

Profile

Kavita Chhibber talks to Robin Raina



*Two roads diverged in a
yellow wood,
And sorry I could not
travel both
And be one traveler, long I
stood
And looked down one as
far as I could
To where it bent in the
undergrowth;*

*I shall be telling this with a
sigh
Somewhere ages and
ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a
wood, and I--
I took the one less
traveled by,
And that has made all the
difference.*

[Excerpts from "The Road Not
Taken" By Robert Frost]

He was born in 1966 in a Kashmiri Hindu family, in Srinagar, the youngest of four children and given the name Robin because he was vocal like the bird. His father was a secular man with communist leanings who taught him about honesty and integrity; his mother inspired him by her courage and inner strength.

He didn't have any lofty dreams-all he knew was he wanted to be different.

Robin Raina says he wanted to be a physician initially because as a child he was fascinated by the awe a doctor inspired in every one and saving lives seemed a very novel way of empowering yourself. Instead Robin ended up doing everything but that. Today he heads the very successful Atlanta-based Ebix Inc., an international developer and supplier of software and e-commerce solutions to the insurance industry. Robin Raina ranks among the top entrepreneurs in his field and has been credited redefining and introducing many novel concepts in the insurance industry: The concept of market making was introduced, launched and designed by him for the insurance industry was the industry's first Internet insurance exchange for market making by the leading analysts like McKinsey.

Raina also launched the world's first completely wireless insurance system, targeted to lead the slow moving insurance agents forward. In an exclusive with **Little India** he talks about his journey and the detours that brought him to America, a place he never wanted to be- why he is perennially restless, and what is meaningful in his life these days.

Your parents moved to Punjab when you were very young and you saw the repercussions of Punjab before and after Indira Gandhi's assassination.

Yes, I did my schooling and college in Punjab. In fact I was in the middle of pursuing my dream of a medical career taking the next step after doing very well in my premedical exams when operation Blue Star happened. It created havoc in the University, and the medical exams got delayed. I ended up studying engineering instead. While in college I saw how the integration between Hindus and Sikhs crumbled, how divisions were created. The Sikhs are a very patriotic community and there were wounds inflicted that ran very deep and bled for a long time.

I was very active in college and when I saw the turbulence and decided to run for President to bring in unity and cohesiveness. I was beaten up by some elements who didn't like the fact, but I won uncontested and brought the much needed positivism in the university. We raised 2 lakhs for a function and actually had Arthur Andersen audit our books. That was a great learning experience for me. I realized then that honesty and integrity, would eventually win you the day. I also realized that unlike a lot of men, I thought with my heart and not my head. I can say from my personal experience that if you put your heart into anything and do it with passion there is no reason not to achieve your goals. But I was always striving for one thing-that no matter what I do, where I reach, I have to do it my way, on my terms and differently from others.

So, unlike the trend you chose not to apply to US universities for further education-was it to be different?

I really wasn't charmed by the material trappings of the American dream and had decided I would do my MBA and that too at IIM Calcutta. But then in the meantime while still in college I had started working as a management training for a company called PCL(Pertech Computers Ltd India's largest brand of personal computers) and had done very well. In one year I had sold the largest amount of hardware in the country and they had given me three promotions. I realized that no amount of studying at a management school would give me the kind of hands on education I was receiving in this work.

I started in 1990 as a manager in PCL and then they transferred me to Delhi. Unlike most successful managers who want to enjoy the perks of having many people report to them, I just told the company-give me one focused activity and I will handle it on my own. Their biggest account was with the World Bank and in the first year I ended up achieving single-handedly what their Calcutta and Bangalore office did with the help of 250 people.

I then got an offer from Compaq but turned them down. I believe in loyalty and to this day all my employees stay with me.

Then Dell came to market and soon after your role changed to that of a trouble shooter.

I was asked to help launch Dell. I did all the work related to market branding and we launched the Dell system with great success making it the number one foreign brand, but I was beginning to get bored and felt stagnant. It was around that time that the software boom had started in the country and as that began there was a company called **Mind ware**, that was launched and I was asked to take charge in Singapore. In 2 and a half years we went to \$400,000 in net income and 180 employees from the \$100,000 they gave me to start operations.

Then came your next troubleshooting spree and that too in USA.

Yes one of PCL'S subsidiaries **Altos** was in trouble. It was a contract manufacturing concern and one of its major orders had been cancelled. The company desperately needed a 100 million dollar deal to put it back in business and I was brought in. I flew to Charlotte and was welcomed with raised eyebrows. I was this young kid with no background in manufacturing, and they were so sure the Chairman had accidentally goofed up and sent the wrong man. Even though they knew my track record, they were skeptical. But I had done my homework, and in 6-7 months we got the first \$100 million that we needed with a contract for a 125 million deal from Motorola. It was not easy to win the others over and then on top of that go to an American company and tell them you can have your products manufactured in India and prove we were better than the manufacturers in USA and other leading countries like Korea.

Why do you think you succeeded?

I have realized that whether its business or personal issues, life is always about relationships and eventually it all boils down to the fact that if you deal with people with honesty, sincerity and integrity and create the quality that you promise, it will get you through the door. India is not very well known for its manufacturing capabilities but we managed to offer them the quality they were looking for.

You had begun to start liking the US by then and a quirk of fate changed everything! You went from being the sales superstar to star trouble shooter and today being named among the 100 most powerful people in the insurance business.

I really didn't want to stay in manufacturing. I wanted to get into the software business and around that time **Delphi Information Systems**, (an established public company trading on the NASDAQ), was doing a reference check on someone I had worked with and the CEO liked my track record and offered me a job instead. I accepted. **Delphi** had just entered the insurance industry and while I didn't like the insurance business, I saw possibilities to create key changes.

I didn't get into the insurance process per se but our company creates the software and hardware that goes into running insurance. I still hate the inefficiency and incompetence I see in the insurance industry. Last year the industry wasted 59 billion in the paper process. I realized that we led the market designing systems that insurance companies and agencies were using. I wanted to streamline the pricing processes. That's when the idea of a dot.com came to mind and ebix was created.

I realized if we had to make a mark we had to again be different. We had to be the ones to define the standards. I also felt that since I didn't have an insurance background, I would bring fresh perspective. I started building from scratch. I introduced the concept of market making in insurance and brought in the double concept of anytime anywhere technology. Everything we did was cutting edge and my objective was to create the tools to simplify insurance.

I am very proud of these innovations. Market making didn't set the world on fire but it's a concept that is here to stay. I said let's create a technology where a buyer wants to buy any insurance, it can happen online, instantly across multiple companies and the consumer gets the best deal without commission. The company will make money on a flat transaction fee. It didn't matter whether the policy premium was 10 or 10,000 dollars.

When I introduced the anytime anyplace concept every one said this guy is too

ahead of his time. Today every one has done the same thing and there is not a single competitor in the market that doesn't have that as part of their services.

You decided in 2001 to go back and create a base in India. A lot of companies balk at the idea because of poor infrastructure and corruption. Yet you have done the impossible in a short time.

On the contrary I think if I had wanted to do what I did in India in the US, I would have had major trouble. People here are 9 to 5 kind of people. In India people will go beyond their designated hours to accommodate you. In 30 days I had bought a building which was not in the best of conditions and had 30 employees working there. I also designed another state of the art building myself and had it replicate the state of Rajasthan in its portals in 52 days. All of that without paying a rupee in bribe. Two of the floors in one of the buildings did not have power for 3 years and yet I didn't budge and now it does. Today we have 400 employees- the ebix buildings are equipped with the most cutting edge technology and reflect what can be achieved if you set your mind to it.

The building depicting Rajasthan has a different aspect of Rajasthan on each floor, the guards wear Rajasthani gear and turbans and every detail is minutely etched.

Did you see the dot.com bust coming? And where is ebix headed?

I talked about it all along, but while I knew it would happen even I wasn't prepared for the speed at which it happened. Well acquisition is the best way for us and we have recently acquired two more companies two more companies worth \$20 million in Australia and Utah in the last six months or so. Ebix is doing well and is fairly cash rich. Each quarter has been better than the previous one and I don't expect things to be any different in the future."

You seem pretty detached by all your success and yet there is something that currently is a passion with you and it's not in the glitzy world of business success or being so respected in your field.

Well material gains have never meant anything to me. I never wanted to be rich, or make millions. It happened and it made me realize how important it is to give back. I have always been very affected by the plight of the senior citizens in India and wanted to start a project to rehabilitate those deserted by their loved ones. I was told however that the infrastructure wasn't ready so I started a foundation three years ago to help underprivileged kids. We have a project to help blind children., another to educate the girl child and to watch these children grow and become something in life. We don't spend anything on administrative work. We offer medical help through Sunil Dutt and the Nargis Dutt foundation and also through donating a medical ambulance and medical services.

This foundation is my passion today and I don't think twice about taking 30 days off and being right there in the midst of it to make sure everything is running the way it should. I put in \$100,000 as my contribution and the response has been great. A lot however remains to be done. A lot however remains to be done and some of it got accomplished on my recent trip to India. A school has been constructed through the Raina-Prayas project which educates, feeds and clothes underprivileged children and I was at hand to formally inaugurate the wooden building in Bawana. On my recent trip I happened to see a report on NDTV about 15 young girls ranging from the age of 4 to 7 years, who would go to vehicle workshops lie under cars and collect the dripping mobile oil, which their parents would sell for 15 rupees at the end of the day. That is very hazardous and eventually can kill the child. My foundation immediately adopted the 15 girls and gave the parents rations in lieu of the 400 odd rupees the girls earned.

While I was talking to the media about various projects a group of journalists

were so moved they approached me and said that would like to jointly start a project with the Raina foundation and work as volunteers in it.

Another thing that I noticed was the fact that women in the slum areas had no sense of empowerment. On asking them how I could help them I was repeatedly told to start a center where they could learn sewing. Through the Raina foundation the first sewing center is being set up in Hapur a village near Delhi and other centers across villages will follow.

The Raina foundation is bringing singer Shaan next month for fundraising events.

Where are you headed today?

Well I have bought some land around the buildings in India and plan to recapture the life in the Indian villages by constructing replicas which will function as the offices on one hand and revisiting Indian culture on the other. Ebix is doing very well, but being as restless as I am I don't see myself doing this all my life. I am in the middle of writing two books, one on insurance, the other a work of fiction. I may get into the entertainment business. But anything I do it has to flow smoothly and seamlessly and touch my heart.

[To know more about the Raina foundation go to www.Rainafoundation.com]

[Kavita Chhibber is an accomplished freelance writer and media personality. She is well-known for her interviews of celebrities, authors and public officials. But she also writes hard-hitting news articles and cover stories for publications.]