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Ordinary people can do extraordinary things

How humble beginnings, fierce determination and a few open doors continue to shape some of India's most remarkable success stories

A young girl grows up in Delhi, finds refuge and opportunity in her studies, and while she later drops out of school, a loving parent helps her return to her education and go on to graduate from the London School of Economics. After working at a startup in Silicon Valley, she feels called to social impact. She leads the US-based organisation Child Family Health International for seven years and does amazing work in Asia, Africa and South America. In 2004, she returns to India to take on the issue closest to her heart. In 2007, she launches Educate Girls NGO in Rajasthan, a region of India where women and girls face some of the greatest disparities in the country. She has shepherded the organisation through dramatic growth and has received global recognition, including the Wise Prize for Education in 2023, and most recently, the very prestigious Ramon Magsaysay Award for 2025, "Educate Girls" she founded to educate girls globally. Truly a role model for women and social sector professionals, not just in India but worldwide—she is Safeena Husain, and she educates girls.

Having been privileged to be invited by Safeena to join the Board of Directors of Educate Girls, over five years ago, I have been able to watch with admiration and pride the commitment of over two thousand outstanding young men and women across four of the poorest states of the country, in their noble work of tracking out-of-school girls in remote tribal areas, and putting them back into school. Today the organisation, not just through its own employees but also with Government and State MAITRI partners and volunteers called *Team Balikas*, has become a much-



BVR Mohan Reddy



Safeena Husain

admired entity and a magnet for attracting funds from global foundations, Indian CSR and philanthropists. In her wonderful speech in Manila at the awards event, Safeena dedicated it to her girls and every individual who makes Educate Girls one of the most successful non-profits in the country.

The interesting and good part of this story is that Safeena is not the only person who has risen from humble origins to become a colossus in her chosen sphere of activity. Switching to the world of business, I had the privilege in November to host a friend, the Chairperson Council Convenor, NASSCOM, and the enormously successful founder of Cyient and Cyient DLM, major names in the global engineering design and design-led manufacturing segments, BVR Mohan Reddy, as the first guest of a new podcast titled "Unmute with Dr. Ganesh Natarajan". Known for his integrity and easy approachability, there is no surprise that Mohan had extremely humble beginnings in Andhra Pradesh, the son of a homemaker and a policeman, who worked his way up the ranks after his Master's degree in engineering at IIT Kanpur and became an entrepreneur after successful

CEO roles. His roots give him humility and the values he stands for, including the highest standards of commitment to hard work and integrity, make Mohan Reddy a shining exemplar in our industry and the world of business and entrepreneurship. I am again privileged to be invited by him and his son Krishna to join their board.

The heartening news for many young readers of this column is that these two stories, one of a woman in the social sector and the other of a man who has built successful businesses, are not unique. I have no data to bear me out, but I am sure that a majority of our successful leaders today, from Prime Minister Modi to IT industry doyen N.R. Narayana Murthy, and many other names that all of us are aware of, have risen from humble backgrounds and grasped whatever opportunities came to them to climb up the ladder of success.

My own grandfather was a schoolteacher in a little village called Vadiveeswaram in Tamil Nadu, who had a dozen children, and it became the responsibility of his eldest son, my father, to build a career for himself in an industrial and consumer chemicals company he helped to build, and to bring his family to Calcutta (now Kolkata) in the 1950s and set up each of his brothers and sisters on the path to prosperity and some modicum of success.

Today, when I look back on my own life, with career beginnings on the shop floor of a factory in Nashik and then two successful CEO stints in Mumbai and Pune, and now two entrepreneurial entities, Lighthouse Communities Foundation and GTT Data Solutions, the latter recently listed on the Bombay Stock Exchange, the formula for success seems apparent – inspiration, perspiration and some opportunism. While I am aware that hard work is not a very popular aspiration in these times, with Mr. Murthy's exhortations of a 72-hour work week and his more recent statement regarding the Chinese work culture of 9 am to 9 pm - six days a week, receiving many howls of protest, there are many pathways to success. I look forward to future guests on the podcast showing us the way. ■

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