

ASHISH RAJPAL

The man with the mad ideas

The founder-MD of iDiscoveri wants a million students to escape the rote method of our education system

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Now that I've got it in my head, I can't wait," says Ashish Rajpal, as he goes hunting for the second time in less than a minute to find the errant waiter who's supposed to bring us our beers. We had started the meeting at 5pm at the coffee shop of the Park Plaza Hotel in Gurgaon, and since the sun was still up and neither of us wanted to be the first to ask for an alcoholic drink, we settled for cappuccinos. But at some point the 41-year-old iDiscoveri founder said, "The stories I can tell you after a couple of beers"—and that was cue enough. The shining sun notwithstanding, he hailed a waiter and we ordered our beers.

In the course of the evening, I realized that when Rajpal gets something into his head, it often leads to life-altering consequences for him. As it did when after two years as a brand manager for Procter and Gamble's Ariel detergent, he thought that working in the beer-brewing business in Russia would be a good career move. Or when, at 30, as the worldwide marketing director of Group Danone, living in Paris—a stone's throw from Champs-Élysées—and travelling the world, he got it into his head that he should return to India and do "something" in education. So he went to Harvard, studied about education, came back and initiated his attempt at changing Indian education by setting up iDiscoveri.

But let's start at the beginning. "I grew up in Delhi and spent my teenage years trekking in the mountains and that was my first contact with the other India. That led to some kind of desire to do socially relevant stuff—for lack of a better terminology. During college (economics honours from Delhi University), I hung around NGOs, doing internships in Uttarakhand. But I came from a background where I needed to get a

job quickly, so this NGO romance didn't last long," he says.

An MBA from XLRI, Jamshedpur, in 1992 and a campus placement offer from P&G followed. Two years later came the call from Moscow. Boris Yeltsin had taken charge and it was a tumultuous time in Russia. The Khemkas had set up Sun Brewing there and needed someone to run the business. "They took me for a titillation visit. In February 1994, when I was 25, I showed up in Moscow. It was -33 degrees Celsius. They took me by a propeller plane to Kursk on the Ukraine border and showed one of their plants. It was all very heady. I came back, called my mother and told her that I was moving to Russia. It was a rocky time—the bread queues were huge and you could see the old babushkas begging. Everybody thought I was mad to go," he says. He quickly married his girlfriend, Rachna, and they moved to Moscow.

"My mother was the only remaining grandparent when my daughter was due to be born, and her flight was delayed. So my daughter was born in a Russian midwife screaming *davaai, davaai* (push, in Russian). It was a marking episode in my life. My son came along a couple of years later and I got intrigued about what makes children different. I guessed that education is the area and along the way this vision started crystallizing that I want to go back to India and change education," he says.

By then he had learnt Russian. When the global giant Danone went to Russia to set up a \$50 million (around Rs227 crore then) plant, Rajpal was hired. It was 1997. In a year, they moved him to the head office in Paris as worldwide marketing director. "It was a big, fat job for a young, brown boy. Everything I thought what life was about in terms of aspi-

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IN PARENTHESIS

Rajpal is a trekker, though now he is a trekker with a slight paunch. He has done a lot of the difficult Indian routes—Pindari Glacier, Gulbarga and Kishwar. "Unlike most people, I don't find the steep climb difficult. The tough part of a trek for me is the long, flat one where there is no action. On the Pindari, there is a 22km flat stretch and I found that to be the most dreadful," he says. Now, he mostly goes on one-day trips. This helps him avoid his other peeve, sleeping in a leaky tent on a rainy night.

ration was done. I was 30 years old. It was hysterical," he says.

But Rajpal interpreted this as a pair of golden handcuffs. He secretly researched courses and zeroed in on a one-year programme on education in Harvard. "My friends called me mad again. But my wife was not unsupportive, and that's saying a lot," he says. So she came back to India with the children while he went to Boston. "That was a year of rebirth for me. I became a disciple of Howard Gardner (the American developmental psychologist known for his theory of multiple intelligences) and met Anustup Nayak, who became my partner," he says.

In 2002, he returned to India and iDiscoveri was born. They started with a programme on teachers' training. "It was so hard, after the kind of life I led, to wait outside principals' rooms for 2 hours for an appointment and have totally crummy people talk down to me," he says. But he had "burnt his bridges so completely" that there was no question of abandoning this project and going back to another job.

In the meantime, the company got some attention. Kanti Bajpai was joining Doon School as headmaster and he invited Rajpal to check up on the teachers there. Some more premium schools followed, some low-end schools signed on. Three years later, though business was growing, Rajpal got the feeling they weren't really driving any change in education. He spoke to the schools that had signed on. Initially, the principals said the programmes were great. "But then they would drop this great Indian umbrella phrase—frankly speaking—and say that most teachers had reverted to their earlier methods of teaching."

Then the penny dropped. Whoever learnt anything from a training programme? So they changed the model, hired academics with a research background and started writing practical lesson plans that teachers could use in classrooms. "This programme is called XSEED and the idea is to provide teachers four or five entry points to the same subject. We have 4,000 ready teaching plans," he says. The focus is on making learning experiential, rather than just reading from a book. "With *Taare Zameen Par* and *3 Idiots*, Aamir Khan has become an unofficial salesman for XSEED," he says.

Today, XSEED covers 305 schools, mostly in tier II and tier III cities. It covers around 100,000 students. "Now the hardest period is over and we have to consolidate. Once we have a million children, we will be a force to reckon with. We are serving schools mostly in the Rs500-1,000 fees bracket, which are not the most profitable to serve, but our mission is larger. I am certain this will be profitable in the long run—in the short run, it's a different story," he says.

What happens if he gets something else in his head before that? "Oh, I have several more careers in my head, many mad ideas. But there is a time for everything. Right now, my job is to do this well," he says.



Back to school: Rajpal's decision to work in the field of education was the outcome of his experience as a parent.