

# MY OWN INC

Once upon a time in Laidback City, business was what your father bequeathed to you. But now in Here and Now Hyderabad, droves of diaspora returnees and home-grown entrepreneurs are espying opportunities at every street corner. One turned an ill-kept canteen into a catering empire and a successful NRI lawyer chucked it all up and decided she can do it herself. Who says Hyderabad can't do business?



**G**andra Praveen Rao came to Hyderabad from Karimnagar in 1987 to go to college. After law school, he took up a job as a court clerk in the office of a senior High Court lawyer. The master used to pay him Rs 150 per month, which even in those days was enough for just about half a square meal a day. The court cafeteria served subsidised food, but it tasted like canteen food, after all.

In his adversity, the novice lawyer sensed a great business opportunity. He took the canteen on lease and turned it into an edible eatery. After running the canteen for some years, he started accepting catering orders. Today, 10 years later, Rao owns Ultimate Hospitality Services

(UHS), the leading corporate caterer in the country with a turnover of Rs 10 crore per annum. **BY K V RAMANA/TNN**

Sundari R Pisupati graduated with honours from the National Law School in Bangalore in 1993. She went on to Columbia Law School and thereafter joined Sibley Austin Brown & Wood's stable of 1,500 lawyers. After over six years of arguing corporate briefs, she broke away to co-found Quislex, a legal process outsourcing company, with a colleague, and moved to Hyderabad to set up its India centre. Today, she is the chief operating officer of Quislex and employs about 25 law professionals, all graduates of top ten law schools.

"This is a great experience," says Sundari.

To all those who say that Hyderabad's entrepreneurial talent runs no deeper than the Anji Reddys, Ramalinga Rajus and Vara Prasad Reddys, Praveen Rao and Sundari Pisupati are the answer. The desire to do things differently is common to these two first-generation entrepreneurs. Hyderabad today has dozens of such people who are willing to take risks and do something on their own.

Praveen Rao's venture is a typical catering service, one among about 2,000 caterers in

the city. But the innovation he brings to the table has made Ultimate Hospitality Services the caterer of choice to a high-profile list of clients. Rao's kitchen has some certifications that even five-star hotels do not have, including one from the Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP).

The trick of the trade, says Praveen Rao, is using technology to make things better. Once, while watching a movie on the Gulf War, the lawyer-turned-entrepreneur saw a hot case used by the US army staff. He sent out queries and located the supplier—Cambro, a leading food equipment supplier to the US defence forces. "I bought the hot cases to transport food from our base kitchen to the client's place. It keeps food hot for over six hours," he says.

Similarly, he uses mechanised vegetable cutters imported from Germany which can dice 10 kg of vegetables in

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**SUNDARI R PISUPATI**  
US returnee lawyer



**MASTER CATERER:**  
Praveen Rao tries out his own stirring ideas

an hour. "This is not being lavish. This is using available technology to do things better," Rao says.

The entrepreneurial itch is an irresistible urge. It goes beyond the desire to make money. Sundari was a highly paid lawyer in the US but gave in to the yen to chart her own course. "There was never any need for me to work in India. But I wanted to do something new here and Quislex is possibly the first legal process outsourcing company in the city. We are growing at an exponential rate and we should be outgrowing our office by February," she says.

Much of the city's new found pioneer spirit is coming from diaspora returnees. Till about 1999, professionals

used to migrate to the US to earn more or get global exposure. But since 2002, the traffic has become two-way. The early migrants started coming back with rich knowledge and a global mindset. Their strike-out spirit is having a ripple effect in the city's start-up sphere.

D D Ganguly, a techie who is in the process of launching his own web collaboration firm Communiva, is another of those who came to Hyderabad after several pit stops in the US. The Indian Institute of Technology (IIT)-Kharagpur grad started off with Digital Technologies in the US in 1991 and did stints with several tech companies, before coming to Hyderabad to start Communiva in January 2006.

It's not just the call of home that's bringing these birds. Given globalisation, there are inherent advantages in operating out of cities like Hyderabad. The cost factor is the obvious one, but in addition, the conditions are favourable too. Ravi Subramaniam, who set up MobileOne here after working for SAP Ag in Germany, says it is easier for startups to make a mark from India rather than Europe.

"In Europe it takes a long time for a company to be established. SAP was started in 1972 but became successful only in the early 1990s. But the market dynamics in India are quite favourable to tech companies. Unlike the Tatas and Birlas, which took generations to get established, we don't need long lead times. All we need is a quality product. If you have a unique solution, success comes calling." Hyderabad has for long been saddled with the image of being a city that didn't have the drive or the policy regime for business success. But the new entrepreneurs say the city is ready now. Says Subramaniam, "There are opportunities galore."