

THY LIFE'S A MIRACLE

RJ, THE HARVESTER OF OPPORTUNITIES

Chander Mahadev



In Shakespeare's play King Lear, a distressed Gloucester attempts to take his life but Edgar speaks the famous lines, at once filial and fatherly, **"Thy life's a miracle"**.

This is the line that pulls Gloucester back from distress and anguish into a new lease of life where change and redemption are a way of human existence.

This wonderful line conveys that a man need never despair, there are happenings, redemptions and circumstances which can pull him out of despondency into a life of satisfaction and happiness.

But for that, a man must be ready to harness the good and gratifying from the godsend thrown at him by fate. And such a man is Rakesh, who goes beyond mere rejoicing in the fruits of simple serendipity to a belief that harvesting of opportunities is our true karma.

~ Sudhanshu Mani

Thy Life's a Miracle

RJ, The Harvester of Opportunities

CHANDER MAHADEV

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My loving niece **Akriti** in Melbourne, for giving life to the text by adding pictures, artwork, and layout design of the book, and my associate staff **Neha** for working tirelessly on the creation of this book.

It is amazing, upon reflection, to have started business as a retail seller of Zippo lighters and thereafter to have gotten on a roller coaster ride putting up units manufacturing some of the most challenging engineering goods including Rubber & Polymers Products, Filters, Sugar Machinery, Automobile Mounts, Railroad Brake Systems, Pneumatic Equipment & Machinery and finally a variety of Rolling Stock Heat Exchangers and Air Conditioners duly approved by the Indian Railways. The journey bequeathed to me a rich international exposure, having joint ventures with a number of multi-national companies, and an extremely dedicated and competent team of around 600 people that I fondly call the 'PRAG Parivaar'.

It has indeed been a very enriching and gratifying odyssey and could not have been possible without the support and blessings of my parents, brothers, and all family members, to whom I am eternally grateful and indebted.

My thoughts go out to all my friends and extended family members, and all who have been close to my heart from my school days to college and thereafter throughout my life and career path and have contributed to my journey, although a meeting with them may have not happened for years.

~ *Rakesh Jain*



Foreword

I have known Rakesh for quite some time. We have often met during my visits to Lucknow and have had many interesting conversations.

Rakesh's own journey has been nothing short of miraculous. When he unexpectedly lost a secure job he set up a small entrepreneurial enterprise in Lucknow and expanded it to Mumbai.

Among his serendipitous encounters was the one with Madhavrao Scindia, then the Maharaja of the Railways, which helped Rakesh to first become an ancillary supplier to the Indian Railways, then to the American Railways. Even now I believe he continues to maintain a lion's share of the Indian market for some railway ancillaries!

Life's unexpected twists and turns are reflected in this absorbing book by Rakesh, and its ups and downs that occur to all of us, but Rakesh's persona and temperament have turned seemingly unfavourable situations into agreeable and pleasant outcomes!

This is the central theme of Rakesh's fascinating story which I have enjoyed reading and which I hope you will find inspiring. I raise a toast to his courage and indomitable will and wish him all success in his life!

~ *Shatrughan Sinha*

* * * * *



Preface

"Life is 10% what happens to you and 90% how you react to it."

~ Charles R. Swindoll

Growing up under the auspices of a very charismatic father, I was often awestruck by some of his most incredible, almost surreal, real-life stories that may well give the most well-curated Bollywood blockbuster plots a run for their money.

The story of Dad (hereinafter referred to as RJ) has it all – a gripping storyline with several unexpected twists and turns, some incredible happenstances that seem to be choreographed by the almighty himself, and an emotion-charged melodrama of a court battle as the climax.

The story begins with a flashback to RJ's school days. His passion and inner drive to achieve new heights were evident even in those early days as he contested and won the secretaryship elections against the now famous film director, Ketan Mehta.

A young and dynamic graduate from Shri Ram College of Commerce, RJ joined a fledgling start-up under a charismatic founder and mentor and quickly climbed up the corporate ladder, only to be thrown overboard in the most unexpected fashion. A person with modest roots, he decided never to work for anyone else again and started off on his own.

With nothing but a tenacious zeal to excel and a never-say-die attitude, he set up a stall selling Zippo lighters in Lucknow, while at the same time, garnered the enterprise to pivot a revolutionary idea into a small trading business based out of Mumbai.

Ultimately, as he was forging ahead with blood, tears, and sweat, manna started to fall from up above. A chance visitor to his Zippo lighter stall provided the bolts that fastened him like a cog in the wheels of the world's largest transporter – the Indian Railways. An erstwhile Prefect from his school appeared out of nowhere to provide him the next rung of the ladder, which was almost taken away from him had it not been for another chance encounter that led him to the doorsteps of Madhav Rao Scindia, the then Minister of Railways.

The story then moves overseas to the US, where the VP of one the largest freight wagon builders helped RJ's company become the first-ever Indian company to manufacture and supply rubber products to an American railroad OEM, and a casual cold call made from the Chicago airport lead RJ first to Australia and then to Louisiana's sugar belt, where he bagged his first 10-million-rupee contract.

The next scene is shot in the backdrops of Chicago and Baltimore, where a chance opening of a door (literally), opened the doors for RJ to enter, and quickly climb atop the world of railroad filters, where he continues, till date, to maintain 80% market share of the Indian market.

Another interesting saga is that of Mr. Amit Slev, who, shortly before his death, called upon RJ, handing over, almost like a parting gift, the keys to enter the automotive component business. The next episode shows RJ board a train to Dehradun, almost on an impulse, to set up a new plant there and encounter an exceptional landowner who provides him the required land in a jiffy and on the most unconventional of terms.

The role of the villain in the story can be said to be assumed by the Central Bureau of Investigations and the fateful CBI case and RJ's emphatic fight and emergence from the same is a fascinating story in its own right. The final episode talks about how a world-class HVAC manufacturing plant was set up in record time, only to be subjected to the Murphy's law ("if anything can go wrong, it will") of entrenched business lobbies, and the ensuing court battle.

Eventually, it was out of a subconscious yearning to document these incredible stories from RJ's life that the book you hold in your hand was born. As I was composing this book, revisiting the remarkable stories I had grown up listening to, I could not help but wonder: *'Is it that RJ was born plain lucky or did he have some role to play in the creation of the miracles that he so gratefully attributes to 'divine intervention'?'*

Although there has been no dearth of perseverance and uncompromising hard work put in by RJ in all his endeavors, he has never shied away from crediting all his success to destiny. Nonetheless, it is a stimulating exercise to explore other more sublunary possibilities.

Ashwin Sanghi's *"13 Steps to Bloody Good Luck"* provides an interesting take on the concept of "luck". Just as RJ's life-story is full of quite a few streaks of remarkably good luck, if we look at the life-story of any hugely successful person, we will find that luck has an important role to play.

There are numerous examples of people out there who have the skills, qualification, and hard work, but are still unsuccessful. All the same, we can find numerous examples of successful 'lucky' people without many of the above qualifications. If luck was pure destiny, it should be randomly distributed, with streaks of good luck dispersed in the general populace more in the shape of a bell-curve.

However, in reality, it is not so. The world around us is full of either 'lucky' people, who have numerous miracles in their lives, or with 'unlucky' people, who can hardly boast of any. This tells us that most miracles are not absolute acts of nature. They are – to a certain extent – and perhaps to a much larger extent than we care to think of – nurtured and controlled by us.

According to Anthony Tjan, co-author of New York Times bestseller *Heart, Smarts, Guts, and Luck*, there are three types of luck: Circumstantial Luck, Constitutional Luck, & Dumb Luck.

Circumstantial Luck: Being at the right place at the right time. For example,

RJ walking into an Indian Railways office for the first time and finding his old friend and senior from school sitting across the table.

Constitutional Luck: An outcome you are predisposed to due to age, race, heritage, culture, or upbringing. For example, a person securing college admission through minority quota.

Dumb Luck: The sort of luck where one cannot analyze the cause and effect e.g. winning the lottery.

As per Sanghi, “while constitutional luck and dumb luck are difficult to control, one can substantially improve the circumstantial luck in one’s life.” While there might have been a stroke or two of dumb luck in RJ’s life, you will find most “miracles” you read about in this book attributable to circumstantial luck.

An act of good luck or bad luck usually happens when we are presented with an opportunity and we respond to it. Accordingly, ‘how lucky we are’ is determined largely by the following:

- ▶ The number of opportunities presented to us
- ▶ How we respond to those opportunities, and
- ▶ How the outcome of our response pans out

Once we can see luck as an outcome of our responses to the opportunities presented to us, it is easy to start thinking about how we can make ourselves luckier. Sanghi, in his book, draws a very interesting parallel between rainwater harvesting in Mumbai and luck:

“Mumbai has an acute shortage of water with the city’s Municipal Corporation only being able to cater to about 80% of daily water requirement. However, the balance 20% can be easily catered to if the whole city could harvest even 70% of Mumbai’s annual rainfall. The rainfall is in abundance; the only problem is that not all houses in Mumbai are equipped to harvest the same. Homes with rainwater harvesting are effectively able to catch, store, and use the free rainwater available.”

Now, imagine that opportunities are like rainfall. They are falling freely and in abundance all over the world. However, it is only very few ‘lucky’ people who have an ‘opportunity harvester’ installed within themselves. It is these lucky

people who are effectively able to recognize and respond to these opportunities.

Lucky people imbibe and practice the three 'R's of opportunity harvesting: They know how to **RAISE** the number of opportunities that come their way, **RECOGNISE** these opportunities better, and **RESPOND** effectively to these recognized opportunities.

Sanghi presents the following 13 attributes of lucky people that help them create an opportunity harvester within themselves:

- **Network** *Lucky people grow and strengthen their network.*
"Luck hates loneliness. It is almost impossible to be lucky alone." ~ Philippe Gabilliet.
- **Intuition** *Lucky people listen to their intuition and develop it.*
"The intuitive mind is a sacred gift, and the rational mind is a faithful servant. We have created a society that honors the servant and has forgotten the gift." ~ Albert Einstein
- **Experiment** *Lucky people are willing to try new things.*
"I'd rather regret the things that I have done than the things that I have not done" ~ Lucille Ball
- **Risk Taking** *Lucky people take calculated risks, cut losses, and learn from mistakes.*
"If you are not willing to risk the unusual, you will have to settle for the ordinary." ~ Jim Rohn
- **Positivity** *Lucky people stay positive, persevere, and cultivate a thick skin.*
"The most certain way to succeed is always to try just one more time." ~ Thomas Edison
- **Alertness** *Lucky people find ways to remain calm and thus alert.*
"I was seldom able to see an opportunity until it had ceased to be one." ~ Mark Twain
- **Situations** *Lucky people make the best of bad situations.*
"We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars." ~ Oscar Wilde

- ▶ **Confidence** *Lucky people develop their confidence and communicate.*
"Experience tells you what to do; confidence allows you to do it." ~ Stan Smith

- ▶ **Information** *Lucky people stay informed and absorb new ideas.*
"As a general rule, the most successful man in life is the man who has the best information." ~ Benjamin Disraeli

- ▶ **Goodness** *Lucky people understand the power of goodness.*
"Always give without remembering and always receive without forgetting." ~ Brian Tracy.

- ▶ **Passion** *Lucky people seek ways to get paid for their passion.*
"Choose a job you love, and you will never have to work a day in your life." ~ Confucius

- ▶ **Unlearn** *Lucky people unlearn old attitudes and approaches.*
"I am looking for a lot of men who have an infinite capacity to not know what can't be done!" ~ Henry Ford

- ▶ **Leveraging Strengths** *Lucky people leverage preparation, planning, and potential*
"Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, It will live its whole life believing that it is stupid." ~ Albert Einstein

As we go through RJ's life story, it would be a stimulating exercise to look at each 'miracle' in the light of the above '13-Steps' and take a minute to think about how RJ created an 'opportunity harvester' within himself using some of them. This might just turn out be the biggest life lesson for the reader from the miraculous life-story of RJ.

~Gokul Jain



Chapter 1

THE RAJA OF RELATIONSHIPS



According to the great thinker Martin Buber, it is a universally accepted fact that miracles are but pointing fingers to the existence of God. And it is one such miracle in flesh and blood that I wish to share with you. A miracle because on the innumerable occasions when he felt he was going off track, the gentle hand of destiny brought him back to be the engine of growth. For him, business did not mean notching success living in the comfort zone. He constantly pushed the envelope, and always stayed out of his comfort zone. Here was an entrepreneur for whom personal aggrandizement and materialism were low on the priority list. He insisted that at every turning point and at every defining moment in his life as an entrepreneur, some miracle, in the form of a human being helped him scale greater heights, both as a thought leader and man of action. However, most people were of the unanimous view that his is a story waiting to be told.



I distinctly recall it was April 25, 2015. As I sauntered into Mr. Rakesh Jain's office in Talkatora Industrial Estate, in Aishbagh area of Lucknow, I was struck by his candor and his earnestness. As he welcomed me into his tastefully done but almost minimalist office, I could not but notice that despite his short stature, he wore a broad pair of shoulders. As he sized me up from behind his broad-rimmed spectacles, I saw his clear, sparkling eyes darting across the room, on to the TV screen that was blaring out tragic breaking news. It was the day that the devastating earthquake had struck Nepal. The tremors and the aftershocks were coming in, in unrelenting waves. Lucknow had never witnessed such a shake-up and buildings could be seen swaying perilously that morning.

As Chairman of the PRAG Group of Industries, I saw the care and concern in his eyes. He was sharing his office with his son and Director, Mr. Gokul Jain. As I eased myself into the large leather-toned guest chair in front of me, with a cup of hot cappuccino, I heard Rakesh share with his son, "I was the last to leave the premises on the two occasions since morning. I was worried stiff about the 300-odd staff members being evacuated from the buildings and I prayed that they got away unscathed."

I immediately discerned that these were the words of a team leader who cared for his players. His easy demeanor and his disarming smile were two great indicators of his affable personality. When asked as to why his company was called PRAG and why was it often mistakenly referred to as 'Parag', a State Milk Cooperative that went by this name, he looked serious, just for a moment. With a shy smile playing on his weather-beaten face, he revealed that it was an acronym that stood for four people who got together to start a business but never got started. That was over three and a half decades ago.

These four protagonists were his brother and partners. The acronym stood for Pramod, Ravinder, Arun and Gujral. When I looked at him a wee bit surprised, he realized my concern. "I found that this name spelled success and was kind of synonymous to progress" Pragress" so there was no need for me to find my name included as an acronym," he revealed almost nonchalantly. "It was a 7,800 Sq. Ft. of barren land allotted in the name of PRAG by the industries office, and I had to shell out Rs. 12,000 to get possession. Ever since, we have operated out of here."

PRAG started off as a trading and a small manufacturing enterprise, and nobody then expected it to be associated as a Railway ancillary for most critical and innovative engineering products like it has come to be today. How did he embark on his journey as a businessman in the first place?

Considering his father, Mr. S P Jain, was a renowned engineer who started his career with the Defence Ordnance factories and thereafter working with multinationals and big corporate business houses, how did business figure in Rakesh's scheme of things?

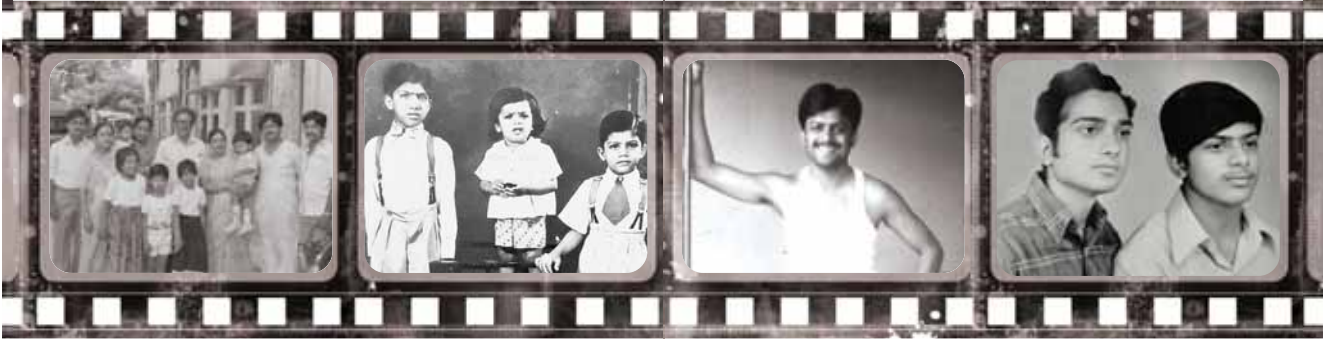
Rakesh reveals it was all because of TNA. TN Agarwal happened to be his father's friend. And it was the TNA factor that played a huge role in shaping him the way he is today. About his own role in the success of his company, Rakesh is almost dismissive. He says he had hardly any role to play in his own success, but it was the people who came into his life and got associated with him who helped him scale the heights that PRAG has come to be known for.



By now, the death toll being beamed on the TV screen showed over 200 people had been killed as reports and updates poured in. By now, Rakesh had revealed that he was part of the flower power generation and he loved to smoke his occasional toke of grass and do the rounds of discotheques. He then went on to share that he was still close to those who were with him then, during his carefree days.



He then made a startling disclosure. "I invest in relationships, not in business. That has been my life mantra". It was then that the thought crossed my mind: Was this hugely successful Lucknow entrepreneur a Raja of relationships? A man for whom unconditional love was nurturing friendships and these friends played a miraculous role in his chequered but hugely successful career. Aiming to see a pattern in his miracles, I wondered if acronyms too had a decisive role to play in his peaking career graphs. Whether it was PRAG or TNA, two acronyms could be a coincidence. But then looking at Mr. Rakesh Jain's name in the form of an acronym, I looked at two letters, RJ. It then dawned upon me that he certainly had the gift of articulation, much like a modern-day Radio Jockey [RJ]. Or would it be better still that RJ stood for the consummate Relationship Jockey that scripted the highs in RJ's life? Yes, Relationship Jockey sounded like the perfect epithet to describe him and to take the readers through his reflective journey of sorts.



By now, the two-hour meeting was drawing to a close. The modest and humble human being who stood in front of me hugely took me in. He was wearing a long white shirt and as he escorted me to the parking lot, he noticed my black shirt. He looked at me with a beaming smile and with a childlike glee quipped: "I like the black shirt. The next time we meet you will see me in a black shirt." RJ's charms had begun to weave magic into my soul. Yes indeed, his is a story waiting to be told.

Chapter 2

RJ IGNITES THE SPARK



**“Learn to
write your
own narrative;
Miracles will
follow”**

– T.N. Agarwal

RJ's father was a renowned mechanical engineer. He was not just an inspiration; he was a friend, philosopher, guide and RJ's lifeline. Amongst the most educated member of the illustrious Jain family from Ambala, SP Jain was an engineer with the defence ordnance factories and many multinationals, and at that point in time had landed a key job in the suburban town of Bahadurgarh, some 45 kilometers from Delhi. The job he landed was no easy choice since he had to set up facilities for manufacturing automatic glass bottling plants for the first time in India in collaboration with two international companies based out of USA & Brazil. It was the sixties and choosing a school for RJ – a bright student and active in curricular activities who had completed Class V from a boarding school – was an issue close to his father's heart.

To put things in context, a resurgent India was taking baby steps to script its own place among the comity of nations. Due emphasis was being given to the role of schools in character-building and educationalists like JD Tytler were making waves by mentoring schools that were based on the British education model.

Amongst the prominent British-modeled public schools that had gained prominence in Lutyen's Delhi in those days were JD Tytler's School, Summerfield School, Delhi Public School, & Frank Anthony School. Being both the power centre and emerging business hub, most well-heeled professionals preferred to send their children to schools in Delhi. RJ is not clear why his father zeroed in on Sardar Patel Vidyalaya, housed in posh South Delhi, but it was certainly a school with a difference. One, it did not conform to the usual public school. Two, it was a fine blend of modernity and tradition. More significantly, the red brick and mortar building, a symbol of Indian-ness and Parliamentary system of the country, was chosen as the medium of governance. And three, unlike the English-fixated education system, the school fostered classical Indian virtues and patriotism and it was a school that was inspired by the late home minister and visionary Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel.

Recalling his early days in school, RJ remembers he was amongst the few privileged students who were recognized for excelling in school events i.e. sports, elocution recitations, music, dramatics, etc. By the time, he reached class IX, RJ had turned into a fine schoolboy and his desire to shape his own narrative was slowly becoming evident. One fine morning, on a suggestion from a dear friend, Vinod Ahuja, a senior and the outgoing secretary of the school, he decided to run for the secretary-ship of the school in class IX that nobody ever had attempted as traditionally it was a position reserved for a candidate from class X. In junior boarding school earlier, Rakesh had already donned the hat of school head-boy. In keeping with the best traditions of the parliamentary system, Sardar Patel Vidyalaya nurtured its students to don the leader's hat without fear or favor. Students who threw their hat into the leadership ring had to canvass their cause by delivering spirited speeches in front of the school students at a pre-designated place and time. They had to market their skills and abilities in front of their electorate, and this in turn would bring out their latent oratorical skills.

RJ distinctly recalls that he knew he was up against an opponent who was classy, suave, and dramatic to the core. His rival, as it turned out, was none other than the redoubtable Ketan Mehta, his senior, who later went on to become a legendary Bollywood filmmaker with films like *Maya Memsaheb*, *Mangal Pandey*, *Manjhi*, etc. Unfazed by Ketan's natural flair to attract crowds, RJ delivered fiery speeches when he was asked to throw his hat in the ring. RJ also realized rhetorical skills alone will not land him on the victory podium. It was then that he decided to up the ante by introducing a new poll gimmick that had never been tried before. RJ and his friends decided to introduce scented cards and personalized handwritten flyers. The move was a

match-winner and the election results defied logic. RJ had beaten Ketan Mehta hands-down, and the Raja of relationships tasted his first bout of heady success. Since his elevation to this post, he got immense opportunities to showcase his school and build its image among other institutions. RJ had a free run every Saturday since as secretary he was authorized to build bridges with other schools and many a times was an invitee to meet up with Indian Parliamentarians rubbing shoulders with high and mighty politicians. Soon, RJ evolved into a natural leader and through his years in school he excelled in whatever he set out to achieve. However, he never enjoyed the goody-goody squeaky-clean image of a virtuous schoolboy but was better known as a dapper and suave go-getter.

When his higher secondary board examination results were declared, RJ emerged with top honors. The year was 1973 and his aggregate marks were enough to get him into the best institution Sri Ram College of Commerce in Delhi University, better known as DU. DU enjoyed pride of place in the country. SRCC was the ultimate destination for young eligible bachelors to make their foray into the world of business or step into top-notch corporate houses as management trainees. Having already earned the reputation of David, the giant killer, in Sardar Patel, RJ cleared the qualifying requirements to join the three-year B.Com Honors course.

To be young and wild in Delhi in the early seventies was a time of tumult and triumph. While the Leftists held sway in the university coffee houses or at the St. Stephen's College, winds of change blew at every crossroad in Dilli. Revolution was in the air and making love not babies was the order of the day. Middle class moorings were swathed in the draft resistance movement of the US of A, and hippie culture was spawning a new music revolution with greats like Pink Floyd, Santana, Grateful Dead, Jimi Hendrix, Led



RJ (left) with Vinod Ahuja (right)

Zeppelin etc., the likes of which were being shepherded by home-grown bands like Human Bondage, Waterfront, and a DU folk singer Sushmit Bose, who was making waves in Delhi's discotheques. Many a heated debate was won over by long pulls at hash-filled chillums. RJ loved going to Sensation, Cellar, and Wheels, the best discs in town and enjoy his share of toke with friends. Even the university lingo was taking on a hip and happening dimension and inventive acronyms changed the cultural landscape of the capital city. Kamla Nagar was known as K-Nags and Gulab Jamuns came to be known as G-Jams, Connaught place as CP, Tibetan Dhabas as Tib dhabas etc.

RJ loved every moment in DU - music, politics, debates, some heady acid trips, and dramatics under the legendary Barry John - all lent gravitas to his bohemian personality. By the 2nd year he was elected cultural secretary of SRCC, and he soon became a key member in the young students union with leaders like Arun Jaitley, Vijay Goyal etc. Arun Jaitley came like a whiff of fresh air in the dusty left-lined avenues of Delhi University. A student leader hailing from the Akhil Bharitya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), the student wing of the Bhartiya Jana Sangh, he fired the imagination of his peers with his awesome personality and became a star to reckon with. And when India was faced with its darkest threat to democracy with the imposition of internal emergency in 1975, this young protégé of Atal Bihari Vajpayee rode to power with the backing of Sarvodaya leader Jaiprakash Narain. As President of the Delhi University Students' Union, Jaitley became a rallying point for the defenders of democracy and proponents of free speech and democracy.

By 1976, our protagonist completed his graduation and emerged with good marks. It was time for him to face an existential dilemma of whether to pitch for a management trainee's job in Delhi Cloth Mills, owned by the promoters of SRCC, or to join either Usha group of companies who had already selected him in the campus recruitment. If not these Indian majors, RJ could plump for the MNC giant Hindustan Lever or go on to do a master's in business administration.

He decided to drift around for the time being to decide the next course of action. He, with a couple of close college friends, went off to the hills of Manali, trekking from Bhuntar to Rohtang Pass with stopovers at Manikaran, Kulu, Manala, Naggar, Manali, and Beas Kund.

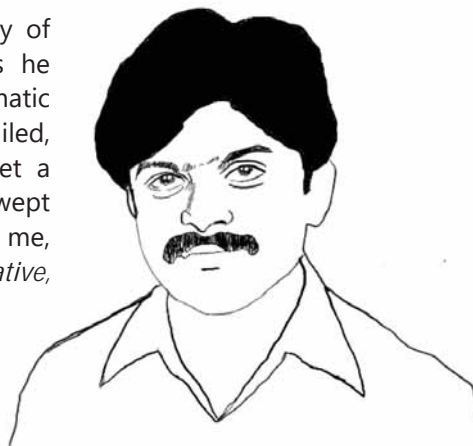
Not willing to stay in his comfort zone, RJ decided to branch out on his own and tread the path less taken – he did not want to study further and wanted to start his own enterprise.

To come down to more mundane matters about his state-of-affairs in Delhi after his Manali trip, RJ himself confides, "I had no clue as to what to do next and how to start the enterprise I was to undertake. When I asked my visionary father, he commented instead that he could try and get me a job at a multinational company. 'If that does not work, we will work out your options.'"

Much to RJ's amazement, his father played another ace up his sleeve and invited his friend over to the house for RJ to meet. The father's friend was the sophisticated and charming IBM-trained industrial engineer T.N. Agarwal. By the time he had turned 37, TNA had worked for MNC giants Union Carbide, Andrew Yule, and Bestobell and as a consultant for Birlas and Daburs – a rare achievement for one so young. Moreover, TNA was the master of both style and substance.

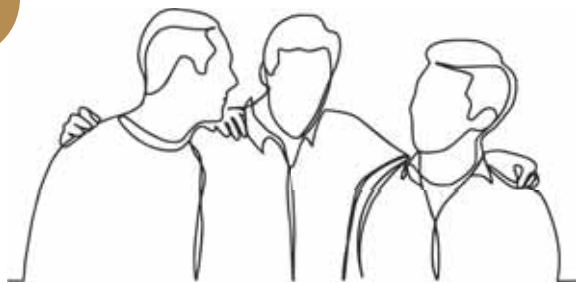
RJ was enthralled in the company of TNA's magnetic persona and, as he says, "TNA was a very charismatic character in himself. When he smiled, he oozed charm. I had never met a man so fascinating, and I was swept off my feet. He seemed to tell me, *'Learn to write your own narrative, miracles are bound to follow.'*"

RJ was soon to realize later that he had experienced the biggest miracle in his life.



Chapter 3

READY TO ADD VICES!



Call it serendipity or a stroke of luck, RJ & TNA forged such a strong bond of mutual trust and admiration for each other's personalities and vision in their very first meeting itself that TNA offered to mentor RJ as his assistant while setting up his maiden attempt to set up a new business of his own – an offer which RJ readily accepted.

This was truly one of the most dramatic turning points in our young hero's life. When TNA offered to mentor him as his assistant, it opened immense possibilities for RJ. After giving much thought to a possible business plan, TNA decided on a hunch to start a paint factory along with his young apprentice at Lucknow where his father lived. The idea was to set up a factory for manufacturing ready-mixed paints for supplies to the Railways and Defence establishments through the Directorate General of Supplies & Disposal (DGS&D). For the record, this central government department fixed rate contracts for both the Central and State governments to purchase items under different categories from private manufacturers. The corridors of power in those days were unflatteringly replete with red tape. No file moved without notings and unending demi-official (DO) letters. The state of Government business during these times was termed as the "Inspector Raj".

To cut a long story short, the paint unit, 'named TIEN Industries,' was set up from scratch without availability of any land, building, finances, technical team etc. However, within a short time it was established and the unit became fully operational by 1979 with product approvals from DGS&D and pan India sales.



"There was a mirror placed on an old tree in TNA's garden. To help me hone my oratorical skills, he would hand out classical literary passages from Shakespeare and ask me to practice in front of the mirror, while he would carefully watch from his office window." ~ RJ

By now, RJ's narrative had taken on miraculous proportions. This was the time when both TNA & RJ decided to paint the town red, figuratively speaking. It is not quite clear whether it was RJ's instinct or was it the sheer force of TNA's personality that worked its magic on RJ's DNA, so to speak. The handsome and extremely urbane not-so-young genius cast a spell on our young hero. His London-laced accent and his stiff upper lip lent a forbidding aura to the man. His carefully designed Savile Row suits, the Rolex watch, and his brilliant silk scarves gave TNA the look of a corporate honcho. The most telling image that RJ recalled was that of an ornate mirror that was dramatically placed on an old tree in TNA's garden when he first visited the latter's home. As RJ shared, the mirror was one of the many theatrical dimensions to TNA's colorful personality. It was a small reflection of how he would train RJ in his own inimitable style to hone his neophyte's soft skills. He would hand out RJ classical literary passages from Shakespeare and the likes to brush up his tone, pitch, and modulation. He would then carefully watch over his pupil from his office window. This exercise continued for months on end.

He would frequently goad RJ to hone his oratorical skills and would often remind him that the best prerequisite for a marketing man was his impeccable communication skills. He would also share rare tips about body language, poise, and arm movements to lend gravitas to RJ's personality.

As RJ would later recall, "It was a great experience to work under TNA who would put me through the most adverse and demanding situations, giving deep insight into product knowledge and marketing, and coax me through intense learning sessions in most aspects of the business and personality development, including dress code. He was always very composed, calm, and firm and would often forewarn that he could never fathom words like 'not possible, not able'.

It was two years of intense training requiring me to work long hours. He would spend arduous hours giving me a low-down on how to deal with government officials and impart finer details regarding how to give cutting edge presentations. He would spend hours discussing business issues, make me travel on unknown assignments, instructions for which would come on telephone ensuring to enable me to form instant strategic decisions and not go by any pre-scripted versions.

Concurrently while working with TNA, I took admission in Lucknow University to pursue master's in public administration. I could hardly find the time to attend classes and devote any time for studies and finally after one year, I gave it up."

"After hands-on training for over a year as manager of business operations, I was ready to move into my boss' shoes and TNA encouraged me to make the takeover. I also recall that in one of my first assignments as the CEO of the company, I was scheduled to go for a business meeting in what was then called Bombay, where I was to make a pitch with a government department. I called up TNA once I reached Bombay to tell him that the known government officer in the chair had taken voluntary retirement and I did not know the new incumbent and was at loss to take forward the subject in the changed environment.



TNA gave me the most unlikely of solutions. He asked me to move into the best hotel in town – preferably with the facility of an in-room bar and butler service and not bother about the tariff, invite the new officer over and tackle the situation without any premeditated thoughts, and tread forward with conviction. He also pointedly told me to book the flashiest of private AC taxis and wear the most up-market shoes so that the shine and glitz would bedazzle my prospective client. And lo behold, TNA's magic worked, and we struck the paint deal."

However, such successes were not as regular as TNA wanted. RJ did not understand then that his mentor set impossibly high standards for success. "We had worked out the profit per paint box at around Rs 1.6 per liter and there was always a pressure to get bulk orders if we were to generate enough profit to keep the company on a progressive roll."

"Unfortunately, in 1980, after I could not succeed in a business negotiation, I was asked to quit the company. My mentor's decision came like a bolt from the blue. It was as sudden and unpredictable as TNA himself. He felt I was not progressing befitting the growth potential of the business and the organization needed a change of guard. He opined I had much better potential to develop independently and urged me to move on and wished me all the best. The separation was abrupt.

I distinctly remember how TNA would diffidently roar when a business deal was not struck. He would cite the example of William Pitt, the youngest Prime Minister of England who made his mark at the age of 21, he was the youngest PM, and by comparison he would try and make me realize the immense responsibility I carried on my shoulder as his business head.

After quitting I remained his ardent follower and disciple and would often meet and solicit his advice. Such was the charisma of the man that he would always end the conversation saying, 'Always happy to AD(D) VICE(S). Welcome anytime.'" RJ held back a tear as he shook himself clean of TNA's memories.

"It was a very depressing time since I had no clue as to what to do next and how to start a self-business – a path that I wanted to undertake. My Father offered to get me a suitable job back in Delhi. Feeling low and confused at this stage, I was not inclined to take up a job. I needed a few months' break to reflect and consider the next steps and, in the interim, decided to stay back in Lucknow."



Chapter 4

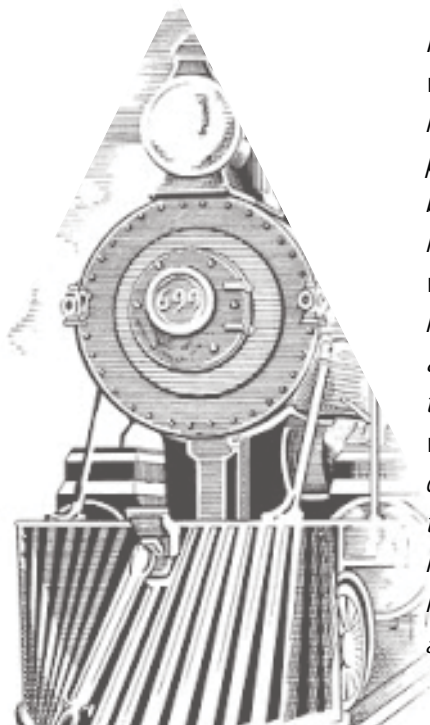
BOLTS FROM THE BLUE



“Risks & Relationships share an inseparable bond in my life”

~RJ

Three hurricane-like proverbial bolts from the blue changed our protagonist's life forever. From a historical perspective, RJ had now entered the most risk-prone and exciting phase of his dizzy climb up the entrepreneurial ladder. Call it bravura or braggadocio, RJ – our Raja of relationships – decided to do the impossible.



I call this the first bolt from the blue wherein RJ, in a fit of pique, decided to try his luck at retail sales. In the second and perhaps the most dramatic bolt from the blue, he also got the unlikely offer to make bolts for the Indian railways. This was his visiting card to gain entry into the hallowed portals of the Research Designs & Standards Organization [RDSO]. And the third bolt was when he entered wedlock, albeit in a most unique, if not dramatic manner. To get a sense of how these dramatic events unfolded, it would make greater sense to tune in to what he himself had to share on this tumultuous and miraculous phase of his career.

"TNA's sudden departure from my fledgling corporate caper plunged my life into glorious uncertainties. Not one to be bogged down by adversities, I decided to try my hand at retail sales and undertook to do the unthinkable. After much scrutiny and careful thought, I decided to sell second world-war vintage Zippo lighters, which being a new fad at the time and not easily available in Lucknow, could be sold at a princely profit margin of Rs 5 per lighter. I put up a small goods stall in the posh Hazratganj area of Lucknow. The counter measured barely 3' x 2'. This was at the 'Love Lane' – a prized commercial destination in Lucknow of the time.

On hindsight, I realize I didn't let my father's reputation or lineage come in the way of my bold decision. I never gave a thought to the feeling that how would I face people who knew me in the city or knew my father, considering my hole-in-the-wall shop was in the most prime destination. When my father learnt of my decision, without any fret or anger he came down to Lucknow and proudly brought his friends to enjoy a cup of coffee at my stall [For him, work was worship; no matter how small or big].



RJ with Rajendra Kumar Khare

I had eased into being a lighter salesman and had begun to enjoy my work. Little did I know at the time that I had ignited the spark that would help me scale splendid heights in my future entrepreneurial journey. I felt that if I struck an emotional bond with my product, nobody could keep me down. A strong believer in miracles, one fine day a virtual bolt from the blue shook me out of my sales reverie. An unknown customer, communicating in English [rather uncommon in those days], was surprised to see my present plight. He was further constrained to learn that the lighter salesman standing in front of him was a B. Com [Honors]

Graduate from Shriram College of Commerce, Delhi, and son of S.P. Jain, a very well-known corporate personality. This person, whose name was Rajendra Kumar Khare, was an engineer working as charge-man [spares cell] of the Railway Locomotive Workshop in Lucknow [having thereafter worked as a very senior consultant with the Malaysian Railways – KTMB – and Asian Development Bank]. Khare offered his help to set me up in a business for engineering hardware supplies required by the locomotive workshop. The business was established and soon started to give substantial profits.

In the same year, I also set foot in Bombay and in association with close college friends – Manbir Singh [Talla], Suman Jaitly, and a Bombay friend Joseph John – set up a partnership firm dazzlingly named “Flash Services”. It was a unique business concept, and we promised to provide instant miscellaneous home services [in a Flash, of course]. I later realized it was a concept whose time had not yet arrived. In order to generate sustainable revenues, we also sold file folders, Methodex filing systems, stationery, and corporate gift items. Moreover, we promoted sales in the interiors of Maharashtra and U.P. selling industrial products on commission basis. It was tough going considering we were always woefully short of funds. I remember we used to travel by state transport buses at night [saving on hotel costs] and make sales call during the day. I would flip between Lucknow and



Manbir Singh (left) and Suman Jaitly (right)

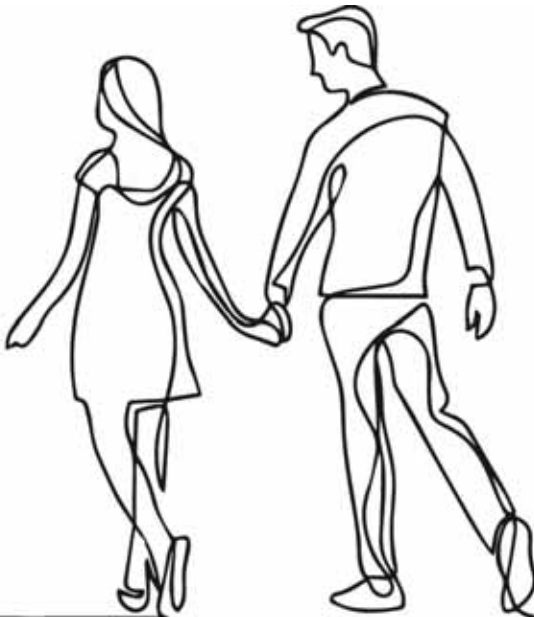
Bombay and was always on the run. The business operations worked well in the short run but the financial gains were insufficient to sustain the expectations of four partners, resulting in the closure of Bombay operations with the four best friends going their own ways looking for more stable and greener pastures.

Meanwhile, my father retired and joined me in my endeavor at Lucknow. With his expertise and guidance, business with locomotive workshops increased manifold as we could now supply highly engineered

small components. Within a short time span, our operations expanded to four major locomotive workshops of Northern India.

Back in Lucknow, with things looking up in the business arena, my father stirred me out of my sense of complacency and yet another welcome third bolt of lightning struck my life. One fine morning, he expressed the desire that it is time I got married. After giving it some thought, I agreed. This is because I always considered my father my best friend and guide. The next question was, 'Did I have anybody in particular in my mind?' I had none since I had worked so tirelessly all these years that I had missed out on developing my personal and social life. As a result, I asked my father to find me a girl of his choice.

I realized this was an especially difficult task for him since I also happened to be his favorite offspring. However, trust SP [as my father was affectionately called] to work out an ingenious method to help me select my better half. I also need to put in perspective here that, in the Indian context, marriages are made in heaven and God decides who will be your life partner. Since it is not easy to converse with God regarding such matters, it is usually the job of 'Pandit Ji' or the Family Priest to study and match one's 'Kundali' [Horoscope] with that of the prospective bride. If the stars and constellations are in place, then marriage is the most logical way forward. I would also hasten to add that in India you did not marry a girl; you actually married the whole family.





In any case, my father decided to play priest, petitioner, and counselor, all rolled into one. As was his wont, he came up with a brilliant and transparent evaluation system, which was both scalable and achievable. It went somewhat as follows:

- ▶ We shall advertise and call for responses from interested families of girls
- ▶ Decide on merits based on the following four categories, to be evaluated on a total of 10 points:

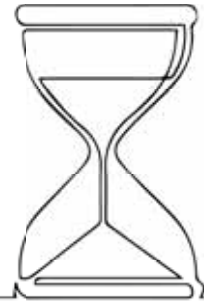
Attributes → Total 10 Points	Education 4 Points		Height 2 Points	Weight 2 Points	Family 2 Points	
Marks Allocated	MBA	4	5'2" – 5'4" 2	50 – 53 Kg 2	Upper Middle- Class upbringing with Convent Education Schooling – 2	
	Doctor	3		> 53 - 55 Kg 1.5		
	Engineer	2.5	< 5'2" 1	> 55 Kg 1		
	Others	2				
Score – Amita	MBA – 4		5'1" – 1	53 Kg – 1.5	As above – 2	

We received about 50-odd proposals out of which 5 were shortlisted based on the above marking pattern and Amita, with an MBA degree cornering 4 marks, obviously stood first with a tally of 8.5 points out of 10. Since she was also based out of Lucknow, I could find her office and get to talk to her before we sent our consent. This was prequalified by Amita's elder sister's visit to my workplace, followed by a high-tea session in the evening at their house and the decision to unite was sealed.

Amita was highly accomplished in so many ways, and the moment she became a part of my life, my life took on altogether a different meaning. She was an MBA, professionally doing very well, but gave it all up to become an anchor in my life – a fact that will be dealt with in further detail sometime later in this book."

Chapter 5

SIMPLE TWISTS OF FATE



“Opportunities come knocking when the chips are down”

To use a cliché, ‘When the going gets tough, the tough get going.’ In RJ’s case, not staying in his comfort zone proved to be his masterstroke. They say lady luck smiles when you are at the right place at the right time. Right when things were looking up, RJ’s father decided to administer a stiff dose of living life on life’s terms and pulling him out of his comfort zone. Mentor, master, and motivator, RJ’s father urged him to move on to the other world. In a major reversal of sorts, RJ’s life stared down the barrel, so to speak. Right when all looked good but yet lost, destiny nudged RJ to move on to uncharted territory. And like moving through a hairpin bend on the highway of life, he hit the long and straight road to success by what can be best termed as simple twists of fate.

In this chapter, two miracles beckoned RJ. One came in the form of Mr. Niraj Kumar at R.D.S.O., and the other – the more eye-popping one – happened when the then Maharaj of Railways pitched in to put RJ’s business back on the right track. Over now to RJ:

"My father thought it was time to move out of my comfort zone and shut shop to start a more sustainable venture. He felt that the business was mainly based on his knowledge and expertise and he feared the worst in absence of his support [A prophecy that came true when in 1989, at the age of 68 and with no ailment, he suddenly left us].

Never one to provide me with a crutch to hobble about in life, he desired of me to put up a proper manufacturing factory with a product line where over the years we could develop an in-house team of people and nurture our intrinsic manufacturing capabilities. Once again, my dad was asking me to make a heart-breaking exit from a flourishing business.

It took me some time to move out of my comfort zone. However, soon enough, I started looking for a suitable new product line for supplying to the

Indian railways [with whom I had gotten familiar].



S. P. Jain & Bimla Jain (RJ's parents)

Once again, lady luck smiled on me. Call it luck or a simple twist of fate, on my very first visit to RDSO, the nodal body for approving products for supply to the Indian railways, I walked into the room of a mechanical official, Mr. Niraj Kumar [Joint Director], seeking information on procedures and prospects of business for supply of rubber components used on rail wagons [My brothers were manufacturing rubber products, hence I could rely upon their support and guidance].

The gentleman realized that I was groping in the dark with no knowledge or experience and with no facility in place. However, he walked up to my side of the table and tapped me on my head asking, 'Don't you recollect anything?' I could not, but as soon as his hand went up again, I recognized the gentleman was my senior and classmate of my elder brother in school. He was also the Prefect of my hostel and, on a number of occasions, I was subject to hard taps on my head for being late to the morning assembly. For once, if this is

what it was to come to, I did not mind those painful knocks on my head.

I got unconditional support from Mr. Niraj Kumar and within two years, i.e. by 1985, we could set up a RDSO qualified rubber product manufacturing facility, and by 1988 had established reasonable business operations. For the record, Mr. Kumar retired in 2014 from a General Manager level position as the Principal of the Railway Staff College, Baroda."



RJ with Mr. Niraj Kumar

Whether it was a case of bagging a contract for buffer springs or getting a divine buffer from the high almighty to re-shape destiny, a young man who breezed into RJ's life, was nothing short of a divine intervention:

"In October 1988, the Railway Board [New Delhi] floated an annual tender for procurement of Rubber Buffer Springs [the only Railway approved product of PRAG at the time] for a quantity of about 12,00,000 units. PRAG had by then qualified as a regular approved source having supplied two supply orders in the previous years with proven product performance, clearing the way as incumbent for placement of bulk quantity.

This was the tender where all our hopes were placed to take off in business. It was being actively pursued and followed up with the authorities by us when suddenly, my father took ill on 26th January 1989 and, in spite of a bitter fight for life for 14 days in the hospital, he died. The timing, as far as the tender was concerned was very crucial and the case could not be followed-up by me for about 20 days till completion of all the formalities and rituals. When I resumed work, to my utter surprise and disgust, the buffer tender had been decided without PRAG being considered for placement of any order. It was definitely a 'managed affair' in which the competitors had colluded with the order-placing officer to keep us out of business. It was a nerve-shattering situation and I started making representations and daily visits to the Ministry of Railways, but to no avail. I would travel to Delhi every morning and return in the night to Lucknow, and at times would stop over in Delhi. This continued for more than two months.



One evening, while walking aimlessly near my hotel 'Marina' in Connaught Place, I was called out by name by a familiar face. It was Nisheet Singh – a sales representative with Godrej at Lucknow. Sometime earlier, he had sold a Godrej typewriter to our organization. In my troubled state, he was a welcome stranger to share some time with. I invited him over to my hotel for a drink and during the course of the evening I narrated my bad luck and how I was seeking a miracle through my desperate representations.

Upon hearing of my plight, Nisheet made the strangest and unexpected of moves – one that would ultimately change the future of my business forever!

The fellow just picked up the hotel room phone and dialed the Railway Minister's office to proclaim that he was an ex-student of Scindia College, Gwalior [a school founded by the erstwhile Maharaja of Gwalior, who was the Grandfather of Mr. Madhav Rao Scindia – the then Minister of Railways] and that he wanted to speak to the Maharaj [as Mr. Scindia was known and respectfully addressed by the ex-students]. The office of the Minister courteously took down his details and advised that the same would be forwarded to the Maharaj and that he would revert shortly. I guessed it was a standard reply that all get on making such a request. However, Nisheet Singh – the young man bubbling with life – seemed confident that he would shortly get a call back as he had heard the Minister was known for promptly meeting ex-Scindians. We settled down with our drinks and by late evening, when the call was not returned, Nisheet invited me to his house for dinner and we left the hotel.

Late at night, I returned to my room only to find a message at the reception from the Minister himself inviting Nisheet to join him for breakfast at 8:30 a.m. the following morning at his house, which was located at 27, Safdarjung Road, New Delhi. I immediately rushed back to the residence of my stranger friend and we both decided to go for breakfast and carry our brief petition to the Minister the next morning.

Making sure to not be late, we reached 30 minutes before the appointment time and stood at the Minister's gate. Exactly at 8:30 a.m., we were taken into the bungalow to be met by the Maharaj – Mr. Madhav Rao Scindia – himself. The minister, dressed in white kurta-pajama, came across as a very elegant personality. After introductions and exchange of pleasantries, we settled down for breakfast. He discussed school affairs with Nisheet and thereafter we apprised him about my misfortune of having been given a raw deal by the Railways in the tender.

Mr. Scindia was surprised and kind of annoyed at us for having brought to his notice such a trivial matter. However, he promised to get the case examined by his office. We thanked him and left his house, leaving our petition on the breakfast table in a blue colored folder. That same afternoon we went to the Railway Ministry office and enquired about the whereabouts of our petition asking the Minister's personal assistant how to follow up the matter. We were directed to contact the Member-Mechanical, who was likely to have been apprised of our case by the Maharaj.

We took an appointment with the Member-Mechanical, who informed us that our case has been sent to the Stores Directorate for examination and advised us to meet the Member-Stores. Upon meeting the Member-Stores [we saw our blue colored folder on his table], we were told to wait and not leave the Ministry till it closed for the day.



Lo and behold, at 5:30 p.m., we were called by the Executive Director of Stores and handed over a Purchase Order for 125,000 units! I could not have envisaged an order for more than 75,000 units in the normal course of affairs. Here, after having been rejected for placement of order, I was holding an order for 1,25,000 pieces. Stunned and not knowing how to react, thanking the stores officer, we went running to the Minister's office to express our gratitude but were informed courteously that the Maharaj was busy, and we could not meet him. Later, we tried several times to make contact with the Maharaj to express our indebtedness, but in vain. Finally, I settled to sending him a letter on behalf of all the employees of the company, expressing our heartfelt gratitude.

The world at large could not understand how we were able to bag such a huge contract in a government tender case after the same had been decided and done away with. This gave rise to rumors in the inner and outer circles of the industry that 'RJ was a personal friend of the Maharaj himself'. The railways world, as I knew it, had changed for good and this resulted in the elevation of our prestige within the Indian railway industry, making PRAG a force to be reckoned with.

P.S: Later on, we learnt that the Minister had written on the file: "The submissions be examined and, if the administration has erred, then immediate amends be made by placing suitable contract on merits on the complainant firm even if the tender procurement quantity has been fully decided, in which case procurement be done against projected next year requirements."

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Chapter 6

RJ GOES GLOBAL

“Attraction rather than promotion should be the driving force of life” – RJ

During the course of long interview sessions, RJ always stressed the fact that all through his life, he always followed the dictum that if you make yourself a magnet with your positive persona, attraction rather than promotion would become the leitmotif of success.



RJ with Barry McClintic, Oil States Industries, USA

Talking of PRAG's forays into the US shores, if there is one country that has spawned a global culture around its railroad network, it is the US of A. Railroads in USA are almost as old as the country itself connecting vast distances from North to South with its rich historical background played out during the times of American Civil War and the Industrial Revolution. The introduction of blue jeans, blues music, and the various races and creeds that made up for the Great American Dream was fired by the travel bug that hit North America once the rail network was in place. It is in this backdrop that immigrants thronged the continent to live out their American dream. Today, they have the World's Longest Railway Network and are also the leading designers and manufacturers of Diesel Locomotives with corporate giants like GE & EMD in the global lead.

In RJ's case, the American dream was not an aspiration; it literally walked into his chequered life, courtesy the Research Designs & Standards Organisation (RDSO), Lucknow. To put it in RJ's perspective, it was yet another unexpected miracle, almost like manna from heaven. This is how he recalls PRAG's American saga:

"On February 9th, 1989, my father breathed his last. The fact that he died so suddenly without any ailment brought my world crashing down. Tragedy had struck hook line and sinker. I had lost my best friend and support.

I was heartbroken and struggled along a very lonely path. So, it was hard to come to terms when two miracles struck and kicked me out of the stupor. This was the beginning of my American story.

In June 1990, Research Designs and Standards Organisation promoted & recommended our firm to a renowned American Firm – Miner Enterprises – for undertaking approval testing of a rubber product named the RF-8 Pad, to be fitted in Miner's equipment being procured by the Indian Railways.

To add meat and substance to my American narrative, I little realized that there was yet another miracle waiting to unfold.

A couple of days before leaving for the US, a senior company colleague called up my home and expressed the desire that I join him for dinner to meet an American gentleman – who he had met at RDSO. My wife attended the phone and I told her to courteously refuse [as I was busy with Diwali gift distribution and tying up ends for my upcoming first visit to the US]. However, as an afterthought, I stopped her and decided to accept the invitation.

The gentlemen, Mr. Robert L. Bullock, was the Vice President of an American Firm, which had something to do with railroad freight operations. During dinner, he talked of freight wagons and related equipment their company manufactured. I told him of our rubber factory, and he desired to visit our factory. I learnt that we had been referred by RDSO purporting his desire to visit. I played along not knowing the purpose or what was in store.

During the factory visit, I told him of our technical shortcomings and lack of latest molding process capabilities and kind of sought his help in suggesting a specialist company in USA who could help. He offered to check it out and help.

I apprised him of my upcoming visit to the USA, and as a reciprocal gesture he extended me an invitation to visit him. On careful scrutiny of his visiting card, I found that his address was based out of Park Ridge, Illinois, USA. I just did not have the money to be able to afford a separate US internal flight to Park Ridge; I was only scheduled to visit Chicago city. Mulling over such thoughts, we exchanged pleasantries and parted ways. I remained noncommittal."



RJ with Ashok Mehan

"I recall that my first trip to US was dramatic if not bizarre. It was 31st of October 1990 that I first set foot in the US. Everything was planned on a tight shoestring budget; arrangements were facilitated by my friend Ashok Mehan, who was settled in the US. I was forewarned to keep off Chicago streets at late hours and to stay within advised safe limits. It was late evening when I reached Chicago city only to be encountered by crowds of people wearing big flowing gowns sporting artificial beards and weird masks. To add to my cultural shock, people were shouting and throwing eggs around and one hit my taxi also. The experience was shocking; I crouched low in the vehicle and prayed to reach the safe vicinity of my hotel.

I was terrified and stayed numb and confined for many days before I shared the experience with a staff member of Miner Enterprises whom I was visiting for my testing, only to be told smilingly, 'Oh, you witnessed the Halloween – a festival where people wear such traditional costumes and come on the streets as part of the celebrations'. I thought to myself this was not the way normal people behaved, culture or no culture. I be damned; I was mortally afraid since my arrival but breathed a sigh of relief that this was just a one-off experience. I now started to move around the city and enjoyed my long stay in Chicago.

As it turned out, the rubber product testing was a rigorous and long-drawn affair, and I was not willing to leave without seeing the final result. This warranted frequent visits to Miner's campus, and I had a lot of time to kill. One day, out of sheer boredom, I called up Mr. Bullock [the gentleman who had visited my factory premises back in Lucknow]. My only avowed intention was to make small talk and while-away some time. My justification for not visiting him was that I did not have the wherewithal to travel to Park Ridge since I was short of funds. To my utter surprise, Mr. Bullock offered to pick me up from my hotel – The LaSalle Lodge. I was dumbfounded as to how he could pick me up from downtown Chicago. I then learnt that Park Ridge was a nearby suburb of Chicago. This was yet another turning point in my life, as I would soon come to know.

For the present, I was taken aback being picked up in a Rolls Royce and driven to the office premises where it dawned on me that I was actually visiting one of the largest Railroad Companies of the USA – Standard Car Truck Company – and was chaperoned around by the Senior Vice President of the company who was none other than Mr. Robert L. Bullock.

For the record, he was a highly acclaimed name in the US railroad industry with numerous patents to his credit and was a member on many of the

technical committees of Association of American Railroads. His open and forthright stance came like a revelation. After being given a full preview of the company, I was shown one rubber component – The 'C-Pep Pad' – weighing about 8 Kg. Mr. Bullock asked me if I would be interested to develop this product for him. I looked around in disbelief. My first reaction was that it was not possible since I believed that we neither had the capability nor the manufacturing equipment to match the top-class quality of the product. Mr. Bullock very patiently told me not to worry as he had already satisfied himself of our capability and asked me to provide him a benchmark price, if I could, in the next one hour.



I went to their conference hall and feverishly started to work on the pricing in telephonic consultation with my factory colleagues back in India. I benchmarked the price at approximately USD 12 each, keeping it as low as possible since I was looking at a lifetime opportunity and could not afford to pass it by. Mr. Bullock understood my predicament and helpfully counter-offered a price of 17.4 USD i.e. 20% off-their current purchase price. I could not still believe and simply got up and, unmindful of those around me, kept asking Mr. Bullock, *"Do you really mean it? Can it be really true that on my very first visit to USA, I would pick up an export order of this magnitude?"*

And just like that, Prag had become an OEM manufacturer to Standard Car Truck Company. We were placed with a running contract for regular supply of 'C-Pep' Pads. I pinched myself to get back to ground zero but to my utter surprise, it was a reality! It was the first time that an Indian company had sold a rubber product to an American Railroad OEM. Meanwhile, we also cleared the testing at Miner Enterprises. I finally had a foot in the American door. The Standard Car Truck Company business required me to make frequent visits to the US of A, leading to opening up of other export business prospects."

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Chapter 7

TWO SUGAR 'DADDIES'



When product diversification happens not by design or planning, but at the altar of relationships, it defies logic. There was nothing logical about RJ's decision to opt for manufacturing cane extracting machinery for the sugar industry. Two iconic industry leaders, one based in US and the other based in Australia offered RJ the gift from on high.

A sugar baron from the US offered our protagonist a lucrative deal to manufacture an extractor to squeeze out additional sugar from a machine that would revolutionize the sugar crushing industry. But there was a catch: the patent for this equipment was held by an Australian firm. This chapter deals with how RJ's effusive charm and his sense of enterprise won over the two 'Sugar Daddies' in question. Read on:

"By late 1990, PRAG was one of the only two railroad rubber components manufacturers in India to have been approved by Miner Enterprises for supply of RF-8 Pads for Miner Designed Draft Gears, which was a standard product in all IR freight wagons at the time. We were also the first duly approved OEM exporting rubber product to an American Railroad Major, i.e. Standard Car Truck Company. If these were not courting success to further PRAG's prospects in the US, I would like to share another landmark event that took us to a completely different level.

In 1993, on a visit to USA, I was accompanied by one of my senior colleagues, Rajanish Sahab who had extensive experience in manufacture of sugar machinery and spare parts. During the visit I was apprised of the product line he had worked on, which seemed interesting enough for me to evaluate its sales potential in the US.

During our return journey, while waiting at the departure terminal at Chicago O'Hare airport, I made a couple of sales calls to listed yellow book sugar mill companies soliciting business for such spare parts. I realized that my passion levels and energy were such that I did not hesitate to make cold calls in order to bring PRAG on the world map.

One receiver showed keen interest in a particular equipment called 'TRPF' [Toothed Roller Pressure Feeder] and asked me if I could show him one such working installation in India. The gentleman was Mr. Dennis [Plant manager] of St. James Sugar Co-operative in Louisiana. Within the next fortnight, along with his wife, he visited India and we facilitated a visit to a sugar mill running with the equipment. Satisfied with what he saw, he offered to place an order for the equipment designed to suit his mill's capacity of 10,000 TCD [Tons of Cane per Day], to be supplied and commissioned on-site.

Meanwhile, the Indian TRPF manufacturer expressed his inability to supply since it was a patented Australian design and he had rights for manufacture and supply in India only. They did not have the licence to supply to USA. Moreover, their technical capability for designing was limited to sugar mills with a maximum crushing capacity of 5,000 TCD.

This was certainly not heartening to hear, and I was pretty sure of my customer's intent and the immense business potential that he could offer us. The equipment on offer would facilitate extraction of additional juice from the sugarcane, generating sufficient additional revenue to offset the installation and equipment cost within 'one crushing season' and thereafter resulting in continued savings. Not one to lose out on such an opportunity, I immediately contacted the Australian company holding the Patent [M/s Polymex Pty.] and sought a personal meeting with the owner – Mr. Derrick Ganter.

Mr. Ganter graciously agreed to meet, and I air-dashed to Sydney. Mr. Ganter personally came to my hotel in the afternoon and we headed to the bar lounge for discussions. To begin with, he was astonished that I could get an order from USA where they had seen no sales in spite of his best efforts. That broke the ice. He agreed to sign on the dotted line, but for different reasons. He became willing not to push for any financial gains but for his personal satisfaction of seeing an installation of his equipment in the USA. He wrote out the agreement in his own handwriting and we signed and sealed the association right there in the hotel bar lounge! I was not only allowed to use the patent design within the limited territory of US of A but was also promised assistance by Mr. Ganter in designing of the equipment and securing the manufacturing drawings, all for a royalty payment of 2.5% on sales.



Mrs. & Mr. Dennis, St. James Sugar Cooperative

We got TRPF manufactured as per drawings provided by Polymex [Australia] and supplied the machinery, which was a huge equipment consisting of a set of two steel-toothed rollers mounted on steel frames along with other equipment like the 'Fibrizer' [differently designed Cane cutting knife with Anvil], an electronically controlled cane feeder apparatus – 'Donald Shoot' – and, with on-site installation included, we priced the package at ten million rupees.

This equipment, which was introduced in America for the very first time by us, was to soon become an industry norm and, by 1997, its success would earn us the sobriquet of "You Honorable Gentlemen" in the sugar industry of Louisiana, USA – certainly a very heady feather in my cap!

The story for earning this 'Khitaab' dates back to the time when I went to the US to sign my first contract. Here, I was made to meet the President of St. James Sugar Co-operative, Mr. Neil Bolton – a 6.5 Feet Tall South-American gentleman – who, after the meeting, invited me to his farmhouse for a boating experience in the backwaters of the Pacific and to enjoy the traditional crawfish feast with his family.



It was a uniquely gratifying experience, catching the crawfishes, stuffing them in bags, boiling them live with sausages, potatoes, corn etc. and spreading them on big wooden tables where one was to pinch the tail and suck the head extracting a tiny piece of meat. Frankly, I could not appreciate the meal since the quantity of meat did not merit the sacrifice of such a big crustacean. However, to me it was indeed a great honor to be invited for this traditional feast with his family.

RJ with Mr. Neil Bolton, President, St. James Sugar Cooperative

After downing a few drinks post-dinner, Mr. Bolton loosened up and came into his own. In a seeming rush of blood, he brazenly accused me of having taken his plant manager for a ride. He felt that his manager had fallen for my sales pitch. He did not believe my equipment could perform and deliver as promised. What intrigued me more was that he kept exclaiming, 'on my knees', probably meaning thereby, that he was down on his knees in front of my pitch. However, he still went ahead with the purchase, as promised, since he had come to like me, and it also seemed that he was kind of impressed by my sincere sales pitch. To cut to the quick, **it was my first 10 million-rupee single contract – and that too with 50% advance payment!**

Once the equipment was installed, I and my colleagues stayed on in the sugar mill premises for three months of its operation from October till December 15th, ensuring smooth functioning of the equipment. It was tough going since the mill was located on the banks of Mississippi river inside a dense jungle. I stayed in a nearby small city – Baton Rouge – and it was only on weekends that I could visit the nearest big city of New Orleans – one of the most fascinating cities of the world – which was great fun. The Bourbon street always overflowing with Bars, Night Clubs, Casinos, Eateries, and its French quarters always live with numerous music clubs blaring out Jazz music by the world-greats like Stevie Wonder, Neil Young, Snoop Dogg, and Nick



Crawfish Feast with Neil Bolton's family

Jones. Other than that, it was a very rugged and tough living. Nevertheless, the weekends in New Orleans made all the hard work worthwhile.

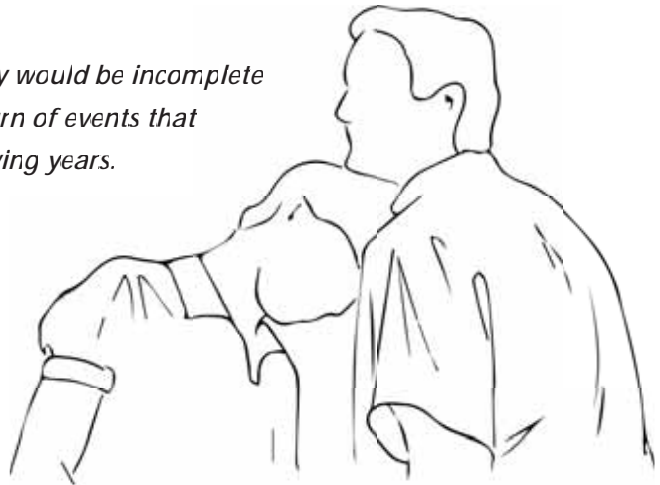
A couple of months later after returning to India I was told about the financial success of the equipment in the most exciting manner. The installation turned out to be runaway success and it earned extra revenues of over Rs. 13.5 million in one operational season – well above the promised figure.

I was sent two First-Class air tickets to travel to USA on Mr. Neil Bolton's personal invitation. We were received at the Dulles International Airport by Mrs. & Mr. Bolton and were greeted by the words, "**You, Honorable Gentlemen**".

These words resonate in my mind even today and remain right on top of the list of compliments I have received in life.

Thereafter TRPF became an industry norm in USA."

However, RJ's US story would be incomplete without a dramatic turn of events that unfolded in the following years.



Chapter 8

FUTURE FILTERED

“Life is all about distilling and filtering the best experiences.”

~RJ

RJ has always believed that miracles are the filters that pave the future course of life. It is said that cultural moorings determine the strength of a business relationship. While the East believes in a relationship-based business culture [i.e., a ‘holistic’ culture], the West believes more in a deal-based culture [i.e., a ‘specific’ culture]. In simple terms, in the West, you don’t necessarily need to know a contact to strike a business deal, but in the East [Asia], you often need to have contacts and tip-offs in order to strike deals.



But RJ, as is his wont, seemed to have made such a deep impact on whomsoever he met, that they responded emotionally rather than logically to help him in his enterprise. In this case, once again, a foreign collaborator provided an unlikely lifeline taking Prag to the next level.

"In 1993, Prag was in discussions with one Mr. Grandy for purchase of foam – a raw material for manufacturing foam lubricating pads used on freight wagon for lubrication of Wheel Axle-Box Joints. These were imported from USA by the Indian Railways from Mr. Grandy and there was a good scope for expanding the business if the same could be manufactured and supplied from India without diluting the interest of Mr. Grandy, who could keep selling the base raw material on a licence to us.

Mr. Grandy agreed to give us the foam and we traveled to Baltimore where the manufacturing operations were witnessed and understood to be set up in India. A couple of days later, we met up again at another factory and head office of Mr. Grandy on the outskirts of Chicago. While the nitty-gritties were being discussed on the subject of foam lubricating pads, by a freak chance, the factory door behind Mr. Grandy's table opened and I caught a glimpse of the operations inside.

To my surprise, they were manufacturing Locomotive Filters – a product line that had been recently initiated by us in India and we were in search of special railroad filter media and manufacturing technical support to be able to proliferate into the Indian Locomotives Filter Market. Excitedly, I informed Mr. Grandy about our operations and shifted attention to the possibility of a suitable tie-up for filter operations in India.

Mr. Grandy was willing, and we quickly sewed up a joint venture technology agreement with his filter company 'Allied Filters' to manufacture Railroad Oil Filters in India. The agreement was sealed in writing with initial signing amount of 10,000 USD paid by them to us as advance. However, before we could initiate the next steps, 'Allied Filters' closed down.

In October 1995, I met up with Mr. Bob Grandy and enquired how to pay back the money taken as advance for the joint venture start-up. He expressed surprise that we were not aware that his filter company had been taken over by a business giant – 'The Clarcor Group'. He was even more surprised by the fact that Clarcor had not gotten in touch with Prag based on our joint venture agreement with Allied Filters. Not only were we not required to return the money but also, as per terms of the acquisition, we were technically joint venture partners of 'The Clarcor Group'.

Mr. Grandy immediately made some phone calls and got me an appointment for the next day with Mr. Bob Brubaker, President of M/s Clark Filters – a subsidiary of the Clacor Group specializing in manufacture of Locomotive Filters – at Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

Mr. Bob Brubaker got very interested at the possibility of selling filters to the Indian Railways and, as an effort in this direction, made a visit to India in December 1995. He met senior railroad officials at RDSO and Ministry of Railways unveiling the long-life and superior filtration Clark products, which were approved in USA as OEM to most of the Locomotive builders.

Clark's Filters had great win-win attributes. The long-life filters were highly efficient in providing extra protection to engines, extending the maintenance schedules of locomotives from monthly to quarterly cycles, saving tremendous amount of oil wastages and reducing pollution by nearly six times on account of reduction in burning emissions. The filters were promised as Made-in-India to be manufactured under a Clark-Prag Joint Venture, ensuring low cost and easy availability in India.

The Indian Railways appreciated the concept and, by the year 2000, after extended tests and trails, approved the product for regular use on their locomotives. Within the next couple of years, 100% of the railroad filtration market in India converted to the use of Clark Long-Life-High-Efficiency Lube-Oil Filters. This was a crowning glory moment for PRAG. Till-date, the Prag-Clark Joint Venture holds 80% of the Indian Railroad Filter Market.



RJ with Bob Brubaker

However, another miracle was in the offing. Once again, the year was 1993 – March 9th, 1993, to be precise – when another surprise visitor turned up in our office. He went by the name of Mr. Amit Slev from LSB Group, USA – bulk distributors of automotive rubber mounts servicing aftersales spares market of USA. LSB procured their products from different Asian countries including India. It was a very promising meeting, and he left us on a high note, confirming initiation of further positive steps for bulk purchasing from us.

After his visit to Lucknow, Mr. Amit Slev left for Bombay where he got caught in the tragic 12th March 1993 Bombay bomb blasts at his hotel 'The Oberoi'. He left the country in a state of panic and the Indian business prospect took a back seat and I did not hear anything from him till 1998 when he called our office to speak with me, only to be told that I was in the US, visiting an oil company – M/s Oil States Industries – located in Arlington, Texas.

The same afternoon, Mr. Amit Slev contacted me through the reception desk of Oil States Industries – the company I was visiting – and desired that I visit him in Oklahoma before I return to India. I left by road from Dallas to Oklahoma City the same evening and met Mr. Slev briefly over breakfast the next morning in the hotel 'Saddle Back Inn', where he had booked a room for me.

The meeting was a brief one, as I had to travel back the same day to connect to my return flight to India from Dallas. It was almost a one-way conversation. Mr. Slev told me that he had decided to close down business relations with his two existing Indian suppliers and expressed his resolve to shift his entire range of rubber auto-mount tooling available with the LSB's existing Indian suppliers [the tooling was owned by LSB] to our factory for manufacture and supply of the automobile rubber mounts.

This was another moment of disbelief. It was absolutely unbelievable, as readymade tooling is big buck business [at least running into a million dollars at that time for the 150-odd products he was talking about]. Such tooling range takes years to build and here I was being offered this free of cost, and with assured continued business, on a platter! Dumbfounded, I left.

Tsunami was in store when I reached India. I was informed by my office that Mr. Amit Slev was dead and I was probably amongst the last people to have met him. I was left trembling not knowing how to react.



Claude Rappaport, LSB Group

Soon a young man, Mr. Claude Rappaport, who was the son in law of LSB owners [the prominent Golson Family of Oklahoma] took over the management and called me up with a request to visit USA on his courtesy.

Mr. Rappaport, an extremely handsome, lovable, flamboyant, and amenable personality, reiterated the business commitment as given to me by the late Mr. Amit Slev. He immediately ordered shifting of all motor mount tooling to PRAG. PO schedules for all the parts for the next 6 months were immediately drawn up and released along with a cheque for USD 15,000 to cover his stated courtesy. PRAG soon became a regular and stable supplier extending the part range to over 300 different types of motor mounts for different automobile models in USA. In 2000, the



Engineering Export Promotion Council of India [EEPC] honored PRAG with India's 'Highest Exporters Award' [New Product Exporter / Non-SSI Category].

Around the same time PRAG also got into a Transfer-Of-Technology (TOT) Agreement with 100% buy-back arrangement for manufacture & supply of pneumatic rubber-bladder based Clutches & Brakes with Oil States Industries – a renowned offshore oil well specialty products manufacturer in the US. The tie-up was facilitated by my brother-in-law, Anant, who was a senior rubber technologist with Oil States. Barry McClintic was the head of the industrial products group at Oil States. Over time, our association grew so strong that we have become family. The TOT was a huge step forward for PRAG in terms of technological advancement.

By early 2000's, PRAG had become a renowned Indian exporter of rubber products and sugar machinery to the US and held technical collaborations with two giant American Corporations – Clarcor & Oil States. We enjoyed immense goodwill within the American Railroad, Sugar-Milling and automotive spare part industries.



Left to right: RJ, Gokul, Suman Jaitly, Peter Nangle

However, on the family front, frequent foreign travel began to take its toll leaving me little time with family. This, coupled with the vagaries of the new export policies of Govt. of India – reduction of export benefits from 15% to 3%, termination of the DEPB [Duty Entitlement Pass Book] incentive, and further strengthening of the rupee led to a gradual drop of export operations and increased concentration on development of a new range of products for the Indian Railways business.

My focus, over the next few years, shifted to the fast-growing domestic market. We wound up our motor mount export business in 2008, and by 2009, I had stopped travelling to the US for business. However, in 2013, when I was in the US to attend the graduation of my son, Gokul, who was pursuing his MBA from Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management, I informed our old associates at Clarcor about my visit. To my absolute surprise, we were facilitated by Mr. Peter Nangle with a private jet sent by Clarcor to fly us down to their headquarters to meet them. Such is the love showered by our old American associates even to this day; it always makes my heart warm. *Similar welcome and love are reflected from our past customers in Europe.* It is like having a big global family!"

Chapter 9

NEW HORIZONS, NEW CHALLENGES



*"A son-rise can change
your company's destiny" ~RJ*



Gokul (left) with Sarthak (right)

By now the possible questions that may have intrigued the reader's mind could be the following: What exactly are the triggers that drive RJ to excel despite low downs and unpredictability? Is he the unique but quintessential relationship jockey who runs into purple patches of luck shaped by the magic of destiny or the hand of God? Or behind the veneer of good manners and impeccable behavior is a hard-nosed businessman who is able to smell opportunities before others can? The answer is simple: he is all of this and more.

By 2005, RJ had become an international entrepreneur who had managed to make waves both in USA and in Europe. Post-2006, the starting point could well be that it was 'son-rise' time for RJ. It was a time for new beginnings and fresh forays into the world of business and enterprise. In 2006, his elder son Gokul – a dapper young man – had completed his bachelor's and master's degrees in industrial engineering from The Ohio State University, USA. He had successfully lived his American dream, and in the process, acquired practical knowledge and cutting-edge skills. More importantly, his father felt that he had emerged with flying colors having delivered lectures in college on multiple subjects as a Graduate Teaching Associate. Without any further ado, Gokul was initiated into the Business Development Program at PRAG and he began to apply his skillset to add value to the family business. This was the beginning of a new era for the PRAG Group.

This chapter deals with RJ's unique combination of clarity and craft. PRAG's foray into Dehradun in 2004 helped the company chart a new course. This is what RJ shares while reflecting on this 'Roller-Coaster Ride', as RJ loves to describe this station in his life.



PRAG filter plant in Dehradun

"By 2004, Clark Filters' Long-Life High Efficiency Locomotive Filters had cleared all trials and evaluations. More importantly, the Indian Railways decided to switch over to the use of these products to be procured from PRAG under our committed technical joint venture with Clark Filters, USA.

Setting up a new unit was paramount to the success of this high-volume filter business. Moreover, at this juncture, the newly formed state of Uttaranchal [carved out of Uttar Pradesh] had launched a blitzkrieg to woo investors into the fledgling state by announcing a slew of measures that included a series of tax exemptions for new manufacturing units."



RJ's quicksilver response once again changed the course of his company's destiny. "I learnt about this while I was in Delhi and immediately decided to check it out. Instead of boarding the Lucknow-bound train for which I had a confirmed reservation, I took the night train to Dehradun [capital of the new state]. Upon reaching the once laidback education hub and retirement paradise, I went to the industries office to understand the tax exemptions and fiscal incentives that were on offer and realized that it was an extremely lucrative offer – one that could be ignored only at one's own peril. The state was offering 10 years of tax holiday from excise and income tax and a lower sales tax rate in addition to subsidy on purchase of capital equipment and transportation. Uttarakhand was allowing benefits virtually amounting to additional net profits of about 15 % on sale proceeds.

As is my wont, I took an on-the-spot decision, which may have sounded dramatic, but so be it. I asked the industries department officer if she could help me locate a small premises in any industrial area belonging to the department. I convinced her that I needed this assistance so that I could help Prag register its footprint in their state. Struck by my sense of enterprise, the lady officer made a few telephone calls and soon after we were chugging along on her Scooty. She led me to a small industrial unit in the nearby Patel Nagar Industrial Area. The unit, belonging to one Mr. Nichani, was inoperative and up for sale. As luck would have it, Mr. Nichani was already present on site and was happy to meet us. I told him of my immediate

intention to purchase the unit. He quoted a price that I felt was way over the top but, having no knowledge of the reference prices in that area, I had no choice but to mutely agree.

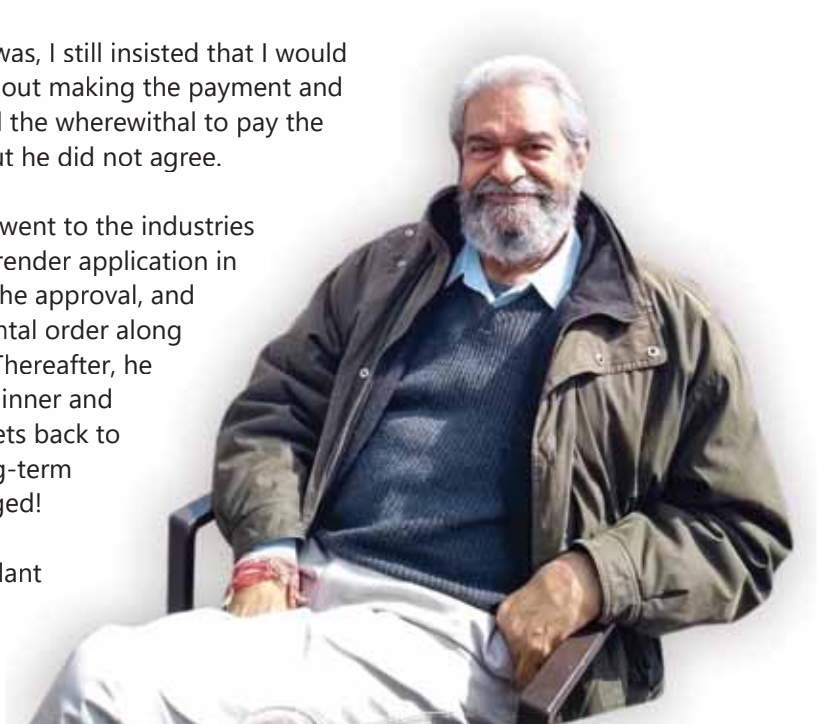
Now came another watershed event in Prag's history: "At that instance, I felt Mr. Nichani sensed my dilemma and came out with the most preposterous proposal that I could have ever imagined. He asked the lady officer to prepare the transfer papers of the department and get them signed and approved immediately. I told him to hang on since I had not come with any money. I could only give him a token handshake amount and would return the following week to conclude the deal.

To my utter surprise, Mr. Nichani responded with an unbelievable offer – one that could not be refused. "No Mr. Jain", he said, "the transaction will be done today itself and I will not take the money from you till the time you are able to set up the unit and earn the agreed sale amount as profit". He further said, "Jain Sahab, this is a very lucky property", and prophesied that I would be able to earn enough to pay for the property within six months' time.

Completely stumped as I was, I still insisted that I would not take the property without making the payment and told Mr. Nichani that I had the wherewithal to pay the required funds upfront; but he did not agree.

The next day, Mr. Nichani went to the industries department, made his surrender application in my company's favor, got the approval, and handed me the departmental order along with the keys of the unit. Thereafter, he took me to his home for dinner and arranged for my train tickets back to Lucknow. Yet another long-term relationship had been forged!

Lo and behold, the filter plant was set up and began production by June 2004. By the end of the financial year [31st March 2005], the account books showed more than



RJ's friend and caretaker of Dehradun operations, Mr. Nirmal Tiwari

enough profits to pay not only for the property purchase but also for the building renovations and all plant and machinery investment.

In 2006, my elder son Gokul completed his master's degree in industrial engineering from The Ohio State University [USA] and was initiated into the business development program, wherein he excelled and added [and continues to add] great value to the family business. By 2008, Gokul had not only taken charge of the filter plant, he had also set up a new plant for manufacture of Cast and Thermoplastic Urethane products at Dehradun in technical collaboration with a US Based Company.

The operations in Dehradun gave us the surplus revenues that resulted in strengthening our operations in Lucknow and helped fund the expansion of our manufacturing operations into the new fields of railroad air brake systems, HVAC systems, a range of locomotive equipment, draft gears, fire-retardant cushioning materials, steel fabrications, and aluminum castings.

All the new expansions were supported not only by world-class manufacturing facilities, but also by extensive in-house test laboratories and highly skilled engineering teams, giving us cutting-edge design and engineering capabilities. The biggest gain from our Dehradun foray has been that we have been able to work till date without any outside funding.

To my surprise, I am seeing similar miracles happening all over again as Gokul takes up new challenges leading to many new innovative developments. On 22nd June 2016 – my 60th birthday – Gokul, in association with a Swiss rail consultant, landed a big contract for design and manufacture of auxiliary power units for the next-generation diesel-electric locomotives to be manufactured in India by GE.

*This, I am sure, is the beginning of a
new era for PRAG!"*





Chapter 10

TWO CRACKS FOR THE LIGHT TO ENTER

image courtesy: Amir Doreh

RJ was often subsumed by the fascinating concept mooted by the great Canadian poet and singer Leonard Cohen, who sang “There is a crack in everything, that’s how the light gets in.” RJ had miraculously developed an inbuilt system to deal with life’s vagaries and this helped him turn adversities into opportunities. This raised a basic question for RJ’s philosophy of life. Is a miracle man the one who is able to see light where others see darkness? We all go through rough patches in life, RJ would say. He knew it’s a part of being alive and it’s the reality we all have to deal with. He knew life itself isn’t always about darkness and sadness, life is also filled with colours and that makes it beautiful. Along this path of darkness there’s always light at the end of the tunnel. Two defining moments in RJ’s life turned out to be stepping stones to dark miracles, if I may use this expression.

"It is strange now that as I reflect over my life and find that I went through two major upsets in life that disturbed me no end. Yet these misadventures turned out to be extremely lucky for me. In the year 2000, my elder son Gokul passed out from a boarding school in Delhi with top honors. He was confused about his higher studies and was on the horns of a dilemma. As a result of this he did not appear in any qualifying exams for entrance to colleges. I was keen that he pursued his graduation in engineering since he was blessed with a strong analytical mind. He was also very logical in his thinking and possessed a calm and unflappable demeanor. I was a little worried since I was keen that he did not waste a year by not attending college. Admissions into good engineering colleges were still available through management quota on payment of a donation. After much research and enquiry, Gokul gave his consent to take this route. I arranged for his admission to the renowned RV Institute of Technology, Bangalore.

Once the donation fee was paid, he was asked to report on the last permissible date, as was the norm for such admissions. Gokul and I were booked by the afternoon flight, which was late by 3 hours, so we both decided in the interim to visit our factory. At the factory, all hell had broken loose. Was it my intuition or divine intervention, I can never say but we found our staff was engaged in a bloody altercation with the neighboring factory staff, one of whom had slapped our workmen following a trivial issue. Within an hour, the matter escalated requiring police intervention. And as bad luck would have it, we could not take our flight to Bangalore. Worse was to follow when the college refused to entertain a late arrival and Gokul lost his seat. It was the proverbial slip between the cup and the lip. Very concerned and distraught, I tried to contact other institutions but in vain. The admission process in all the institutes had been completed. I was convinced that by playing in the gaps light enters through a divine crack as we struggle with real life problems.



Gokul, in front of his hostel in Manipal

A couple of days later I ran into a friend who gave me a rundown on a 'sandwich' engineering program being offered by Manipal University wherein the student was supposed to study in India for two years and thereafter spend two years abroad in designated universities with whom they had tie-ups. By a stroke of good fortune, another friend of ours was already in Manipal for admission for his son to this program. We contacted him only to be told that there was one seat still available and Gokul's marks at school would help him qualify for this lone seat, provided we could reach Manipal the next day. We took an early morning flight and, via Mumbai, reached Manipal by evening just in time when offices were about to shut for the day.

Gokul qualified with honors at ICAS Manipal and got admission in Ohio State University in USA. He continued to win honors in his bachelor's studies and thereafter was offered a fellowship as a teaching assistant with permission to complete his master's degree in one year instead of two years, which was the norm. Without delving into too many details, Gokul came back to join Prag in 2005 and, after 6 years of work experience, went on to do his MBA from the prestigious Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University, USA and returned to India in 2013.



RJ with Sarthak

I wonder if Gokul could have gone to USA if he had not been a part of the misadventure. To me, his admission at ICAS was nothing short of a miracle that allowed him such rich international exposure and laid the foundation for his younger brother to follow suit, who after completing law school for five years in an Indian university, did a short course at the London School of Economics, UK, and University of California – Berkley, USA, to finally obtain a master's degree in Professional Accountancy from Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, Australia."

The second crack in his life came through in a totally unexpected if not bizarre manner. RJ has always nurtured relationships even at the cost of losing hard-earned money. This philanthropic side to his personality found resonance in the year 2007. RJ was on a morning walk when a close acquaintance made an unreasonable demand to loan him a huge amount of money for a few months. RJ, who is a staunch believer of the adage that the more you give the more you get, acceded to his request. Since the person had a big name and aura in town, RJ was confident to get back the money as promised.

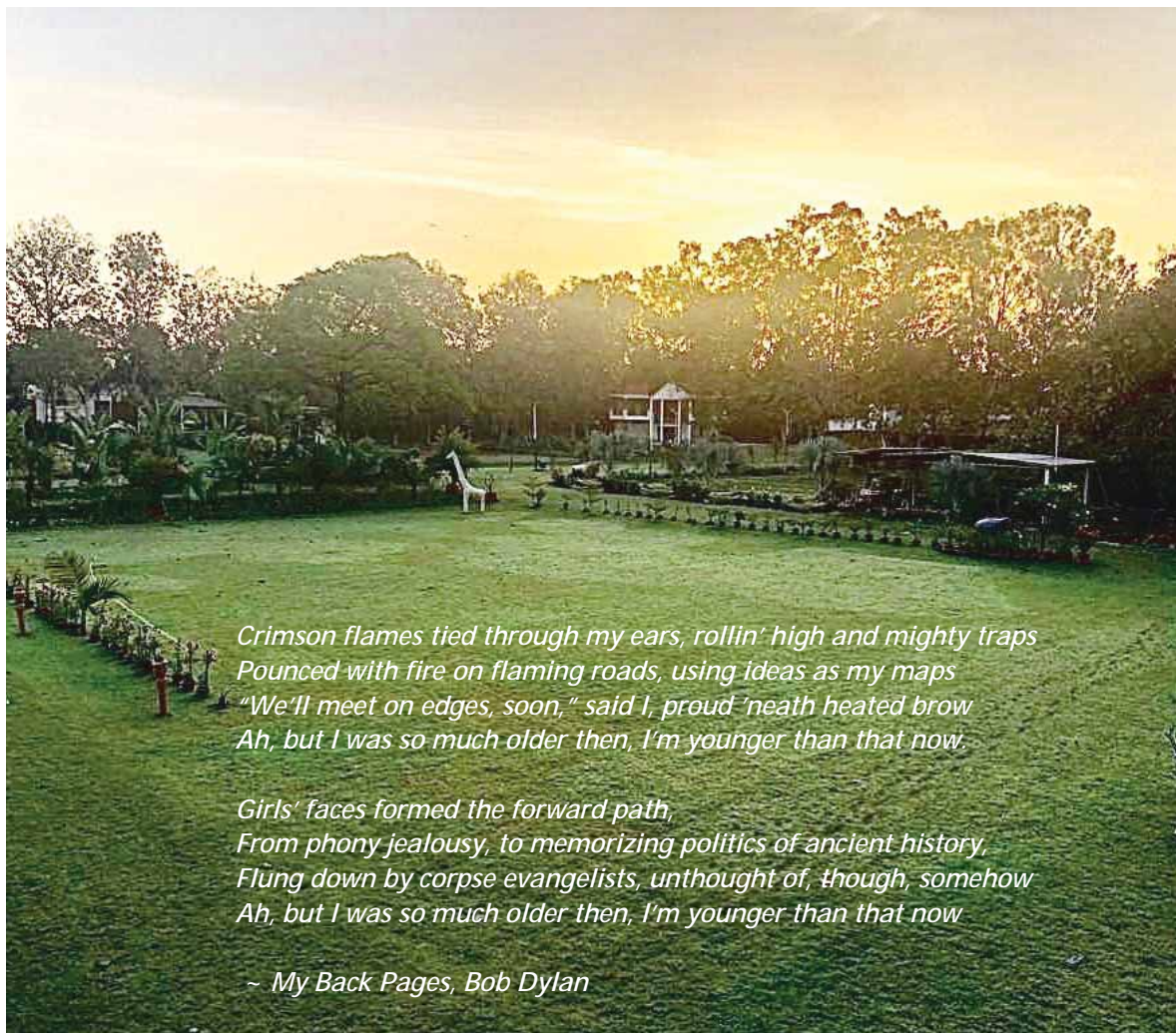
Unfortunately, this was not to be. The business honcho turned out to be a crook and refused to pay back the sum under some pretext or the other. And in order to camouflage his nefarious design he even signed an IOU to comfort RJ promising to pay back the amount in question. "I was facing a liquidity crunch and it started affecting my business and my mind. However, I had generated tremendous goodwill with my main customer, the Indian Railways. My friends who were in very senior positions tried to console me and offered to help in any manner, so that I could tide over this crisis. I came to realize shortly that the railway officials were not merely paying lip service to my predicament, and much to my surprise miracles began to happen. Prag was assisted for development of new railroad products and granted approvals on fast track. They also facilitated a collaboration with the German giant Knorr-Bremse for technology transfer and manufacture of Bogie Mounted Brake Systems for Freight Wagons.

This goodwill initiative allowed me to set up a new tax-free facility under the partnership of my two sons in the state of Uttaranchal (now Uttarakhand), where I was able to avail tax exemptions for 10-years along with various other incentives. This further culminated into me earning many times over the money I had lost in the guise of a good Samaritan.

Will you not call these miracles within the ambit of serious misadventures?"

Chapter 11

GEET MADHAV: LOVE IN C-MINOR



*Crimson flames tied through my ears, rollin' high and mighty traps
Pounced with fire on flaming roads, using ideas as my maps
"We'll meet on edges, soon," said I, proud 'neath heated brow
Ah, but I was so much older then, I'm younger than that now.*

*Girls' faces formed the forward path,
From phony jealousy, to memorizing politics of ancient history,
Flung down by corpse evangelists, unthought of, though, somehow
Ah, but I was so much older then, I'm younger than that now*

~ My Back Pages, Bob Dylan

Bobbing up and down on the somewhat turbulent sea of life, RJ never once allowed life or even difficult relationships to keep him down, for long. He was going through what Nobel laureate and protest poet Bob Dylan crooned in one of his famous songs titled 'My Back Pages. "Ah, but I was so much older then; I'm younger than that now". Yes, each passing year made him brim with younger ideas even when he became father to two strapping sons, Gokul & Sarthak, he preferred to meander his way along life almost like an endearing vagabond merrily puffing away on his cigarette, whistling along merrily and mercurially on the uncharted expanse of life. He fitted the definition of a successful businessman, but he was never the prim, bow-tied business tycoon, who sent shivers down his rivals or compatriots' spine. His seemingly easy-going demeanour was often punctuated with a mercurial flash of temper which ignited his face in a flash of lightning, but an easy and affable smile the very next instant spelt great relief to the palpably scared audience.





Whenever RJ lost his way in life, as he often did, there would have been no miracles worth his salt. He would nonchalantly say, "every time I lost my way, I found myself, instead." Inscrutable as it may sound, RJ looked like an impulsive romantic but to his wiser friends, he was like Krishna the flute-player, irreverent but innocent, at times indolent, at other times shocking but intrinsically gentle. His children and family members never really understood him but loved him immensely for his inexplicable largeness of spirit and his intense emotional responses to people and life situations. At one moment he was the brash, youthful decision-maker and in the very next instance he was the wise and patient friend who was ever willing to forgive them and unconditionally accepted them beyond their own limitations.

So, was this inscrutability that drew me to his lair or lure? Well, most certainly. The first time I visited him at his sprawling and beautifully laid out Geet Madhav Farmhouse on the outskirts of Gomti Nagar, I came to see the divinity in his simple persona. His sons wanted his story to be told to the world and I as a writer, came to know myself a little better. His sparkling wit, his love to feed me 'Poha' and 'Dhokla' even as he settled me down to let me soak in his personality, turned out to be my love for him in C-Minor. I had been hired by Gokul to chronicle his father's life, but after my first meeting with RJ, I realized that he was a man I was in search of. Or more importantly, we were two journey men who needed each other's company to flow and grow through each other's spirit of freedom. He was like the Shams of Tabrizi to the great Sufi Saint Rumi, flashes of which I claimed to have in my personality. But his avatar of Shams at the Geet Madhav farmhouse was the unearthing of the great wandering dervish in the form of Shams. Shams was upfront, but irreverent. However, whenever he saw someone or some event in the form of a higher experiential learning, he bowed down his head in reverence.



When one day I asked RJ, as to what made him trust people and help them without a second thought, he blissfully said, "I don't know, it is for you to find out. If I did, I wouldn't have asked you to write my story. I want to know the 'Khuda ka bandha' that I may be but leave it to you to un-fathom me." In a fit of mutual admiration, I dared to ask him how he got around to buying Geet Madhav. He matter-of-factly remarked, "I had grown up on the outskirts of Delhi where working on agricultural lands had become a hobby. On settling down in my professional life at Lucknow, I always longed to possess a large tract of land where I could get back to the field – a tall wish at that point in time, since availability of money was non-existent.

Once during a bird-watching trip on the outskirts of Lucknow, I came across a forest area where the landscape was a dense forest, a flowing water stream and in-between was a tract of uncultivable land separated with deep gorges. Upon enquiring, I found that the dump land was up for sale since a long time, and that too, at throwaway prices. Though there was no proper road connectivity to the area, I just loved the natural setting of the place and, on impulse or intuition as you would call it, purchased approximately 12 acres of the land on both sides of the stream. Thereafter, weeks after weeks, we worked on the land and, within three years, we were able to make it cultivable.

Soon, it became a family ritual to spend all our spare time at this farm growing vegetables, grain, fruits, and finally flowers. Cows were brought in along with dogs, ducks, rabbits, pigeons, hens, & fish. By year seven, we were exporting flowers and were adequately provided with milk, fresh vegetables, fruits, pulses, rice, and wheat. On hindsight, I realize that if this was not a flash of spiritual awakening, what else could it be?

My wife, a religiously inspiring lady, got a temple, a meditation center, and a big community kitchen built here and frequently holds Satsang and meditation camps comprising up to 100 people who are all able to stay and dine in a fully self-sufficient environment at the farm." When I gently goaded my hero to disclose what Amita means to him, he said, "She is one of the spiritual wellsprings in my life. Her total devotion to her guruji, her unwavering attention to the two children, and her natural flair for letting in divinity wherever she goes makes her my wellspring of existence. I was so busy with my business ventures that I didn't have time to know which class in school were my two children in. Amita was an oasis of calm in our house. Her presence wafts through every inch of the farmhouse. It is the divine music in her soul that has stood me in good stead, every time there was a downside to business or personal life."



Talking about their mother, both Sarthak and Gokul reveal that both her mother and grandmother were highly religious persons. Soon they both started following Pathik Ji, a spiritual nomad, who later became a person of high influence in their mother's life and how this in turn helped in the spiritual well-being of the entire family. "And it is her spiritual advice that helped my father to forgive Sanjay and move on in life to bigger things and objectives", says Gokul [we will talk about this in the next chapter, the CBI case].

Both Gokul and Sarthak became very attached to this land and have now developed a farmhouse with a swimming pool, a Zen garden, a billiard room, music room, etc. Both earned their spurs there. RJ was not sure at that point in time whether his children would ease into the family business, but he never tried to push them into the vortex of re-writing the PRAG story.

Over the years, the area around the farmhouse has developed into one of the most prime locations of the city, with the new outer ring road connecting it to all major highways in and around Lucknow, and with the airport, the railway station, and city center, all being within 20 to 30 minutes' drive.

What started as a humble acquisition in 1993, has today blossomed into a wonderful family resort to which all family members have contributed and have built the same as per their perception and needs.



* * * * *

Chapter 12

THE CBI STORM BLOWS OVER



"Sometimes I turn, there's someone there, other times it's only me, I am hanging in the balance of the reality of man like every sparrow falling, like every grain of sand", Bob Dylan, Every Grain of Sand.

Troubles come in droves not in drops.



This is the most tumultuous chapter in the life of RJ. In what turned to be a Bollywood potboiler, our protagonist was subjected to the biggest subterfuge by none other than a close business associate. The CBI investigation period was sheer baptism by fire. In March 2013, there were simultaneous CBI raids on 11 locations including RJ's offices and manufacturing facilities across three different cities. This subjected the family to unwarranted negative publicity in newspapers as well as on national television.

"Suddenly, the attitude of all stakeholders even within business circles turned against us. Our customers, vendors, and partners deserted us like rats abandoning a sinking ship. The negativity, of course, rubbed off on every single member of the 'PRAG Parivaar'. All plans for growth and diversification were put on hold and family focus shifted to saving our existing business, and more importantly, saving face. It was by far the darkest period in PRAG's history. "The troubles that the family went through were nearly insurmountable. Physically too, dad suffered a lot while mentally he was learning to be strong. He suffered from depression, Uveitis, and Crohn's disease and it took him almost two years to detect these ailments.", recalls Gokul.

Captaining the PRAG ship and steering it through troubled waters came naturally to RJ. His mastery over finding good human beings who became part of his life's journey did not come to him through corporate talent hunting. RJ has always had this strong intuition that the relationships he nurtures in people will never come back to hurt him. He also believed karma is not an instant reward system. It is a set of values that are meant to teach us all to do better. The more good people do, the more good will come of it. You shouldn't be in it for yourself, but for the growth of the greater good, like his guru would often tell him, "The people in the world will keep changing. They will come and go. But the more people adhere to the teachings of karma, the better the world will become for everyone."

Now, you may ask how could a hard-headed profit-driven businessman think in such philosophical terms and still be successful enough to dominate the world of money and vaulting ambitions. Well, this is exactly why RJ is no common seeker of wealth. He is a seeker of life and his life motive has been to nurture everlasting relationships. This forgiving and self-effacing nature came to the fore during the most tumultuous chapter in his life.

The CBI case foisted on our protagonist's companies was concocted by none other than a close business and family associate. The family had not seen it coming. The raids hit RJ like a sledgehammer crushing every belief that he stood for. For a moment he floundered and thought how someone that he trusted to the core could stab him in the back.

He took out his car and quietly headed to his Geet Madhav Farm. He first made way to the pooja room so lovingly nurtured by his wife Amita. In the solitude of his dialogue with his guru, Swami Pathik Ji, RJ broke down like a child and shed copious tears. Within one hour he began to feel better. As he would later confess, the farmhouse was his and his family's spiritual soul kitchen.

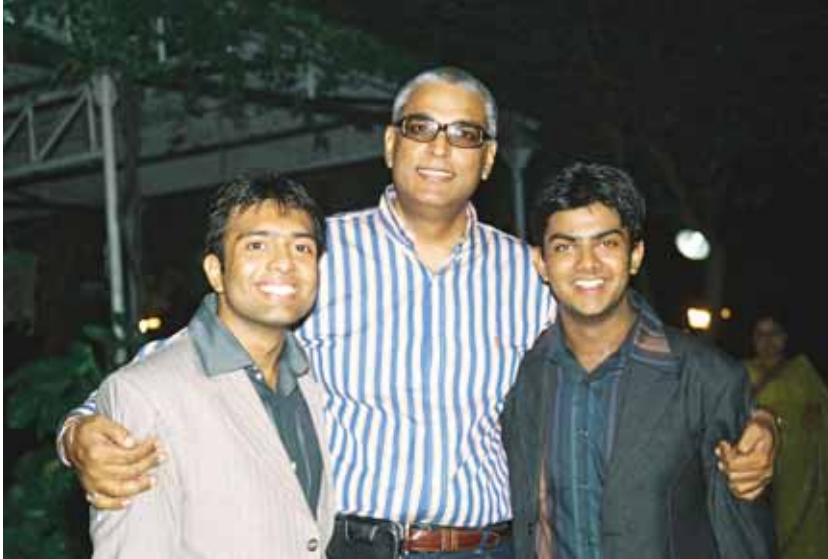
A thought crossed his incensed mind when he saw that his wife and two sons had quietly followed him to his retreat. He realized that it was time for him to step back, clear his mind, and seek the comfort of his soul mate, Amita. His elder son, Gokul, gently placed his hand on RJ's weakening shoulder as if to say, 'don't worry, we are here to take care of you.' His younger son Sarthak, who was more emotionally exhausted, decided to fight back his tears and start preparing to use his legal knowledge to help his father in the long battle that lay ahead.

It is important to understand what had actually transpired against RJ's companies. There were a group of companies that were dead against PRAG and they were led by an erstwhile close family associate, Sanjay Sangtani. The proverbial trojan horse, Sanjay, was responsible for realizing this spiteful act of envy when he joined hands with RJ's rivals. Ever willing to give the devil his due, Gokul says that Sanjay was a brilliant marketing wizard and possessed a razor-sharp mind. "He was a strong-minded person and could charm anybody of his or her pants. Sanjay's father once owned a company manufacturing a range of rubber products. Being in the same industry, my father knew him well and looked up to him with respect due to his accomplishments. My father had met Sanjay a few times and used to think of him as a bubbly kid who was very animated about life. That was something my father adored about Sanjay."

"Sanjay inherited his father's business but was, unfortunately, cheated and robbed out of it allegedly by the company's accountant who was hand-in-gloves with the local mafia. This is when RJ took Sanjay under his wings and asked him to promote our products in international markets. Energetic and extremely passionate and endowed with outstanding interpersonal skills, Sanjay soon became a skillful international sales and marketing strategist. I would even dare say that he was the ideal American salesman. Sanjay and his family were very close to us and we even went on a vacation to the U.S. with them way back in 1998. The Sangtanis knew they were family."

However, it was only when Sanjay switched sides to join RJ's competition – a group of companies that were envious and felt threatened by RJ's progress – that it became clear that Sanjay had himself long harbored a certain jealousy against RJ. "These companies got together to connive against us and our products and, using Sanjay as their front man, they made a series of baseless and spiteful complaints against us to the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI). The complaint letters were full of venom and hatred and accused the officials of the Indian Railways of wrongfully promoting and siding with PRAG

to introduce our newly developed railway bogie suspension technology. The most shocking part of this backstab was the ugly fact that these complaint letters were not written directly by our competitors, but by Sanjay Sangtani himself", says RJ.



From left to right: Gokul, Sanjay, Sarthak

"The primary accusation levelled against us was that because of the significantly higher cost of the new urethane-based bogie suspension technology introduced by us, the Indian Railways had lost over Rs. 60 crores, vis-à-vis the cost of the erstwhile rubber-metal suspension technology. Polyurethane materials are next-generation materials replacing traditional elastomeric materials and even in some cases steel, providing not only higher product life but also better and sustained deflection characteristics and reduced wear and abrasion rates. Prag had secured a transfer-of-technology agreement with a US based engineering company and, after having set up a new manufacturing plant in India producing cast polyurethane (PU) products, were successful in providing a PU based suspension to Indian Railways that successfully addressed their long-standing problems of premature failures and short service life of the incumbent rubber-metal suspension. However, since the cost of the new technology vis-à-vis the incumbent suspension was more than 10 times, the same could not find acceptability with the Indian Railways in the initial stages.

By an unusual chance, the Minister of Railways happened to make a surprise spot check at New Delhi Railway freight yard to discover that most of the

wagons were loaded up to 23-tonnes per axle against permitted and sanctioned 20-tonnes. The extra 3-tonnes was not billed and was being skimmed off by the loading authorities. This had been a long-ongoing practice that everybody knew about, but no one ever complained. The concerned minister, Mr. Lalu Prasad Yadav, decided to do the unthinkable and asked railway authorities to permit 22.5-tonnes per axle loading, which they could not do since the design of the suspension technically did not justify the extension of permissible weight carrying capacity. Nevertheless, since the minister was hell bent to do this (as the fact was that the wagons were anyway being loaded up to 23-tonnes per axle) and directed the authorities to do whatever changes to the bogie design that they might need to ensure release of technical certification for loading of wagons up to a capacity of 22.5-tonnes per axle. As the railway wagon runs on four axles, this meant that the railways would earn an extra 10-tonnes per wagon. With nearly 4,00,000 wagons in the system, the freight earnings would increase by 40,00,000-tonnes overnight.

The design wing of the railways, which was already facing premature failure issues with incumbent rubber suspension, realized that in order to certify loading of wagons up to 22.5-tonnes per axle, it had no choice but to upgrade their suspension using the new polyurethane-based technology that had long been promoted by us but was not able to find clearance due to its significantly higher cost. Our product, which had already been undergoing field trials with the Indian Railways, was promptly approved and adopted by the railways, with a mandate first to install on all newly manufactured wagons and thereafter to upgrade all existing wagons across the country with our product. This was a god-sent opportunity for PRAG.

However, the 12 to 15 manufacturers of the incumbent rubber-metal suspension suddenly found themselves out of business. They could not gear up for the new development since the Indian Railways, in one of the rare cases, had chosen a patented product. Hence, the pain and the spite of these companies against us was palpable and understandable.

Sanjay was approached by our competitors to find another suitable competing urethane product, which he could promptly find with another company with whom we had been in discussion but could not strike a deal since the company was not willing to tweak the product design to match the Indian Railways' laid down technical requirements. The product offered was as per international AAR specification and in use with the American Railroads, which, according to Sanjay and the competition, should have been adopted by the Indian Railways also. "But the approving authorities in India did not do so as they were 'under our influence'", they complained.



The investigation started after the complaint was found to have preliminary substance for investigation and while on a holiday in Mussoorie with my close family friends a day after Holi, I was summoned by CBI to report immediately to their headquarters in Delhi.

We cut-short our holiday and reached Dehradun, from where I left for Delhi and my family and friends continued to Lucknow. In Dehradun, according to my learnings from my mentoring guru Mr. T.N. Agarwal, I bought myself a new pair of shoes and a couple of white shirts as I was to appear before the premier investigative agency and was required to depose in front of them with full confidence.

Thereafter, many such visits were made for interrogation and I could see that the CBI sleuths were never able to understand the subject fully, the same being quite technical in nature. On one such visit, I dared to request them to allow me to present the full case and assist them in the investigation as a lawyer does in the courts. They could not understand such an approach and took me to their superior authority who after hearing me gave me the permission to do so. It was a Friday and he asked me to report back on Monday morning 9 AM.

I prepared 22 files, each addressing, with evidence, all the questions that were placed before us. The investigating officers and I together went through each and every file and by the time we finished 17th file they got up and declared that the investigation was over and they would not require me to present myself before them again, kind of hinting that all was understood and found acceptable.

Lo and behold, after two months the case was dropped by the investigating team and sent to CBI Court for final adjudication. It took more than one year for the court to accept the case closure and in January 2016, the court pronounced their judgement honorably exonerating us from all charges.

Ironically, it was adjudged by the CBI court that the new technology introduced by us, far from causing the alleged loss of some Rs. 60 crore, was in fact instrumental in a savings of more than Rs. 600 crore to the government exchequer in direct product replacement costs alone, as the polyurethane-based suspension provided a service life of over 6 years vis-à-vis 6 to 9 months service life provided by the incumbent rubber-metal suspension, not accounting for savings in labor and overheads, reduced downtime of rolling stock, or the benefits accrued to the railways due to the higher carrying capacity of wagons.

Today, the PU technology has not only been made standard for use on all types of wagon suspensions but has also been proliferated in many more similar applications within the railways.

From that day on till now, we have not only openly talked about the case facts to all stakeholders, we have even displayed the court judgment in all our offices and even our booths at various trade fairs."

IMITATION IS EASY...

True meaningful innovation is hard work. It is triggered by the need of the customer, cautiously cultivated in a dynamic environment and nurtured by technology and expertise. Any new idea, by definition, is not accepted at first; it disturbs the status quo and faces opposition.

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POLYURETHANE CONSTANT CONTACT SIDE BEARING

First introduced in 2004, the PU-CCSB has significantly enhanced product life and reduced failure rate,¹ resulting in cumulative benefit to Indian Railways of more than Rs. 600 Crores.²

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Polspa™ Polymer Springs

¹ Compared to the erstwhile Rubber-to-Metal Bonded Product with 6-9 months life and failure rate of 22.34 % [vs. PU-CCSB with 6 year life and failure rate of 2.47 %]; recorded field data available with Research, Designs & Standards Organisation.

² More than 3 Lakh wagons fitted with the product till date with an estimated saving of Rs. 19,110/- per wagon, as repeatedly investigated, verified and held by competent authorities; recorded field data available with R.D.S.O. and Ministry of Railways.

"Though the women of the family were not actively involved in resolving the vexed issue the way my younger brother Sarthak and dad were doing, they were instrumental in guiding us through these troubled times. My mother, although was not actively involved in issues surrounding the case, became the life sustaining force for the beleaguered family. She was the oasis of calm in a troubled sea. She was actively involved in her daily pooja, looking for solutions from God and helping us spiritually. She participated in various charities and her thought process enveloped us like a soothing balm. It helped us gain relaxed insights into the issue and gave us the resolve to overcome these trying situations. Her good karma ensured that we were taken care of and slowly, but surely, we were able to find ways and means to tide over this crisis.", says Gokul.



"Much after the CBI case was decided in our favor, my father did the impossible. After the case, Sanjay was unceremoniously deserted by the very competitors who had used him against us. I wouldn't ever have forgiven him but knowing my father, who often has a very different perspective on human relationships and always tries to see the positive side of people, I knew he would. Dad believed that Sanjay was just the rival companies' mouthpiece and had been completely brainwashed against us. Dad forgave Sanjay and hired him back to work with us again. "Despite his 'vileness' there are many virtues in him too", he said.

RJ's outlook towards Sanjay, might be aptly summarized in this beautiful Buddhist saying: "It is the cracks that make you a more flesh and blood human being rather than being an embodiment of perfection." Gokul, however, has a slightly different view on this: "I can find the action justifiable only by citing a less popular proverb by Oscar Wilde: 'Forgive your enemies, nothing annoys them more.'"

When I asked Gokul if I could get Sanjay's side of the story, Gokul readily gave me his number.

RJ's friend-turned adversary, Sanjay Sangtani was eloquent about how the CBI case that was foisted on RJ, was his call to conscience. "I was always against the type of materials we were providing, as they were not in conformance with the international standards. It is our country and we cannot degrade its prime transportation service by offering non-standard products. My fight and dispute were not with RJ per se but with the type of product the railways were procuring. I believe in transparency and how we can improve the quality and standards of our product", says Sanjay, "My complaint was never against RJ but against the system. I wanted to bring a change in the way business was conducted in the industry, but no one wanted to change the status quo."

According to Sanjay, he and RJ always argued about the way business was conducted by the Indian Railways. "I have always been pushing RJ to step up, take charge, and change things around him, which, I am happy to note, he is now doing." Despite their differences both Sanjay and RJ have been respectful of each other. "We can talk to each other without any awkwardness and RJ accepts my role in the investigation.", he says, "I must clarify that I never approached the CBI with the complaints. Instead, they approached me."

"RJ's wife is a pious and calm lady. She is highly spiritual and maintains a healthy and open relationship with God. If one gets her blessings, it is impossible for a person to fail and this proved to be true for RJ in his time of need. She stood like a pillar of strength during RJ's testing times and he emerged with all the love and blessings of God." Sangtani and RJ have been family for a very long time and the former still considers RJ as his brother and family despite going through the phase that put them in each other's crosshairs with the CBI.



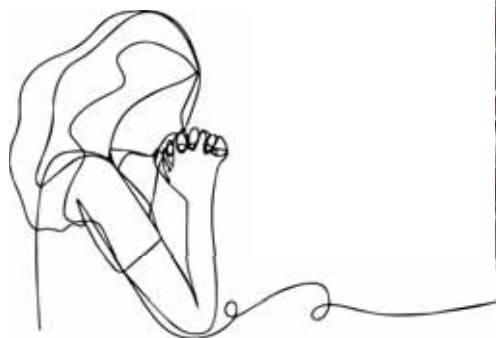
RJ with Sanjay & Rohina Sangtani

RJ comes across as an inspirational figure who doesn't hold grudges against anyone, no matter how badly they have treated him in the past. He sees the good in everyone, whether or not they can see it in themselves. As Mahatma Gandhi famously said, "The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong". Perhaps it is RJ's ability to overlook the wrongs and forgive that gives him the strength to move on with positivity and gain the respect of his peers, friends, and family.

Chapter 13

AMITA, MIRACLES, & MAHARAJ JI

The great C S Lewis once said miracles are a retelling in small letters of the very same story which is written across the whole world in letters too large for some of us to see. The genius Albert Einstein adds to this lofty thought by saying: 'There are two ways to live: you can live as if nothing is a miracle; you can live as if everything is a miracle.' RJ, whom we have seen as nature's child who loved to follow his heart in whatever he did, seemed destined to lead a blessed if not charmed life, thanks to the spiritual wellspring his wife and soulmate Amita provided him.





To those uninitiated in western metaphysics, RJ's actions can remind us of the Fool in a pack of tarot cards, both mystical and romantic. A Fool who is numbered 0 has unlimited potential. Tarot Card readers would have us believe that the "Fool belongs to the Major Arcana and since he journeys through life, he is ever present and therefore needs no number. The colourful card shows a young man standing on the edge of a cliff, without a care in the world, as he sets out on a new adventure. He is gazing upwards toward the sky and is seemingly unaware that he is about to skip off a precipice into the unknown. Over his shoulder rests a modest knapsack containing everything he needs. The white rose in his left hand represents his purity and innocence. And at his feet is a small white dog, representing loyalty and protection that encourages him to charge forward and learn the lessons he came to learn. The mountains behind the Fool symbolise the challenges yet to come. They are forever present, but the Fool doesn't care about them right now; he's more focused on starting his expedition. In short, he represents a person who lives in the here and now, is naïve and childlike."

Perennial philosophies expound the inner values one needs to imbibe to live a harmonious and happy life. It is in this context that we need to understand how the biggest miracle played out in RJ's life. It came to pass that a wondering mendicant named Pathik Maharaj blessed his wife Amita's life. As faith would have it, even before RJ married Amita her father was a staunch follower of Maharaj Ji. Amita's father, it so happened died at a young age, leaving the family emotionally scarred. It is during these troubled times that the wandering mendicant entered Amita's house. Whenever he was in Lucknow, Maharaj Ji stayed at their house and provided them with the mental and spiritual succor they badly needed.



After RJ's marriage with Amita, Maharaj Ji paid a visit to their house during one of his Lucknow sojourns and asked for RJ's permission to stay at his house. RJ inexplicably fell at his feet and welcomed him into the house with an open heart. From that moment on till the day he died, he would stay at their place whenever he was in the city. Even though RJ was exceptionally fond of Maharaj Ji, he was not a very devout follower. Many would find it uncanny since like the Fool in a pack of Tarot cards, RJ preferred to live life completely on his own terms, singing, and spending time with his friends, even while Maharaj Ji was present in the house. Every morning, when RJ would go to Maharaj Ji to seek his blessings, the guru would sit him down for two minutes, and then himself let his disciple take leave, knowing fully well that he wouldn't stay any longer than that. RJ was not a devout follower, but was a follower nonetheless, and had imbibed many of Maharaj Ji's teachings and philosophies in his life.

One of his famous teachings from his sermons, that each of his followers including RJ and his family, inculcated was:

*"Ishwar Ansh Jeev Avinashi;
Chetan Amal Sahaj Sukh Rashi".*

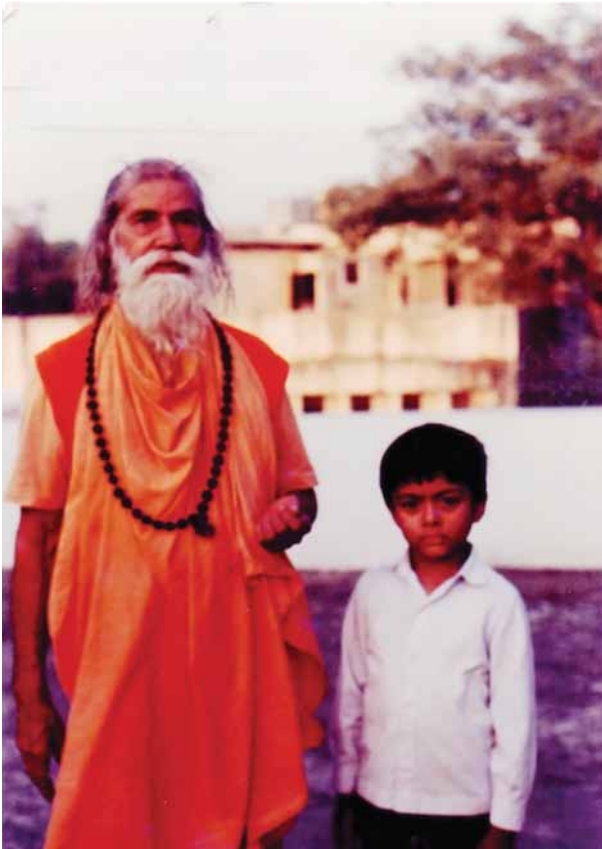
This was a life-lesson from Ramayana that meant: "All living beings are a part of the almighty, and therefore conscious, pure, and full of happiness by nature."

Over time, the bond between Pathik Maharaj and RJ became stronger; A strong follower and disciple of Naga baba, Maharaj Ji would wander around in the small districts, villages, and towns all over the country. Wherever he went, he would take shelter at the house of a disciple, stay there for a day or two, and then move on in his pursuit of inner truth and God. He would drop in without any prior notice, or a very short one if at all, and often leave without any information within a couple of days. His followers would trace him and accompany him to wherever he went since he never explicitly attached himself to one place nor did he ask his followers to visit temples or read scriptures.

Maharaj Ji would often give sermons, that did not specifically pertain to one particular religion. In the summers, he would live at the Parmarth Ashram in Haridwar for about two months, that is, from the start of May to the end of June. During this period, many of his disciples would gather in and around the ashram in order to attend his sermons, which he took once in the morning and once in the evening. These disciples would observe the same

simple lifestyle as followed by their guru and would reach out to him with whatever contentious issues they may be facing in their lives. The wandering minstrel always had a solution to offer each one of his devotees.

Maharaj Ji's sermons were philosophical in nature and dealt with life and how one should live it. Most of his sermons would end up being recorded by his disciples, following which many books were written later. These dealt with various issues of life such as the right way to live life, what should matter to us as human beings, and what role material wealth plays in our lives. Often, these sermons were recorded in video form too, but since technology was not that advanced back then, these videos weren't of very high quality. Maharaj Ji's books and videos were distributed to people across all religions, who would follow his sermons through the years.



Swami Pathik Maharaj with Gokul

RJ's family, including Amita, Gokul, & Sarthak too would spend two months of their summer vacations in Haridwar at Parmarth Ashram till the time Maharaj Ji was alive. His kids have grown up there, playing on the banks of Ganga near Maharaj Ji's cottage, listening to his sermons, and eating with him and his disciples in the community kitchen. RJ would not stay long at the Haridwar ashram but would leave his wife and children to stay on for two months. In the sixteen years of his marriage to Amita from 1981 to Maharaj Ji's demise in 1997, the family had the great privilege of being under his tutelage. RJ even named his house "Paramashray", meaning, "dwelling of the supreme being".

Six months before he passed away, RJ's life took a miraculous turn when Maharaj Ji visited his abode in Lucknow and asked him to summon a lawyer. Without asking any questions, RJ invited over a lawyer friend. Maharaj Ji then dropped a bombshell when he asked the lawyer to make his will. Even though Maharaj Ji did not possess much money, he had several institutions, schools, colleges, orphanages, old age homes, ashrams, and cowsheds running under his name and large tracts of land that had been donated to him by followers. In his will, Maharaj Ji made Rakesh his executor and sole trustee, and specified that RJ will manage all his property after his demise. The will was drafted in the span of just one hour. As fate would have it, Maharaj Ji passed away six months later at the age of 88. Such was the bond and trust of RJ & Amita with Pathik Ji.

Maharaj Ji's followers are still present in large numbers and are spread across the world. Amita holds camps for about 10 to 15 days at the family owned Geet Madhav Farms in Lucknow every year to read and discuss his teachings, and hundreds of devotees attend the congregation. In Maharaj Ji's Guru's village of Pali, a fair is held every year during Guru Purnima in his honor. Lakhs of saints and disciples now congregate at this annual fair and participate in community kitchens and other such activities that evoke the philosophy of life propagated by Pathik Maharaj. Even the internationally celebrated Acharya Rajneesh was once Maharaj Ji's disciple, and on various occasions Maharaj Ji used to quote from Osho's teachings in his sermons. Such was the lure and charm of the wandering baba.

The lure of Maharaj Ji and his mystical appeal spread far and wide. One of the most well-known and humorous tales that still does the rounds is that Maharaj Ji's guru Naga Baba once had to shackle Maharaj Ji in chains so as to prevent him from wandering off.

After his death, when RJ circulated this will among the various organizations that were running under Maharaj Ji, all hell broke loose. Given man's

avaricious nature when it came to property and institutions a whisper campaign gained ground that RJ had manipulated Maharaj Ji into writing this will. Many of the ashram organizers accused him of having obtained the property by force and suggested that the will was a fake. Things turned for the worse, and many of them filed cases against him in the court. Now, this is where RJ's sagacity and his miraculous ability to rise above petty monetary matters came to the fore. Not interested in sullyng the name of Maharaj Ji, RJ constituted a central committee and handed over the management of several of his institutions to them, retaining no control, ownership, or committee membership with him. This ability to step back and not let his business skills take over, is one of the pristine qualities in RJ which adds to his innate charm.

Summarizing his mother's unconditional love and her spiritual presence in the house Sarthak puts it most succinctly when he says, "Mummy has always been a grounded person and till date doesn't find any happiness in the luxuries of life. Her jewels are her never fading smile and her love of simplicity. Spiritualism has given her an envious power that we all want i.e. contentment and calmness, which in real terms translates into the emotion of not being angry. Being virtuous in all that she does, it's always easy to find a friend in her and she is always the go-to person for me."



Swami Pathik Meditation Hall at RJ's Farmhouse

* * * * *

Chapter 14

SAME THING ONLY DIFFERENT

COVID 19 gave us the belief that life is indeed a miracle.

As I drove into the sprawling farmhouse Geet Madhav what with its well landscaped gardens, the elegant temple, the swimming pool and aquarium there was a palpable sense of foreboding, much like the lull before a storm. The Sunday morning was the first day when the six-week total lockdown imposed due to the sordid saga of COVID 19 had eased somewhat. We all knew that a sanitizer, mask, social distancing and no handshakes was the protocol we needed to follow if we were to meet each other in person. By now, more than 350,000 thousand global citizens had laid down their lives even as the coronavirus continued to debilitate or



devour anyone who came in contact with it. The air in Lucknow was suffused with the imagined smell of disease and cordite, and daily conversations veered around how we all need to dodge death and depravation. This is the backdrop in which I had decided to meet my protagonist RJ for the final session of this saga of miracles. I had first set out to capture his freewheeling story on April 25, 2015. On that day too, I was stung by the fact that a series of earthquakes had devastated and destroyed large parts of Nepal as also the religious town of Uttarkashi in India.



Geeteshwar Mahadev Temple at Geet Madhav Farm

RJ had looked calm and composed even as he set about comforting his family of 350 employees by reaching out to them on an hourly basis. With one eye glued to the TV set, he had agreed to talk to me once his son Gokul introduced me to him. Gokul had, at that point in time commissioned me to chronicle his father's amazing story and here I was sitting in front of the mesmerizing and larger than life persona of RJ. He reminded me of the diminutive hero Dusty Fog in a J T Edson western novel. It was said that when Dusty entered a room his shadow too became a part of his personality and he assumed a larger than life demeanor. Only 165 cm in height, when Dusty began to talk in his booming baritone, others in the room paled into insignificance. I had felt the same heady ambience when I walked into his sparse but elegantly done up office.

Today, the venue was different, but the aura was the same. Nature had unleashed its fury then and it was doing the same today, five years down the line. Just as I eased into a dining chair, the ever-hospitable RJ and his wife Amita were busy spoiling us silly by serving dishes from the rich breakfast fare laid out on the table. There was poha, dhokla, sandwiches and what have you even as we exchanged pleasantries. Another striking similarity hit me right between the eyes, when I saw RJ busy consoling and talking to Kamlesh,

his farmhouse cook, whose father had suffered serious injuries in Colonelganj town, some 80 kms from Lucknow. With the complete lockdown in place, RJ was busy arranging for a car to ferry Kamlesh to his hometown since the latter's father had fallen victim to an attack by a bull that had decided to serenade the family cow. When the bull found Kamlesh's father trying to shoo it away, it decided to butt him out of the way. The results were disastrous and Kamlesh's father suffered many broken bones. The old man needed to be shifted to a hospital at the earliest. After many phone calls and police permissions later, RJ emptied out his pocket which contained Rs. 7,500 in cash and he then turned to his younger son Sarthak who shelled out another 12,500 as advance money for Kamlesh's father's treatment. Having tended to Kamlesh's needs, RJ looked comforted even as he sat at the breakfast table along with Sudhanshu Mani, a retired General Manager of the Indian Railways and a writer of eminence. I felt a strong sense of *déjà vu* because it was the same Mr. Mani who was seated next to me when I had interviewed RJ for the first time in his office.

I realized that life had come a full circle as the book project was drawing to a close. Both Sarthak and Gokul were seated close by and I soon realized that the farmhouse had now become the 'Camp David' for major decisions of the RJ family. Talk veered around how it looked apparent that the youngest of the family were now moving with authority. Had RJ decided to let his two strapping young sons steer the PRAG ship was a question that was met with a sense of befuddlement. When I asked RJ whether it was his idea to put a family constitution in place now that there were young players who wanted to further their father's dreams, RJ said, "I was introduced to the idea of Family Constitution by my elder son, Gokul, who set up a meeting with Anil Sainani Ji in which I was enlightened on the subject."

My family, consisting of an illustrious father having worked at senior levels with multinational companies, a doting mother and four brothers, was brought up in a healthy and happy environment with each individual given the opportunity to pursue the best of education suiting their liking and ability. I am a self-promoted entrepreneur, having worked under my father who was a brilliant engineer and a friend, always there to help me mould my ideas / efforts into success. I made a humble start in 1979 selling Zippo lighters, and today we are a well-established business enterprise known as the PRAG group with six facilities manufacturing some of the most technically challenging products and equipment and growing with a strong and loyal 'Prag Parivaar' having more than 500 people. My two sons, Gokul and Sarthak are both well-read and able personalities, married to well-educated and able spouses. Both my daughters-in-law are very loving,



affable, and cultured, having great talent in fine arts and are supportive in business and family. Both Sarthak and Gokul decided to pursue their journey with PRAG, necessitating the need of putting together a family constitution document to encompass the requirements of all individuals in the family and to lay down a road map facilitating healthy principles of working together in a manner where both the sons support each other keeping in mind the interests of the 'PRAG Parivaar'."

This Family Constitution document has addressed all issues as discussed and brought forward by all family members in various meetings and workshops under the able guidance of Anil Sainani Ji and under the supervision of counselor Ms. Richa Singh. They have now set aside all confusion with regards to their rights and obligations and the document incorporates the views and needs of all family members, to which I bestow my blessings. I pray for the continued happiness of all family members in the present and in the future. I wish that everyone will stand by each other always as one family keeping aside all differences and realize the strength of family unity." The preamble to the family constitution was etched by Pathik Maharaj's world view and herein lies the miraculous quality of the constitution becoming an integral document that enshrined RJ's family business.

Lending his perspective to the decision to adopt the family constitution, Sarthak, the younger son, says that the advantage of a family constitution is that it ensures clarity and transparency and families know what to do when

disagreements arise. In addition, it strengthens the family's emotional cohesion because the shareholders work together to formulate the family constitution. By following the tenets and spirit of the document, it confirms the fact that intensive discussions in an environment viewed as safe, leads to a high degree of trust, openness, and attachment. The family constitution ultimately acts as an indispensable link between the family and the business. Family-owned businesses without a family constitution in place are therefore more likely to be susceptible to crisis, adds Gokul.

So, in effect a succession document was now in place and the RJ family was ready to kiss the skies. Was this just practical thinking or was it a precursor to future miracles? No one can say yet.

Coming back to the role of miracles in RJ's illustrious life is something the writer is convinced of, but the idea of him being called the Miracle Man does not sit well with RJ. So, discussion now turned to what could be construed as a miracle. Any solution that is arrived at, through an unconventional or divine intervention could be believed to be a miracle. The fact is that whenever RJ hit rock bottom or was in a serious spot of bother, some good Samaritan or some unexpected person bailed him out.

If we consider what some of the world's leading thinkers call a miracle, we have a kaleidoscope of thoughts and explanations. For instance, according to philosopher David Hume, a miracle is "a violation of the laws of nature", or more fully, "a transgression of a law of nature by a particular volition of the Deity, or by the interposition of some invisible agent." By this definition, a miracle goes against our regular experience of how the universe works. As miracles are single events, the evidence for them is always limited and we experience them rarely. On the basis of experience and evidence, the probability that a miracle occurred is always less than the probability that it did not occur. As it is rational to believe what is more probable, we are not supposed to have a good reason to believe that a miracle occurred. According to the Christian theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher, "every event, even the most natural and usual, becomes a miracle as soon as the religious view of it can be the dominant".

On the other hand, mystical Sufi biographical literature records claims of miraculous accounts of men and women. The miraculous prowess of the Sufi holy men includes *firasa* [clairvoyance], the ability to disappear from sight, to become completely invisible and practice *buruz* [exteriorization]. The holy men reportedly tame wild beasts and traverse long distances in a very short time span. They could also produce food and rain in seasons of drought, heal the sick, and help barren women conceive.

But when it comes to more mundane and day to day activities, will a seemingly divine intervention pass off as a miracle? Was RJ always privileged to be in the right place at the right time? Gokul would tend to agree to this premise even though he has tried to deconstruct miracles and how they play out in our lives.

We now come to a spine-chilling story in PRAG's annals which may pass off as a miracle in my terms of reference but as a touch of magic as Gokul would have me believe. Whatever we may want to name this saga of blood, sweat, and achievement, it is authored not by RJ but by Gokul. Does this mean that miracle is a family inheritance? Let me tell you the story in Gokul's own words and leave you to decide as to what genre it fits into.

Gokul recounts this magical albeit complicated story. He says, "Action began in 2015, when our railway business was heavily dependent on equipment for diesel locomotives that were on their way out thanks to the rapid electrification of railway tracks. In order to safeguard our businesses, we needed to add some product or equipment that could be used on non-diesel rolling stock. As luck would have it, around the same time, the railways were rapidly increasing their production of air-conditioned coaches and were about to introduce AC EMU (Electric-Multiple-Units) / MEMU (Mainline Electric-Multiple-Units) rakes for suburban transport.

A first of sorts, PRAG had been the first Indian company to design and manufacture completely indigenous heat-exchangers for diesel locomotives and had subsequently introduced several thermal management products including thermal insulation for locomotive compressor and exhaust systems and high-capacity industrial chillers. PRAG was also the first company to introduce onboard water purifiers-cum-coolers in India, with several trains in operation providing clean, potable, cold drinking water to railway passengers.

It so transpired that because of our rich experience in thermodynamics, the railways turned to us to develop a Driver Cab AC to be retrofitted on their existing fleet of ALCo Locomotives. Acutely quality conscious and ever willing to push the envelope, we tied up with a European designer of bespoke railway HVAC [Heating, Ventilation, & Air-Conditioning] systems and within one year, in 2016 to be precise, we designed and introduced India's first-ever split-type air-conditioning system for onboard railway applications. Our design was duly approved by the Indian Railways.

In 2017, we went on to design India's first ever driver cab AC for the Mumbai Local, and by mid-2018, scores of EMU trains were running across the



country fitted with Prag Cab AC systems. Buoyed by these successes and given the increasing market of air-conditioned passenger coaches in India, manufacture of railway coach HVAC seemed to be a natural step forward for us.

As luck would have it, around this time, the Indian Railways were on their way to producing their first indigenous self-propelled trainset, which would later be christened the 'Vande Bharat Express', a pet project of our honorable Prime Minister. The railways were looking for an expert who could help them fill the technological void in onboard railway air-conditioning technology and help them design a modern world-class coach HVAC for this project. Given our track record in technological innovation coupled with the success of our recent mobile HVAC designs, we were provided this opportunity.

It was around this time that our association with the European designer soured as we realized that they were only interested in selling their equipment to us and extracting their pound of flesh, deliberately leaving us with no margins [we had always been completely transparent with them with regards to our pricing to the customer]. Even though the relationship was formed with a clear understanding of make-in-India, the British company was interested only in selling European products to us at exorbitant cost. This sudden turn of events left us high and dry. While we had the prestigious Vande Bharat Air Conditioning project in our pocket, our design and development wing [the British partner] had vanished into thin air!

It was here that our technical prowess came into play. Our technical wizard D. K. Srivastava, a dear friend of my father and my work colleague, took it upon himself to design a fully indigenous product, while at the same time setting up a state-of-the-art manufacturing plant and recruiting an expert team of HVAC designers and engineers – all within record time. We had less than 6-months to design, develop, test, and supply a completely new coach HVAC system – a process that would under normal circumstances take a minimum of 1.5 years.

We invested in the best plant and machinery and test equipment, albeit with no guaranteed future business, and decided to cut no corners in product design, technology, and quality. Vande Bharat was a very prestigious project for our country and it certainly deserved the best HVAC, regardless of our dispute with the British designers. To cut a long story short, Prag Koldform™ 8T Roof Mounted HVAC System was developed in record time and was the first major upgrade in Indian Railways' passenger coach air-conditioning in more than a decade.

It was all very well to have these accolades and successful technically challenging innovations on our resumé. In the process, we built a very dynamic expert team of engineers and invested heavily in a new state-of-the-art manufacturing facility, which remains, to this day, a feather in our cap. However, we needed a standard product that could provide stable high-volume business and allow us to break even and sustain the new plant and team. For this, we needed approval for manufacture and supply of mainline passenger coach air-conditioning for the Indian Railways.”

Now, what I am about to divulge next, could well be the turning point in the company’s life. “The approval for mainline passenger coach HVAC rested with RDSO, Lucknow. We went through the RDSO specifications and were confident of not only meeting them but comfortably exceeding them. Our plant, team, and manufacturing capabilities far exceeded all RDSO requirements and we had been already approved for the exact same product by the Integral Coach Factory, Chennai – an Indian Railways organization, which happens to be the world’s largest producer of passenger coaches! To my mind, the RDSO registration should’ve been nothing more than a mere formality.”

But now comes the twist in the tale. “Little did I know about the nefarious designs of a strong entrenched lobby of HVAC suppliers that we were soon about to confront. It needs to be mentioned here that the mainline coach air-conditioning market in India, right since its inception, had been tightly controlled by a coterie of seven firms on paper that were, in fact, only four companies [There were 3 pairs of sister concerns approved for the same product, making them six suppliers on paper whereas, in reality, they were only 3].

For almost a decade, no new vendor had been able to get entry into this cozy club, although many tried and failed, thanks to a lopsided specification revision introduced in 2011, that set an eligibility criterion that was all but impossible for any new entrant to qualify. Even renowned global suppliers like Knorr Bremse (Germany), and Faiveley Transport (France) had been trying to get this approval for eons but were repeatedly denied, in spite of being the world leaders in railway air-conditioning systems.

To worsen matters, by 2018, of the seven approved vendors one had closed shop after the demise of its founder, two had been blacklisted by SEBI for fraud, and another, being on the verge of bankruptcy, had stopped supplying. This left only 3 vendors in operation, two of which were sister concerns. Consequently, the coach production units were facing an acute

shortage of HVAC suppliers, leading to delay in roll out of passenger coaches. They had made several representations to RDSO in writing requesting them to urgently add new HVAC suppliers. Apparently, all these representations fell on deaf ears.

Finally, in 2018, thanks to our successful HVAC innovations and our audacity to go ahead with huge plant and machinery investments without any assured future business, we became the first company to become fully compliant to the 2011 revision of the RDSO specification. We applied for RDSO registration in October 2018. Our approval was only a simple matter of procedure, or so we thought.

Mysteriously, however, a straightforward application that would normally take no more than a couple of months, was repeatedly stalled on some pretext or the other before being finally rejected in September 2019. The lame and only reason for rejection being a delayed response from us to an RDSO letter intentionally posted to the wrong address to ensure that it was never delivered to us.

What was more shocking was the bureaucratic double-speak and inanities that stared us in the face. The letter, non-receipt of which was to be the reason for our rejection, contained a host of completely extraneous and irrelevant queries, such as, "You have mentioned that your CEO has MBA and engineering degrees, but have not mentioned the subjects / discipline he pursued?".

We did finally manage to get delivery of this letter, but by then it was already too late. That was when I truly realized the extent of notoriety of the coterie at play and the power wielded by them.

Being bonafide railway suppliers for almost four decades with several RDSO approved products in our portfolio, I believed we knew the system and the processes well and had faith in them. The recent visits of the very same officers who rejected our application to our new plant and their admiration and encouragement had further strengthened this belief.

When I saw the rejection letter in September 2019, all of a sudden, the earth slipped from under my feet. Apart from the huge investments we had made in setting up the HVAC plant, we had recruited a team of some 100 young professionals to run this new plant. This rejection letter spelled doom and gloom for PRAG. We were pushed against the wall. The only choice left was to either close down our new plant and fire the entire team, or to go to court



directly against our most important customer, i.e. the Indian Railways – something that no railway vendor had ever done before!

It was at this juncture that we decided to do the unthinkable. We petitioned the High Court against the Indian Railways. The railway officials, and indirectly the lobby, were hit hard as they never expected us to take them to court. Thankfully, almost all railway officials, except the select few who had wronged us, acknowledged that we had been wronged and stood by us, giving us the confidence to go ahead.

Our petition was very straightforward. The court could instantaneously smell foul play and on the very first hearing itself directed RDSO to “consider the case of the petitioner on the application moved by him in accordance with the law / existing specification.” Within 20 days, we miraculously had the product approval in our hands. As they would say, the magic was back in our lives.”

Passenger Coach HVAC Unit



EMU Driver Cab AC

Now, could this path-breaking and extraordinary incident, replete with drama, conflict, subterfuge, suspense and courtroom proceedings be the harbinger of miracles that could lie in store for the young honchos of the PRAG family? Only time will tell.

Gokul puts it succinctly when he wisely quotes Bob Marley who once famously said, "You never know how strong you are until being strong is the only choice you have"!

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Chapter 15

TALKING HEADS

RJ has continued to be friends with even those who have viciously tried to harm him. He seems to be functioning from a level where he is perhaps relating to the divinity in a person rather than their worldly traits and frailties. Hats off to such an attitude!

~ Suman Jaitly (RJ's Friend).



From left to right: RJ, Rajendra Kumar Khare, D.K. Srivastava, Suman Jaitly

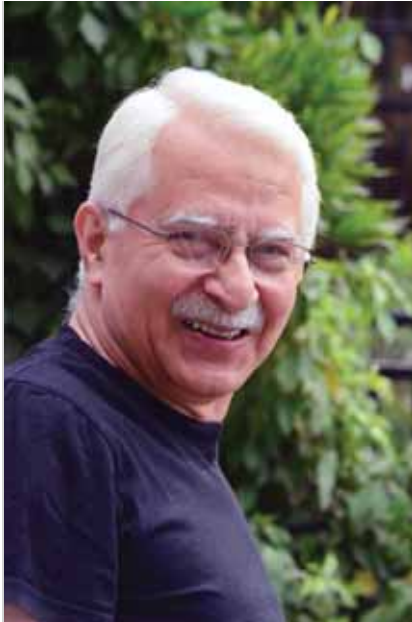
You may well ask as to why I am spending so much time writing a book on a Lucknow-based entrepreneur, the likes of whom you can probably find in any and every city of India. To me, tracking RJ's life has been a life-changing journey both as a writer and as a chronicler of events. I had initially conceived my protagonist to be a modern-day RJ (Radio Jockey), but over time came to believe he is a Relationship Jockey par excellence. In this book, I have tried to capture the rich and magical journey of an extraordinary individual who developed long-lasting relationships without any apparent motive in mind. Unlike most success stories, it is often seen that successful business magnates build networks so that they grow wings and get noticed in the international arena. However, when you come across a person like RJ who intuitively shapes miracles without following a time-tested path, you are forced to sit up and take notice. It seemed like people simply sprang up in his life to work miracles and bring him to where he stands today. The drama that life enacted on him each time he hit rock bottom will inspire many who want to excel as business leaders.

You may then ask how can the promoter of a firm committed to making top-class railway equipment and accessories be larger than life? Most railway equipment manufacturers are not known in the public domain because it is important for them to remain faceless and anonymous. The fact is that RJ is one of the few business leaders who took to untested waters to convey his thoughts, ideas, and emotions. He invoked his musical genes to communicate with his family, community, and society at large. He learnt to play the flute early in life and didn't allow business interests to come in the way of his creative pursuits. Over time, he learned to play the keyboard and every time he found the going tough or was in the throes of a crisis, he would sit down to sing and record old Kishore Kumar and Mukesh songs and then regale his family and friends with them. His baritone voice, his easy demeanor and his reckless charm made him the favorite among society. He also found another unlikely outlet to stay calm during times of stress – simply by watching TV news. Here is a self-effacing businessman who has taken such huge risks that he becomes an object of wonder for his peer group.

It is at this turning point in his life, that I decided to interview some of his closest friends and colleagues to find out why he is affectionately called the 'Miracle Man'. I also decided to find out how large-hearted and magical he was in dealing with people when they were in need or how they were charmed off their pants when they ran into him. It is with this idea in mind that I decided to use the 'Talking Heads' format generally used in TV and documentary formats to engender spontaneous responses. I realized that when I have a character who is larger than life, interview sessions were the best way forward.

In my experience, the best interview-based sessions happen when the subjects speak and respond naturally. Their attention is focused, their passion comes out, and they don't sound rehearsed. You don't want an interviewee to script out everything they say. According to an expert, "unless you're working with a professional actor, scripted answers can tend to feel stiff, forced, or too corporate. If you run into someone who's scripted or memorized their answers, first let them run through a few. If it's going well, that's great. Keep on trucking. If it feels too rigid though, pause the interview, politely ask them to have a drink of water, and remove their answer sheet. You'll be surprised. When people speak off the cuff, their answers are typically more thorough, natural, and convincing."

I now take the opportunity to share the responses of close friends who were magically impacted by RJ's spontaneous actions.



Meeting RJ – By Manoj Kapoor

"Sir, this gentleman needs 20 fans."

"So, give it to him. What's the problem?" I asked

"The problem is that he wants them on credit and to be billed to PRAG Industries."

"Ok. Send him to me." I said.

"Sir, I am Bhatnagar from PRAG. I want 20 fans billed to PRAG Industries."

"Sorry I don't know any PRAG Industries."

"You don't know PRAG Industries? Mr. Rakesh Jain owns it. Surely you must know of him."

"I don't know any Rakesh Jain."

"You don't know Rakesh Jain?"

Such was the expression of hurt and disbelief on his face that it drew my

complete attention! I started probing further and learnt from him that PRAG Industries was situated at Talkatora Industrial Estate, manufacturing rubber components for the railways.

For some strange reason, I was interested.

"When will you make the payment?"

"Within 7 days"

"Okay. Give me Mr. Jain's phone number and show me your identity."

"Give him the fans and bill them as he says."

My staff was surprised. I never extended credit to unknown people. But for some strange reason, I was giving the goods to this man without even a formal Purchase Order.

Two Weeks Later...

"Sir, you had extended credit to PRAG Industries. The payment has not come in yet."

I called up Rakesh Jain and explained the situations to him, half expecting him to deny the presence of any Bhatnagar in PRAG. But he simply asked me the amount due and promised me 'within next one hour'. As he had stated the cheque was delivered to us within the next hour.

One week later...

"Sir, we have made a terrible mistake. PRAG Industries payment had come in as committed by Bhatnagar but by mistake it was credited in the account of Parag Milk Dairy. You then complained to Mr. Jain and he promptly sent another cheque, so now we have a double payment from PRAG.

It was now my turn to feel embarrassed. I had complained to Rakesh and he sent the cheque immediately. After thinking for long, I called up Rakesh,

"Mr. Jain you sure are a rich man."

"Why, what happened Kapoor Sa'ab?"

"Nothing much, Sir. You buy goods once and pay for them twice. Some

accounting method you have!

Before he got a chance to respond, I said:

"Actually, my apologies. Bhatnagar sent the payment as committed. I wrongly complained to you and you promptly sent another cheque. Please send someone to collect the excess payment and once again accept my apologies."

► Diwali Party at Pappu's House...

'Come in come in' Welcomed Pappu. "Diwali Greetings my friend. Do you know him?" Pappu pointed to a gentleman sitting in the room.

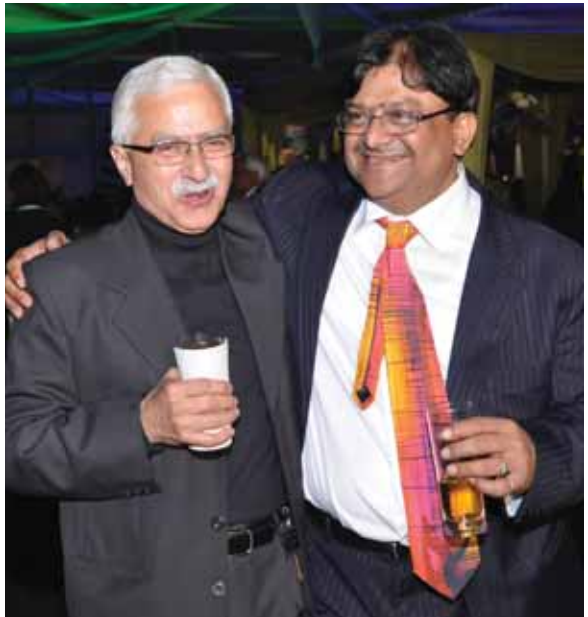
"No, I don't."

"In that case meet Rakesh Jain. Rakesh, this is Manoj Kapoor."

"YOU", I loudly exclaimed.

"YOU" was the common response from both of us.

I had just met RJ of the double payment fame to start a lifetime bond of friendship.



► *Sunshine – Suman Jaitly*

Having been asked to write a few lines about my friend and brother from another mother, I find myself at a loss. How to illumine the Sun with the help of a lamp? Having said that, I will humbly attempt the impossible.

Rakesh is to be measured not by his material achievements, which pale in comparison to the use he put his success to. He is very fortunate to be blessed with a wife like Amita who is a 'Devi' incarnate and also, I suspect, an important reason behind his worldly success. Rakesh has never stopped his wife Amita from carrying on her spiritual life and has in fact aided her in every possible way, participating whenever possible, thus fulfilling the holy 'dharma' of the husband.

Rakesh brought up his two sons Gokul and Sarthak to be sturdy young men who know their minds and the world is better off because of their presence in it. Rakesh has only two biological sons but I have seen his fatherly instinct express itself towards all children he comes across. 'Rakesh Uncle' is certainly a popular one!

There is a saying that a true friend is he who comes forward to help without being asked. Rakesh has surely lived up to this saying and more. Rakesh has continued to be friends with even those who have viciously tried to harm him. He seems to be functioning from a level where he is perhaps relating to the divinity in a person rather than the worldly traits and frailties. Hats off to such an attitude!

In a nutshell, Rakesh and his family are living life in the 'Vedic' spirit of sharing joy and taking responsibility. Blessed are those who are part of their world. Below, I share three interesting memories from our eventful past together.

► *The Interview*

The year is perhaps 2008. I am in Lucknow as is quite usual. When visiting Lucknow, I accompany Rakesh to his office and factories as I don't have any personal agenda to follow and have lots of time on my hands. More than just whiling away time, it is a very interesting and enlightening experience at times.

On this particular morning we had arrived at the factory and Rakesh was scheduled to interview an engineer for one of his factories. This engineer had

come from Delhi and had been put up in a hotel as PRAG's guest. A car was sent to fetch him and the interview begun at around noon with Mr. Sinha (PRAG's General Manager) and Rakesh.

The interview carried on till 1:30 p.m. when lunch was announced and we all had a community lunch. Post lunch we were all back in Rakesh's office and having coffee when Rakesh thanked the engineer for coming and handed him a thick envelope. A car was sent to drop the engineer, who was heading back to Delhi, to the airport.

Later, Rakesh told me that it could not work out, as the guy was overqualified for the job. I asked Rakesh what was in the envelope he had handed over. He told me 50 thousand rupees! I was surprised, to say the least. If failed interviewees received fifty grand what about the successful ones?

He then explained that this was just a goodwill gesture. "I'm not sure whether I will meet this person again in my life or whether I will require his services anytime in the future, but if and when I do, I know that he will be on my side." There was no reason really for Rakesh to give that money. Nobody does. But then, Rakesh does what nobody does!

► *Miracles Do Happen!*



The year is 2000. The time is perhaps June / July. The peak of summer in Lucknow. I am in Lucknow for one of my periodic visits. The day after I land there, RJ tells me that he has a luncheon party planned at the farm for a few close friends, say about a hundred on the coming Sunday which was just two days later!

I was a bit taken aback as the temperature was over 40°C and very uncomfortable for an open air, under the shed party, to say the least. I suggested that why not make it a dinner as it would be relatively cooler. However, he said that it was not possible as invitations had been issued and some important guests could only make it that Sunday afternoon.

Since it was a friends and families affair, a few games along with Tambola too were planned with a number of gifts as giveaways. And also a musical band to boot. Came Saturday and the relentless heat had not abated. We were continuously in touch with the MET department, checking if there was any possibility of the weather becoming cooler. They eventually started taking it as a joke and told us that there was absolutely no chance unless a miracle took place. Anyhow, came Sunday and Rakesh organised a number of industrial fans to create at least the impression of a breeze. I left with RJ in his car for the farm at around 11am, a bit worried to say the least. The guests were to start arriving by 1:30pm and drinks were being served for the gents while the ladies were all flocking round the Chaat corner.

It was hot as hell!

Then, a Miracle of Miracles! It was as if Lord Indra had just heard about RJs party and decided to come to his aid! Suddenly, out of nowhere there were crashes of thunder and streaks of lightning and dark clouds appeared from nowhere! Within minutes it was raining heavily and the temperature dropped to a very comfortable level!

Suddenly the intake of alcohol stepped up, the band started playing more gaily, the happy chatter and laughter of the children totally altered the atmosphere to a very festive occasion.

We then started to play Tambola and I was calling out the numbers. RJ told me that each and every guest had to be a winner! However since prizes were limited he said we could give money instead. Believe me, every guest that day was a VIP!

The rain too, as suddenly as it had started, stopped at around 5:30p.m., just as the party wound up and everybody left for home.

That was the day I was convinced that RJ was a true Miracle Maker and that the Universe would gladly support and facilitate any plans that he would have!

► *A Routine Business Tour*

The year is 1979 and Rakesh is visiting Mumbai to further travel to Pune, Kolhapur, Nanded, etc. in Maharashtra to promote rubber products to companies like Kirloskar. We are all staying in Prabhadevi at Sanjay Housing Society, where we have the good fortune of having an apartment all to ourselves. Manbir (Talla), Ravi, and I are sharing the flat and, of course, Rakesh always stays here when in Mumbai.

We spent this particular evening in the usual revelry full of music, drink, and smoke, eating 'Parathas' prepared in milk and ghee along with the 'Gajar Ka Achaar' that Auntie (Rakesh's Mom) always packed for him for his travels. It was delicious and would stay edible over a period of time.

After our dinner, Rakesh asked me to accompany him on this tour the next day, to which I promptly agreed. We left for Dadar station the next morning and boarded a train to Pune. At Pune station, we freshened up in the waiting room and proceeded to visit the companies on Rakesh's agenda.



Barry McClintic (left) and Suman Jaitly (right)

We worked all day and came back to the Pune station in the night. Now, we were to go to Aurangabad. We decided to take the night train so that we could sleep while travelling and get to work straight away in the morning.

Since we had some time to kill at the station, Rakesh took out his flute and started playing. Music has been an essential part of Rakesh's life. We managed to collect quite an appreciative audience in the railway waiting room!

We boarded the train and reached Aurangabad early next morning. There followed the same rehearsed routine of the waiting room and bathing and dressing up for work.

Our trips were carefully planned so that we spent the night travelling and work in the day. This way we saved on paying at hotels! The day was spent visiting clients and by the evening we were ready for the next leg of the journey. Those were the days of youth and inexhaustible energy. Rakesh, even then, had started displaying signs of where he was headed. He had a huge heart then too, but most remarkable was his zest and love for life, which has always been a constant in his life even to this day. Rakesh has a great desire to know and learn everything.

► *My Indian Family – Barry McClintic*

In 1994 I was introduced to Rakesh Jain, through my colleague, Anant Bhushan, as the owner of a Rubber Manufacturing facility in Lucknow, India, and a manufacturer of Sugarcane Processing equipment. Mr. Ricky Simic, our VP of Sales and Marketing here at Oil States Industries, Arlington, Texas, USA, had also previously met Rakesh and with a multiple appointment trip to India, visited the Lucknow facility in 1994. Seeing that Rakesh had a small but productive rubber manufacturing and molding facility, we entered into an agreement where Rakesh would manufacture a new generation of plumbing Test Plugs made to Oil States design and specifications.

The product went through successful development and went into limited production. The new design concept worked perfectly but there was an issue with the rubber that needed adjustment and halted the production. The program was a success from a development view but a failure on Oil States part for not following through with development and sales. The program did point out that products could be produced at a significant cost reduction in India and supplied to the US for resale into the US markets.

It was during the development of this program that I began to realize what a great person we were dealing with. I found Rakesh Jain to be a very bright and quick minded businessman, I found him to be a very caring and compassionate person and most of all found him to be driven by some internal vision that he clearly saw in his mind not only for the development and growth of his company for him and his family but for the growth and development of India. My first trip to PRAG found me in Rakesh's office with one of the first fax machines in the entire area. He later shared with me that at that time the fax machine was responsible for bringing India from third world status into the 20th century business arena by connecting India to the world.

From that point forward Rakesh and I became more than business associates. He introduced me to the culture of India and to the warmth of the people and the close-knit relationships of family and friends. He introduced me to Indian holidays and religious ceremonies.

As our plan to establish business in India developed, it was my good fortune to make many trips to India. Each trip more fulfilling and interesting than the last. This was because Rakesh has so many friends of all different backgrounds and interests. The Indian people that Rakesh introduced me to became like my family on my visits to Lucknow. I was greatly honored to be invited to Rakesh's son's wedding and had the great privilege



to ride in on an elephant, in my suit.

I have admired Rakesh in his relentless business dealings moving his company, PRAG Group, to the powerhouse it is today. It seemed that every trip that I made there were new buildings and projects started, moving the business forward. Rakesh gives much credit for this to the very loyal staff he has assembled over the years but without his leadership, it would not have been as it is today.

My feelings for Rakesh and his family are as strong as my own family here. I am welcomed as a long-lost member of the family when I arrive and am included in all that occurs during my stays. I have come to know India in a light that I never thought possible 20 years ago by the warmth and kindness of the people I have met.

I have a medical condition, as a cancer survivor, and with only one partially functioning kidney, Rakesh has taken on my medical care when I am there. He has introduced me to one of the top kidney doctors. in Delhi and made sure that I have been examined in each trip as time allowed. He holds my complete medical file. I explain this to show the depth of compassion and friendship that exists between us. I am truly in his debt for many of these things but that is Rakesh Jain's style. He is one of the most generous men I have met in my life, anywhere. He would literally give you the shirt off of his back if you needed it. Money for Rakesh is only a vehicle to do more good than he could before.

If all I have said positive about Rakesh Jain is not enough, then you only need to look to his two sons to see for yourself. They are the perfect reflection of Rakesh and their mother. They are both very smart and well educated but along with that they are true gentlemen in every respect. I have known them both for a long while. They are kind and compassionate young men and I am sure that Rakesh must count this as one of his finest accomplishments, raising two sons that also share his values and having them in place to take the business he started into the future knowing that it is in the trusted hands of his reflection.

I am thankful that I have had the opportunity to know Rakesh and his family and friends in India. It has been an experience few people get to share, and I am extremely grateful that God has permitted this in my life.

► *Paradise Revisited – Nirmal Tiwari*



As a senior government officer, I knew RJ as an acquaintance right since the '90s but did not know him from close quarters. We had no official relationship but there were times when he used to phone me up and consult me on tax-related matters. On a couple of occasions, I helped him save money by interpreting tax laws for him. Our relationship grew stronger when RJ's son Gokul left for Manipal to do his B. Tech. in engineering. My son too was coming of age, and as is his wont, RJ volunteered to help my son get admission. Using the excuse of meeting his son in Manipal, he asked my son and I to tag along. This is when I witnessed the magical side to his personality. He went out of his way to get my son admitted there. Our bond now assumed altogether a different dimension.

On another occasion, I distinctly recall I was going through a resource crunch and wanted to buy a better second hand car, since the one I was using was small and I was looking for a better and roomier car. During the course of a conversation with one of my close friends, I confessed to him saying I only have Rs. 2.5 lakh to spare. My friend was trying to convince me to go for a nearly brand new Maruti Esteem which was up for sale and its cost was around Rs. 4.5 lakh. RJ, who was listening to our conversation chipped in saying he could loan the remaining amount to me and I could clear it over

time. I was dumbstruck by his big-hearted offer. Overwhelmed by his gesture, I was for a moment tempted to accept the offer. However, my self-righteousness came in the way, but this generous gesture by RJ made me come still closer to him. Here was a businessman who was so caring and empathetic that he cared for people's problem and was ever-willing to help. From that day onwards, I became his unadulterated fan.

► *Dehradun, My Paradise On Earth*

In the year 2007, I was scheduled to retire from service on August 31st. Some friends suggested I buy a plot and build a house so that I could get a decent amount as rent and live a comfortable life post-retirement. When RJ came to know that I was going to buy a plot in Lucknow, he rang me up one day and casually asked me "what are your post-retirement plans?" When I told him I was looking to buy a piece of land, he asked me to keep my decision in abeyance.

On August 31, 2007, the day I was to retire, RJ rang me up and made me an offer I simply couldn't refuse. On September 1st, I joined his Dehradun operations as custodian of his properties and business interests there. However, he had told me in categorical terms that I will not need to go to office, since it was not my job to look after the factory's day-to-day activities. Since his son Gokul was looking after the Dehradun operations, he asked me to nurture him and be his guiding light.

He had also rented out a palatial 10,000 square feet bungalow which housed a stately mansion and a lot of green cover to boot. Tending to the garden and spending quality time in the foothills of the Himalayas, this became my paradise on earth. Every time I requested RJ to let me handle tax and other accounts-related matters, he would have none of it. His favourite retort was, "Boss, I need to keep my word. Enjoy life and leave the nitty-gritties of daily operations to Gokul and his team."

During my 10 high-quality years in Dehradun, I kept requesting RJ to let me go. The day I completed a decade of association with PRAG, RJ reluctantly permitted me to walk into the sunset. Even today, RJ never fails to keep in touch with me. Whenever we have a family get-together at his farmhouse, I am invited and hosted like a core family member, and therein lies RJ's greatness.

► *A man who has realized the blessings of the almighty*
 – Dr. Shobhit Chawla

I met Rakesh bhai as I call Mr. Rakesh Jain because the relationship over time has blossomed into that of an elder brother with a caring and guiding hand. I met him first time in a music get together hosted by a common friend. I don't recall the year but surely well over a decade ago. I was struggling with issues in my personal life and professional life was growing by leaps and bounds. I was in need of a mature clear-thinking mind with a streak of brilliance and I found



everything as a package in Rakesh bhai. Forget my selfish need of a guide and mentor, I came in contact with a beautiful human being dependable and always willing to lend a helping hand where needed. Whether it be his philanthropic nature or just the rock like support for one and all in trying times.

I have seen him surmounting all odds and emerge with new strength in the most challenging situations. It is besides the point that the man has created an institution serving the nation and giving progressive employment to many. He has in his journey of life nurtured old relationships and made new ones mature and become rich and flavorsome like a full-bodied vintage wine.

He has not only shown respect to the privileged in the society, but respect and love more to the underprivileged. A man who has realized the blessings of the almighty and reciprocated by gratitude to the call of the less fortunate.

It's a friendship and brotherhood I will always cherish.

► *Golden Moments of Friendship – Vikram Aditya Kohli*

Having met Rakesh bhai after I returned from Mumbai in 2002 was a total delight, a man with such humility, love, and liveliness. Ever since we were introduced by our common friend Rajesh Ramchandani, we never looked back having been bonded with the love of music and a special bond of trust. A man who makes everyone feel comfortable in his company despite holding a very high stature in business and among the upper crust of society. I have heard his stories of struggles and the huge successes after many falls, a man who stood strong through all and redeemed himself every time setting examples to his family and friends by raising the bar to very high levels of existence at business and at home.

I feel extremely lucky and fortunate to have found a friend like him who is genuine, full of admiration and respect for all, and above all a true friend who is always ready to extend a helping hand to all. Blessed with a beautiful loving family I wish him the very best in life and pray that we always continue to celebrate life's golden moments of friendship and togetherness like we always do whenever we meet.

With a lot of admiration, love, and respect for him,

His friend,

Vikram Aditya Kohli ("Viky")



► *In times of need – Dr. Rajat Dhesi*

There are some basic qualities in a man that I value most and they make my admiration for that person increase exponentially. A few of them are honesty, uprightness, responsible behavior and dependability.



These are the qualities that made me admire Rakesh Jain, or Rocky as we call him, as I slowly got to know him better. He's a human being who has immensely influenced the hundreds of people who have come in contact with him. He is a person who takes no time to make a decision, a person who will go out of his way to help another, and a person who one can expect to be there in times of need. His progressive nature, openness and frankness are his other outstanding qualities. He is one SOLID personality.

I consider myself extremely fortunate to be amongst his friends and will always cherish my friendship with him.

I wish him a healthy life ahead.

► *Rakesh, My Everything – Rajesh Ramchandani Urf Ramu*



I first met Rakesh in August 1983. I had gone to meet him at his in-laws' house at Nawal Kishore Road because I needed his help in filling up a form to apply for a Term Loan at UPFC (Uttar Pradesh Financial corporation) and I didn't know the meaning of DSCR (Debt Service Credit Ratio).

That chance meeting was the beginning of a wonderful and lasting friendship. I was 23 years old at that time and now I am 60. From then till now, Rakesh has been my everything – A true friend,

philosopher and guide. Rakesh and Amita have attended my engagement, my wedding, my daughter's wedding, my son's wedding and everything in between.

I would need to write volumes to explain this lovely man, but in short, his most endearing quality is his rare ability to love and be friends with people regardless of their financial and social position in society. Rakesh Jain does not judge people from the size of their wallet. He is a brilliant and most simple man who can sit with presidents and statesmen and at the same time with the poor and the downtrodden and this is a very rare quality.

For me to describe the life and work of Rakesh Jain Sahib thus far, I quote below a few words from a Teddy Roosevelt speech:

"It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who strives valiantly, who errs, who comes short again and again, who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions, who spends himself in a worthy cause, who at the best knows in

the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat."



From left to right: Bani & Dr. Shobhit Chawla, Nina & Rajesh Ramchandani, Dr. Rajat & Jayashree Dhesi



Epilogue

Shakespeare speaks through Claudio in *Much Ado About Nothing* that true friendship endures except when it comes to matters of heart and office.

*"Friendship is constant in all things
Save in the office and affairs of love"*

Rakesh has been that true friend for nearly twenty five years. Matters of heart could hardly disjoin us for such matters hardly knocked on our doors, let alone capture us with any remarkable parity. Office? Ah, now that I am not sure about and I do not even know what office meant here. Nevertheless, if he were to rubberneck on our rapport, the bard would need to pull back a bit and have Claudio eat 'office' away from this dialogue.

Why do I say this? Because, although our friendship grew initially without any affairs of business, as it started to ripen into something secure and durable, occasional business issues did intersect. And with time, he did many projects for railways with and not so infrequently, he chipped in for some development works which railways desperately needed. You have already read so much about Rakesh and his business ethics and also his Midas touch.

So without giving you a touché moment, let me wrap up this business association bit quickly. First of all, it was, in spite of, and not because of our burgeoning affinity. His spirit of enterprise saw him engage in many railway rolling stock programmes. Many of these succeeded, some failed and a few withered away but the outcome was always based on the merit of the work of his company and not through any undue indulgence. You will be surprised to know that whenever we met socially and I asked him if any of his issues were pending on me or my office, he would never bring up anything. If at all, we would meet formally in the office to discuss those issues.

What you have just finished is a book about Rakesh, the man. Or the miracle man. Rakesh is bold and for centuries we have indeed believed that fortune favours the bold. That indubitably is Rakesh. Gokul has written in the preface that you would find most of the “miracles” described in this book attributable to circumstantial luck and that such luck was not a result, but a cause, of our response to an opportunity. A ‘lucky person’ is a person who has an ‘opportunity harvester’ ingrained within his personality and such a person is Rakesh. That is a brilliant technical analysis, but can I simplify it for you?

By this time, readers know that Rakesh has had much more than a fair divvy of stupendous good fortune or serendipity and that, perhaps, is true of most successfully people. But, at the same time, the number of people who got lucky very frequently but kept losing the plot is legion; to an extent that their good luck is not considered good luck at all but merely happenstance. Rakesh almost always catapulted such coincidences into a flight of positivity. He never let a good fortune go waste and harvested it to move towards his larger objective. That is the essence of Rakesh’s story, or rather the story which is Rakesh, and I happily thank poet Ahmad Faraz for writing it:

"Is se barh kar koi inam-e-hunar kya hai Faraz

Apne he ahd mein ek shakhs fasana ban jaaye"

(Can there be a greater reward for a skill that a man himself becomes a story in his lifetime?)

Rakesh loves his music and I see him the happiest when he is singing. And George Santayan, the philosopher, declared that the earth had music for those who listened. Rakesh not only sang but he listened as well. He listens to the song of life with empathy and warmth. He employs more than 500 persons in his factory and it is a pleasure to take a walk with him through the work areas, cluttered or organized, in these factories. Exchange of smiles and small talk with all those back-room boys is a pleasure to behold. No surprise



that his employees turn to him first for immediate and long term succour if ever any personal exigency arises. That also explains how he is able to retain the cream of the crop in his employment even in an industrially-immature place like Lucknow.

A great quality Rakesh has is that he avoids beating about the bush and calls a spade a spade. You do not need to get him in vino veritas, although that always is a pleasurable break with him, for him to shed sham diplomacy and speak the pleasant, or more importantly, unpleasant truth. You cannot ask for a better quality in a friend.

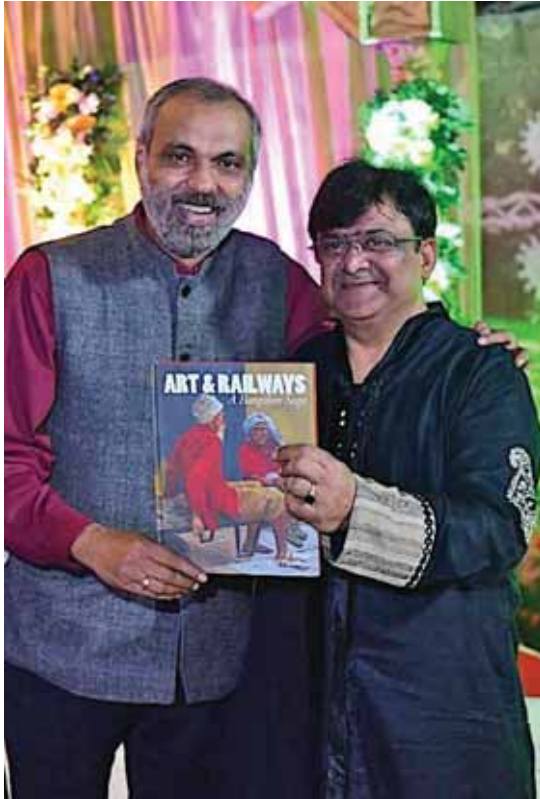
Rakesh is a family man. His commitment to his family is phenomenal. After I settled in Lucknow post-retirement, many a time would he excuse himself from a get together simply because it interfered with his frequent, almost daily, visit to go and sit with his infirm mother. I have seen him handle his family affairs concerning his wife, son, daughters-in-law and grandchildren with subdued but intense emotion and clear-headed sense of responsibility.

I value his friendship greatly, as something fortuitously miraculous for me. He is not the kind to ever say 'no' to a request for help. I will not even begin to recount or count the occasions on which he stepped forward to help me with my personal affairs, particularly when I was posted far away from Lucknow.

I have also made good friends with some of his other friends. Yaaron ka yaar is how most of his close friends describe him. He is the friend one looks for when one is happy or sad or just wants company. Somebody who has seen and experienced the world first-hand and come up through his own unfettered determination and hard work, he knows sincerity when he sees it. And he is never stingy with his words of praise. We, his corps of friends, agree that Wasim Barelvi must have written these lines for some Rakesh-clone, who would accept a friend as a friend with all his shortcomings:

*"Sharten lagayi jaati nahin dosti ke saath
keeje mujhe qubool meri har kami ke saath"*

(You do not impose conditions on friendship;
accept me, my friend, with all my shortcomings).



This is an epilogue of just the book. As for the man, it is more the prime time of a continuing saga.

Rakesh will continue to weave many such stories in life and I hope to be around to be a part.

As the poet has said,

*"Raat hai baqi, chand baqi
Tere mere sab hisab baqi"*

(The night is still young; the crescent moon still shines through and you and I have hundreds of reckonings left to explore and settle).

~ Sudhanshu Mani



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Blogger, writer, journalist, communication specialist, scriptwriter, and lead trainer, Chander Mahadev has donned many hats. He has authored two books, which are in the final stage of completion. Both books are biography-based novels.

He has been recently appointed Adjunct Professor for Media Studies at AURO University, Surat, for a period of two years. A well-known content writer for Jagran Coffee Table Books, he has been actively involved with mainstream media for nearly four decades. He has worked for three decades in leading news dailies like The Times of India and The Indian Express.

Rakesh Jain, aka RJ, is a successful self-made entrepreneur from Lucknow who dabbled in many business ideas but didn't blink whenever he hit a roadblock or even when he hit rock bottom. An intuitive and brave hearted risk-taker, he was helped along by people in seemingly miraculous ways and finally set up the PRAG Group of Companies making quality engineering products for the Indian Railways.

Over time, he ended up being a brilliant Relationship Jockey (RJ) who conquered great heights in the face of adversities. Armed with a smile, a business plan and shoals of positive energy he tempted fate with childlike innocence only to be showered with miracles.

The chapters throw up mind-boggling questions like:

- ▶ Do miracles really happen?
- ▶ If they do, why do they happen to a man deeply involved in the world of business and enterprise?
- ▶ Does a human being need to be the perfect receptacle for miracles to play out in daily life?

RJ's thrilling and dramatic life story throws up philosophical possibilities as to what construes a miracle? Can RJ's miracles be replicated by young entrepreneurs trying to make a mark with their startups?