

ROUTE 66: Burning a New Track

NAME

Subroto Bagchi

PROFILE

Co-founder & Gardener, MindTree Ltd., best-selling author

FORBES INDIA BRIEF

Every fortnight, exchange tales of the road with successful entrepreneurs

NAME

Jagdish Khattar

PROFILE

Founder of Carnation Auto, a multi-brand auto services company

BASIC PRINCIPLE

Enthusiasm and confidence — not age — bring success



Jagdish Khattar is used to starting over from scratch. And at age 66, that's what he is doing once again, with his auto services company

by Subroto Bagchi

Away from the hustle and bustle of Delhi, when I arrived in Noida to meet entrepreneur Jagdish Khattar at Carnation Auto's office, I was in for a surprise. Khattar was seated in a room barely ten by six feet, bereft of any extravagance that his past entitles him to. The man ruled the roost for years as the all powerful managing director at Maruti Suzuki. A former IAS officer, he was one of the most respected CEOs of the country and his ability to manage that transition from the bureaucracy to industry made even his detractors take note. So when he eventually stepped down from Maruti Suzuki, he was entitled to drive off into the sunset. But, at 66, Khattar was not ready to play grandpa. Instead, in September 2008, he sent ripples down the wire announcing his new baby, Carnation Auto.

Today, the venture capital funded Carnation is already operating in seven cities, providing car owners a range of branded products and services from accessories to oil change, insurance to custom design.

I am curious to know where he gets the zeal and zest from. Turns out, it is a story of displacement, of emergence and a certain self-confidence that spans four generations today.

"I was born in Pakistan — a place called Dera Ismail Khan. My grandfather was a landlord. The electric company for the entire district was Khattar Electric company; distributors and generators of power. He was involved in local politics. My grandfather died when my father was 16 years old. Partition happened and we came back. My father was detained in Pakistan — the take-over of his banks, army contracts and other businesses meant that he was needed to see through the transition process. It was long and slow. Every fortnight, a group favouring him used to keep pushing to let him go and another would want to keep him back and all this while, the family was in Delhi. Finally, he got his freedom to come over to join us.

"We started from scratch. I studied in Delhi Public School, joined St. Stephens college. My father said, do law or journalism, be self dependant and then join politics. So, I did my law, and my father got me attached to N. C. Chatterjee, father of Somnath Chatterjee. My friends in the meantime wanted to sit for the Civil Services examination; I told father, let me appear for it. He said okay. I was selected for the Foreign Service. Upon selection, we were told to call on this joint secretary. The gentleman told us, 'you have come into the heaven born service — you go abroad and forget the poverty of this country — you must behave like other diplomats do.' That was the time when India was reeling under a drought and the Green Revolution

commentary, my father used to reply to his article the very same day. We discussed issues concerning the nation. We used to buy one newspaper and I used to go to the neighbour's to read the other newspapers. So, when I joined the IAS, I had already seen a lot of tall people around and had a world view larger than many others who let power define them. As a young IAS officer in UP, I had no issues riding my Vespa scooter to go around. Even when I was entitled to it, I never had a red light on my official vehicle. When I was secretary, Department of Transport in UP, I started a campaign and got the red lights removed from all the bureaucrat's cars. That did not make me very popular, of course."

Thousands of civil servants take on as-

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was just starting, and here was this joint secretary urging us to forget the poverty of the country! I stepped out of his room and along with S. Narayan — he was to become finance secretary and economic advisor to Atal Behari Vajpayee — decided to opt out of the Foreign Service and chose the IAS instead. We went to the home ministry and changed our cadre to the IAS the very same day."

Since that day, Khattar hasn't looked back. From collector of Chamoli, UP to chairman of the Tea Board to joint secretary, Ministry of Steel, he's had an enviable ride. But none of that has a visible rub-off on the man. He is not one who has lived off the IAS brand. "You show exceptional humility with people. Where do you get this humility from?" I ask.

"My father was very humble. As a student, I used to go to the Parliament to listen to leaders like Acharya Kriplani. When [journalist] Prem Bhatia wrote an article in the morning with a political

signments in the public sector and build valuable experience but they all close shop upon retirement. I want to know why they can't start something on their own.

"One of the reasons I became an entrepreneur at 66 is that though I have been a member of five golf clubs for the last 20 years, I have never been to a golf course even once! So, even as I retired, I could not imagine becoming a golf junkie. I knew I had to do something of substance all over again. What has age got to do with taking new initiatives? It is always the 'I', the individual who finds a reason why something new cannot be done. A Japanese gentleman once told me, every salesman can find countless reasons why he cannot sell. But he has to find out just two reasons why he can. So, always look for those two reasons why you can. Age has nothing to do with being an entrepreneur. Your enthusiasm and your confidence are what matter; they are the most important ingredients of success." ■

