth. On his first birthday also, Kris was away. 'So, as a cricketer, there are many such key moments of life that you miss out. There are pressures of performing well, the tension and expectations a

cricketer has to manage. Stress, however is a part and parcel of life and the best way to deal with it is to go through it rather than circumvent it. The family stands by you, enjoys with you in good times and supports you when you are going through a rough patch,' comments Kris on the pivotal role the family plays in a cricketer's life.

The year 1985 was another memorable year for Kris. This was the year when India won the Benson & Hedges World Championship of Cricket by defeating Pakistan in the finals at Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG) and cemented its newly

acquired status in the ODIs. Kris played an important role in the win, hitting tough bowlers like Imran Khan all over the place and enthralling the spectators at MCG. Kris and Ravi Shastri put up a century opening stand and placed India on a strong footing to win the match. Both of them were rewarded at the end of the match, Kris winning the Man of the Match award and Ravi Shastri bagging the Man of the Series award, or the Champion of Champions as the award was known. Ravi Shastri's award also included an Audi 100 car. All those in India who watched this grand finale on their television sets that day still have vivid

memories of the victory lap or “drive” the team had taken around the MCG with the entire jubilant team sitting either inside or atop the car.

After returning from Melbourne, Kris lost his form for some time and was dropped from the team. He later fought his way back into the team and played in the Reliance World Cup in 1987 which was hosted by India. The expectations were high from the team as they were the defenders of the title. In the first match of the tournament that India played against Australia, Kris (70 from 83 balls, 7 fours) and Navjot Singh Sidhu (73 from 79 balls, 4 fours, 5 sixes) put up a good score, but the

team lost by one run. In the match against New Zealand that was to decide the group stage winner, Kris played an important role scoring 75 from 58 balls which included 9 fours and 3 sixes. India reached the semi-finals but sadly lost to England.

Playing against New Zealand in the first ODI at Vishakapatnam in 1988 during the New Zealand ODI series, Srikanth surprised everyone with his abilities in the bowling department too. He picked up five wickets conceding a meagre 27 runs and later opened the innings with an explosive score of 70 runs off 87 balls. As the key player leading India to victory, he

bagged the Man of the Match award. Kris also became the first Indian player to take five wickets in an ODI. Interestingly, he was the seventh bowler tried by captain Dilip Vengsarkar to break the second wicket partnership between Andrew Jones and Ken Rutherford. Kris achieved the skipper's objective and much more.

In 1989, he was made captain of the Indian team and was handed over the baton by Dilip Vengsarkar. Kapil Dev, Mohammad Azharuddin, Vengsarkar, Ravi Shastri, Sachin Tendulkar, Anil Kumble, Sourav Ganguly, etc., went on to play under his captaincy. On

their tour to Pakistan, with Kris as captain, the Indian team managed to draw all the four Tests of the series against Pakistan. This was the first time that India did not lose a series in Pakistan which was naturally hailed as a great achievement for India and its skipper. The series is also remembered for marking Sachin Tendulkar's international Test debut. All of sixteen years old at the time, he made his Test debut in Karachi on 15 November 1989 as part of the squad, standing firm against the pace attack of fierce bowlers like Imran Khan, Wasim Akram and Waqar Younis (who also made his debut in this series) and

winning kudos for his grit as he insisted on playing despite being hit by Waqar Younis's bouncer and bleeding from the nose.

The trip to Pakistan was also mired in controversy over issues related to players' compensation. There were differences of opinion between senior players and the administrators. Given the situation, on returning from Pakistan even as Kris was preparing to go to New Zealand in a week's time, came the news of him being dropped, not just from the captaincy but also from the team with Mohammad Azharuddin being anointed as the next captain. This was the beginning of the

end of Kris's cricketing career. He retired from international cricket in 1992 after playing in the World Cup at Australia that was won by Pakistan.

Since retirement till date, Srikanth has worn multiple hats. He worked with his father in the switchgear industry and also got into textile and leather exports; been an expert commentator for several leading sports and news channels; and also produced and anchored cricket related serials and shows in Tamil for south Indian channels. In 1997, he was appointed the India A team coach and later also for the Indian Under 19 team, the position he retained till 1999.

Harbhajan Singh, Mohammed Kaif and several other cricketers who went on to do very well in later years made their debut in the India Under 19 team when Kris was the coach and benefitted from his brilliant coaching which focused singularly on a positive mind set.

In 1999, Kris set up and developed a dotcom business which he sold in 2001. Kris's elder son Adithya who played cricket for Tamil Nadu for some time and later quit the game to pursue management abroad returned in 2006. On his return, Kris once again thought of doing something innovative and together with him set

up a business in gaming and value added mobile services. They have also launched e-learning businesses called [Careerstrokes.com](#) and [Edustrokes.com](#). As the names suggest Careerstrokes deals with career and personality development and Edustrokes is into teaching Physics and Maths to students. The medium for both these e-learning initiatives however is cricket. Kris is also into motivational speaking and has conducted several workshops for MNCs and Indian conglomerates.

While Adithya's expertise lies in creating content for their online and mobile businesses, Kris younger son,

Aniruddha is keenly pursuing his career as a professional cricketer—he plays for Tamil Nadu and is a part of the IPL team, Chennai Super Kings.

An ardent lover of nature, Kris has chosen to live on the outskirts of Chennai at Neelangarai beach. At this stage of life he thinks that God has been very kind to him and has bestowed him with umpteen blessings. He wants to now enjoy the success of his children and gradually move deeper into spirituality.

His deep faith in the supreme power and devotion to religion is something that he has imbibed from his parents. He goes to the temple

often, believes in following certain customs and rituals, has read many religious scriptures like the Bhagavad Gita, *Narayaniyam*, *Vishnu Bhagavatam*, *Bhagavad Purana*, etc., and knows most shlokas by heart. He prays for one hour every day and also believes in numerology. As a result, he added an extra K to his name so that it added up to nine letters; in numerology nine being associated with heaven and strength.

He believes that success is a journey. 'Human desires keep changing with time. Success means a lot to all of us. Who doesn't want to have name, fame and money? But one should

have a balance in life. The family and friends help you achieve that. Also success is but a passing phase of life. One day people will forget you. Nobody will remember you forever. You should know your limitations also,' he shares his philosophical thoughts.

I ask him if he follows a strict fitness regimen?

Kris claims that he does not. He confesses that he hated exercising and actually never exercised throughout his life.

His best times are those that are spent in the company of his close friends—who sat in the same class as

him during his school days and then joined him in the same class in college too. One of those friends gave him his popular name Cheeka when they were together in class two and that has become quite popular even with TV anchors who often call him by that name.

It's a Saturday in April when we are talking. The IPL match between Chennai Super Kings and Deccan Chargers is about to commence and a lot of goodies are being cooked and laid out for friends to munch over the match. Cheeka gets a shout out from his friends and he has to finally leave the conversation and join them for

another evening of fun and laughter—
something so dear to his heart that no
other joy compares with it.



PURSUING

THE QUEST FOR A JUST WORLD

INGRID SRINATH

*ex-Secretary General, CIVICUS—World
Alliance for Citizen Participation*

On this pleasantly chilly Saturday afternoon in mid-January, as I drive towards the J W Marriott hotel in Juhu, where I am scheduled to meet Ingrid Srinath[★], I feel happy that she has been able to make time for the

meeting during the few days of her vacation in Mumbai before getting back to work in Johannesburg.

A graduate from IIM Calcutta, Ingrid pursued a successful career in the private sector in advertising for more than a decade before giving it all up. Taking a ninety percent cut in compensation, she switched to the non-profit sector by signing up with Child Rights and You (CRY) as head of its western region in 1998. She became CEO in 2004 and after ten years with CRY moved to CIVICUS in 2008 as Secretary General based out of Johannesburg, in South Africa.

Waiting in the lobby, I see Ingrid

arriving into the hotel. Looking svelte in a peach coloured top and dark trousers, she walks towards me. We exchange greetings and move to a comfortable corner in the patisserie which is a bright and lively spot of the hotel at lobby level, just apt for a long conversation over coffee and snacks.

Ingrid is an out and out South Mumbai born and bred person, totally urban at heart, in love with her home city Mumbai as well as other multi-ethnic cities like Istanbul, Berlin, Montreal, and Johannesburg. Growing up in Mumbai with a younger brother, exactly one year, one month and one day younger to her, and a

sister younger by almost thirteen years, it was her parents who had the most influence in shaping her personality. Ingrid has huge admiration for her mother who despite having to quit her studies after high school, managed to carve out a successful career through sheer hard work, spending a major part of her working life with Hindustan Unilever. Ingrid's father was an upright journalist who always found the time to help people in need. The family as well as the school (Convent of Jesus and Mary, Fort) environment laid emphasis on good deeds through community work and concepts of justice and fair play.

In the pre-liberalization era of the early Eighties, when Ingrid pursued a B.A. in Economics from Mumbai's Elphinstone College, and later while studying management at IIM Calcutta, Marxist thinking was still quite dominant on campus and in a subconscious way exerted significant influence on her.

When the placement season at IIM Calcutta got underway in 1986, it was Ajay Shrikhande of Lintas who convinced Ingrid that her key strengths were effective communication and an ability to synthesize information, which made advertising an ideal career for her.

Thus started her seven-year-long stint with Lintas in the days when Alyque Padamsee was heading the agency. Ingrid had not imagined that the father of her childhood classmate, Raell Padamsee, would be her first super boss!

Meanwhile her personal life was looking up as well. Ingrid's intelligence and restlessness matched well with her batchmate, IIT Madras alumnus, Srinath Narasimhan's brilliance and calm temperament and they got married two years after graduating. Srinath joined the Tata Group through the Tata Administrative Services from campus

and has continued to work with the group in different roles in their IT and Telecommunications businesses, currently holding the position of MD and CEO, Tata Teleservices.

The twelve years' experience in the advertising industry—seven with Lintas and then with Trikaya Grey Worldwide were full of learning and challenges for Ingrid. Handling big brands like Unilever, Cadbury, Bank of America, a range of product and service categories and diverse people gave her tremendous exposure to the key principles of communication. More than advertising, it was market research and strategy that always

appealed to her intellectual bent of mind. She remembers her stint with Pathfinders, the market research agency of Lintas, as the most exciting part of her life then and acknowledges that it was her good fortune to work with some truly stellar people in advertising like Ravi Gupta, Alok Nanda, Vikas Gaitonde, Kiran Khalap, Christopher d'Rozario, etc. With Bank of America setting up its NRI business at the time, Cadbury diversifying its products and the Oberoi group launching new restaurants and properties, she had the opportunity to work with a very interesting set of clients as well.

At Trikaya, working with Mauritius Tourism was an exciting phase while developing the Arrow brand from scratch and implementing the brand architecture to the minutest details the most fulfilling experience.

Her key learning during her tenure in advertising was that the secret of being successful in client engagement lies in building a relationship based on fair exchange of value rather than positioning oneself as just a service provider to make the client happy. True value, feels Ingrid, comes by strategically positioning your pitch, why it's right and how the partnership can help the client's business.

So, the overall stint with advertising industry was great for her on several counts. She says, ‘The people were fantastic, it was a great industry for women to be in. Being a woman was rather an advantage as the bulk of advertising in that period was targeted at women. Being blessed with good colleagues and bosses was the icing on the cake.’

When everything seemed to be going so well, what was it that propelled her to switch to an assignment with the social sector with a huge salary cut, I put the key question of the day to her.

She shares, ‘I had been thinking for

some time about what lay ahead for me in the industry. Becoming CEO was the ultimate goal possible but that proposition did not excite me. As CEO, the financials and running of the organization predominate, rather than brand strategy and creative parts of the job, a prospect that did not give me joy. Very often, during that period, work felt like sleepwalking. There wasn't anything exciting to look forward to barring a periodic new designation, better car or a bigger budget and team. Utterly bored, I went on for some eighteen months in this auto-pilot phase while constantly wondering what I could do that

would fill the void. Switching to the client side in marketing or joining a market research or consulting firm would only postpone the problem, I felt, and soon I would again be confronted with the futility and purposelessness of working on something that was essentially so ephemeral and transient. Working in the advertising industry literally felt as though even your best work was like writing on sand which the next wave would simply obliterate.

‘An added factor that possibly contributed to the switch was the fact that we don’t have children. It is my hypothesis that this compounds the

need to leave a more permanent mark or legacy through one's work. I needed to find an answer to this question to get out of the depths of frustration I was feeling at the time. My husband helped me analyze what I wanted. It's quite funny that it took me ten years of being married to him to have the psychological comfort that I could give up the need for financial independence that had guided so many choices during my student days including pursuing Economics and Management. If that had not been the case, I would have probably opted for English and Political Science,' she quips.

So, when CRY advertised for the position of Regional Director, West, around this time, Ingrid applied for it as she knew some people who worked there and through them had an idea that it was the sort of place which would be conducive for her to work. Also, amongst Indian NGOs, CRY most certainly understood the value of brand and communication very well. She got on board with CRY with a whole new and different world lying ahead of her.

From the glitzy world of advertising, consumerism and materialism, what was the initial experience of being a part of the social

sector, I ask.

‘As far as the physical working conditions are concerned, it was hard and took some adjusting and I have to confess that I never really fully adjusted to this part. Offices without air-conditioning, bad toilets and inadequate infrastructure made work more arduous than necessary. The work involved travelling to remote parts of the country. Sharing a room with a few people was something that took some time getting used to. My friends and colleagues from the advertising world who knew me as a serious professional were skeptical whether I would fit in and last in this

assignment. They would often remark, “When are you coming back to real work?” They soon figured out that I was resolute in my decision and there to stay for the long haul. I suspect my sheer obstinacy to prove I could do this and not let anything deter me played its part too.

‘The professional interactions however were not very different from the corporate world. One was still meeting CEOs and senior marketing professionals from some of the largest Indian companies, though with a different perspective. One still interacted with the PR and market research agencies, CAs, audit firms,

lawyers, etc. In addition, there was a lot of interaction with senior government officials to influence policy or to lobby for tax exemptions, etc.

‘A significant difference between the private and social sector, I realized, was in the approach to work. The private sector says to many of us “Bring your brain to office and leave the rest of yourself at home.” In the non-profit sector, it’s exactly the opposite. However brilliant and strategic a plan you may present, you can’t make headway until you are trusted as a human being. You have to bring your whole self to work,

demonstrate commitment and be evaluated for your ethics and values as much as your IQ or expertise.

‘On a personal level, the difference for which I can vouch is that each day that I have worked in the social sector, I have learned more than I did in my entire years in the private sector. As an individual, it has helped me become a more patient, healthier and wholesome person apart from giving me the opportunity to do amazing things and meet the most amazing people.’

Like? I prompt her to tell me more about her interactions with the people at grassroots level.

Just the thought of them gets Ingrid animated and she remarks, ‘There are incredible people in every district in our country who are doing things that are simply mind boggling whether it is for the cause of women, children, Dalits, minorities, unorganized labourers, tribal communities, the environment etc. In every single district, there are people working against all odds whose heroism, vision and leadership leaves you awestruck even though they are relatively unknown people. So whether its Montu in Manipur who is an insurgentturned- photographer and now an NGO activist, or Eknath Bhau

in Marathwada who is a Dalit activist, or Paromita in Kolkata who runs an NGO for children of sex workers or Sanjay in Jharkhand who spearheads a large alliance of tribal groups across Chattisgarh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Orissa or people working in refugee camps in Jammu and Kashmir or even the kids themselves who show tremendous courage and valour in lifting themselves out from situations many of us would see as hopeless—wherever you look there are amazing things people are accomplishing on the ground. If there is a lot to be depressed about in India after two decades of record GDP growth, the

success stories such people are creating are a source of hope and positivity for the future.'

From heading the western region, Ingrid moved into the role of Director, resource mobilization and finally became CEO in 2004. Over her tenure of ten years with CRY she acquired comprehensive experience in fundraising, grant making, institution building, alliance building and, most importantly, working towards building a more just world. The key accomplishments at CRY that she is proudest of are putting a robust, self-sustaining revenue generating system in place and leading the transition of

the organization from its relief-based approach to a rights-based approach, from Child Relief and You to Child Rights and You.

Putting an effective revenue generating mechanism in place entailed a whole mix of strategies ranging from brand licensing tie ups, with Archies for greeting cards, and Citibank and Deutsche Bank for credit cards, fundraising initiatives with individual donors (who have been and remain the primary source of revenue for CRY) through direct mail, online and face-to-face interactions, together with some institutional fundraising from foundations and corporations.

The whole effort was geared towards building diversified channels to insulate the organization from the risks of business cycles. A large part of these activities was outsourced to further ensure that the system continued to function smoothly even when CRY was under-staffed as NGOs perennially are.

In 2006, CRY formally changed its name from Child Relief and You to Child Rights and You. CRY's experience since its foundation in 1979 had shown that the problems which kept children out of classrooms were several and inter-related. Unless food, sanitation, livelihoods, as well as social

barriers like caste and gender, were tackled, no sustainable change could be brought about. There was also a realization that to improve the lot of a staggering 220 million underprivileged children in India on any significant scale, things had to change at the policy level. Although the framework for child rights had existed in India since it ratified the UN Convention for Child Rights in 1992, CRY's transition from Relief to Rights was imperative and involved a comprehensive overhaul. It entailed not only changing the pitch to donors, but also the kind of programmes that would be funded at grassroots level

and staff orientation. Across these groups it was necessary to stop seeing the child as “*bechara bachha*”, an object of charity, but rather as a citizen with rights, claims and entitlements. Ingrid and her team steered this entire exercise successfully through many rounds of discussions as well as experimentation with processes.

As luck would have it, after having spent about ten fruitful years with CRY, she was presented with the opportunity to do something different and hugely exciting during a chance meeting with one of the Board members of CIVICUS while attending a conference in Brooklyn,

New York. They were looking for a Secretary General for CIVICUS. Ingrid had been thinking for a while of making way in CRY for younger people to take over and allowing infusion of fresh ideas in the organization. So, when she got the offer from CIVICUS, there was no reason for her not to consider it. CIVICUS is a unique organization in the world, most vibrant in the context of current times and working with it would also have meant living in South Africa which Ingrid finds one of the most fascinating countries in the world for its landscape, people, climate, food, history, culture and politics. She

readily accepted the offer. Thus began her journey with CIVICUS in 2008, taking office about six weeks before the financial crisis imploded, thus adding an additional constraint to the other challenges her new job entailed.

So, I assume that since the last four years you and Srinath are operating out of different continents. How does your relationship pan out in such a scenario? I ask.

‘In the 23 years we’ve been married, both of us have always travelled a lot. Rarely, if ever, have we spent more than 6-7 days together consecutively in a month. It has definitely got worse since I moved to South Africa. We try

to meet on an average at least once a month. It works for us. It even has some advantages—you never get bored of each other, are always considerate, never take each other for granted and truly treasure the time you get to spend together.’

Then there is always the internet and the phone, I butt in.

And he does work for a telecom company, she quips and laughs.

Tell me more about CIVICUS.

‘CIVICUS is an alliance of civil society organizations from around the world. We have members in 110 countries ranging from tiny grassroots NGOs to large international

organizations like Amnesty, Greenpeace, Oxfam etc. A critical part of our membership is national NGO associations like VANI in India. I like to use the analogy that CIVICUS plays the role of an industry association for civil society just as the International Chamber of Commerce or the Confederation of Indian Industries does for the corporate sector. Like any industry confederation, CIVICUS works to promote and protect its sector's interests and tries to ensure that it has enabling conditions to operate in. The advantage with CIVICUS is that there isn't another organization like it in the world. One

of our key roles is to ensure that civil society is protected which we can't take for granted in too many countries in the world. The situation is particularly bad in countries like Ethiopia, Swaziland, Belarus, Kazakhstan, China and till recently in Myanmar. In such countries, we try and get laws passed to protect the very existence of civil society. Where enabling laws exist, we work towards expanding civil society's role in influencing policy and ensuring that civil society groups are included in decision making on planning and framing new laws and policies and in representing the country's point of

view in international fora. A large part of what we do is to make linkages between the national and the global, ensuring that there are civil society voices at all the UN bodies whether it is the Human Rights Council or climate negotiations or general assembly, etc. Similarly, we ensure that the civil society has access and influence at the World Bank, IMF, the World Economic Forum and other global institutions. Sharing best practices among our members, especially in the realm of accountability, is another key focus area for CIVICUS.'

Ingrid has travelled to about forty-

four countries in the last three years as part of her work with CIVICUS. In her current role, besides interacting with many amazing activists across the world, she also regularly meets political, economic, business, spiritual and thought leaders of the stature of Archbishop Desmond Tutu (anti-apartheid activist), Mary Robinson (first female President of Ireland and retired United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights), Robert Zoellick (ex-President, World Bank), Ban Ki-Moon (Secretary General, United Nations), Christine Lagarde (Managing Director, International Monetary Fund), and

several others across sectors, industries and geographies. Much more than the celebrity interactions, it's the ordinary people and activists who still continue to amaze her the most.

What's most fascinating is that her scope of work in her current position is truly eclectic. It is as diverse as going from a conversation about accountability in Oxford, to New York for a seminar on NGO branding, on to talking to young Egyptians who are part of the revolution there, then to Johannesburg to discuss next year's budgets before going on to Cambodia to meet its Prime Minister, Hun Sen to lobby for

the prevention of new laws that would constrain civil society freedoms. Throughout these travels, eating at local restaurants and meeting ordinary people ranging from government officials to marginalized communities, ensures that she gets an insider's view, a completely different perspective from that of a business traveler or tourist.

With Facebook, Google, You Tube etc, the world seems more like a global village now than ever before in human history. What's your view of the future socio-political world trends and your expectations from your current role?

‘It is interesting that you bring up the reference to Facebook,’ she comments. ‘Today, Facebook is throwing up new models of governance. It’s fascinating to me that users, who don’t pay a cent or own a single share, believe they can and should have a say in determining Facebook policies and that they regularly exercise this power without formal structures or channels.’

‘The possibilities for the future are daunting and amazing in equal measure. This is a phenomenal time and age to live in. It’s increasingly obvious, especially since the financial crisis, that there are a large numbers of

angry people around the world who feel that they have been unjustly treated. Whether it's an auto worker in Michigan or a young Spaniard who is unemployed or an Indonesian farmer displaced by a biofuel plantation or a displaced tribal in India—for the first time all of these groups of indigenous, middle class, unemployed, unorganized workers and young people on every continent realize that the root cause of their many problems is the same and that it's a problem of governance, not just of particular policies. There is really a fundamental breakdown in democratic governance. This moment

in history offers people across the world an incredible opportunity to build a coalition on a scale that can have some real political clout globally and not just in some isolated countries. Thanks to technology, this critical mass of people can make inter-connections between issues and use networks, online and offline, to work in solidarity. This year there is a big conference called Rio+20, which commemorates the 20th anniversary of the original United Nations conference that first talked about sustainable development. This is a unique conference where all the pieces will come together whether

they are to do with environment, human rights, business, industry, children, youth, farmers, NGOs, scientific and technological communities, women, workers and trade unions. CIVICUS is one of the organizing partners that is working with the UN on this conference and we look at it as a make or break moment for the world to secure renewed political commitment for sustainable development as we race against time to prevent economic, social and ecological meltdown.

‘What we are hoping for is that young and middle class people the world over, who have over the last

twenty years or so moved away from politics, will come back and start caring about and engaging with politics. If it's only this and nothing else we achieve, it will still be worth all the effort. In some ways, peer pressure is forcing people to reconsider their priorities. The trends show that everyone wants their own Tahrir Square. There are some welcome signs. China has opened up the NGO sector a little recently, Myanmar is moving towards democracy, Cuba too is opening up and there are interesting developments likely in Russia where citizens have decided that they have had enough.

Simultaneously, however, democratic freedoms are coming under increasing threat in developed and emerging economies. With many parts of the world still far removed from experiencing democracy and citizen participation, we in India should realize how fortunate we are to have a stable democracy and do everything we can to protect and reinforce our democratic fabric.'

Feeling enthused by envisioning a world where civil society plays a proactive role and reclaims its rightful place in governance, I imagine that Ingrid will have several busy years ahead.

For those who are interested, I ask Ingrid, if there are any specialized job boards or recruitment firms focused on the social sector? How can people volunteer with NGOs?

‘There are websites like [devnetjobsindia](#), [nonprofitjobs.org](#) and several others. Some headhunters also specialize in jobs for non-profit sector. Third Sector Partners and Talent Advisory Services are a couple of the firms that specialize in senior level nonprofit jobs in India. There are plenty of opportunities in this sector in every working discipline from Sales, Marketing and PR to Accounting, Finance and IT. The only trade off is

money but as far as career advancement and learning are concerned, the social sector offers just as many opportunities. And, of course, the people are much nicer! Also, due to the shortage of qualified talent one typically gets to handle more responsibility earlier on in one's career than one could in the for-profit sector. If you don't want to take up a full time assignment, you can always do pro bono work by serving on a non-profit board or by offering your services at a discounted rate. Even devoting 3-4 hours a month can make a big difference to an NGO. In South Africa, for instance, the association of

chartered accountants organizes volunteering for its members to sign up for pro bono work for NGOs whereby the NGOs get a good access to serious professional skills. It would be great if professional associations in India would consider doing something similar,' concludes Ingrid with this message.

If freedom, justice, equality, honour, duty, mercy and hope stir one's soul deeply and the heart desires to make a lasting impact towards making the world a better place, then social sector could very well be one's final destination. It may not be possible for everyone to commit

themselves full time like Ingrid, but it's possible for a lot of us to volunteer some part of our lives for the causes dear to our heart. The change could very well begin with each one of us.

* I met Ingrid Srinath in January 2012 while she was still with CIVICUS. She subsequently left CIVICUS at the end of her contract in May 2012 and is currently based in Mumbai.



THE KING OF COUTURE

TARUN TAHILIANI

Founder, Tarun Tahiliani Design Studio

When I get in touch with Tarun Tahiliani in the beginning of December 2011, it turns out that it is the wrong time of the year to set up a leisurely conversation with the much indemand haute couturier. The wedding season as well as putting together the autumn/winter fashion collection for the next season has him neck deep in work. Finally, we catch up on a Sunday afternoon after two months, in February.

For the son of a former Navy Chief and graduate from the Wharton

School of Business, how did a career in fashion designing come about? I begin by asking Tarun if he had ever thought of following in his illustrious father, Admiral Radhakrishna Hariram Tahiliani's footsteps, who after retiring as the Chief of Naval Staff went on to serve as the Governor of Sikkim. Did he not fancy being a proud naval officer like his father, wearing crisp white naval uniform, flying fighter jets like Sea Hawks and Sea Harriers, commanding elite naval fleets like INS Vikrant and INS Trishul, navigating choppy waters, safeguarding Indian coastline and being bestowed with decorations like the Param Vishisht

Seva Medal and Ati Vishisht Seva Medal?

At the time Tarun was born, Admiral Tahiliani was the Lieutenant Commander of the Indian Naval Air Squadron 300—then the only fighter squadron of the Indian Navy. Tarun shares that in his childhood, he suffered with a physical condition that required him to wear orthopedic shoes. So while the other children played and ran around, he was forced to just observe. He would see the sailors marching and doing the drills but knew that this would never be something that he would be able to do. He feels fortunate that his mother,

Jaswanti never let him get adversely affected by this limitation, and encouraged him instead to explore his abounding natural inclination towards soft skills.

Tarun joined Doon School, and amongst other things, if there was one thing that remained constant with him, it was his love for the fine arts. Even though his mother was the first woman engineer to have graduated from VJTI in Mumbai and had created quite a shock with her decision to pursue engineering at that time, Tarun inherited none of her passion and inclination for the sciences. Jaswanti was a model too and

possessed a high sense of aesthetics, elegance and refined taste. In some ways if that had had any influence on him, it was reflected in his fascination for drawing sketches which showed grand processions of people wearing fashionable and flowing drapes.

His talent did not go unnoticed in school and he was conferred with the Best Artist of the Year award in the final year.

Ironically, his English teacher while congratulating him had also commented, 'But where will you get in life sketching these high-fashion models?' His teacher couldn't have imagined that these were prophetic

words and in a way, he was the first one to recognize Tarun's talent and point out the field in which it could be used well, albeit skeptically. Tarun's enchantment with sketching drapes, a refined taste and an admiration for the beautiful things in life ultimately went to define him and his signature style.

Unfortunately, while he was in high school, his source of inspiration and courage, his mother Jawanti passed away. He realized that as the older of the two siblings, his sister Tina being four and a half years younger to him, besides coping with the pain of bereavement, he would have to become more self reliant and provide

solace and strength to his kid sister as well. Difficult as those years were, with the passage of time, life moved on.

Tarun wanted to go to the US for higher education and therefore joined the English Hons course at St Stephen's College, Delhi for a year to complete the required number of years for admission in the US. 'Looking back I would have ideally liked to join the National Institute of Design but back then I did not know about it. Pursuing architecture would also have been in line with my aptitude but in India one needed a background in Physics and Chemistry

for studying architecture. Therefore, by the process of elimination, English became the subject of choice for me,' explains Tarun.

After a year at Stephen's, as planned, he secured admission at the University of Pennsylvania at Philadelphia in the US. Though not particularly inclined towards business management, Tarun pursued the course to live up to his father's expectations. It's at UPenn that he met his soulmate, Sailaja, aka Sal who hailed from Hyderabad but was raised in New York. Tarun Sal have remained together ever since, subsequently becoming partners in life and in business as well.

With Sal by his side, the years in the US flew past quickly. On completion of the course, they returned to India in 1984. The year was very special for the family. In November 1984, Admiral Tahiliani assumed charge of the Indian Navy as the eleventh Chief of Naval Staff. The family celebrations continued well into the next year when Tarun and Sal tied the knot.

Upon his return, Tarun had started working in the family business of his mother's family which owned a machine tool workshop selling tools for oil-field equipments. Tarun involved himself with this business but soon realized that he did not enjoy

this kind of work and found it very tedious and boring. To give vent to his intrinsically artistic bent of mind, he did some theatre with the renowned stage personality, Pearl Padamsee and kept pulling along in the mundane business.

Meanwhile, Sal was also trying to keep herself creatively engaged. Though she had never modeled earlier, on being asked by a friend she walked for the Pierre Cardin fashion show at the Taj Mahal Palace hotel in South Mumbai. This was the first ever fashion show that Tarun had witnessed and he was completely mesmerized by the style, finesse and glamour and

wanted to do something similar.

The fashion industry in India was pretty nascent at the time. There were only a few trendy advertisements like that for Vimal saris, Liril soap and Bombay Dyeing textiles, etc. Fashion shows were a rarity and most trade fairs which threw up such opportunities once in a while were anyway held in faraway Delhi.

Sal meanwhile had thoroughly enjoyed her first assignment and continued doing more such assignments that came her way like that for Vimal saris. During one of the photo shoots, she happened to meet Rohit Khosla who was one of the and

pioneers of Indian fashion industry at the time. Rohit was also from Doon School and had recently returned from the US after training with the renowned international fashion house Versace and was trying out some pioneering fashion concepts in India. By this time, Tarun was also convinced that fashion was something that fascinated him and he wanted to get more involved. So, when Sal and Rohit had to travel to Jaipur for one of the shoots, Tarun also joined them. In the course of this journey, an innovative idea was born and was called by the Tahilianis simply as: Ensemble.

At that time India did not have high end fashion retailers. Although a lot of people had honed their fashion skills overseas and were moving back to the country, most of their exquisite work always found its way abroad rather than being sold at home. Therefore for the first time ever, Ensemble gave designers a wonderful platform to sell their work in the country through a multi-brand outlet. That's how Ensemble was started way back in 1987 at the same location where it still is today, at Apollo Bunder in South Mumbai. A part of the machine tools workshop that Tarun had been managing was converted to house the

store and both the businesses ran simultaneously for some time. It ensured that the startup cost did not become a deterrent.

Ensemble offered collections from top five designers of the time : Rohit Khosla, Anuradha Mafatlal, American fashion designer Neil Bieff, Abu Jani and Sandeep Khosla, label Maaya (started by Anita Shivdasani and Sunita Kapoor, actor Anil Kapoor's wife) and Tahiliani's own label, Ahilian. It was a celebration of Indian fashion and designers and also the discerning customer who was offered customized high fashion garments of superior quality under one roof and an

exclusive shopping experience. As expected, Ensemble was a success from the start.

Over a period of time, the machine tools business became more and more cumbersome and uncompetitive and Tarun finally shut it down. Ensemble was giving him good returns and a major part of the revenue was ploughed back into the business to make it more expansive. Tarun and Sal parallelly also made efforts to make their label Ahilian a viable business proposition.

Even as Ensemble became first of its kind and was a success story, Tarun realized that his deeper urge was not

so much to be a retailer but a designer. The school boy in him resurfaced and he wanted to give life to his sketches, vision and imagination. He felt a strong motivation to dabble in the intricacies of drapes and colours and give a structure to the creativity that lay suppressed within him. When he attempted to do that, he felt frustrated as he faced technical constraints: how to make a fall look right, how to get the correct sleeve and armhole fit, etc. He realized that he needed to educate himself and with that objective enrolled himself with the Fashion Institute of Technology, New York in 1991. With Sal and their two sons,

Anand and Jahan, Tarun spent the next couple of years in New York, leaving Tina in charge of Ensemble during this period.

In September 1994, Tarun held his first solo fashion show at hotel Dorchester in London which he called, the Rubaiyat. It got him instant recognition and was highly appreciated.

Meanwhile, Admiral Tahiliani had completed his four year tenure as Governor of Sikkim and had chosen to settle in Delhi. When Tarun and Sal returned in 1995, they too decided to base their business out of the capital. In the few years they were away from

the country, the fashion industry had taken sure and steady strides in India. In 1989, the first batch had graduated from the National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT), India's pioneering institution in fashion business education. In the next few years many of the NIFT graduates had set up standalone stores for their labels. In this changed scenario, armed with technical expertise and booming confidence, Tarun too focused full time on his own brand and signature collections. He started in a small way in a rented place in Delhi with a ready to wear collection as well as a wedding collection for men and

women.

The Fashion Design Council of India (FDCI), the national apex body of Indian fashion, was set up in 1998 and Tarun became one of its founding members. Under the aegis of FDCI, the first ever Lakme India Fashion Week (LIFW) was held in August 2000 at the Taj Palace Convention Centre in New Delhi. From amongst thirty-three designers who participated in this high profile spectacle, Tarun had the honour of being the finale designer. In 2005 and 2009, he enjoyed the same honour again.

The brand Tarun Tahiliani has gotten stronger by the day, delivering

its promise of refined elegance year after year. Be it Hollywood or Bollywood celebrities, or royalty or society's A-listers and billionaires, he has dressed them all. Beginning with an invitation by Jemima Khan (daughter of the late UK billionaire, Sir James Goldsmith) to design her wedding outfit in 1995, Tarun has been the wedding couturier of choice for several brides like Shilpa Shetty, Vanisha Mittal, Elizabeth Hurley, Natasha (Gautam Gambhir's wife), etc. Aamir Khan's outfit for the Oscar presentation ceremony in 2002 was designed by him; Lady Gaga opted for a Tarun Tahiliani sari for her maiden

gig in India at the inaugural 2011 Indian Grand Prix; Oprah Winfrey also chose to wear a Tarun Tahiliani sari on the occasion of her first visit to India in January 2012; the Duchess of Kent, Kabir Bedi, Naomi Campbell, Goldie Hawn, Deepika Padukone, Katrina Kaif, Abhishek Bachchan, etc., are regulars at the TT (Tarun Tahiliani) Studio.

In 2003 Tarun became the first Indian designer to be invited to the Milan Fashion Week which is part of the Big 4 fashion weeks held internationally, the others being Paris, London and New York. The opening of Ensemble, his debut solo show at

London and being invited to Milan remain the high points of his career so far, Tarun acknowledges.

Since then he has showcased his collections at several fashion shows globally and several awards have continued to come his way and the most prestigious of the lot have been the Moët and Chandon Fashion Tribute 2004 Award (awarded by the prominent champagne house for high fashion) for Designer of the Year for India and in 2006 the Order of the Star of Italian Solidarity (knighthood for outstanding contribution to Italy) conferred by the government of Italy.

In due course, Tarun's first flagship

store came up in Mehrauli's Ambawata Complex, followed by stores in Defence Colony and DLF Emporio which is the luxury mall in Vasant Kunj, Delhi. His wide range of designer wear is retailed worldwide, besides being sold through his flagship stores and Ensemble stores in Delhi and Mumbai. Recalls Tarun, 'Apart from when we set up the factory (in a 45,000 sq ft area) in 2008 at Mehrauli, we have not had to take on any loan for our business.'

As the business continues to grow at a healthy rate, Tarun wants to focus on consolidating it and building systems and processes whereby the

most beautiful creations emerge consistently out of his studio. Having achieved enormous satisfaction through professional success, he now wants to devote more time towards personal goals as well. 'While I am not a very religious person, of late it is spirituality about which I am beginning to think more and more. To me, spirituality is all about how you treat yourself and the rest of the world. Like most people, I too am on a perpetual quest to understand and explore myself,' says Tarun sharing his current state of mind.

His abiding interest for the arts, culture and antiquity makes visiting

two to three museums a mandatory yearly ritual for him even as he enjoys scuba diving and traveling to wild and remote places especially in unexplored Africa. 'The night clubs, restaurants and cities don't fascinate me at all anymore. There was a time when I had done enough of it. I like to paint a bit and then there isn't more time left for anything else,' he shares. He does not want to be carried away by the rat race, rather he wants to withdraw himself from the fashion world somewhat and have time to do things that are close to his heart.

So, does it mean that he does not care much for competition?

Tarun believes that competition has a healthy side to it. ‘When you are in business you have to be aware of your competitors. You cannot be like an ostrich. If you are succeeding in taking someone else’s customer away, it tells you in some way about your quality of work. At the same time you don’t have to be purely driven by competition alone. You must remain true to your style. It’s a kind of a balancing game,’ he opines.

The brand Tarun Tahiliani is associated with luxury. What’s the price point at which one can own a TT creation, I ask.

‘The simple prêt lines, a shirt or a

blouse costs as little as rupees seven to eight thousand.'

That's not really prohibitive then, I quip.

'There are pieces that have intricate detailing and their cost can go upward of rupees fifteen lakhs and more.'

What about bridal wear, what's the starting price for a TT piece?

'An off the rack bridal outfit can be bought for two-and-a-half lakhs. But one of a kind, very specialized and customized sari, lehenga or evening gown can cost as much as ten lakhs or more. However, there are beautiful things sold in the store from rupees eight thousand up.'

TT Studio soon plans to set up a large bridal store measuring approximately 10,000 sq feet to meet the growing demand from this segment.

Does he ever entertain thoughts of going public? I ask.

‘I don’t feel the need to go public. I want to keep the brand special and enjoy doing what I do,’ declares Tarun.

Today when you are successful and a leader in your chosen field, I am sure Admiral Tahiliani must be very proud of you. However, back in the late Eighties, when you were trying to dabble into a small scale, relatively

non-existent fashion industry, did he express any qualms?

‘To be fair to my father, he never had a problem with whatever I did. In fact if I had told him that I did not want to do business management, he would have been fine with it. It was my own psychological reasons which made me imagine that by pursuing management I would be meeting his expectations from me.

‘Ensemble had the blessings of all the elders as we were trying to make use of the family property and make it viable for everyone. With time, our venture has yielded handsome dividends. So, I believe that as long as

we enjoy doing what we do and do it well, no one will really have a reason to be unhappy. Also, I was aware that there was no economic necessity for me to do something I didn't want to do. That certainly helped us in going in the direction where our heart took us,' reasons Tarun.

This question is often put to Abhishek Bachchan about how he copes with the pressure that comes by having super successful parents. The same is true in your case too. Did you have to deal with such pressures?

'Well certainly, there was always pressure on us to do well. My father achieved a lot through his intelligence

and integrity. So, there was this expectation that we should also live with dignity and should value education, fairness and transparency. But more than this kind of overt pressure from parents, I would say the true drive to deliver excellence comes from within. It also comes from the kind of people you associate yourself with. There is a certain value system I want to follow. Our company has an informal board and we have people like Sanjay Labroo (Managing Director of Asahi India Glass Limited) on this board. They set high standards of excellence and those are the standards we want to live up to,' come

forth the resolute words from Tarun.

The way he has laboured hard at building his own identity, he would like both his sons also to make a successful future for themselves on their own steam. He would like them to discover where their passion lies and would not want to encumber them with his expectations from them. If they have the talent and natural urge to join in the business, they would have to work hard and prove themselves at it. Whatever they do, it is certainly the legacy of dignity and grace which they will be expected to maintain.



THE CHOSEN ONE

AMISH TRIPATHI

Bestselling author of the Shiva Trilogy

Call it divine will or pure coincidence, I met Amish Tripathi, author of the bestselling and critically acclaimed *Shiva Trilogy*, at hotel “Trident” in Mumbai and the context wasn’t lost on me! *The Immortals of Meluha*, the first book in the *Shiva Trilogy*, was Amish’s debut novel and created a huge stir in the world of publishing. The book was first self published in 2008, and later within a week of its “relaunch” in February 2010, broke into the best seller charts and sold over 275,000 copies within two years of hitting the publishing market. The second book in the Trilogy, *The Secret of the Nagas* was in high demand even before its

release in August 2011, as 80,000 copies were already preordered. This too quickly reached the top of best-seller listings, selling 95,000 copies in the first month, before going for a quick reprint and is now at a print run of 225,000 copies. The third and final book of the Trilogy, *The Oath of the Vayuputras*, is slated for release in 2013 and is eagerly awaited by Amish's huge fan base of readers.

It may sound strange but the *Shiva Trilogy*, which cuts across age and geographical boundaries and propelled people towards taking a fresh look at Hindu mythology, is written by a person who claims to have been an

atheist for a large part of his student and working life. The quest for harmony that led Amish to atheism also brought him back to faith.

Born in Mumbai, Amish alongwith his fraternal twin, Ashish, elder by a few minutes are the youngest children of V K Tripathi and Usha Tripathi. The firstborn of the Tripathis, Bhavna teaches Computer Science in Mumbai after resigning from the Tamil Nadu cadre of the Indian Administrative Service, a move to be with her husband, Himanshu Roy posted as an IPS Officer in Maharashtra. There is a brother in the middle, Anish who works with a law firm and Ashish, the

twin is an investment banker. The Tripathis are a very close knit family rooted in Hindu values with liberal religious views.

Amish's initial schooling was in Orissa, and after three years of junior school at Lawrence School in Lovedale, Ooty, he completed his middle school from the prestigious Cathedral and John Connon School in South Mumbai. He then joined St Xavier's college, Mumbai and chose to graduate in Maths mainly to avoid practicals that was mandatory with Science subjects. He also met Preeti Vyas in college who became his wife, and an abiding source of inspiration

later in life. What Preeti and their son, Neel mean to Amish, comes across beautifully in his acknowledgements through his poems at the beginning of his books.

While growing up in Mumbai, Amish and some of his friends were worst impacted when the city was torn apart by bomb blasts and mindless violence. The group of young men felt anger and frustration to see religious bigotry as the reason behind terror attacks and were repulsed by the ugly manifestation of religion in politics. They decided to “unfollow” any form of religion and at the cost of buying peace, most

happily embraced atheism. At the time, they felt they were making their own little contribution towards averting the recurrence of such tragic events.

In the final year of college, Amish and Ashish appeared for the Common Admission Test (CAT) exams; the twins knew they had another year to make a serious attempt and therefore took it lightly the first time around. Amish made it to IIM Calcutta as he had always been good in academics through school and college, and dropped his alternate plan of pursuing Chartered Accountancy. Preeti was fascinated by the retail industry which

in the mid-Nineties was at a very nascent stage in India and therefore decided to pursue it in Melbourne. The following year Ashish also went to the same university to pursue an MBA.

After his return, Amish landed his first job with Whirlpool as a Management Trainee in Pune. After a short stint of just about seven months, he shifted to Standard Chartered Bank (SCB) where he worked for three years before taking a giant leap as Head of Marketing for IDBI Principal Mutual Fund. Later, for a brief period of two years, he shifted to private banking with Development Bank of

Singapore and then rejoined IDBI Federal Life Insurance. When he finally quit, he was Head of Marketing & Product Management with IDBI and also a part of the Senior Management Committee.

Amish wrote his first two books while he was with IDBI but the genesis of the book lay way back when he was still a student. History, Philosophy and Mythology had always interested him and he remembers how in school he would always read up History books from cover to cover, even before the academic session began. Despite his passion for the subject, he didn't pursue it as a career

because he felt that the subject had limited scope and value in the job market. He however continued to read extensively on the subjects.

In 2004, while watching a TV show on the history of ancient Persians with his family, Amish discovered something interesting. So far, he had read in Indian mythology, that the gods were called devas and the demons, asuras. But he discovered that for the ancient Persians, the pantheon was the exact opposite—the gods were called ahuras and the demons were called daevas. This gave rise to an interesting debate in his family that if the ancient Indians and ancient

Persians had met, they'd probably be calling each other evil—because one person's God was the other person's Demon. So who amongst them would be Evil? The obvious answer is: neither. If neither of them is Evil, then what is Evil? Amish pondered over the answer and came to a philosophical conclusion. When he discussed this with his family members, they encouraged him to document it and advised him that instead of writing a serious book on Philosophy, he should write a thriller and weave the philosophy in.

The flow of thoughts did not stop for Amish and he felt compelled to

tell the story. Amish would punch in the story on his laptop during his daily commute to office as a full-fledged corporate career left him with little time to indulge in the luxury of writing with peace and leisure. He would use all Sundays and other holidays to write and began to completely focus his energies on the three areas that mattered the most to him—his family, career and the novel, cutting all the rest out from his life.

Whenever he faced a mental block in writing, as advised by his wife, Preeti, he would surrender himself to the will of the Lord and let the story flow and characters unfold, instead of

trying to take control of the story. Over a period of time, the more he witnessed the story as simply “coming to him”, more ardent a Shiva devotee he became, bringing him back full circle to the fold of faith. For a person who had not written even a short story so far, being able to write not one but two blockbuster novels was nothing short of a miracle.

More miracles lay in store. From utter dejection, Amish experienced heights of success in a short span of time. *The Immortals of Meluha* initially met with rejection from almost all publishers who cited various reasons like “the youth would not be

interested in this kind of book based on religion/mythology and the older people would not appreciate Shiva interpreted in a modern way". To receive rejection letters from more than twenty publishers is enough to dishearten anyone and abandon all hope for a writer, but Amish persevered and one of the reasons for that was his family who stood by him. The fact that he received very encouraging comments from adman Prahlad Kakkar, writer and journalist Sandipan Deb, Dr Devdutt Patnaik who is a prolific writer in his own right and veteran journalist and author, Anil Dharkar whom he had requested

to review the book also gave him a lot of confidence and kept his optimism alive. After some time, Sandipan Deb, author of *The IITians*, suggested to Amish that he should consider engaging Anuj Bahri as his literary agent.

Anuj proved to be a godsend for Amish. He reposed his faith in Amish and proposed that they co-publish the book; Anuj would bear the cost of printing the book and Amish in turn would take care of the entire marketing effort. *The Immortals of Meluha* was thus first published in 2008 with a print run of 5000 copies. Supported by an innovative marketing campaign

like uploading video clips on YouTube and giving away the first chapter of the book as a free digital download, within a week of hitting the market, the book became a remarkable commercial success. In 2010 Amish moved to Westland publishers and began with an impressive run of 10,000 copies which also sold out.

When the second book in the *Shiva Trilogy*, *The Secret of the Nagas*, also met with a similar success, Amish Tripathi resigned from his job.

I ask him to tell me more about the thoughts around this time which led him to take the crucial decision.

‘While I did not plan the change itself—it just happened because of the success of the books—I did plan the process of change,’ narrates Amish. ‘I am a finance guy and a very risk averse person. I come from a middle class background and don’t really have any inherited wealth. I had a family to support and I couldn’t be irresponsible. While Preeti too had been working all these years, around this time even she had taken a break to be able to spend more time with our son, Neel. The first book came out in 2010 and received a good response. I waited to see whether the second book would also be as well-

received.

‘A large part of the credit for my decision actually goes to Preeti in encouraging me and giving me the guts to resign. She said, you have discovered a purpose and you should give it your best shot. My elder brother Anish particularly, and all other family members too encouraged me. The royalties had started flowing in. The books were earning me more than my salary. Quitting the job therefore became a question of not *whether* but *when*. I thought there was not much reason to delay what I eventually wanted to do. So, I made up my mind and quit in mid-2011.

‘My boss, the CEO was quite reasonable and understood that it was personally important and logical for me to pursue writing. I gave a long notice and finished all pending projects. I was satisfied with my achievements in the corporate sector having progressed reasonably well in my career and to have become a part of the Senior Management Committee. The years I spent in banking helped me to fulfill my responsibilities towards my family and have the basic security of a house, reasonable savings etc. My colleagues threw a farewell party and presented me with a large idol of Lord Shiva. I

left the organization on a good note. So I hope I can go back to banking if my novels flop in the future,' he chuckles.

Yours and Chetan Bhagat's trajectory is quite similar— both bankers, both quit financial services to become full time authors. Did his example have a bearing on your decision?

'Chetan is a trailblazer. He proved that one can make a career out of writing. Before he came on the scene, an author could be successful by selling just 5,000 copies. You certainly can't make a living out of selling this kind of a number. But when you sell

in lakhs, it surely becomes a very viable career option and Chetan had set that example,' concedes Amish.

For someone who was used to the rigorous routine of a corporate life for fourteen years, how does it feel today to be on your own without an organizational framework to operate in and how do you ensure a disciplined working schedule and productivity in such a scenario?

Amish is prompt to answer this and says, 'In fact, by working for so long with solid professional companies, one imbibes that disciplined way of working. Discipline is all about having a routine and sticking to it. So, I still

continue to make a “to do” list. I set aside time for writing in the mornings during my writing phase. When my novels are close to release, my days are planned as per the marketing phase. I write the marketing vision document for the book myself and I drive it personally through the publisher. I am an early riser and early sleeper, and I exercise regularly.’

Elaborating on his working style as an author, he continues, ‘In office, the environment disciplines you. When you are on your own, you have to bring discipline into your environment. You have to set those expectations. If I have any meetings, I

make sure I am on time and have the same expectation from others too so that we don't waste our time. Having a disciplined life makes you productive but it doesn't take away the joy of writing. In fact you find more time to do things which you like. I am a voracious reader. I have more time to read now.

‘I was always extremely interested in History, Philosophy and Mythology. I now have the time to attend courses on these topics. I am attending one such weekly course with New Acropolis which is an international organization propagating the love of Philosophy. We are a group of like-

mindful people who like to discuss world civilizations and philosophies. My grandfather was a priest and all the other members in our family are also very religious. So I know the Hindu religion and philosophy quite well. Being in India, one gets to know a lot about Islam and Christianity too. To learn and discover the beauty, similarities and differences in Egyptian, Greek, Tibetan, Chinese and other world cultures and philosophies, which I could never do as a BSc Maths and MBA graduate, is simply a fascinating experience for me. So I would say that at the moment being on my own is a wonderful space to be

in.’

What about becoming a “house husband” in the process. Are you comfortable with that status?

‘That’s not much of an issue for me,’ says Amish, ‘as I have a super wife. I have been part of the publishing business only for the last three years whereas Preeti has been in it for many years now. She had worked with Globus and Crossword. Her last job was with Big Bazaar where she ran the books and music business for some time. After resigning, she has been running a business from home. She is into publishing children’s books. Recently,

she has taken up an office. She has contributed many marketing ideas for my book. She knew the trade and advised me well. She is responsible for a large part of my success. We are enjoying this status of being on our own. Our son, Neel too is a peaceful child. It's a pleasure to be able to spend longer hours with the family than in a regular job.'

How is the experience of directly interacting with your readers at literary festivals, our conversation continues.

'The first festival I attended was the Kovalam Literary Festival while still in my job. It was a Sunday. I went to attend my session and was back the

same day.

‘I like to interact with all those who are passionate about Lord Shiva. The younger people ask me more about Shiva’s charisma, they call him the cool God. The elderly like to have discussions on Philosophy and Mythology. It’s fun to interact with all of them.

‘It’s a very good experience to interact with and learn from other speakers too who are invited to these festivals. Amongst all, the Jaipur Literature Festival (JLT) particularly ranks up there mainly for the sheer scale it has. It was a great experience to be there. I enjoyed meeting Gulzar

Saab and hearing his poetry as well as Pavan Saab's translations of his poetry into English. Meeting Gurcharan Das, Arshia Sattar who has translated the Ramayana and M J Akbar whose book *Tinderbox* I had read last year was also immensely enjoyable.'

So, was it at Kovalam that you got to know Shashi Tharoor who praised your book and was there for the mega launch of *The Immortals of Meluha* at Delhi?

'No. I got to know Dr Tharoor only once the book was transferred to Westland. Westland had sent the book to him and invited him to be the Chief Guest for the launch. I have

been an admirer of Dr Tharoor's writings for a long time. He is exceptionally articulate, deeply religious and very liberal—a cracking combination! I had read his book, *The Great Indian Novel* while in college and it remains one of my favourite novels of all time.'

And the criteria for transferring the book to Westland, what factors prevailed?

'Four to five months after the commercial success of the book, it went up for bidding. Fortunately we got good terms from all the publishers pitching for it. We chose Westland as they had supported the book from the

beginning and were our distribution partners through Anuj. They have the rights for South Asia for the book.'

My curiosity does not ebb and I ask him to tell me the story behind the *Shiva Trilogy* being made into a movie by Karan Johar.

'It's interesting the way it happened. There is this agency called the CAA, the Creative Artists Agency, headquartered at Los Angeles. They represent Hollywood royalty, the likes of Steven Spielberg, Brad Pitt, Will Smith, Julia Roberts etc. Someone who works with CAA was travelling through India and picked up the book and handed it over to Caleb Franklin

of CAA. Luckily Caleb had lived in India for 2-3 years and was passionate about India. I was called and asked “Would you be willing to work with us?” That was the first time I had heard of CAA. When I googled and found out who they were, I was obviously very enthusiastic about them representing me. It ended up being a good partnership.

‘They handle the movie rights for the book across the world including Hollywood. They negotiated the Indian language rights as well. The prestige of CAA ensured that we spoke to the best producers in Bollywood. Once they shortlisted the

producers, I met all of them to get a creative comfort. This book is a result of Lord Shiva's blessings and I wanted to ensure that the producer making a movie on the book is passionate about the subject. Of all, Karan Johar's deal seemed the best and more importantly, I liked the passion with which his team and he approached the subject.'

So, there is a possibility that we may see an *Avatar* kind of movie made on the *Shiva Trilogy*!

'Inshallah! With Lord Shiva's blessings, we'll certainly have a great movie,' Amish makes the submission.

Now, when you are able to deeply

appreciate and feel the sense of devotion and faith, you will probably also understand distinctly what different faiths mean to different people. Approaching from that plane, how do you look at M F Hussain or Salman Rushdie, who some people feel, perhaps alienate people with their approach?

‘Understanding faith deeply helps you to grow more. There is a lovely poem by Maulana Rumi where he says we must remember that God doesn’t expect gifts from us. He wants us to be ready to receive gifts from Him. This can also be interpreted to mean that He doesn’t expect us to

protect Him; he only expects us to be ready to receive His protection. Therefore, what is the correct way to deal with such insensitivity towards religion? If someone else is showing disrespect to our Gods, we have a right to question his way of thinking. We should invite such people for a debate. If we can convince them of our viewpoint, great, otherwise we can peacefully agree to disagree and let the issue remain between God and the person insulting Him. None of us must have the arrogance of thinking that we are the ones who will protect God. Who are we to protect Him? As for me, I'll never insult someone else's

faith but, I will also not object to someone else's right to question and even insult religion, if that is what he chooses to do. In any case, freedom of expression is a constitutionally guaranteed right in our country.

‘I believe in the approach of positive secularism, where we don't hate all religions equally, but actually, respect all religions equally. And that is the natural Indian way. I am extremely proud of our heritage. So while I do the Mahamrityunjaya jaap and worship Lord Shiva every day, my puja room has many religious deities, books and symbols including Lord Ram, Lord Krishna, Durga Ma,

Kali Ma, Saraswati Ma, Lakshmi Ma, Mother Mary, Jesus Christ, Zarathustra ji, the Kaaba, Guru Nanak, Gautam Buddha, besides others.

‘I believe that the vast majority of Indians are sensible people, otherwise our country would have descended into a civil war. The liberal and moderate voices are not usually heard as they don’t make for great press. The voices that are heard are of the controversial, violent and regressive types. I believe, like my grandfather used to say, that it is the duty of the liberal people who love their religion to speak about their faith otherwise the hate mongers will take over,’

Amish elucidates at length his views on his favourite subject and it is impossible not to notice his passion on the theme of peaceful co-existence. Amish has built up an interesting story in the first two books of the Trilogy which is supposed to lead to the philosophy he wants to convey. Is the philosophy going to be about peaceful co-existence? One will have to wait to know this through the final book in the Trilogy, *The Oath of the Vayuputras*.

What after the Trilogy, I ask?

‘I have enough story ideas that can keep me busy for years to come. I would like to write books on the Mahabharata, Ramayana, Lord Rudra,

Lord Manu, Akbar, who was one of the greatest emperors the world has ever seen, etc. The land of my passion is India or let's say South Asia, as in ancient times this entire land was one. Most of my books are likely to be based in this region.'

In his leisure time, Amish is usually thinking of a story. At such times, he likes to listen to music that matches the mood of what he is trying to write. It can be any genre of music—Hindi, English, world music, old, new, western, Indian, etc., as long as it is in tune with the particular theme of the story that's running in his mind. He gathers all these thoughts and then

when he starts writing, they just expand. It's a sacred activity for him. He believes in honouring the blessing and to just let it flow.

While it seems completely surreal to me that the book just “happens to someone”, I am glad that I have met as charming, eloquent, forthright and humble a person like Amish with whom such a miracle has indeed happened. I hope the blessing continues to flow for him and he gives us many more bestsellers to enjoy.



THE NEW AGE
DRONACHARYA

PRAVEEN TYAGI

*Managing Director, IITians PACE Education
Private Limited*

It may not be an exaggeration to say that the story of Praveen Tyagi's life reads like a fairytale. Incredibly amazing, it makes one believe that dreams do come true, miracles do happen and that God does exist.

Praveen Tyagi is an IIT Delhi graduate and founder director of approximately a hundred crore business in education, called the IITians PACE Education Private Limited, popularly known as PACE. An extremely well known institution

in Mumbai, PACE is renowned for coaching young students for the prestigious IIT-JEE examination and achieving superlative results. Several PACE's students regularly secure top ranks in IIT-JEE and large numbers qualify the tough exam with relative ease. Its success ratio is nearly thirty per cent in IITJEE and ninety per cent in the All India Engineering Entrance Examination or AIEEE. If its able to succeed in its mission year after year, it is primarily because of an outstanding faculty, innovative teaching methodology and a sincere dedication towards the cause of quality education.

I was intrigued as to why an IIT

graduate should be managing a coaching institute when IITians are most sought after by corporates and usually land great jobs with reputed organizations. Not just Praveen Tyagi, but a large number of faculty members that PACE employs are also from different IITs. So, how did he manage to take the teaching career to such a level whereby he also attracted other IITians to the fold? Generally, IITians don't take to teaching for school level but PACE pioneered this refreshing change. I met the gracious and personable Praveen Tyagi at the PACE head office at Andheri West in Mumbai to fathom this phenomenon

which is both fascinating and delightful as it has clearly raised the bar for education at school level.

Praveen's personal journey is closely intertwined with his professional journey. I am pretty certain that there is no other teacher his age in the whole world who has more experience than Praveen. It's not possible too, simply because Praveen has been teaching since he was barely eight years old! While the main purpose of my meeting him was to understand why he chose an offbeat career, what I discovered in the process actually ended up touching me at the core in a much deeper way.

I am about to share the incredible story of an extremely bright, self-respecting and self-made man who is following an offbeat profession not so much because he chose it but because it was almost like it was divine will that he should be in it.

Praveen hails from a small village in Uttar Pradesh called Morta located on Meerut road in the district of Ghaziabad. He was born to a farmer and is the eldest of the nine siblings. The family owned a small piece of land and struggled hard to make ends meet. His father tilled the land and also worked as a daily wage labourer at a nearby construction site to

supplement his income. As a toddler, Praveen accompanied his father to their farmland (*khet*) and helped him with the chores. As his father was a daily wage earner, the family often subsisted on an extremely frugal meal of plain roti and occasionally chutney for an accompaniment. Praveen recalls, ‘There were also many days when my father did not manage to get any work and all of us would sleep on a hungry stomach. But my father’s jovial and highly spiritual nature kept us going in the midst of acute shortages. He kept us regaled with interesting stories. We would tire ourselves with laughter and go off to

sleep. The whole atmosphere at home remained happy; sharing and caring with enough laughter which made up for all that we lacked.'

As Praveen talks to me about his childhood, I feel completely jolted. It boggles me to think how a child from such an environment could possibly go on to graduate from IIT? Praveen did his schooling from DPS Ghaziabad, one of the most prestigious schools in the region. I make no effort at hiding my surprise that considering his family's environment, how could he afford this kind of schooling?

Praveen attributes his good schooling to his father's desire and

dream. He says, ‘My father had never been to school. However, it was his deep desire that his children should be well educated.’ About twenty kilometers from their small farm, there was a reputed English medium school: Delhi Public School, Ghaziabad. When he saw well dressed children in that school, he wanted his children to go to school neatly turned out and speak in English like those children. He befriended the PT teacher of the school to understand about admissions. He was told that the school admitted only “*bade afsaron ke bacche*” (children of senior officers) through an entrance exam. The admission process also

involved parents' interview and they were expected to speak in English as well. Even though Praveen's father was not educated and could hardly speak confidently in Hindi, the criteria for admission did not dishearten him. He continued meeting the PT teacher taking small gifts of milk, curd and farm produce for him as a token of thanks for giving him the information about the school. Seeing his persistence and resilience, the PT teacher arranged someone to teach Praveen for the entrance exam to the school. Praveen learnt fast and well and cleared the exam. One of the relatives who spoke in English and

dressed in formal clothes was “arranged” to accompany him for the interview process. The efforts paid off. Praveen’s admission was through. His father was beyond himself with joy and felt on top of the world. He was determined more than ever before to work hard, borrow money and do whatever it takes to give a good foundation to his children by educating them well.

However, shortly after, Praveen’s father got embroiled in an accident and was stabbed in the back over a land dispute and was no longer able to carry load or work in the farm. The question was how would the family

sustain now? As young as eight years old, Praveen took over and started teaching the village children all that he learnt in school. Out of gratitude, some started paying for his “tuitions” and many others simply gifted milk, vegetables and other farm produce to the family. As Praveen’s younger siblings joined school, they also followed the same practice and very soon their house in the village literally became a coaching centre of sorts.

Praveen has mixed memories of those days. In hindsight, he looks upon those days with a lot of positivity. He says, ‘It was all about living life one day at a time. In the

open and green surroundings of the countryside, studies, farm work and tuitions happened simultaneously. Our family was a large, closeknit family full of love and support for each other, determined that it would be happy whatever the circumstances. Based on my experience, I know it for a fact that happiness has nothing to do with wealth. It is more a state of mind than anything else.'

Although the circumstances were not great, the attitude remained upbeat. Praveen had a single set of school uniform and shoes for several years and braced acute north Indian winters without warm wear. If his

friends asked why he did not wear a blazer on icy cold days, his deep sense of dignity would help him put up a brave front and he would say that he just did not feel cold. Once or twice his friends tried to offer help with clothes and shoes but soon realized that he was too self respecting to take any favours and stopped asking. They however made use of occasions like his birthday and gave him gifts that he wouldn't mind. Impressed with his brilliant academic performance, the teachers also made sure that the prizes and awards were such that they could be used. Praveen enjoyed studying and found it much easier and

enjoyable than his everyday work in the hot sun, digging the earth, making it ready for sowing crops and doing other kind of farm labour. As he was always amongst the top three in the class, pursuing the science stream in higher classes was the logical choice for him.

How did IIT happen? I ask. What he tells me reinforces my faith in friendship and in the goodness of people.

‘It was my friend Pankaj Singh who put the thought in me, gave me the confidence, guidance and study material for the IIT-JEE exam. Without him I would not have

known about its importance,' acknowledges Praveen. Pankaj made Praveen conscious of the fact that he was brilliant and if they studied together, they would both be able to qualify the much coveted IIT-JEE exam. And this is how things exactly turned out. Praveen made it to IIT Delhi. Pankaj also got through IIT BHU and later qualified the Union Public Services Commission(UPSC) examination and joined the Indian Revenue Service. Both remain best of friends till date.

However, joining IIT Delhi was a touch and go situation for Praveen due to his dire financial condition.

Until a day before the last day for paying fees, he had no clue how he would pay four thousand rupees required for the admission. He went to Delhi to get help from his maternal uncle who was reasonably well off. But when the uncle made comments about his father, it hurt him. He recalls, 'In a huff, I left refusing to take the money and returned to the village mentally prepared that I would forgo IIT and do a regular BSc course.' Under these circumstances, Praveen's father mortgaged his land as a last resort, and with that money sent Praveen to complete the admission process.

‘IIT Delhi was like heaven! From so many of us living in one room all these years in the village, here I was in Kumaon hostel with a room all to myself. I felt like a king. For the first time in my life, I saw a swimming pool. It was sheer luxury for me. While the other students cribbed about mess food, I thanked God that there was food to eat!’ reminisces Praveen.

Being used to hard physical labour on the farm, sports like weight lifting came easily to him. His father was a wrestler and had made sure that Praveen participated in and won the wrestling competitions with nearby

villages all through his school days. Soon Praveen made a name for himself at IIT by winning gold medals in various sports activities and was eventually awarded the best sportsperson of the year. This factor got him enough patronage from seniors too and he faced less ragging than usual.

This was as much about the good part. There was however no getting away from financial problems. The mess fee which was a few hundred rupees per month had to be paid. In the first year, Praveen defaulted for two months and was constantly worried about paying the dues. He

discussed this with Nitin, his good friend and senior from school who had also joined IIT. Nitin was from a wealthy background and could have easily bailed Praveen out from this situation. However he knew very well that Praveen would not take any financial help from him and desist such favours. Therefore he suggested to him to look up Private Tutions Bureau, a leading name in home tutions in Delhi, to earn some extra money. Nitin's suggestion proved to be a terrific enabler for Praveen.

Praveen's earlier experience and proficiency at teaching promptly got him the job. He would finish his

classes at IIT, then rush for tuitions and return to the hostel by midnight. The money he earned through tuitions was substantial enough to meet all his expenses as well as send money back home. In fact, soon he became the guy with the most money at hand in his hostel and would even lend to his friends and spend on them. Tuitions proved to be his passport to liberation from financial troubles and comfortably sustained him through the four years at IIT.

Eager to hear more about his almost fable-like life, I ask him about PACE's genesis.

Praveen completed his BTech with

reasonably good grades. He was in a dilemma now and wondered whether he should take the UPSC exam as his father desired or should join the workforce. Looking at the family situation and the responsibility of getting his sisters married, devoting another year or two to the UPSC exam seemed onerous and he decided he needed a full time job.

At the end of his third year programme at IIT, he had interned with the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre (BARC) in Mumbai and on the side, done a small survey on the coaching centre scene in the metropolis. He learnt that there was

no decent coaching institute for the IIT-JEE exam preparation and immediately thought of tapping the Mumbai market. While doing tuitions in Delhi, Praveen had met Anjali Jaipuria, and she became a sort of Godmother to him and would advise him periodically. When he told her that he needed a place to start his coaching classes in Mumbai, she put him in touch with the trustees of G D Somani School at Cuffe Parade who, she felt might allow him to use the school premises.

Praveen came to Mumbai and met the trustees of G D Somani School. They asked him to submit the business

plan and he did, a very rudimentary handmade business plan by writing all their questions and his answers in a plain art book. Recalling about this incident, Praveen smiles and says, 'Later, when I became familiar with management jargon and sophisticated reports, I realized that the business plan I had submitted was my first project report and what an utterly simplistic version it was!'

Nevertheless, if the vision is good, the intention sincere and sounds viable, even a rudimentary project report works its magic. The trustees believed in his concept and conviction and let him use the school premises

for IIT-JEE coaching after school hours. Praveen christened his tuition venture in Mumbai: Professionals Academy for Competitive Exams or PACE.

He met his first student at a book shop in Flora Fountain. The student had scored a very average percentage in class twelve which was not good enough to get him into local engineering colleges which only admitted students with high percentages. The year was 1999. Praveen told him that he could join his coaching classes to prepare for the IIT exam. As providential as it may seem, Praveen's first student went on

to qualify the IIT-JEE exam that very same year.

The Cuffe Parade location had a good footfall and ensured good business in financial terms. Despite this, Praveen felt that in an upscale area students were more focused on going abroad and their parents emphasized on “holistic” personality development of their children rather than single minded focus on academics. Expecting phenomenal or hundred per cent results from students with this mind set was a tall order. He knew he had to move to a more middle class location where students had a lot at stake and would devote themselves

wholeheartedly to succeed. It was a wise thought on Praveen's part. He moved to Goregaon in Mumbai's suburbs.

His first set of students were those who used to travel a long distance from Goregaon to Cuffe Parade to attend his classes. In no time, his teaching won him ardent fans amongst students in the new location. His classes became popular and were backed by superb results in IITs, Olympiads and board examinations. On popular demand, he started another centre at Borivali and Chembur and later at Andheri and hired top quality teachers by offering

them good packages to associate with PACE. He had decided pretty early in business that he would never compromise on the quality of teachers who formed the backbone for any institute and would always be generous and fair with them.

Innovation and a keen understanding of students' needs have been the other key differentiating and winning factors for Praveen. Realizing that students wasted a lot of time running from school to coaching classes, he pioneered the concept of integrated learning by tying up with schools and junior colleges. In such a tie up, the student does not have to

travel separately to attend coaching classes for competitive exams as it is integrated with college studies within the usual working hours. On the days allocated to college, the board syllabus is taught to the students and the days which are allocated to PACE, tutors coach children in keeping with the pattern of competitive exams. The first tie up PACE entered into was with RN Podar School at Santa Cruz in Mumbai. It was followed by similar tie ups with leading junior colleges in the city. Initially, colleges expressed apprehension about collaborating with a coaching institute but Praveen's logical explanation worked and the

synergy between colleges and coaching classes got underway in Mumbai. This approach proved to be a stupendous success and went on to become a winning proposition for all three stakeholders—the students, the college and PACE.

The next big success for Praveen was setting up of PACE's own junior colleges. Never before in Maharashtra had a coaching institute been allowed to set up a junior college. Only schools which were already up to class ten or degree colleges that wanted to be upgraded to junior colleges had so far been granted permission by the state government. Praveen met the

state education minister, Balasaheb Thorat and explained how it would benefit the students as well as raise the quality of education if PACE's coaching centres were allowed to function as junior colleges. The minister was already aware of the goodwill Praveen enjoyed as quite a few of the bureaucrats' children as well as the children of IIT Bombay's faculty had been tutored by PACE and had achieved success. He saw merit in Praveen's case. Initially two municipal colleges were allowed to be run by PACE Education Trust and subsequently permission was extended to convert all its six centres in Mumbai

into fullfledged junior science colleges.

Praveen is now focusing on converting these eight junior colleges into centres of excellence offering a hybrid learning environment. The objective pursued is as earlier—to prepare and send maximum number of students to reputed engineering colleges within the country. A new segment that the hybrid colleges caters to are students who want to go abroad for higher education. Practical application of knowledge, extracurricular activities and community service initiatives which are given weightage for admissions abroad are therefore adequately

addressed in these hybrid colleges. Praveen says with booming confidence, 'We will send more students abroad than all the IB schools in the city put together can.' Having the best faculty on its rolls and an innovative approach to education in accordance with the needs of the time continue to be the chief pillars of PACE which has now started coaching for SAT, IELTS and TOEFL as well. In 2011, PACE posted a turnover of seventy crores and is easily expecting to cross a 100 crores in the coming year.

Hailing from an extremely humble background, going on to qualify the

IIT-JEE exam to now heading a successful business in education, Praveen has indeed covered a long distance and is now a name to reckon with in the field of education in Maharashtra. His experience with extraordinary success has made him more spiritual and deeply conscious of God's grace and blessings which he believes has inspired him to step up from one level to the next. Expressing his gratitude he says, 'It seems almost like a divine blessing that whatever I dream, comes true.' Praveen on his part is making all efforts to give back to society and is profoundly conscious of his responsibilities.

In some of his colleges, he maintains a ratio whereby fifty percent of the children pay the full fees so that the other half of the class from economically weaker sections of the society can receive free education. The earnings of the trust are invested back in the system by way of attractive remuneration to teachers, improving the infrastructure, technology upgradation, etc. In collaboration with the Government of Maharashtra, Praveen started a “Super 50 batch” wherein fifty poor but brilliant children are handpicked from all over Maharashtra and arrangements are made for their free boarding, lodging

and coaching in Mumbai to enable them to prepare for the IIT entrance. For that matter, PACE does not charge students from economically weak or disadvantaged backgrounds. All it asks for is submission of adequate proof and they secure a right to top quality education absolutely free at PACE.

Has he thought of involving venture capitalists or angel investors to further scale up the business?

Praveen is not tempted to invite private equity or venture capital participation at this juncture as he feels that it would result in concentrating resources in just a few hands. He

instead strongly advocates collaborating with teachers to encourage an equitable distribution of wealth. Praveen follows a benign philosophy as far as teachers at PACE are concerned. He believes that overall teachers in our country are an ignored lot: neither do they get paid adequately, nor are they accorded the respect they deserve. As a result, the compensation offered to teachers at PACE is not only the highest in the education sector but also very competitive even when compared across industry segments. He would like to believe that this approach is not driven by benevolence but rather

makes for smart business sense.

What's his vision for future?

Praveen elaborates on his favourite topic and that is a grand vision for the future of education in India. Outlining his ambitious plans he says, 'I want to unleash an education movement across the country by turning country's most talented teachers from employees to partners and stakeholders in PACE. It is my belief that this approach will ensure consistent superior delivery from committed individuals on a long term basis. This will also ensure that PACE will have a strong and stable countrywide presence and will be able to withstand and survive any

competition.’ As a proponent of inclusive growth, he claims his needs are limited and instead of being avaricious and amassing wealth for self, he would like to use the money generated by his business towards improving the lives of people connected with him in his mission and in community development initiatives.

It is routine to hear people criticize the current system of education and other state of affairs in the country. There is a lot that the government can do to update the existing syllabi to suit the requirements of modern times, change the mundane way in which courses are taught and improve the

substandard infrastructural and research facilities to make them competitive at an international level. And the list goes on. However, in spite of the several lacunae that exist, people like Praveen go ahead and do the right things undeterred. Praveen's father used to say, one good deed done sets a hundred more good deeds in motion. Praveen's conviction in such simple pastoral wisdom and value systems, singularity of purpose and hard work has brought him huge success. With a limited resource base but abounding intellectual and value-driven capabilities, Praveen has created an army of students and teachers and a

teaching methodology which is cutting edge and at par with the best in the world.

Praveen may well be called the new age Dronacharya, a master par excellence like the famous Guru from the Mahabharata, albeit with a difference. He is a Guru as much for the so-called “less privileged” Eklavyas and Karnas as for the fortunate Pandavas and Kauravas, imparting knowledge in a superior, humane, equitable and inclusive manner. We need more people like him in our country to pursue a positive agenda and become the change agents and evangelists for our society and

communities. As someone who believes that India has everything, sans political will, that is necessary for making it a world class destination for education, I am definite that people like Praveen will continue to lead from the front and soon make that day a reality when Indian institutes will be reckoned no less than Harvard, Stanford, ICL, Oxbridge and MITs of the world.



THE FEISTY FOOD EXPLORER

RASHMI UDAY SINGH

Food Critic, Author & TV Host

Rashmi Uday Singh's transition from a senior civil servant to a famous food critic and author, I reckon, must be a unique, one of its kind case. Rashmi had put in fifteen years of service with the Indian Revenue Service and was Deputy Commissioner, Income Tax

when she resigned and switched to doing what she loves most—exploring and discovering great places to eat and writing about them. Over the last twenty years, she has carved out a niche for herself as the most sought after food commentator in India. Rashmi has published thirty-two books, many of them being first of their kind, and has several prestigious national and international awards to her credit.

In India immense prestige is attached to becoming a bureaucrat because of the power and status that comes with the job. Usually, it's a career people keep for life. But

Rashmi decided otherwise.

On my way to the Breach Candy Club in South Mumbai to meet Rashmi, I am curious to know why she made the choices she did. How difficult was it to give up a position that brought her so much prestige and power? How did food come into the picture? How has her journey been since? Has it ever occurred to her in all these years that she should have continued in the civil services?

Rashmi, accompanied by a genteel German friend, is sitting in the restaurant across the beautiful swimming pool (which is in the shape of undivided India) that seems to

almost merge into the endlessly stretched, vast expanse of the Arabian Sea. She looks relaxed and resplendent in a pair of ankle length jeans, denim top and red coloured flip flops which have flowers on them. I join them and the interesting interaction amongst the three of us over some bites of short eats and coffee serves as a prelude to the long conversation that continues between me and Rashmi after her German friend leaves. Her hospitality, exuberance and delightfully friendly temperament makes me think what a perfect match Rashmi makes with her profession.

Born as the eldest child of Air

Marshall Arjun Singh Luthra, Rashmi spent her childhood in Delhi with two younger brothers. On her insistence to go to a boarding school, her parents admitted her in Sophia Girls College at Ajmer where she spent some of the most beautiful years of her life. Besides a good education, the school provided her the opportunity to engage in a lot of sports, have wonderful friends and learn important life skills. She excelled at swimming particularly, winning several district and state level competitions. Along with being nominated as the Head Girl, she was also chosen for the Most Outstanding

Student award in her final year at school.

For college education, Rashmi moved back to Delhi and joined the prestigious Lady Shri Ram College to study English. After college, Mumbai, where her maternal aunt lived, beckoned her and she joined a year's programme in journalism at the Bombay School of Journalism. The city cast its magic spell on Rashmi. She felt that Mumbai offered more freedom and safety to women and talent and achievement of the individual was truly valued in this city.

It was the most eventful one year for her. One day, as she was walking

down the road near her college at Churchgate, an ambassador car screeched to a halt near her. A gentleman and a lady came out and approached her asking whether she would like to model for an advertisement. It turned out that they were from Ogilvy & Mather, called Ogilvy, Benson and Mather then. Rashmi accepted the offer and was delighted to explore newer avenues. Her orientation has always been to learn something new and this is what drives her till date. The assignment extended into a part time job offer with the agency which she readily accepted as well. Towards the latter

part of the journalism course, Rashmi got an opportunity to work at the *Junior Statesman* with the legendary journalist, the late Behram 'Busybee' Contractor, very popular for his pioneering writings as a food critic and restaurant reviewer. This was her first introduction to the fascinating world of flavours and aromas and captured her interest like nothing else in the world had and would go on to become a lifelong passion with her.

It was not just the city of Mumbai with which Rashmi fell in love, she also found the love of her life here. Uday Singh, an ex-Mayoite (Mayo College, located at Ajmer, is one of

the leading boarding schools for boys in India) admired Rashmi ever since he had seen her in Ajmer but got to know her only in Mumbai. Their relationship blossomed, withstood the separation of some years due to their careers and finally culminated in marriage.

When her course in journalism got over, her parents called her back to Delhi as they had set about lining up marriage proposals for her. Rashmi had to somehow delay this entire process to bide time till Uday settled in his career as a legal professional. She thought the best way out was to sit for the Union Public Service Commission

(UPSC) examination. This seemed the sure shot way to keep marriage off her parents' mind for a long period of time. Having always encouraged their daughter to do whatever she chose to, the Luthras supported her wholeheartedly to undertake the UPSC examination.

Adamant that she would fund her own studies, she did some odd jobs like working at a petrol pump for a battery company donning a red cap and filling gas in vehicles, at a garments export fair and as a clotheshorse for a French garments company to earn enough for enrolling herself with the Rau's Study Circle in

Delhi for the civil services exam!

With her deep enchantment for examinations, it was not difficult for her to sail through this tough examination. She made it to the Indian Revenue Service and headed to Mussoorie for the four months Foundation Course at the Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration. ‘It was meant to introduce us young civil servants to various avenues of governance as well as develop “OLQs”—Officer Like Qualities—in us like playing snooker, horse riding, yoga and what have you,’ shares Rashmi with a chuckle about the initial days of being

inducted into the civil services.

The Foundation Course was followed by one year of intensive training in the fields of Taxation, Accountancy, Law and Management at the National Academy of Direct Taxes at Nagpur. Rashmi fondly remembers the days spent at Nagpur relishing its world famous oranges, cycling to Seminary hills, playing golf at the Gondwana Club, along with getting thoroughly trained to take on the duties of the Tax Department.

Her first posting was at Mayur Bhawan at Connaught Place in Delhi as Assistant Commissioner, Income Tax, a quasi-judicial post appointed by

the President of India with vast powers. All of twenty-two, she now headed a hierarchy of seven layers that comprised a large staff twice her age and led tax raids on violators irrespective of their being in high places, famous or mighty.

In the next couple of years' time, both Rashmi and Uday were quite settled and doing well in their careers; Uday had made a name for himself as a promising lawyer. It was time to solemnize their commitment to each other. Their wedding took place in Delhi and with that Rashmi moved to Mumbai, bringing the six years of their long distance relationship to a

happy conclusion.

At Mumbai her workplace was Aaykar Bhawan. She was made incharge of Circle 1 and 2 which had corporate behemoths like TISCO, TELCO, Hindustan Petroleum and Voltas under it. She remembers that the very first case she handled, she had none other than the prominent tax advocate Behram Palkhiwala coming in to discuss the depreciation schedule and other matters with her! There were several well known and powerful people from the corporate world as well as from Bollywood whom she cross-examined in her office or against whom she led raids.

‘The tax department proved to be a great confidence builder and equaliser for me. It made me learn to deal with anybody and everybody. Seeing the rich and famous with all their warts and at their quivering worst, makes one lose all awe for them. Not that it pleased me, but what it did was that it made me learn the most important lesson of seeing all as equal. I also witnessed closely that it is the *kursi* (one’s position or the chair one occupies) or the pen that emanates power and one should remain alive to that,’ reflects Rashmi on the learnings from her days as a civil servant.

Through all the fifteen years with

the tax department, Rashmi had kept alive her passion of writing about food. She wrote regularly on food for the *Bombay* magazine of the *India Today* group of which her mother-in-law was the editor. When *Bombay* closed down, Rashmi continued writing on food for the *Sunday Observer*, the *Times of India* and the *Afternoon Despatch & Courier*.

Why food? How did you decide to focus on this area, I ask as I move to occupy the opposite chair, on Rashmi's suggestion, with my back turned to the pool now and the mesmerizing view of the Arabian Sea spread out in front of me.

‘I had fallen in love with the city and writing about food gave me the license to roam about and explore this enchanting town. I went to Sasoon Docks, Crawford market, the suburbs and wherever there was an exciting restaurant or eatery to write about. The last story I did, while still with the tax department, was “Flavours of the Past” about the fabulous oldest restaurant at Grant Road. Rather than just opine about different issues, I felt by writing about food, I could give information to the readers that could be used by them and something they could do, at the same time giving me a chance to love my city even more.’

When their son Dhruv was going to come into Rashmi and Uday's lives, Rashmi went on maternity leave which got extended into study leave of nearly three years. Along with raising the young child with utmost delight, she channelized her time and energy to study further. During this period, she completed an LLB from Government Law College, MBA from Jamnalal Bajaj Institute of Management Studies and also a Masters in Administrative Management as well as taught drama at the Villa Theresa High School in South Mumbai. Rashmi acknowledges that she is immensely grateful to the tax department to have

facilitated her studies.

But why did she need to study so much, I interrupt.

Rashmi replies with childlike enthusiasm, with a twinkle in her eye and a spark in her voice 'Because I love studying. I have my own way of studying and love to crack the system. It's my dream to study more, go to Harvard.'

After a three year hiatus, she joined back as Deputy Director General, Shipping, moving into this role from her last position as the Deputy Commissioner, Appeals. Deputy Director General, Shipping was a position which was normally handled

by an IAS. It was an honour to be entrusted with the responsibility. Her office at Jahaz Bhawan was the size of a football field with the view outside constantly changing with moving ships. She felt more comfortable in this job as it had more to do with common sense than knowing the laws and by-laws and books of accounts as in the tax department. On her first day in office at Jahaz Bhawan, she signed an order for purchase of a ship worth millions of dollars as Chairman of Ships Acquisition & Licensing Committee. During this fulfilling stint of about a year and a half, she chaired several meetings at the Bombay Port

Trust in Mumbai and Goa and liaised between the shipping industry and the government.

Then, one fine day in 1990, she just quit.

Why, I want to know.

Why did you do that, give up all the power and status that came with the job? Did you not think of carrying on for a few more years, I ask.

Rashmi shoots back a counter-question to me, 'What if you are uncomfortable with both, the status and power? You know it's all fake. It's because of the chair you are in and not because of you as a person. Yes, there is a sense of power and an

inflated self that the job gives and it can go to your head too. But all these power trips may be good for those who enjoy wielding power, it wasn't for me. I can say with certainty that the people in the department were great, more chivalrous than I have seen anywhere else, but somehow I was not happy with moments of negativity that were a part of the job. You looked at Returns of people to see where the faults lay. The raids were the most depressing part of the job. It was clearly not something that I wanted to do for the rest of my life. I had a strong maternal motivation too at that time that acted as a catalyst for

me to resign. Dhruv was four years old and I was not getting enough time with him due to my hectic work schedule. Being a woman has its advantages. I did not have to worry about running the household. On one fine morning, I woke up thinking, “By the time Mozart was my age, he was dead. Am I doing the right thing with my life?” My decision was made in that instant. What I wanted most was to be with my son and I did not analyze beyond that.’

So, how did it feel to be suddenly faceless without a sprawling office, a large staff, a powerful identity as a senior civil servant?

‘It was disorienting initially, no doubt. For a while, it felt like I was floundering in the dark. But things have just fallen in place for me always. I have come to have a strong belief that till you let go of one shore, you can’t see the beauty on the other side and in every crisis, there lies an opportunity. Meenakshi Shedde who was the Assistant Editor with the *Times of India* had seen my work and my passion for writing about food. She offered that I should write the weekly food column for the *Times of India*. Here I was, having all this while written completely unequivocal, crisp, dry, unambiguous quasi-judicial tax

orders, saying assessed and closed herewith. Though, I was writing about food too but just once a month or once in two months. To write a weekly column—would I be able to do that? Meenakshi had put her faith in me and I said to myself, I should give this a try. That's how my new journey began.'

And anchoring television shows, how did that come about?

'Within two weeks of my resigning, Aroon Purie, the editor-owner of the India Today group and a family friend offered me to do television. He wanted me to convert the *Bombay* magazine into a Bombay magazine

video. This was the early 90s and *India Today* was the topmost magazine those days. Not knowing anything about television production, I plunged into it headlong because Aroon Purie believed I could do it and I am so grateful to him for that. I did three stories, managing the writing, direction and production, all on my own. It was a great learning experience for me. But since not enough research had gone into the concept, the “Bombay Fast Track” project had to be shelved. Within four months I had got this great job and lost it too! The good part was that Madhu Trehan liked my work and

asked me to be the stringer for “Newstrack” in Mumbai. I had an amazing time learning all about television and doing stories on Mumbai night life, on homosexuals, on discos, covering Prince Charles’s visit to Jaipur to play polo and on several more such exciting subjects.

‘More good things lay in store for me, everything happening pretty miraculously. I met Nisha Pillai of the BBC and told her that I wanted to train at the BBC. Then Narendra Morar of the BBC Network East met me a couple of times in Mumbai and they organized for my training at the BBC White City in London. I came

back, worked out the concept of a health show with Aroon Purie and finally wrote, directed and produced Health Today. It was a 52 episodes show, a fun project, way ahead of its time that covered topics ranging from managing stress to smoking to social drinking to preventing cancer and had a celebrity close up section too for which I covered Aishwarya Rai who used to model for Garden silk those days, Sunny Deol, Kabir and Nikki Bedi, etc. I continued doing more TV. I did a 3 part series with Times Now, shot with Gordon Ramsay for BBCs Channel 4 and have done a few other shoots too including at Los

Angeles, Paris, Germany and London.’

And Rashmi Uday Singh’s famous *Good Food Guides*, how did those annual editions start?

‘I wanted to write a restaurant guide to Bombay since I moved here in the early 80s but couldn’t find any people who believed in it. Finally, I started working on it with the *Times of India* but due to some difference of opinion with its head, Pradeep Guha, I submitted my resignation and moved out. Then on one of the flights, I met Tariq Ansari of Mid Day publications. It was one of those events in my life, which I believe was part of the universe orchestrating the tiny details

for me. He offered that I should do the guide with him and this is how India's first restaurant guide was launched in 1997. It was an overwhelming moment when Pradeep Guha too came for the launch. I did the next three editions of the *Good Food Guide* with *Mid Day* before they closed their books division. Then, I went back to *TOI* and have been working on the *Guides* with them since.'

So, after all these years, was there any moment when you regretted leaving your job with the tax department?

'Never. Not even for a second,' said

Rashmi. 'I am qualified to practice as a tax lawyer if I want to. But, I never want to go back to that space again. Actually, I don't even know how to look back; to the extent I don't even like the songs which hark back to the nostalgia of old days. I am just made this way I guess. The change was disconcerting but has been my biggest learning curve too. It was my choice. I felt bloated with a sense of self importance and decided to move. The change brought me where I want to be. Even now being called an expert, etc., is not my scene. I don't want to opine. I enjoy being a reporter looking ground upward and am not

an expert, etc.’

A believer in the philosophy of Advaita, equality of human beings and humanitarianism, Rashmi continues to find profound delight in exploring new restaurants, meeting new people, representing India in international seminars and discussions and relishing the diverse flavours and aromas across the world.

Her core belief is that the only thing permanent is change. The most important thing is to surrender and trust the universe to take care of you and it will as no human being can ever do. The moment one realizes this, then miracles start happening. She

believes life is magical and just as music is the space between notes, there lies a world of possibilities between moments.

She is happiest when she is alone on a long journey on a plane. That's when she is completely connected to her inner self, completely centred, having a dialogue within, writing to self as one who is a big believer in the powers of the universe and in God guiding oneself, getting the inspiration and instinct to flow with the time!



PERFECTING

THE ART OF AUCTIONEERING

MINAL VAZIRANI

Co-Founder, Saffronart

‘Choose a job you love, and you will never have to work a day in your life,’ said Confucius. This is exactly what Minal did about twelve years back when she quit her job in consulting to set up Planetsaffron.com which is now known as [Saffronart.com](https://www.saffronart.com).

As I enter the third floor of Industry Manor at Prabhadevi in Mumbai, the

Saffronart gallery transports me into the fine and tranquil world of magnificent art works, away from the buzz and babble of the metropolis. M F Hussain, S H Raza, F N Souza, V S Gaitonde, Krishen Khanna, Bharti Kher, Subodh Gupta...it's simply a delight to see the masterpieces from some of the best known exponents of contemporary and modern Indian art adorning the walls of the gallery. I take a good look at all the paintings while Dhanashree, a pleasant executive from the client relations team at Saffronart, makes it interesting and informative for me by answering my queries and filling me in with

additional information about the artists and the paintings.

Minal arrives dressed in an all black shirt and trousers accessorized with a funky long gold chain with a clutch of colourful pendants. She joins me in the study attached to the gallery where Dhanashree is showing me the catalogues. Looking fit within barely two-and-a-half months of her second daughter Anaya's birth, Minal is back at work and as decided between us in December, when she was away in the US, we meet in early April 2011.

So, how did a Biochemical Engineer from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and a

management graduate from INSEAD, Fontainebleau, France get involved with art? Minal narrates her interesting journey to me.

Born in Delhi, Minal moved to the Middle East with her parents when she was about three years old. By the time she was five and had a younger brother, for whom she chose the name Dinesh, the family moved again to the US. It was pure co-incidence that several years later Minal fell in love and married someone whose name is Dinesh too!

Growing up in the suburbs of Los Angeles, Minal was encouraged by her parents to pursue her interest in the

sciences. As an undergraduate student at UCLA, Minal says she was quite an idealist and was deeply inclined towards medical research. Accordingly, she picked up courses which gave her an opportunity to work on exciting research projects. She considers herself lucky to have worked in the areas which were at the cutting edge of medical research at the time and with people who were very bright and talented. Her principal investigator at the hematology and oncology laboratory where her research work was based, was someone who had worked under Dr Howard Martin Temin, the renowned

Nobel laureate who along with two other scientists had discovered reverse transcriptase, the central enzyme in diseases such as AIDS and Hepatitis B.

Minal had chosen Indian Art History as a parallel area of study. The course was taught by Prof Stanley Albert Wolpert, considered one of the world's foremost authorities on the history of modern India and Pakistan and also the author of *Nine Hours to Rama*. Besides learning extensively about Indian modern history and art in the classroom from him, Minal benefitted greatly through a travel project to India that he assigned to her. She remembers how fascinated

she was with all that she learnt about Indian art.

Looking back she realizes that right through school days she had a latent love for fine, visual and performing arts. She recalls how on her fifteenth birthday she had convinced her family to see the famous Broadway musical “Evita”. She also made it a point to go to the ballet and visit museums, much to her younger brother’s annoyance. While in college, she would always choose to study in the sprawling Sculpture Garden at UCLA that had several larger-than-life sculptures on display amidst lovely trees, fountains and meandering pathways. Fine arts

was something she clearly appreciated and was drawn to but had never thought she would make a career of.

It was during her undergraduate days that she had a chance meeting with Dinesh Vazirani through common friends. They were both invited to a thanksgiving dinner at San Francisco where they were introduced to each other for the first time. After completing his schooling from Cathedral and John Connon in Mumbai, Dinesh had joined Stanford University. At the time he met Minal, he was pursuing management from Harvard Business School (HBS). Minal and Dinesh began seeing each other as

soon as they met and a couple of years later decided to tie the knot.

Minal graduated with a BS in Chemical Engineering and Bioengineering and a minor in Art History and Indian History as per the courses she had taken in college. The gusto and idealism with which she had gone into medical research seemed to have somewhat waned by the time she finished college. Unable to firm up her interest area, she chose not to pursue a PhD programme. Instead she opted to acquire some work experience first. She decided she would return to graduate school at a later date.

What now seems to be kind of a happy accident to her, she accepted an offer in management consulting with Andersen Consulting (AC), the world's largest IT consulting and services firm that was part of Andersen Worldwide before renaming and relaunching itself as Accenture in 2000. She was based at the Los Angeles office of the firm. Though hired for healthcare management consulting, it so turned out that Minal did not work in healthcare even for a single day. Most of the assignments she worked on were focused on technology. 'It was fun to work in a new area. Another good aspect that I

enjoyed in my tenure with consulting was that almost every three months there was something new to work on. It suited me well as I like to be constantly spurred on with the next new idea, the next new learning,' shares Minal about the excitement that her first job brought for her.

In due course, Dinesh completed his two year management programme at HBS and was preparing to move back to Mumbai to join his father's business in material handling equipment under the name of WMI Cranes. As Minal and Dinesh had decided that they would get married, Minal arranged a transfer with AC to

the Mumbai office. They tied the knot in December 1994.

Minal had travelled to India quite a few times earlier and had enjoyed all those visits. However, she soon realized that being in India for a short time was one thing and living here permanently was another. The two were completely different experiences. She had to make a lot of adjustments with the new environment, work culture, attitudes, mindsets, dressing and even the accent. To begin with she took Hindi lessons for a couple of months to get comfortable with speaking and writing the language. She realized that she would have to

refigure her role and space as a woman professional as some things that she had taken for granted in the US did not exist in India, or for that matter in many countries in Asia. On most occasions, she was the only woman in the team on the client side. The Western style business suits she wore to work were replaced by salwar kameezes and saris. 'Adapting to different clothing was the easier part compared to the alignment one had to do with the attitudes, cultural differences and typical mindsets,' says Minal. She considers herself lucky that she got some good managers to work with who helped her find her way

professionally. Sid Khanna, who later went on to head the firm in India when it became Accenture, was one such colleague.

Having put in about three and a half years with Andersen, Minal felt she was ready to go back to school. On considering the options that were available to her, she ruled out HBS for a couple of reasons. When Dinesh was at HBS, she had spent some time with him there and somehow felt that it was not the place for her. She did not want to get back into an American perspective by joining HBS or any other management school in the US. Minal zeroed in on INSEAD in

France and applied to just this institute of impeccable repute. The management course at INSEAD was for one year. The shorter duration made it additionally attractive for her. She was lucky to get an offer of admission from the institute as well as a fellowship!

Dinesh's work with WMI involved dealing with German collaborators for which he travelled to Europe often and on these trips, he stopped by to meet Minal. The one year at INSEAD simply flew past for Minal. Besides being a great experience academically and culturally, Minal cherishes this time also for some wonderful friends

she made, some of whom went on to invest in the business she set up a few years later. ‘This was easily one of the best years of my life,’ exclaims Minal.

The best days over, a tough economic environment awaited her as she faced the job market on completion of the MBA programme. The Asian region was hit by a severe financial crisis and it was easily the worst year to look for a job in this part of the world. Most of the offers Minal got were based in Europe. At this point, Dinesh and Minal even thought of moving to Europe for some time. But that did not happen eventually. Minal got an offer from a

leading American strategy and technology consulting firm, Booz Allen Hamilton that was setting up an office in India. With Booz Allen, Minal worked in the media, hospitality, technology and a couple of more sectors. Here too, besides enjoying working on exciting assignments, Minal had the pleasure of working with some wonderful colleagues. Shumeet Banerjee who set up Booz Allen's practice in India in the mid 1990s, later becoming global CEO of the firm, proved to be a friend and mentor to Minal.

After some time, on one of the large projects for Indonesia, Minal

visited Jakarta. It was the late Nineties when Indonesia was in the grip of a grave economic crisis coupled with political instability and unrest. Close to the office where Minal was working, there was a protest and some protestors turned violent. Minal and her team quickly wound up from the client site and flew to work out of the Singapore office of Booz. This incident set off a thought process in her as to what she really wanted to do with her life and career.

Once back in Mumbai, she pulled out the business plan she had submitted at INSEAD as part of her coursework for “Financing

Entrepreneurial Venture”. This is essentially where the beginning of Saffronart can be traced to. The business plan had envisaged making collectibles, products and information available from the East and Asia to the international markets.

While she mulled over the idea to make a start with this venture and bring the business plan to fruition, a weekend trip to Bengaluru with Dinesh to meet their close friends, Milind and Anna Thakkar, provided the necessary impetus. ‘We brainstormed the idea with them. They have a lot of positive energy and it is great to ideate with them,’ says

Minal in appreciation of the Thakkar couple. The discussion helped Minal arrive at the decision that setting up an e-commerce company for Indian art was the way forward for her.

Minal felt that although she had the entrepreneurial spirit, it was getting somewhat subdued by the analytical, data driven and structured approach that several years of working in consulting had developed in her. Dinesh helped her to break free from the risk averse approach and plunge into the business. 'Dinesh is a fantastic entrepreneur and goes by gut feel and conviction. He nudged me to put my ideas together and make a start. Dinesh

is not so much data driven and sometimes makes great decisions based on gut feel. It's what makes Dinesh and I a great team,' acknowledges Minal.

Minal finally decided to take a leave of absence keeping the option of going back to consulting open. She remembers what Shumeet had commented at the time, 'You know you can come back anytime you want but I don't think that you will.' He couldn't be more right.

Thus came into being Planetsaffron.com in the year 2000. The seed capital for the business came from personal savings and through

some friends and family members who invested into the business. The gallery where Minal and I are in conversation used to be WMI Cranes' office. Minal started out from an extra cabin that was available with WMI.

Initially the company was conceptualized and structured around the NRI client base to whom they would sell multiple products ranging from art, collectibles, holistic medicines, clothing, furniture, etc. However, the way things turned out, it was difficult to build multiple brands simultaneously and art eventually became the primary focus for the company and Planetsaffron

became Saffronart.

Like Minal, Dinesh had also studied art in his undergraduate years, his choice being Art Design. Spending the weekends at museums and art galleries was something they enjoyed doing together for leisure. They had a keen interest in collecting art. The first piece of art they had bought together was when they were on their honeymoon. They had actually planned their trip around looking at Asian art. As new collectors of art, they often faced the twin problems regarding transparency of pricing and access to a wide range of works of art. Invariably they found that for works

of the same artist and same series, there was a pretty significant difference in pricing in different galleries. Pricing for a work was often the result of a one-on-one discussion. Being new collectors, most often, they were not shown important works that the gallery had. The unique positioning of Saffronart evolved from a conscious attempt at removing such constraints for the buyer and making the buying experience informed, convenient and pleasurable for them. Minal and Dinesh were really looking at helping others who were keen on acquiring art and learning about it but faced similar roadblocks as them.

Saffronart therefore stood for transparency in pricing and easy access. After carefully consulting the galleries, dealers and artists, the benchmark prices for the works to be sold by Saffronart were arrived at. The prices for all the paintings were published for the first time. The buyer was given enough information on the site regarding the quality, size, etc of the product so that it was easy for him to decide and buy the product by simply providing the credit card details. The tax implications, duties and logistics were all managed by Saffronart so that it was a hassle free buying experience for the client with an assurance that

the piece would be delivered at his doorstep. This was quite innovative for Indian e-commerce sales at the time. It was also quite new for the leading logistics companies like Fedex and DHL who collaborated with Saffronart towards providing an easy process for international clients purchasing art from India.

One of the most important results of this transparent model with auctions and fixed price purchases online was that it became instrumental in setting international pricing levels also for modern Indian art. Prior to Saffronart, the pricing for Indian art in India was different from the pricing

internationally. After Saffronart, that normalized and Saffronart became the price maker in the market, with anyone including the trade and other auctions houses, checking Saffronart for definitive pricing for modern and contemporary Indian art.

Although the company was online, one of the hurdles it faced was that there hadn't been enough Indian art shown internationally and that comfort level and knowledge needed to be built up prior to clients being willing to make large spends online. Realizing that the physical experience of an exhibit or physical viewing was an important building block for the

business, as a next step, Minal made all the necessary efforts to go out and build a market for the company by holding exhibitions in New York, San Francisco, London, Hong Kong, etc.

‘It was surprising that until Saffronart held these exhibitions, there hadn’t been a single curated exhibition of Indian art overseas. What Saffronart showcased were some of the earliest exhibits people saw abroad of modern Indian art,’ highlights Minal about Saffronart’s pioneering efforts.

These exhibitions provided an opportunity to people to interact with the company. It established the credentials of Saffronart as a bonafide

company which people could trust and through whom they could be sure of buying an authentic product.

The year long hard work seemed worthwhile when finally Saffronart conducted its first auction in December 2000, achieving sales upwards of fifty lakhs over a five-day auction period. 'It was a great feeling that an online company could achieve such numbers in the first year of its operations,' comments Minal on the first brush of success the company experienced.

Within the first year of its operations, Dinesh also started getting interested and involved in working

with the galleries and sourcing. Encouraged by the success of the auctions, Minal hired more people and expanded the team. There came a point when the business seemed ready to get an infusion of external funding. Ashish Dhawan, co-founder of Chrysalis Capital and an HBS alum, put in a million dollars of his firm in Saffronart. At this time, Dinesh took a sabbatical from WMI and never really went back. His father handled the business. The institutional funding helped as besides the finances, it brought in discipline and validation that the business needed at the time.

The first couple of years had turned

out to be fantastic in terms of growth and development for the company. However, if there were ups, the downs were not far and could not be wished away. Around the end of 2002, the difficulties started surfacing. Although Saffronart had a good experience working with Chrysalis and their key partners, the firm revised their investment strategy (like other firms following the dotcom bust). At the beginning of 2003, Saffronart bought back Chrysalis Capital's stake to grow the company on a different trajectory. It was a difficult time because with these changes, Chrysalis had not invested a second tranche of

funding that Saffronart had expected and together with the funds that went for the buy back, the company was stretched for money.

Through these tough times, Minal and Dinesh would hear murmurs from some family members and friends that it was perhaps not a good idea after all for them to give up successful careers and venture into an unproven and uncharted territory. Initially Dinesh's father also did not quite understand what Minal and Dinesh were trying to do and thought that Saffronart was more of a hobby and a passing phase with them. He was however very supportive, both

morally and financially, during this low period. Minal's parents also pitched in with all their resources, keeping the business afloat and spirits from dampening. With this support, Dinesh and Minal were able to bootstrap the company with whatever resources they had, and worked on building a lean, efficient organization that could leverage the investment that they had made in building the market for the prior two years.

Fortunately for them, the testing period ended just when the company was hovering over its lowest point. The prices in the art market started moving up. As buyers gained

confidence with increased public sales, trust with Saffronart grew amongst buyers very rapidly as Saffronart delivered good quality art in a manner that gave clients confidence. Their client base grew through introductions made during the series of exhibitions that the company had done and positive client referrals, etc. With this renewed activity, at a level that was unprecedented in the Indian market, things turned for Saffronart. Within a year, the art auction market for Indian art (through auction sales in India and abroad) grew nearly ten times, from five million to over fifty million dollars in 2004. Saffronart's

investments in growing the market began paying off. In December 2005, the value of their sales in a two-day auction period reached nearly seventeen million dollars (upwards of seventy-five crores). 'From our first auction in December 2000 of a little over Rs. fifty lakhs to this auction in December 2005, a two-day sale of approximately Rs. seventy-five crores—this quantum jump in figures reaffirmed our efforts at growing the market as a whole through transparency and easier access.' It underscored what Minal and Dinesh had been emphasizing—that a collaborative business model like the

one Saffronart had developed to grow the market was far more successful than anyone had ever imagined at the time.

“That was an exciting period. We experimented with the model and created different sections of the website to cater to developing both, different categories with modern and contemporary art and different types of buyers/collectors. We used to twice host “collections of the month” sales. These were essentially flash sales at fixed price and were certainly ahead of their time. Within moments of the works going live on the website, which was the 1st of the month at

exactly 8 pm IST, the works would be sold out. In fact, I think the quickest time frame to sell a work in those collections was twenty seconds after it went live,' recalls Minal about her experience of seeing the complete cycle in the business from boom to doom and back to boom.

The success of Saffronart's business model caught the attention of Harvard Business School too and in 2005, two Harvard professors wrote a case study about Saffronart. 'The case study continues to be taught at Harvard. Dinesh and I are part of that classroom every year and it's a great learning experience for us. We have students

share their honest feedback and input on the company and our strategy and provide their suggestions. It's been a very useful series of inputs that we have gone on to incorporate in our strategy and operations for the company each year,' shares Minal with pride.

Minal goes on to give me a broad perspective of the art market in the last few years.

'The upswing in the market continued till 2007. A couple of events around this time however, caused a slowdown in the art market. The Indian government widened the definition of capital asset to include

properties such as paintings, drawings, sculpture and art work. The gains made from art sale were not considered tax-free any longer and were subjected to long term and short term capital gains, as the case may be. The financial crisis in 2008 resulted in further depressing the market. Between 2008-2010, the market for art, especially for contemporary art which is represented by artists like Subodh Gupta, Bharti Kher, Jitish Kallat, Atul Dodiya, etc., contracted considerably. In the past, during 2005-07, when Indian art had made a mark internationally, a lot of dealers internationally had acquired Indian art,

not necessarily for clients and collectors as they may have indicated, but rather, for trade. When the financial crisis hit international markets, these dealers who did not have the same level of commitment to Indian art as galleries within India, began selling the works within a relatively short period of time, bringing the prices further down.

‘Since 2010, the market for Indian art has seen resurgence with a difference. It has sort of matured where the top quality works do very well as collectors for these works are focused on creating strong collections of rare works. However, the market

for mid range works did not strengthen in the same way,' concludes Minal.

Saffronart is continuing to innovate and experiment with new product categories. How did jewellery, real estate, antiquities, collectibles and other product categories get added to the auction portfolio, I ask.

At the peak in 2006-07, we decided to diversify the categories we were dealing in and provide clients with a wider range of products. In some ways, I would say, Saffronart was ahead of the curve. What we were trying to do was basically preempt and derisk the business by avoiding

dependence only on art.

‘While our focus is on expanding from this region outward, in the recent past, we have successfully conducted an Impressionist and modern art auction too, featuring works of great masters like Vincent van Gogh, Picasso, etc.

‘So what we have done is that we have created a controlled market place for high end luxury products. It is controlled as we intermediate and do a background check on provenance and authenticity of everything that goes on sale or is auctioned on Saffronart. Providing authenticity, doing background research, and building

credibility is a very difficult as well as incredibly important part of the business,' states Minal revealing the secret behind Saffronart's success.

At present, there is enough work on hand for Minal to put her multi-tasking abilities to the fullest use. While she manages a growing business, nurtures the new product categories and on a personal level brings up her young daughters—Arya and Anaya, she is already thinking ahead. Through Saffronart Foundation (which was set up along with the company), Minal and Dinesh would like to see Saffronart's transition beyond individuals to having a larger

identity of its own as an organization and as a social institution which supports art education and art access and enables the use of art as an effective medium to raise awareness about issues related to women and children. They would also like to use the Foundation as a platform to help create a museum in Mumbai—an institution that is well deserved by a city that has been the hub of India's most renowned artists. Minal's mind is ticking away, busy with what gives her most joy—conceptualizing the next new thing, the next big idea for the brand Saffronart—her first baby that has come a long way.