From the IAS to a start-up

Two entrepreneurs who gave up bureaucratic careers to start out on their own

SURVIVING START-UPS

Shreyasi Singh

New paths:
Sangeeta and Vivek Kulkarni

Last month, a thread on Quora - a question and answer website—about a young Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officer who had left the bureaucracy to co-found a start-up caught my eye. Roman Saini, also a medical doctor trained at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (Aiims) in New Delhi, was a 2014-batch IAS officer of the Madhya Pradesh cadre. When he quit the service late last year, a little more than a year after joining, his social media following was abuzz with admiration, conspiracy theories and virulent criticism.

Some people postulated that he had left the bureaucracy because he had been slapped by a politician, or was insulted by a batchmate. "Tax" nationalism has become an oft-used argumentative crutch now, and several people on Saini's Quora feed accused him of wasting taxpayers' money, first by availing subsidized education at government-run Aiims and then squandering the immersive IAS training he had received to co-found Unacademy, a free learning education platform, with his friend Gaurav Munjal.

Saini, an active Quora user, published a long post, debunking the conspiracy theories and trying to reason with critics that he had quit the bureaucracy because he believed in the potential of entrepreneurship, and the ambition of Unacademy's founding team to change the education system in India. The sharp criticism, possibly by those who labour over the highly competitive Union Public Service Commission exams for years and couldn't fathom how somebody who had made it could so nonchalantly give it up, had been unexpected and "hurtful", Saini wrote.

Start-up founders today come from a range of experiences and milieus; high-potential entrepreneurship is slowly transcending the walled gardens of the Indian Institutes of Technology and non-resident Indians who move back home. But there are still only a few examples of people such as Saini, who are forging an unlikely public-private journey.

"I was surprised that people were so surprised," says Sangeeta Kulkarni, referring to the reactions of friends and acquaintances when her husband, Vivek Kulkarni, resigned from the IAS in early 2004. At the time, he was the information technology (IT) and

biotechnology secretary of Karnataka and had helped many global IT firms set up base in Bengaluru. These were the years when the city had first begun to be known as India's Silicon Valley. To make sure they had a steady income as backup, Sangeeta, who had a master's degree in human resources education but wasn't working, took up a job with HSBC Bank—the first big change after going down the entrepreneurial rabbit hole.

"I was definitely lucky, things worked out for me," says Vivek, who was tempted by the opportunities for growth and entrepreneurial zeal he spotted in the Bengaluru of the early 2000s to resign from his 22-year government service. He began by acquiring B2K Corp., a technical support centre formed out of the acquisition of a large customer relationship management company, Talisma.

In 2005, he co-founded Brickwork India, a knowledge process outsourcing firm that provides virtual assistants to global companies. By then, his wife had joined him too as co-founder. Today, she is the company's chief executive officer. The Kulkarnis claim to have clients across 116 countries. Vivek runs Brickwork Ratings, which was incorporated in 2007 as India's fifth Reserve Bank of India accredited credit rating agency—it has so far rated more than 10,000 companies.

> **Governments and start-ups inhabit seemingly different universes: start-ups are infused with spontaneity and new ideas: governments are process-driven**

The emotional reactions of people aside, how do former bureaucrats survive the entrepreneurial battle? The Indian bureaucracy is by no means an obvious place to sharpen one's entrepreneurial skills. On risk-taking, access to resources, personal ambition and the pace of adaptation, the difference between the sarkaar and the start-up is stark. In philosophical terms, governments and start-ups inhabit seemingly opposite universes: Start-ups are infused with spontaneity, new ideas and agility. On the other hand, governments have to be process-driven, compromising speed for due procedure and prioritizing inaction over mistakes.

People are still curious about why the Kulkarnis made this dramatic shift at a time when entrepreneurship was less haloed than it is today, but there is also a certain admiration, the couple adds, since it's a trajectory few people take.

Vivek says people associate social stature, unhindered access and job perks with the bureaucracy. For him, the hardest battle as a business owner was getting a grip on the human resource function. "In the government, there is a certain camaraderie and trust among your batchmates. Since you can't fire anybody nor do you negotiate people's salaries or job descriptions, it's easier to work in a spirit of friendship." Learning how to negotiate salaries and bonuses, and addressing the career anxieties of his employees, required patience-a survival lesson learnt the hard way.

Every fortnight, Surviving Start-ups focuses on the stories of the people (parents, siblings, spouses and friends) who make up an entrepreneur's world.