

His mantra: Run the biz, ensure it doesn't run you

With Many Feathers In His Cap, Aroon Now Eyes Non-Profit Sector

Sujit John & Anshul Dhamija | TNN

He spent more than a week in Tihar Jail in the summer of 1983 as part of a student agitation in JNU. He went on to do an MBA from Wharton. He built his father's business into one of the top three in the world in that field; sold that to an MNC and then built an innovative R&D business with youngsters from villages



ONE FROM THE ALBUM: Entrepreneur Aroon Raman with wife Afried, who he met while doing his masters in JNU, and children Arvind and Ahalya. He wants to work more in the area of disability

PUBLIC SPACE

PRIVATE LIFE

around Mysore who had only completed classes 10 or 12, or a diploma. Then he became president of the Confederation of Indian Industry's Karnataka arm. That's not all. He turned to fiction writing four years ago and now has two bestsellers to boast of.

Not many manage to live such a rich and accomplished life. Aroon Raman has done all this and more. He's only 54, and is eagerly looking at new frontiers. Even as he works on two more books, he's hoping to make a difference in the non-profit space. "Though I'm a trustee with the Children's Movement for Civic Awareness, Bangalore, and a few other NGOs, I've not been able to devote enough time and energy to the social space. I'm looking forward to work more in the areas of disability and the environment," he says.

Raman, the eldest of four children, was born in Chennai. His father was a senior executive in ITC with a trans-

ferable job, so from Class 6 onwards, Raman was in boarding school in Rishi Valley. In 1976, his father quit to set up a venture in Mysore — making a special paperboard used high-voltage insulation in transformers.

In 1988, after having completed studies at Loyola College in Chennai, JNU and Wharton, and a two-year marketing stint, Raman joined his father's firm, Raman Boards. By 1996, he took full operational control. Ten years later, the company was selling in 30 countries and moving to establish a big plant in China when Swiss power technologies major ABB offered to acquire it. Raman agreed.

The decision wasn't tough. Raman had always been interested in writing and trekking, which had taken a backseat while he was concentrating on business. "My dad had advised me: You run the business, ensure the business does not run you," says Raman.

KNOW

Aroon Raman

Entrepreneur, writer

FAVOURITE THINGS

Authors: Arthur Conan Doyle, Henry Rider Haggard, Kalki (in the original Tamil), Amitav Ghosh

Food: As a mannina maga (son of the soil), it's got to be bisibele baath and masuru (curd)

People: The very many unsung and unknown individuals who are working quietly for the people of this country

Pastimes: Trekking, writing, travelling

Passionate about R&D

He was passionate about R&D and kept that arm of his business out of the ABB deal. He had also learnt from his father that many challenging intellectual tasks could be accomplished by people who did not have major academic degrees.

He picked smart youngsters from villages around Mysore, who helped him build a multi-crore business in materials and composites research, and which manufactures materials for companies like ABB, Exide, and Amco.

"They have become masters in the manipulation of materials," Raman says of those he hired. "They conduct experiments that run into hundreds. A smart youngster doing experimental work for years and years picks up a fantastic feel of the interrelationships between compounds. So he has an instinctive sense of what is required to solve a problem," he explains.

Raman spends 30% of his time on the business; the rest is devoted to writing thrillers, trekking — he's been part of a winter trek to the Everest base camp and one to Langtang Valley in Nepal — NGO work, and talking to youth groups. "I discuss with kids how they can deal with pressure."

All of us have stories within, but we have become somewhat insensitive to stuff happening around us. Every time you are free, you are either tweeting or doing something that takes away the creative space required to develop new ideas. As we walk along the road, we're losing the ability to see what somebody on the pavement is doing, be it a hawker or beggar. Going out and seeing unrelated things has contributed to the success of my R&D team. I spent over a week in Tihar, where I met a lot of petty thieves who were very interesting people

TIMES OF INDIA DT. 08 SEPTEMBER 2014