

JOURNEYS

“I decided to walk away from the partnership track.”



The runway to partnership at a global consulting firm is long and tedious. A few months before he was to become one, **Sameer Walia** walked away. It was neither a whim nor an epiphany but the result of a defining trait: self-awareness.

“Amidst all the excitement of an imminent milestone that every college graduate dreams of, I did some soul searching. I absolutely loved my job, it had given me both creature comfort and intellectual opportunities. Yet, as contradictory as it may sound, I could not see myself being a consultant for the rest of my life. I did not want to exist in a comfort zone. I wanted different.”

This pursuit of something different saw him trade his consulting suit for the entrepreneurial sweatshirt. In 2003, he teamed up with a college friend who was in a similar space in life to start an analytics company called The Smart Cube.

The organization had typical garage beginnings: no business plan, no investors, no employees in fact not even an office in its early days. It was fuelled by the passion of its founders to create something from naught. And create they did. Within a decade The Smart Cube grew into a multi-million-dollar enterprise, with offices across the world, creating intelligence to help businesses make sharper decisions.

Sameer speaks of being shaped by three different phases of his life: his alma mater, his Accenture days and his entrepreneurial journey. Of these, his days at The Smart Cube most helped evolve his worldview. Climbing down from the ivory tower of consulting and walking the tough path of entrepreneurship gave him perspective and made him grounded.

The Smart Cube took Sameer places both idiomatically and literally. One such was an exclusive CEO’s event in Goa, where a conversation with a friend proved to be a life-shaping one.

“A friend of mine, Karandeep Singh, had turned up a few days late to the event. We were chatting and I remember telling him that it was absurd to be soaking sun by the pool in a suit and not be in the sea. He replied that in the larger scheme of things, most of our pursuits were far more absurd. It was not the kind of comment I would ordinarily assign to him so my curiosity was piqued. Turned out that he had joined the event later than the others because he was attending a seminar of the Kamalnayan Bajaj Fellowship. We had a long conversation and I instinctively knew that I had to experience the intense soul searching that the seminars sought to catalyse.”

Sameer spent time meeting different people connected to the programme in order to understand it better. He was nominated for the fourth cohort of the Fellowship in 2012 and was amongst those selected.

The Fellowship served to fan something dormant in him and led him once again to ask tough questions of himself.

“Around the Christmas of 2016, I had what you could call an “epiphanous fortnight”. I found myself grappling once again with - will I continue doing this for the rest of my life? It’s a simple question but somewhat frightening when you have absolutely no reason to ask it. After 23 years of working, I had everything that one conventionally works towards so there was

no real need to look a gift horse in the mouth. But the inner voice has a decibel you just cannot control; the Bajaj Fellowship had turned it several notches higher. I found myself evaluating success differently. Was it of any significance at all? What kind of a legacy did I want to build? Did I want more of the same thing or did I have the courage to pursue milestones which were meaningful? And finally, what was really meaningful?”

Sameer did not have to dig too deep for answers. Coming from a family that had a long tradition of public service meant that Sameer took it for granted that those with privileges were responsible for those without. He reached out often to people and causes, either personally or through his organization, and thought little of it.

That epiphanous fortnight however helped him see this aspect differently. He found himself joining the dots to understand his perpetual pursuit of the different. Different was not achieving more or better than his peers, it was about recognizing a different destination. His starting point and end point would be that of the less privileged, the vulnerable, the marginalised and those without a voice. He could help solve social issues using the same set of skills he deployed to help clients solve theirs. Effective altruism could make a huge difference at the grassroot level and also change the paradigm for social engagement in India.

And thus, once again, Sameer walked away from everything he had achieved.

He gave up his position in the organization he co-founded, choosing to engage only in the advisory capacity of a board member. He spent time understanding the complexities of development and absorbing all that he saw and learnt. Then, in 2019, he founded Ripples of Hope to change the ground realities in rural India using a rigorous implementation and evaluation toolkit.

The Foundation is currently taking baby steps. Yet, it has audacious multi-decadal goals that Sameer is intent on pursuing with the same entrepreneurial zeal that marked his years at The Smart Cube.

“Since 2019 I have worked on tiny projects in the space of water management, education and micro-lending. At the end of each project I ask myself - if I concentrate all my efforts on this one cause, will I be creating something that can be scaled up such that it benefits all stakeholders equally? As of now I have not yet found that one lever I can move to contribute to a just and equitable society. My search continues.”

In the meanwhile, Sameer also works to bring personal transformation in people who are in a position to affect change.

“The Kamalnayan Bajaj Fellowship made an incredible difference to my worldview. When I finished the programme, I told myself I’d help others make the journey from thought to action. That would be my way of giving back, a sort of “guru dakshina”. I volunteered with Ananta Aspen to moderate some of the leadership programmes and support Kiran in other small ways. I am now training to be an Aspen moderator. Helping people reach their core and find meaning in what they do, is also immensely fulfilling and an intrinsic part of my journey.”

MAKING NEWS



Ajeet Bajaj and Emission Impossible make the case for zero emission drive

On December 14, 2019 Hyundai Motor India Ltd., flagged-off a fleet of its electric SUV for a 700 km drive from Lhasa to the Mount Everest base camp. The intent was to build awareness around the feasibility of zero emission mobility.

Mountaineer, Padma Shree awardee and Bajaj Fellow (Class 4) Ajeet Bajaj led the challenging

drive to an altitude of 17,000 amidst temperature variations up to -12 degrees. The Discovery Channel covered the initiative and telecast the episode on January 26, 2020.

In 2018, Ajeet and his daughter Deeya became the first father-child duo from India to climb Mount Everest.

Pratibha wins the Woman Lawyer of the Year award



Pratibha, a Class 6 Bajaj Fellow, won the Woman lawyer of the Year (Law Firm) Award at the inaugural edition of the BW Legal Leaders Awards. The intent of this felicitation is to recognize the best legal minds in India. The hurry had to choose

from 150 nominations to which the the BW Editorial Board added its recommendations. After five hours of discussions and deliberations, 42 winners were decided by the seven-member jury panel.

DIALOGUES AND CONVERSATIONS



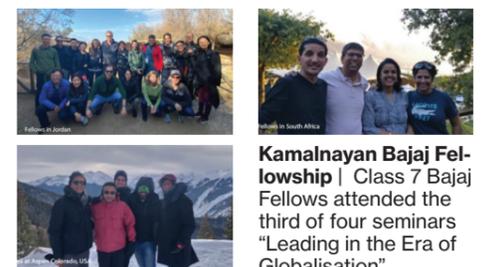
Sameer (Class 4) steered the conversation at Banyan Tree Dinner, Jaipur.



Nikhil (Class 3) co-chairs the 12th India Israel Forum.



Emerging Leaders Fellowship | Aditya (Class 5) takes the lead for the seminar held in Bagar, Rajasthan and takes the young bright college students on the road to introspection.



Kamalnayan Bajaj Fellowship | Class 7 Bajaj Fellows attended the third of four seminars “Leading in the Era of Globalisation”.

MEET-UPS



Class 5 Reunion in New Delhi