



go abroad

P7

A scholarship to do PhD at the alma mater of five Nobel laureates



sunny options

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A fat stipend is just one of the reasons for interning this summer



THE NEW INDIAN EXPRESS



never in class

Businessman Sunil Cherian relished bunking college and going on road trips **P24**

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IT'S YOUR LIFE!



SANJAY VIJAYAKUMAR, VIWEK FRANCIS AND SONY JOY SOLD MOBILE RECHARGE COUPONS TO FUND THEIR 'EXTRACURRICULAR' ACTIVITIES IN COLLEGE, BUT THIS SOON METAMORPHOSED INTO AN AWARD-WINNING START-UP | **P14-15**

The mob factor

cover story




LCD TVs and laptops that use LED backlights use less energy and don't have mercury in their displays.



The global telecommunications industry apparently earned \$1.7 trillion in 2008 and is expected to touch \$2.7 trillion by 2013

Sanjay Vijayakumar, Vivek Francis and Sony Joy

Photos: Kaviyoor Santosh



From coupon sellers to INNOVATORS



Aswin J Kumar

THIRUVANANTHAPURAM

on the start-up highway

The trio made ₹8 lakh in eight months, blew up ₹4 lakh in 30 days and hurriedly set up a firm so as not to lose the remaining, all while in college

Five years ago, three engineering students in Kerala discovered their parents have become thrifty — the pocket money was insufficient; especially to woo the eyes in college! Left with no choice, Sanjay Vijayakumar, Sony Joy (alumni of College of Engineering, Thiruvananthapuram) and Vivek Francis (an alumnus of Sree Chithra Thirunal College of Engineering, Thiruvananthapuram) began to seek ways to make additional money. The idea soon dawned on them in the form of recharge coupons and T-shirts. It worked and grew bigger and bigger.

Today the students who skipped lectures to sell coupons on campus are heading MobME, a mobile media and entertainment firm that's one of the fastest emerging 50 IT companies in India. It was rated as one of India's top 100 innovative start-ups by NASSCOM in 2006. In 2007 MobME was the youngest of the NASSCOM 100 IT Innovators alongside Texas Instruments, HP and Infosys. The firm was also amongst *Wall Street Journal's* 10 start-ups to watch out for in India in 2008 and was

voted as India's most innovative company in 2009 by NASSCOM.

These middle-class young men dreamt big and chose to become entrepreneurs, a risk that finally paid off. "Why should we be scared of dreaming? We tend to take life a bit too seriously," says 26-year-old Sanjay, co-CEO, MobME. They could have easily earned hefty salaries as project heads in a software company but they chose otherwise. "When we joined college, our only plan was to study well and get a good job. But at the fag end of our first year, we realised this is something everybody can do," says 26-year-old Sony Joy, co-CEO, MobME.

Tackle the adversity

Even then they didn't have the slightest idea about starting a company. The trio was more perturbed by 'other serious' issues in college — the sight of their friends vrooming around with girlfriends was unbearable. None of them could ask their parents to increase their monthly allowance, least of all Sanjay. He had to his credit incomplete academic stints at School of

Architecture, Delhi, and Naval Academy, Goa, thanks to his fluctuating career plans. CET was his last resort where he ought not to have thought about anything but studies.

Necessity brought the three desperate souls together. The trio hatched a plan that turned into a money spinner. They started off by selling recharge coupons. Their main customers were the college love birds. Their pockets swelled — in three months they sold 14,000 SIM cards. Not satisfied with the top-up business, the trio began to sell T-shirts sourced from Coimbatore in college. Money just kept flowing and by the end of third semester, they had earned ₹8 lakh in just eight months!

After tons of parties and picnics, the men realised how easy it is to spend money and how difficult is the reverse. "We still don't know how we spent ₹4 lakh in less than a month," wonders Sanjay. They quickly decided to form a company. "The idea was to begin anything — a tea shop or a hotel. But then we decided to persist with the mobile phone business," recalls Sony.

Immediately they approached a telecommunications firm for business op-

cover story

on express

Mammootty's full name is Muhammed Kattay. His first film was *Adhe* (77). Another original Daalichathal.

M

ammooty is the only actor apart from Kamal Haasan to win National Film Award for Best Actor three



A colourful life

As a Class nine student, Sanjay Vijayakumar wished to be a basketball player but when the time came he boarded the train to Delhi to study architecture. Yearning for his mum's food, Sanjay returned to Thiruvananthapuram. He took up his brother's suggestion and enrolled into industrial engineering at CET. However, this wasn't a permanent move. The lure of war movies became irresistible and another shift was imminent. "Nobody likes change. Everybody keeps waiting for things to happen. The fact is that change helps and we got to make that happen. You have to find ingenious ways of doing things," says Sanjay in his defence.

He soon found himself in the Naval Academy, Goa. Eight months of hardship and the lure of the defence forces was slowly beginning to wane. "I was raped regally," is how Sanjay describes his stint at the Naval Academy. Everyday he had to do 16kms of cross country. If he failed to finish within 20 minutes of the first runner, another 28kms of hike followed. At the end of eight months, a boat of smudges brought Sanjay home.

CET beckoned again and Sanjay was readmitted into the college and the rest is, as they say history. Among other things, he was the captain of the college's basketball team



opportunities. The company wanted the trio to build a voice server. Though they were hearing it for the first time, the men readily agreed. And in a week's time, they were ready with the server, an innovation for which they won the first award from NASSCOM. "It was all about taking calculated risks. Confidence and ideas can produce wonders," says 26-year-old Vivek, COO, MobME.

Firm beginnings

Classes had long been abandoned but they continued to finish their course. This was hardly a concern, though as it was time to launch their dream. The trio decided that the future lay in the telecom sector but they were clueless about it. "For six months, we only read blogs and articles related to the telecom sector. We had never studied that hard before," says Sanjay. In 2005, Torque was registered and the first student initiative was incubated in Technopark, the hub of IT companies in Kerala.

Sanjay and Sony were constantly on the move while Vivek worked on ideas. Everyday they would shuttle between Thiruvananthapuram and Kochi. A chance meeting with veteran actor Mammootty resulted in Torque marketing and promoting his movies. The star

connection also lured more investors to the company. The business was growing beyond what they had envisaged. Their mobile phones were flooded with calls — they were not spared even during exams. "Often we would tell them that we're in the middle of an important meeting. But we could not have stayed away from business for the sake of exams," says Sony.

The seniors were hired by the three juniors. A permanent team was set up and the company was renamed MobME. As the company flourished, the boys were soon noticed by IT giants "It is a misconception that nobody will help beginners. We still receive a lot of guidance from men like Kris Gopalakrishnan, CEO of Infosys Technologies. Unless you knock the door, it will remain closed. That is how actor Mammootty gave all the promotion works of his movies to a bunch of three men who have had no previous business experience," says Sanjay.

Even when the boys were busy going after business deals, their parents never had an inkling of what their children were up to. "We told them about it only when we launched the company. Naturally they were shocked." But the shock did not mean that the boys had to quit business. "We were able to con-

About MobME

MobME is a key player in the network solutions space. It is a pioneer in mobile governance initiatives. It has fulfilled the communications needs of banks, government institutions, state governments and nodal agencies through SMS, voice, and other mobile technologies. Mobshare is MobME's flagship platform. It allows users to share mobile photos and videos with as many friends across different service providers with a single click.

Future plans

The trio doesn't want MobME to grow into a 5,000+ people organisation. "We have a very rare DNA in the company. We believe more in the Google philosophy. Flexible work timings, extremely dedicated team members, work hard, party harder," explains Sony. Today MobME has offices in Kochi, Mumbai, Delhi, Chennai and Thiruvananthapuram. In future, the trio wants to diversify into multiple sectors and set a unique path in each one of them. "We believe even conventional businesses can be done in unconventional ways. Eventually, we wish to be angel investors, helping budding entrepreneurs with capital, resources and mentorship. I feel there is an acute lack of gutsy investors in this country, which has to change if there needs to be a radical change in the start-up scene," he says ■

vince them that we could take our business to new heights," says Sanjay.

Though they never attended classes, the trio was dear to their teachers. "They have always been our greatest support. They knew that we bunked classes for a genuine reason," smiles Vivek. The boys were always in the top five in university exams. When they turned down offers from Microsoft and Yahoo, many felt they were being plain stupid. "But we were just being gutsy. It was an easy choice to accept their offer. But we had it in us to tread a much riskier path," says Sony. "What is the thrill in that (a software job)? Life is about taking risks. The only thing is you have to be confident and ensure you take calculated risks," adds Sanjay. "We would have ended up horribly as many including our parents had thought. But in life you got to dream big. One thing we have learnt is that you can't be unlucky all the time" ■

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