

SPECIAL REPORT IMMIGRANT ENTREPRENEURS

GUNJAN BAGLA

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From: India



RINGO H.W. CHIU/LABJ

When did you arrive in the United States, and why did you come?

I came for graduate study at Southern Illinois University, and I arrived in the fall of 1979.

At the time, did you intend to eventually return to your home country?

Yes, I had worked in India for one of its most well-known companies, Larsen & Toubro. I intended to return to my former employer upon completing my M.B.A., but then I was captivated by the opportunities in America and decided to make my home here.

Why did you start your business in the United States instead of back home?

By the time I started my first company, the United States was home for me. I had worked for three American companies in Texas and California by then and my wife and I were ready to take the leap. My first company began in my dining room in Culver City.

What's the worst thing about starting a business here?

I don't think of worst and best, but of hardest and easiest. The hardest thing about starting a company as an immigrant entrepreneur is developing a compelling story for your potential clients. Immigrant entrepreneurs often don't have strong local social networks. If you are a UCLA or USC grad starting a company, you can probably find thousands of local alumni who can help

with mentoring, funding, customer acquisition and more. As an immigrant, you might be lucky to find a small handful of local connections.

And the easiest?

The paperwork and logistics is quick and well defined, so dealing with the local, state and federal governments does not occupy much time until after you get something going, at least for the kinds of companies that I have started.

What have been the biggest surprises?

At first, I was quite surprised by the kindness and willingness of strangers to help with advice, connections and introductions. In this sense, the openness of American society is good for new entrants.

'Even the New York Times misspelled my name when they first quoted me and misspelled it a second time in their correction.'

Would you tell someone from your home country to start a business here or there?

Today's India offers unparalleled opportunity for entrepreneurs, so there are very few people for whom it would make sense to leave India and start their first business here. It does make sense for many successful entrepreneurs

in India to consider expanding to the United States. But the ways of doing business and the key factors to success in India are quite different from the U.S. In fact, my core business at Amritt is helping Americans understand how to succeed in India.

Do you go back often?

Yes, my work takes me back to India several times a year, typically when I travel with major clients for their business interests in India. I try to sneak in a few days of vacation in India whenever I can.

What did you know about the United States before coming here?

My school in India had an American principal. There were a few American kids in my school so we got some insights from them. As a college student, my professors had American Ph.D.s and we used many American textbooks. So I thought I understood America before I arrived. I was wrong. The friendliness, the fast pace, the diversity and the insularity from the rest of the world were all part of the surprise as I began to understand what made America tick.

What's the funniest thing that's happened to you as a foreign-born entrepreneur?

People used to have a lot of trouble with my first name. I have been called Gunjee, which means undershirt in Hindi; Ganja, which is marijuana; and even Gandhi. Even the New York Times misspelled my name when they first quoted me and misspelled it a second time in their correction. I often receive emails addressed to "Gunman" because that is what spell-check software seems to propose. Now I tell people when I meet them that I will respond to all variants of my name and that seems to work well.

— Subrina Hudson

