



small big BANG!

Stories of 30
diehard
entrepreneurs



A QUEST BY 26
STUDENTS OF
ALL THE

IIMs

Editor : Ratan Mani Lal

small **big** **BANG!**

A Detour ... and Why

Angelene is a small town girl from Shillong who has had a remarkable journey and loves both the happy and ugly moments because she has learnt from them all. Surya Teja, from Vijayawada, likes cooking and spending quality time with family. She aspires to learn of new worlds of words. Pooja Sunder thinks that if she had her way life would be her fairy tale but reality continues to ruin it for her. Chetan Yuvraj Chavan is not comfortable imagining himself working for a big corporate organisation post his studies. He gets upset at the sorry state of Indian politics and the degrading social values of Indian society.

These young men and women are among the 26 students from the 13 Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs) who were selected to live the role of a writer before they moved on in the world of business management. Chosen amongst dozens of others, they had the spark with which they have lit up this book.

Meet them all: Asha Lalwani, Harish Mahale, Rajiv Ranjan, Kumar Sundaram, Mithun Madhusudan, Nilofer Thajudeen, Venkateswaran W.S., Deepak Thomas, Vivek K.V., Anshu Manoj Thakur, Chetan Yuvraj Chavan, Rekhith Pachanekar, Ashwin Murali, Pooja Sunder, Srilekha Bhattiprolu, Aniket Sharma, Stuti Garg, Rajat Katiyar, Snigdha Jha, Aanchal Saxena, Aastha Pandey, Amrita Mathews, Nitin Srinivas, Karthikeyan Balakumar, Surya Teja Pingali and Angelene Jyrwa.

All of them have taken a detour, listening to a call from their hearts.

The stories of 30 diehard entrepreneurs penned by them are both heart-warming and inspiring.

small big BANG!

*Stories of 30 diehard
entrepreneurs*

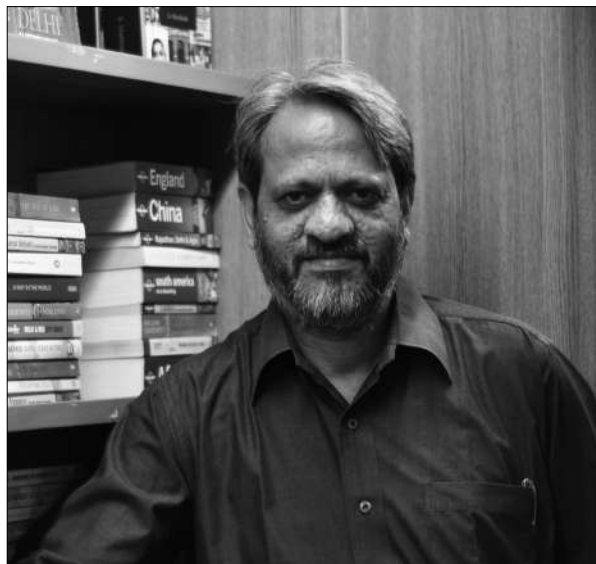
AUTHORS

(from class of 2013-14)

| | |
|-----------------------|----------------|
| Asha Lalwani | IIM, AHMEDABAD |
| Harish Mahale | IIM, AHMEDABAD |
| Rajiv Ranjan | IIM, AHMEDABAD |
| Kumar Sundaram | IIM, BANGALORE |
| Mithun Madhusudan | IIM, BANGALORE |
| Nilofer T. | IIM, BANGALORE |
| Venkateswaran W.S. | IIM, BANGALORE |
| Deepak Thomas | IIM, CALCUTTA |
| Vivek K.V. | IIM, CALCUTTA |
| Anshu Manoj Thakur | IIM, INDORE |
| Chetan Yuvraj Chavan | IIM, INDORE |
| Rekhith Pachanekar | IIM, INDORE |
| Ashwin Murali | IIM, KASHIPUR |
| Pooja Sunder | IIM, KOZHIKODE |
| Srilekha Bhattiprolu | IIM, KOZHIKODE |
| Aniket Sharma | IIM, LUCKNOW |
| Stuti Garg | IIM, LUCKNOW |
| Rajat Katiyar | IIM, RAIPUR |
| Snigdha Jha | IIM, RANCHI |
| Aanchal Saxena | IIM, ROHTAK |
| Aastha Pandey | IIM, ROHTAK |
| Amrita Mathew | IIM, ROHTAK |
| Nitin Srinivas S. | IIM, SHILLONG |
| Karthikeyan Balakumar | IIM, TRICHY |
| Surya Teja Pingali | IIM, TRICHY |
| Angelene G Jyrwa | IIM, UDAIPUR |

EDITOR

RATAN MANI LAL



Ratan Mani Lal

Editor

A wordsmith with a penchant for correctness and credibility, here is a journalist-turned academic who enjoys dealing with expressions and phrases.

In his 39 years in the media and communication industry, Ratan Mani Lal has handled top positions at The Times of India, Hindustan Times, Bhaskar Group and Jaipuria Institute of Mass Communication. Today he is a writer, commentator and teacher, all rolled into one, in addition to being a gentle soul.

He has played the key role in giving proper shape to the raw material brought in by the bright student-writers from IIMs. Not one to impose his style over their stories, he has worked in sync with the writers to blend fresh expressions with his experience, to bring this unique anthology to you.

Title of the Book

No, the title of this book is not inspired by some legend's living, lingo or lecture – it has been crowdsourced. Suggested by a housewife in Karol Bagh, New Delhi, we picked it up without attaching any frills to it. Though this housewife is an MBA, she quit her job right after putting on her engagement ring. Cool move! In fact homemaking was her deliberate choice, and priority of life too. A diehard fan of journalist Vir Sanghvi's 'Rude Food' column, she is a voracious reader of both fiction and non-fiction. She claims to have read over a thousand titles so far. She cherishes a dream of having her own Kindle Paper White some day. She has one more dream, of having her recipes converted into a book.

For us she is Rachana from the crowd. In her spare time, she composes poems in English. All unpublished.

Thank you Rachana for this title!





Small Big Bang!

Small endeavours that grew bigger and then made a great impact are quite like *the* Big Bang that created us eons ago.

Vision, hard work – plus a little madness, maybe – made 30 gritty entrepreneurs create ventures that have changed the ways of the world a little bit.

Who could tell their stories better than those young people who have just begun to chart their course in life?

In the first endeavor of its kind, students of IIMs take on a new avatar to bring the fireworks.

Small Big Bang! is a tribute to the undying spirit of entrepreneurship.

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The book contains stories of 30 entrepreneurs across India who realised their dreams in spite of all odds. Their stories are a source of inspiration to not only students but the young and the old alike. In these stories, the student-writers have merely chronicled the journeys of the entrepreneurs.

The students were pursuing their studies in different campuses of the Indian Institute of Management (IIM) across India. However, this endeavour was strictly the students' own choice and at their discretion, and not in any way influenced or guided by their esteemed institutions. The students' participation was sought through the indulgence of the Students' Councils at IIMs. It was the Students' Council representatives who facilitated the submission of entries of students willing to become a part of this project.

It was a totally voluntary exercise initiated by the publishing team which wanted to identify and encourage new writing talent among the vast student community.

Dedicated to
the raw and pure spirit of
being creative while on the campus.

Because always being a student in life matters

Editor's Note

Catching 'em Young

Students from all IIMs?

Talking to successful entrepreneurs and writing their stories?

Impractical, but possible.

Both the questions, and their answer, came from me and I knew was in. Like so many management and bureaucratic principles, if you say it can be done, then you're told: go ahead and do it. What are you waiting for?

It was in mid-2013 that Avinash materialized at my home one morning and appeared as if prepared for a long haul flight. Indeed, his book-by-IIM-students idea seemed a flight of fancy. But he had come equipped with answers.

He had toured the campuses of all 13 Indian Institutes of Management and approached the respective Students' Councils to spread the word about his project. Students

CATCHING 'EM YOUNG

willing to spare time and do the interviews totalled 382, and 26 had to be selected for the exercise. Avinash gave the list to me. "Select the ones you think are best suited for the exercise and even if half of them are good writers, your job is half done."

Oh well! Suppressing my excitement and trying to sound annoyed, I told him it was not as easy as he had made it out to be. "But yes, how can I say no to you?"

Thus began my association with a project that is truly unique and first of its kind. It is more commendable since it is the first title coming from a start-up publisher. It is not often you come to know about the journey of successful people who are not very well-known outside their domain. While the smallest details about big industrialists or their successors are known and savoured with delight, the toil of many others who rose from the ordinary to become extraordinary remains relatively obscure.

The ball had been set rolling in early 2013 by Prakhar Singh, an IIM-Lucknow alumnus, who first suggested to Avinash how students in all IIMs could be contacted through the Students' Councils. He convinced us that the IIM students would be really and perhaps deeply interested in joining this project. How right he was!

Here was a chance to learn how the scripts of huge successes were written by men and women who were like next-door neighbours. Selecting the eventual student-writers brought back memories of my days as a newspaper editor when I had to recruit trainees or reporters amongst a heap of applications. I did what I would have done in that case – I devised a small test to shortlist those with relatively better writing skills. At the end of it, I selected 26 students who had to do the job. To my delight, the students were as thrilled about it as I, and many of them told me they actually (though secretly) wanted to become writers. What followed were days and nights of long conversations, fixing up appointments, explaining to them the dos and don'ts of interviewing for the umpteenth time and boosting their morale.

We did not want a biography but an account of the person and their fears and hopes, their 'aha' moments and their angst, and the spark that ignited the entrepreneurship cracker in them.

It was interesting to see how easily and effortlessly the students took to the journalistic lingo of 'copy' and 'story,' as if they had been doing it all the time!

CATCHING 'EM YOUNG

Most of the students had been active in writing blogs, articles in college and institute magazines, or other publications. The IIM students are great manager material. However, I found from their work that they are also great author material. In fact, some of them, with their flair for language and expanse of expressions could leave many reporters and copywriters red-faced. It won't be a surprise if these bright writers emerge on the literary scene as shining stars in no time.

The fact that hundreds of students came forward to be a part of this project speaks of their inclination toward a world of words.

IIM students are trained to be methodical. Right from appearing in and clearing CAT, which gives them the entry ticket to IIM, they prefer things to be neatly stacked and quantitative. They came back with interesting stories. That most of the students also had an entrepreneurial streak in them was obvious by the fact that most of them went quite off the guidelines and yet provided excellent copy!

All the student-writers said that they felt overwhelmed at the grit and effort of the entrepreneurs. They were also unanimous in their observation that they saw the entrepreneurs putting into practice what the students had been taught in their classrooms!

As the project neared completion, its scale and significance made me realise how remarkable the transformation of Avinash had been, from a journalist to a publisher. Always involved in the subject, he never appeared to treat it simply as a business venture.

The entrepreneurs selected for the inclusion of their stories are no less than heroic in the scale and depth of their work and its importance. There are life-saving enterprises such as the mobile phone-compatible ECG monitor from Gajanan Nagarsekar or the cancer drugs search engine from Mallik Sundaram. Then there are wizards of the chip like Abhishek Rungta, Deepak Ravindran and Hemang Pandit, who made software that touches different parts of our lives. But there is one from this fraternity who is special to me. He is Abin Jose Tom, from small town Kerala. Not in the big league in terms of turnover, but much greater in terms of courage. The speed this dyslexic genius has with the keyboard has to be seen to be believed.

Like him, there are many who overcame their shortcomings or adversity to achieve success and set an example. There is Madhu Sutodiya, who braved

CATCHING 'EM YOUNG

personal tragedy to establish herself and her children in hostile territory. And who has not heard of the 'mad man' Muruganantham of Coimbatore? Or coffee king Mahendar of Bangalore? It has been a privilege for me to learn their stories, as well as those of Sanjoy Roy of the Jaipur Literature Festival fame, and Shradha Sharma of yourstory.com.

They are largely first-generation entrepreneurs or have emerging start-ups. Some of them were based overseas. It was a challenge, of sorts, for the assigned students to match their time zones with theirs. In an interesting transnational quirk, one student who had moved on an assignment to France interviewed Dilip Rao, then based in Australia. It was great fun synchronizing our discussion across three time zones.

I admit, I have not met most of them but I feel close to all of them. Their stories have convinced me that if a stone is thrown at the sky strongly enough, it will come down and break the ground where it falls – revealing a pot of happiness buried beneath. Their stories comprised diverse elements of courage, aspiration, hard work, vision and personal triggers. However, I could make out that somewhere *irada*, *dhamaka*, *uduan* and *safalta* (intention, endeavour, aspiration and success) were the elements which set them apart from each albeit in a very subtle manner. The stories in this book's respective sections reflect this. There are many more with similar, if not more exciting and inspirational, stories in India and abroad. In fact, Avinash knocked at the doors of nearly 50 star entrepreneurs to get them on board and we had to be content with 30 owing to their pressing schedules and availability. Nevertheless, we salute all of them.

My warmest and deepest thanks to all these successful, diehard entrepreneurs for they are the heroes who not only made it happen in their lives but have also inspired – and will continue to inspire – future generations to dream and fly. They have shown extreme grace and kindness in accommodating our requests to be interviewed by the student-writers, which sometimes lasted more than one sitting. On behalf of myself and the publishers, I express gratitude to all of them for sparing time for this exercise despite their busy schedule.

I have been privileged to get invaluable help from friends and family in putting this task together. The help from Deepak Gidwani, Arindam Roy, Nanya, Swati, Rashi, Shveta and my esteemed colleague C.K. Naidu in script handling has been great. With their excellent language skills and sincerity with correct expressions, they worked on the raw manuscripts submitted by the students. It

CATCHING 'EM YOUNG

was an interesting experience for them as they were not dealing with news copy, and they felt good that that they did not have to impose style uniformity on the text. For a copyeditor, nothing brings more relief than this relaxation.

As the manuscripts started taking shape, we decided to disturb a few friends who were voracious readers. Why not ask them to go through the raw writing and take their feedback? We invited Shirish Sinha, Rishi Ranjan, Anand Kurien, Jyoti Dwivedi and Aayushi Jain, who are IT and management professionals, writers and journalists, to give their honest opinion about the work done so far. They have been very gracious in pointing out the flaws in the narratives. I take full responsibility for whatever shortcomings that still remain after their keen observations.

Old colleague and friend, Ram Krishna, has been the organiser of the months-long exercise of fixing appointments, chasing the stories, getting inputs and sending reminders of all kinds. On occasions, he organised travel and movement with such precision that even I was surprised – because he is not in the travel industry! But good old 'RK' still remains a familiar name among the students and our featured entrepreneurs alike for his friendly firmness.

At home, Shikha and our children Shikhar and Rashi saw me spend long hours poring over my laptop or giving instructions to students. They were not bothered – they knew I was enjoying it all. Avinash later told me that he felt a little guilty about Shikha laying out a quick but delectable spread every time he came over, comprising *pakor*as, *sandesh*, rolls, coffee, *sherbet* and of course, tea. But I told him –with Shikha's concurrence, of course – that it was just like home.

I also thank Rajiv Tiwari for joining this project despite his ongoing assignments and busy schedule in newspapers, agencies and giving lectures on art. It was re-living the old times when we discussed the art possibilities of this book.

Vikas Babu, an accomplished photographer, took out time from his busy and hectic schedule to complete still photography for this project. He also did a great job in the photo session involving the paintings created by Tiwari.

Yes, the project took a little longer to complete than anticipated by us. From getting beaten by deadlines to beating the deadlines is a small leap forward but ultimately things get done. Availability of our stars and students, the great Indian General Elections of 2014 and tying up loose ends took more time than we expected. However, every good thing comes to an end, as did our pre-

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publication adventure, bringing with it a bouquet of stories that are timeless in nature.

Now, it is for the readers to go through the pages of this book and savour the creativity of the management students. As for the stories, they are inspiring, compelling and exciting, all at the same time. The assignment, for them, was more a lesson in life and career than a mere writing exercise. For me and the publishers, it is a part of the success of the project even before it hits the market.

Most of us spend a large part of our lives searching for that elusive bit of success, money or satisfaction and do not even realise that the time lost in their pursuit is best utilised in doing something that we love. Entrepreneurs do just that.

In the end, I feel equally overwhelmed and overshadowed by the the spirit of those entrepreneurs who left behind a comfortable life to explore unknown terrain. How I wish I also had done the same!

Ratan Mani Lal

Art Out of the Box

Over 31 years ago, there was a bunch of young artists with stars in their eyes and (mostly) black pens in their hands, who loved making cartoons and line sketches. Brought together by fate in a newspaper office in Lucknow, they handled similar responsibilities but there was one who always put more expression into his sketches, and the faces he drew seem to be talking to the reader.

He was Rajiv Tiwari, an artist par excellence who was cajoled by Avinash to enrich this book with his illustrations. But it is not as simple as it seems.

Rajiv also used to help and guide a Lucknow-based voluntary organisation Astha Kiran that was involved in teaching and training street children. Contrary to perception, the children were not only keen to learn new things but also expressed themselves eloquently through words, gestures and illustrations when given such an opportunity, recalls Sonia Singh who has guided Astha Kiran to become the mature organization that it is now.

It struck Rajiv that these children's expressions could

ART OUT OF THE BOX

give a raw, unaffected aspect to the visual appeal of this book – only if the children could tell how they felt about each story. The idea kept popping up in his mind and one day he selected six of them, all girls – Abha Gautam, Akanksha Rajpoot, Kavita Soni, Rehnaaz, Nasreen and Zainab. He asked them to draw what came to their minds when told, in a nutshell, about these 30 stories.

Rajiv was astonished to see the clarity of expression and the extent of creativity in the sketches given back by the children. He then went ahead and completed his paintings, painstakingly absorbing what the children had meant to convey. He has created full size (3ft by 4ft) paintings on each featured entrepreneur and, thus, given an entirely new dimension to the book's domain.

With his education in Applied Art from the premier Banares Hindu University (BHU), Varanasi, and years of experience in newspapers, magazines, advertising agencies, printing and publishing establishments and also as a free-lancer, Rajiv has an array of strokes and flourishes that have given him a distinct signature on the contemporary art canvas. With his work in this book, he has moved several notches higher in the eyes of all who admire him and his work. For, only an artist with a large heart can look for inspiration outside his domain.

His endearing wife Indira, I learnt later, shifted a lot of stuff to other rooms in their house to make space for a mini-studio where he could indulge in a creative splash and produce the excellent artwork for this project. In the harsh winters of 2013, she maintained a constant supply of roasted almonds and black coffee and kept the room warm so that Rajiv could not find an excuse to kick up one of his legendary tantrums!

I am grateful to Rajiv for being so patient and particular about the visuals. His association has endowed this book with a class that is unparalleled.

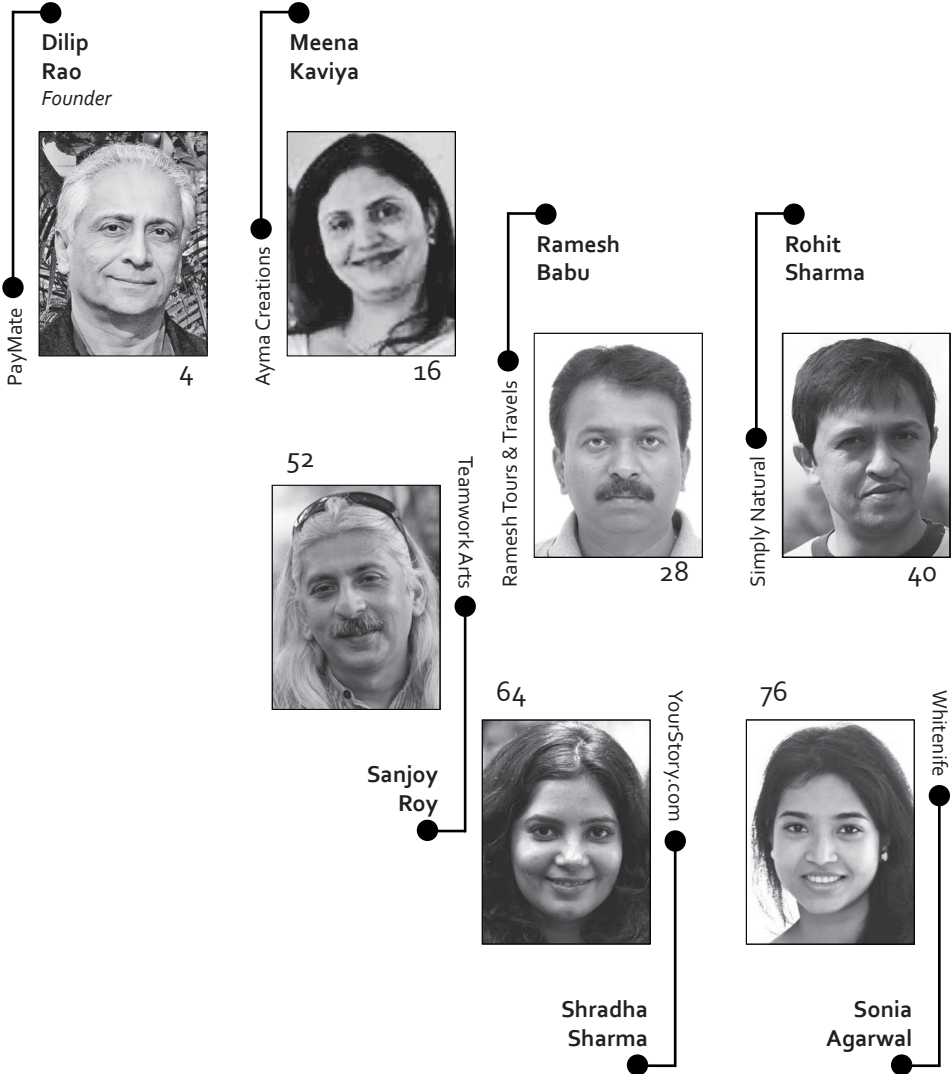
Ratan Mani Lal

P.S. – *The art work for this book is a charitable endeavour and the proceeds from the auction or sale of the paintings will go to a cancer awareness programme by People's Care Society (PCS), the CSR arm of ZAP Infocom Pvt Ltd. A separate book in connection with its fundraising efforts is also in the offing.*

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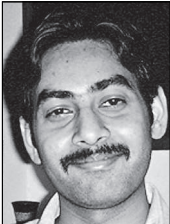
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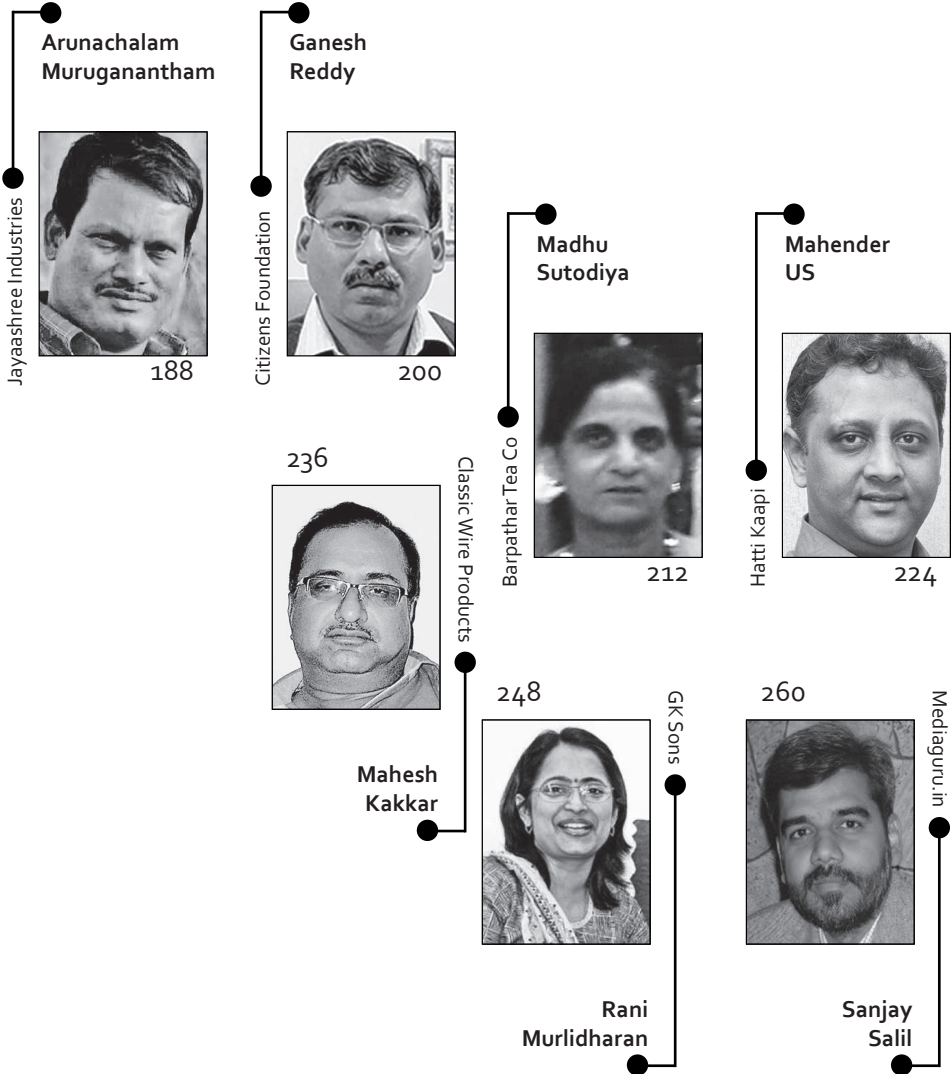
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Entrepreneurship • *noun.*

something which cannot be taught...

HE CREATES VALUE

One step ahead of competition



STORY OF

Abhishek Rungta

Indus Net Technologies

Abhishek Rungta had a fascination for computers and wanted to build a career around it. As his life followed a routine, he decided to quit his job and turn his love for computers into a career for himself. His initial attempts to sell his skills were rebuffed because he did not know much. However, as he says: "If you don't know anything, you really don't fear anything." His one-man venture started with one computer in his bedroom. He saw it all, from installing modems, setting up the Internet connection, making websites and selling webspace until the dotcom bust. His readiness to experiment and a conviction to learn and absorb small details have made his Indus Net Technologies part of the big league. His core philosophy: to create value.



HE CREATES VALUE

One step ahead of competition

Deepak Thomas

IIM-Calcutta

It is pouring in Kolkata as my taxi nears Salt Lake City. The city looks magnificent in the rain. The queen of Queen's India hadn't lost its vitality despite being, seemingly, untouched by the IT revolution that had engulfed all the other major metropolises. Little do I know that the person I am to meet would completely alter my skewed perception regarding IT and Kolkata.

Headquartered in Kolkata, Indus Net Technologies is a premiere web development and digital marketing company. With over 500 employees and offices in the US, the UK and Singapore besides major cities in India, the company is one of the biggest names in its field not just in India, but the world over. Today, in this rainy weather, I am to visit its headquarters and interview the founder and builder of this remarkable enterprise.

Luckily, by the time I reach the complex that houses Indus Net Technologies the rainclouds have decided that they have done enough for the day.

As I enter the headquarters, I notice the place is abuzz with activity. Youngsters sitting on their computers are busy working while others scurry around making deals and sorting issues out on their mobile phones. The wall next to the front entrance showcases the numerous awards and accolades that the enterprise has won in nearly 16 years of its existence. The ET Bengal Corporate Award, Deloitte Technology Fast 500 Asia Pacific and Deloitte Technology Fast 50 India, NASSCOM Emerge 50, #1 IT SME by Dun and Bradstreet, Top 100 SME by CRISIL and many other honours are on display.

I espy the man behind it all sitting inside his glass walled office, busily skimming through some documents. I inform the receptionist of my appointment and am swiftly ushered into the CEO's office.

Abhishek Rungta, founder CEO of Indus Net Technologies, or INT, warmly welcomes me. He seems to have a hundred other things to attend to but, for an hour and a half, he sets them all aside to tell me the story of how Indus Net reached where it is now.

The story began many years ago when Abhishek's father shifted his family from Karimpur, a small town near the Indo-Bangladesh border, to Kolkata to give his children a better education and expand his jute business.

Abhishek was born in Kolkata on November 4, 1977. He began his education at South Point School. His education was, however, not limited to school. In true Marwari tradition, his father would take him along on business errands. As a boy, Abhishek learnt the nitty-gritty of running the jute business, leading to seeds of entrepreneurship being firmly planted in him during childhood itself.

While studying in the eighth standard, Abhishek joined a youth programme called the Duke of Edinburgh's Award. It was during his association with this organisation that the flames of leadership were first kindled in him. He would help organise events and treks for the members and, very soon, he found his first job at DofE while still in school.

Trekking was something Abhishek was passionate about from a very young age. Even today, he believes trekking and other outdoor activities help build

many skills that a leader can use. “In a way, business is also an adventure sport,” he jokes.

Soon after finishing pre-university studies, he joined a newly set up engineering college in Kolkata, for a degree in computer science. However, a few weeks into the curriculum he was disillusioned and bored with the teaching methods the institution followed. He dropped out and joined the legendary St. Xavier’s College, which had been the *alma mater* of stalwarts such as Lakshmi Mittal and JC Bose, to name two of its distinguished alumni.

At St. Xavier’s, the classes wound up by 9.30 am, which left Abhishek with the rest of the day to do whatever he pleased. On a friend’s advice, he was soon working full-time for a direct sales agency of Citibank as a sales agent. The stint taught him valuable lessons in selling, which later helped him as he built his own company. His parents also coaxed him to attend classes at NIIT, where he learnt his first computer skills.

In due time, though, two major incidents changed the course of Abhishek’s life. The first was an accident that left him bed-ridden for several weeks. During this time, the computer was his only source of amusement. This confinement sparked his interest in the machine. Around then, he came to know that Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh, was to visit Kolkata as part of a tour to commemorate the Golden Jubilee of India’s Independence and that he would also give away the year’s DofE awards. As luck would have it, Abhishek was one of the winners. The organisers wished to display to the Duke the various skills of the youth of Kolkata and were particularly interested in displaying the IT acumen of their young members. It was to this end that a group of members, including Abhishek, was asked to make an animated video about the activities of the DofE in Kolkata. Abhishek was soon at work making the video and he fell more in love with his computer and its extensive possibilities.

After the award ceremony and the positive response to his video, Abhishek decided to leave his job at Citibank and turn his love for computers into a viable business. He and his friend decided to start an “email shop”. The concept of cybercafés had not yet set in and Abhishek thought it would be a good opportunity for him to build a business. The two friends bought two modems and tied up with an email service provider. However, the idea was doomed as the company that was to provide them with the email service went bankrupt.

Not knowing what to do with the two modems lying at his home, Abhishek decided to connect them to a service called BBS (Bulletin Board Service). Soon, he realised that BBS was just a drop in the ocean of Internet possibilities, so he upgraded himself with an Internet connection. The new service fascinated him and soon he was emailing his friends who had gone abroad to study and had taken an interest in the then new concept of online chatting. It was in an online chat room called ‘Talk City’ that he built a network of tech savvy people around Kolkata.

His fascination with computers instilled in him a desire to build a career around them. Citing his computer animation skills, he approached an IT company with his services but was rebuffed. They said they required a person who knew HTML and not an animator. Abhishek went home and decided to find out what HTML was all about.

After much research and learning, he became adept at HTML and decided to sell his skills. On his mother’s advice, he went to a commercial exhibition with 50 xeroxed copies of a handwritten advertisement offering his services. Inexperienced as Abhishek was, he did not have a stall to exhibit. Luckily enough, soon after he reached the exhibition he found a modem stall that wasn’t doing good business. He negotiated with the promoter for some space.

Now, when Abhishek looks back, he realises that if he had been a bit more knowledgeable about the world, he probably wouldn’t even have ventured to seek space from the promoter. But as he puts it, “If you don’t know anything, you don’t fear anything.”

Abhishek fully utilised the space provided to him and was soon at work, actively educating people about the Internet and its utilities. The venue was soon milling with people trying to find out more about this new-fangled technology. It is from this shared exhibition stall that Abhishek made his first deal.

This date, in early 1997, is what Abhishek likes to call the founding of Indus Net Technologies. His first customer was kind enough to give him a cheque the very next day and Abhishek and his parents were thrilled. His parents bought him a scanner and from his bedroom he finally started his one-man venture. The first deal ultimately ended up generating Rs 13,000 for the budding entrepreneur.

The dream had begun and he made a logo for his organisation and came up with a name. He would go to customers to install modems for them—this would get

him commissions from modem sellers—and set up Internet connections, thus earning commissions from Internet service providers.

Realising the efficacy of exhibitions in getting customers, he rented a stall at the Industrial Trade Fair held at Maidan in Kolkata. It was at this exhibition that he ventured into two new areas of business. One was Internet telephony—he began dealing in a service called Net2Phone—and the second was website hosting, which would virtually lend wings to his business.

In 1997, when Abhishek decided to set up his own website, there was a major obstacle. Hosting services were prohibitively expensive in India. They were provided by government companies and cost upwards of Rs 25,000. Abhishek researched more on why this was so and he quickly realised that hosting was extremely cheap outside India. The businessman in him saw a golden opportunity. Braving humungous red tape, he arranged to purchase webspace from abroad and sell it locally. This was a phenomenal idea and, soon, he began to do great business in the field. He shifted from directly selling to customers to selling a bundle of website space to companies to sell further. This was his transition from direct hosting to reseller hosting. By 1999, in just two years, the one-man company became the largest private hosting company in eastern India.

However, the same year, unknown to Abhishek, a huge business phenomenon was sweeping the world. The world was witnessing the dotcom boom and Internet companies were popping up a dime a dozen. Large investments were crowding the industries. “But I had no idea this was going on in the rest of the world,” Abhishek recalls.

Abhishek realised he could make a decent living out of his new venture. However, he decided to pursue his studies further. He packed his bags, handed over the reins of his company to his sister and left Indian shores for the University of Bath in the United Kingdom to pursue Masters in Multimedia Technology.

The shift to Bath proved to be an eye-opening experience for Abhishek who had never been abroad before. His small batch was a mixture of people from every nationality. The place he stayed at had 14 rooms and each room had a person from a different country. Here, the bubble that the best programmers lived in India burst in his mind. He realised that good programmers and logical thinkers could come from any part of the globe. He used the opportunity to learn from

the brilliant minds that surrounded him. He tells me that international travel and exposure are learning opportunities no entrepreneur should forego.

The mode of education at the university was also a revelation. Here, he was encouraged to question and think on his own, something he had found lacking in his previous educational experiences.

At Bath, he joined a company called Open World part-time to fund his college degree. It was a large web designing firm that built and maintained websites for prestigious hotel chains like Hyatt and InterContinental. It had hundreds of employees and functioned like a typical corporate enterprise. It was here that Abhishek learnt the methodical approach to website designing. He realised that website designing didn't have to be a small enterprise, generating just enough to earn daily bread for the promoter. He realised that the business could be turned into a large corporation and, now, he knew in what direction he wanted to take his company.

It was during this stint that he heard of a person seeking to build a business listing website. He was willing to pay 2000 pounds to anyone who could set up a replica of a famous American website. Abhishek pounced on the opportunity and bagged the prize in a few days' time. Though the Dean of his department was not too pleased with Abhishek for pursuing such a venture, he himself realised something really important that would help build his business further: "You don't need physical contact with the customer to build a website." He did one more project while still in college but at the back of his mind he thought continuously of his little enterprise back home.

After getting his degree, many job offers came his way but he rejected them in order to go back home to expand his business. Though his sister had been managing the company exceptionally well, it was time for the company to grow further.

Soon after his return, Abhishek formed a new sales team. He handed each one a brochure and sent them out in search of new clients. However, the timing Abhishek chose couldn't have been worse. The dotcom boom had come and gone and it was soon followed by the dotcom bust. The IT companies that had flowered were shutting shop. The sales team returned empty-handed and Abhishek had to roll back his sales plans.

Abhishek's big ideas had, seemingly, bitten the dust. He felt desperate on

realising that he had given up a secure life in the UK to come home to an uncertain future. Throughout this, however, his parents and his sister did not give up hope. They were the inspiring sources of strength that motivated Abhishek through this phase.

At this point, Abhishek stumbled upon a service called Elance, a website that offered freelancers access to clients all over the world. This discovery thrilled Abhishek no end.

“I sat online for three days continuously. I was excited by the possibilities.” He found one client online and, then, many more followed. There was no stopping the company now. Jobs got posted online and Indus Net grabbed them. The clients were impressed and more jobs poured in. Abhishek started hiring employees. However, competitors sniffed out his method of getting clients and soon the Elance space got crowded. Luckily though, soon he discovered GoTo.com. He offers an interesting piece of information: “GoTo was the first site to offer pay-per-click advertising, much before Google ads.” He spent hours bidding to be placed ahead in search results and realised high pay-offs for the low amounts he spent on advertising. Soon, he was also bidding on Google ads.

The customer numbers kept growing. INT built dating sites, e-greeting sites and many others that came its way. Dissatisfied customers were refunded every penny and relationships were built through ace service. The company began building sites on open-source technologies.

A small hiccup was the dissonance between the expectation of clients from the UK and the US and the way the site was built in India. However, Abhishek soon trained his team to address this issue and his hands-on approach in dealing with it pushed his company to greater heights. He did domestic work as well. The first online ticketing site for any theatre in Kolkata was designed by Indus Net, for a theatre called Priya Cinema. This was way before it became the norm. The company was now on the fast track of growth.

In 2001, Indus Net Technologies launched a dedicated hiring model aimed at small outsourcing contracts and, with it, started the expansion of Indus Net's reputation in industry circles. Even today, the model is a trademark of Indus Net.

Despite the expansion of the company, it was still headquartered in a modest

office in Central Kolkata. It did not even provide an AC supply and the company had to use inverters at the risk of burning up their precious equipment. Abhishek realised it was high time that he shifted to a bigger office.

He heard of a new office complex in the famous Salt Lake City area in Kolkata. He went to the TiE office and was introduced to Swaroop Roy, an official at Webel (West Bengal Electronics Industry Development Corporation Limited) who was in charge of office allotment. At a very low price and rent he managed to get a fully furnished office with high-speed Internet access and all the required amenities. With this new office at their command, Abhishek Rungta and Indus Net had truly arrived.

During this period, some of his clients from the US and the UK visited him to see the company that was working on their websites. In 2007, one of his clients was not able to make it all the way to India so, he invited Abhishek to meet him halfway in the UK. Abhishek left for the UK a second time. He met his client and also set up a stall at an industrial exhibition and went around the country getting new clients for the company. With the positive response he got from prospective clients, Abhishek decided to set up shop in the UK. Now, the company had expanded beyond the country's borders and had not just a client but a corporate presence abroad.

Even with revenues tipping USD 6 million for the year 2013, Abhishek plans for further expansion and informs me of how many customers continue to be associated with INT even after over a decade of using their services. That he refused an acquisition in 2011 testifies to the great future Abhishek envisaged. He believes the company has still not reached its full potential.

In this entire growth story, the thing that struck me was how Indus Net always seemed one step ahead of its competitors in attracting new customers.

Abhishek's formula for success is simple: "If you've got to do it, you've got to do it." All through the expansion Abhishek didn't shy away from taking up any job. He never segmented his customers, and all the new avenues of getting customers were more serendipitous rather than a conscious effort to stay ahead of competition.

Another factor in Abhishek's, and INT's, success was his unflinching "conviction to learn". His motto was: "Always learn and upgrade your skills" and that is precisely what he did. It was this conviction that helped INT weather the

dotcom bust of the early 2000s and the fall in customers from the USA and the UK in 2008 due to the recession.

“Our USP has always been ‘customers who pay for X should get more than X,’ which, in essence, means that we create value and that is our core philosophy.”

However, this growth has not come easy. Managing the new size and protecting the growth has been keeping Abhishek busy lately. He confides his worry about the problem of “pseudo-entrepreneurs,” employees who steal away clients from a company while working for it. A company like Indus Net operates on trust as much as on value creation. However, Abhishek learnt the hard way the fallacies of blind trust.

He also learnt the logic of letting people go. If the company grows but the employees don’t upgrade to the necessary skills and the customers don’t grow in size along with them then, Abhishek says, it is in the best interest of all concerned to cut short association. It is a lesson he learnt too late but one he hopes he will be able to impart to other new entrepreneurs.

Mentoring, he reckons, is another important factor in the success of a start-up. Throughout his initial phase, he had the able guidance of his father and mother. Later, he found a mentor in Mr Sanjay Verma, former ITC InfoTech Managing Director. He had introduced Abhishek to the concept of “productising.” Abhishek also got great patronage from NASSCOM. However, he believes the greatest source of the ideas he has is his mastermind group of six other entrepreneur friends. They often meet up and act as guides for each other. “So, in sum, it is like having seven mentors for each company.”

It is to this end that Abhishek and his close friend Pallav Nadhani, co-founder of InfoSoft Global, started the venture capital firm Seeders. Through Seeders, Abhishek not only funds but also mentors firms through their initial growth. He makes it a point to set aside a few hours each week just to help out fledgling firms. Though, initially, he started the fund to specifically promote start-ups in Kolkata, he now promotes companies all over the country. He envisages a growing entrepreneur ecosystem in the city.

Indus Net is not the end of the horizon for Abhishek. “In the field of technology, I have so many ideas that I don’t think I’ll run out of them any time soon.” However, in the unlikely situation that he does he would concentrate

HE CREATES VALUE

on building new companies through his venture fund. Another field he would like to work in, is education. He believes that there are many things that can be corrected in the field and once he figures out how to do that he will probably be at it. However, for the time being, he seems to have his hands full with INT.

The journey that Abhishek took to reach the pinnacle is, in itself, quite an achievement. The characteristic that stands out about him is his tenacity in building his company. No obstacle seemed to impede him. The company was built not just by the businessman in Abhishek but also the trekker. For him, in many ways, the trek is still going on and he is enjoying every bit of it.

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Just a Small Aside

At one point in the interview, a cute little girl opens the glass door and comes in. No important business call interrupted our interview but the CEO has to bow to his daughter's wishes. The interview takes a backseat to Abhishek's daughter. I spend some time watching the little girl play and listen to the familial chit-chat between father and daughter.

"The best thing about being your own boss must probably be having the freedom to play with your kids in the middle of office hours," I quip. He is quick to reply: "Well, every employee in my office has the freedom to do that. We let the families visit and bring tiffin. It is no big deal here. So, where were we?"

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**DEEPAK
THOMAS**

For Deepak Thomas, moving and travelling became the bywords in his life as his father was an officer in the Indian Army. He has lived in 9 different places and studied in 7 different schools. It was only after he got into NIT Calicut that he stayed put in a place for more than 3 years. However, he still remains a nomad at heart and looks forward to visiting places he has never been before.