



On feeding the destitute: "Serving them is a privilege. They are special souls."

— N KRISHNAN



"I was looking for a job where I can wear my dirty pair of jeans and chappals with pride. Advertising fit the bill."

— ANANTHA NARAYAN

"I believe that when things get really comfortable, it's time to reevaluate... reexamine your life."

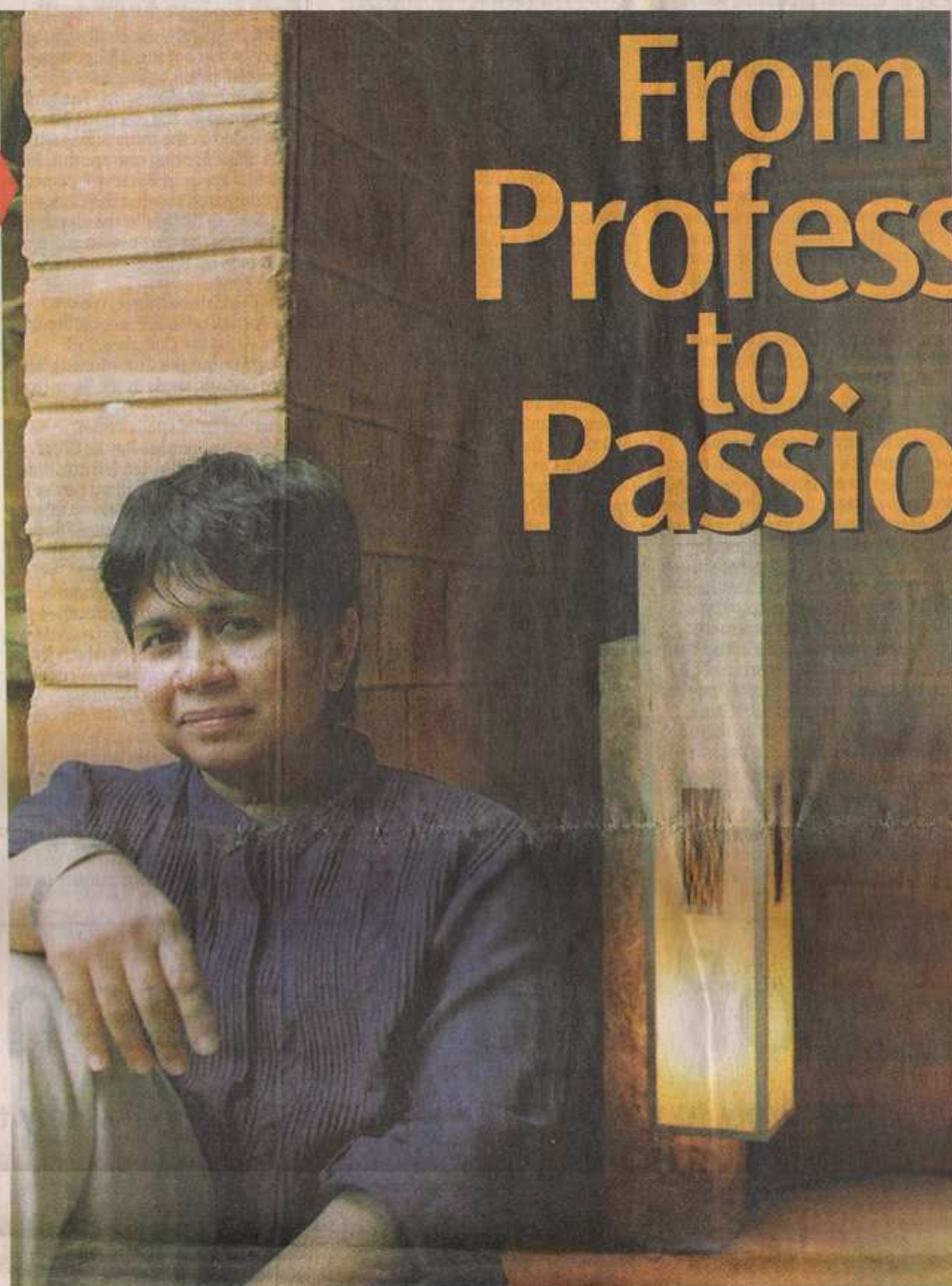
— JENNY PINTO

AFTER 16 years as a producer-director of TV commercials in Mumbai, Jenny Pinto had it all. She had money ("a 6-7-figure annual income, which not many twentysomething women had in the 80s"), she'd established her own company (named "Think Big," something she certainly did), and she was hobbing and nobbing with clients in India and abroad. Then, this ad-lady decided she could use some servicing herself — she felt the need to slow down, to widen her horizons. So she went from making ads with celebrities to making hand paper from agricultural waste.

In an earlier decade, Pinto's decision would have been greeted with leg chains and a windowless room in the sanatorium. Today, she says, "My studio — where I make my own paper, and produce a range of paper lights, sculptures and hand-bound stationery — attracts all sorts of people, from artists, designers and students, to NGOs, conservationists, environmentalists and botanists. I find myself being interviewed, invited to conduct workshops and exhibit my work. I'm also involved with rural livelihood and environmental projects, which are very fulfilling personally. The money isn't within a mile of what I could have earned in film, but in all, I am having such a good time."

Having such a good time wasn't exactly topmost on the minds of our fathers and grandfathers, many of whom selflessly toiled through nine-to-five jobs simply because a certain number of zeroes got added to their bank balance at the end of the month. Even today, for most people, a career is just something that bridges the hours between breakfast-with-the-newspaper and dinner-in-front-of-the-TV — you do it because it gives you money for the weekly family outing at the nearest multiplex, where the expenditure on tickets and parking and popcorn and soda is approximately the GNP of Ethiopia.

Try giving such a logical line of reasoning to Anantha Narayan, a self-confessed "mining engineer turned business management graduate turned light bulb salesman turned servicing guy turned freelancer turned dot-commer turned copywriter," whose resumé ought to be made available at schools all over India as a comprehensive database of available career options. Post-MBA, Narayan says, "Philips Lighting made the mistake of recruiting me from campus." In a year, he got bored of the job, and jokes, "I asked them for VRS. They told me that's just for the oldies. So I left in protest." After several



From Profession to Passion

Baradwaj Rangan talks to some people who gave up what they were doing and got into what they really wanted to do

pit stops, Narayan has parked his car at a tiny creative shop in Chennai called 1pointsize, where he is now sole copywriter.

Read out that last paragraph to someone from an earlier generation, and they'll likely froth at the mouth and describe Narayan with their favourite I word — Irresponsible. But another I word — Interesting — is what characterises such people. What Narayan likes about his job is that it allows him to dabble in scriptwriting. "I work for half-a-day at 1pointsize and I idle away my other half doing many things. One of my trivial pursuits includes short films. I've finished writing and shooting two (out of an intended six). The first one made it to the shortlist of the Third Online Short Film Festival organised by TriggerStreet.com, a revered portal for young filmmakers, founded by Kevin Spacey."

Pavitra Rajaram is another of this breed increasingly influenced less by

riches, more by Richard Bach. ("Your only obligation in any lifetime is to be true to yourself.") This former Territory Manager in Sales, Citibank, Chennai, says, "In mid-1991, when I joined Citibank, a career with foreign banks was the hottest ticket in town. The job paid really well and, as a 22-year-old, I lived in a fancy apartment and had a fair amount of disposable income. But it was a hierarchical and conformist environment at Citibank, and I felt I was losing what I considered the essence of me: being an independent thinker." So she joined a group of mills based in Madurai, "to use handloom as a means of R&D to create products that would compete with the best in the international market, but with an Indian brand name — in other words, use technology without replacing traditional skill."

Thus, a city girl from Bangalore, who spent five years in America, fell in love with rural India. The new job founded a new passion in Rajaram — the desire to nurture and support India's craft and textile heritage. As Director, Good Earth Verandah, India's premier lifestyle store in Mumbai, she works with craftspeople in Asia to create new products using old skill bases. Does she see herself chucking up her job again? Rajaram replies, "I am happy and fulfilled and I think of the move more as a reinvention of myself than 'chucking it up'. But yes, I would no longer hesitate to explore new avenues that interest me and try something off the beaten path."

Mohan V Raman is another of those who took the beaten path — MBA from XLRI, 4-5 years with Binny Ltd — before taking the flyover and finding himself where few men had trod before. "I was looking after Institutional Sales at Binny, but I want-

"You can never really visualise what entrepreneurship is really all about while working for another organisation."

— NIRMALA SANKARAN



ed to be on my own. In fact, I was due for a promotion — yet I moved on to the service industry, set up a small STD booth, Xerox/Fax centre, a small travel agency, and took a franchise for a courier company." Then came the acting opportunities, and the rest, as they say, is his story.

Raman, a leading character actor today, candidly admits, "I am one who loves to ideate and thereafter leave the mundane job of executing to some slogger, and industry is one big slog. But in show business, life was much more interesting. Every day was different — I was a doctor one day, a collector the next, a business tycoon the third day. My face became well known and that was a great kick. Imagine being asked for an autograph in the Tirupati temple! Perhaps inspired by that devotee's multitasking capabilities — devotion, plus a *darshan* of a TV star — Raman, these days, also conducts Management Training Programmes for Executives using movies, say, *Lagaan* for Team Building, *12 Angry Men* for Group Dynamics, or *Apollo 13* for Leadership in Crisis.

If Raman uses cinema for training,

the husband-wife team of Harsh Rajan and Nirmala Sankaran uses computers. In their previous lives in London, he was with Credit Suisse First Boston, and she with Citibank's Global Cash Management and Trade Services. About their rebirth, Sankaran says, "At the time, India had started establishing a strong global brand identity in Information Technology. What struck me was, 'Why can't India do the same on the education front?' It seemed logical that maths and sciences, which were anyway the basis for IT skills and also inherently our traditional strengths, were the fields to focus on. And, with the shortage of good maths teachers globally, the proposition of delivering high quality education leveraging the power of the Internet and delivered out of India to the rest of the world, and indeed, to anywhere within India, was very exciting."

So they formed a company called Sankhya (which is Sanskrit for numbers) and entered into a formal collaboration with the University of Cambridge. Rajan adds, "After 12 months of research into teaching methodologies in the UK, Singapore



"My experiences over the last 10 years have given me the confidence to believe in myself."

— PAVITRA RAJARAM

and India, we identified the best practices from each, and amalgamated them into a prototype of our learning system called HeyMath!, which uses real-life contexts and interactive animations to dispel the fear of the subject and make it more interesting for students." And it's worked. While kids aren't exactly replacing Archie comics with algebra textbooks, HeyMath! has become the top E-learning system for teachers and students in Singapore. It has also been customised for the CBSE and ICSE exam boards, and will soon be available in India.

A very similar story is that of Ashish Rajpal, Managing Director & Co-founder of iDiscover!, who explains, "I had a cushy job at Paris but it just wasn't enough for me. We founded iDiscover! in 1996 to promote experiential education amongst youth and adults. I want to change the system of schooling in India, which is too abstract." Then there's Mano Murthy, who started a software company in the US, but whose passion for music made him sell the company and become a composer for Kannada films, debuting with *Namma Preethiya Hudugi*. "I love music and don't mind shunting between the US and India to compose," reveals Murthy.

But the most atypical move from success to satisfaction is perhaps found in what N. Krishnan did. A gold medallist graduate in catering technology, he was employed with a leading five star hotel chain when he saw a 75-year-old man on the streets of Madurai eating his own waste. A week later, Krishnan quit his lucrative job and undertook the task of feeding uncared-for people. "I felt I had unfinished work in Madurai," recalls Krishnan, who, in 2003, launched Akshaya, a non-profit trust. A family friend donated a Maruti van, and today, the trust provides breakfast, lunch, and dinner to 100 people daily — people who are mentally challenged, destitute, abandoned and abused. "Being poor is no excuse to give them poor quality food. I give them food that I personally eat," states Krishnan.

If you thought that was the heart-warming portion of Krishnan's story, you have to know that he offers this personalised service himself — even if it means no vacations, and little time for recreation like TV-watching. His parents had initial misgivings — understandably so; if they didn't, they wouldn't be parents — but today they believe it is important to support their son, whose non-conformism makes a difference to the lives of several nameless people, and to him too. They've come to understand that he's one of the increasing number of people whose profession is rooted on a passion.

— With inputs from Arindam Bhattacharjee and Nandini Murali



Of his unconventional career choices: "It is a case of maximising strengths, converting experiences into marketable assets."

— MOHAN V RAMAN