

## Three Highfliers & a President

The curious case of an inspiring trio...

*He appeared quite short for someone with a larger-than-life personality. And that look was no perception. He was standing next to my wife, matching shoulder to shoulder. But then, wasn't [Napolean](#) also a man of a short stature? Except, of course, Napolean had the personality of a powerful emperor. The one on the podium neither looked nor orated like a statesman. An old man with drooping shoulders and a confusing hairstyle, speaking in a heavy South Indian accent while frequently referring to his notes—the sight doesn't exactly make for a stately visual. But then again, this event was not meant to be a visual treat, only a warming soup for the soul. And if someone was to ask me to pen down the top-10 enchanting “60 minutes” of my life, this session will figure in the list. For that momentous afternoon of Feb 14, 2013, the man on the center-stage “ignited” my mind to sort out a riddle that I was struggling to decipher over the preceding two weeks. No wonder, [Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam](#) is undisputedly cherished as the greatest President in the history of India.*

[Young Indians \(YI\)](#) is an energetic national association that nurtures an ambitious [India at 75](#) charter. The vision is to galvanize the Indian youth to play an influencing role in transforming our country's political and social fabric by 2022, the year India would clock 75 post-freedom years. My wife, Ritu, was the president of Pune Chapter of YI for the recent 2012-13 term. Before the expiry of her term, she organized two closing events in the early part of 2013. The first one was a conclave—Nurturing the Positive Powers of India—attended by eminent speakers who participated in stimulating panel discussions of national interest. The second one was a single-man thunder—a speech by APJ Abdul Kalam for YI members and the youth of Pune at [Indira Institute of Management](#).

### The Trilogy...

While I attended the entire proceedings of the national conclave, what caught my fancy was a gripping panel discussion involving three inspiring achievers. For it was listening to their trio stories is where the journey of my quandary began. As I excitedly sat in the audience absorbing their fascinating tales, little did I know that it will take no less than our country's ex-president, to dispel the confusing thoughts that these simple moving stories will lead to...

Mr. Rags-to-riches [Sarathbabu](#):

My four siblings and I were brought up in a Chennai slum. My mother was an [Aanganwadi](#) worker who took multiple jobs to raise and educate us. I was determined to make sure that her hard work did not go in vain. I sold [Idlis](#) on my way to school, while topping my class every single year. When I got admission in the prestigious [BITS, Pilani](#), one of my sisters mortgaged her jewelry. I had to do odd jobs to support my education, until partial help arrived in the form of a financial scholarship. After graduating, I took up a job at [Polaris](#) to pay off my loan. Then I went back to do MBA at our country's top management institute [IIM, Ahmedabad](#). While at IIM, I became the hostel mess secretary. I turned down a lucrative campus offer because I

wanted to be an entrepreneur who could create many jobs like [Mukesh Ambani](#), while offering affordable food options to the Indian masses. So I started my own catering business – **Foodking**, that [Narayan Murthy](#) himself came to inaugurate. Today, I employ 200 people across 6 cities, but my ambition is to employ 15000 more within five years across all major cities of India.

*Mrs. Darkness-to-light* [Revathi Roy](#):

Unlike other entrepreneurs, I started off in the darkest hour of my life, the passing away of my husband after a long illness. I had three children when life took this uncertain turn. With no money in hand and children growing up, there were very few options open for me. Finally, I decided to do something in a field that interested me the most—driving. I had been an avid rally driver for the past three decades. I realized that there was a need for a niche service in the transport sector, a safe and reliable service for women commuters in Indian metropolis. My husband's parents were very supportive, as were many of my friends who helped me with the initial capital. I started [For-She](#), and later [Viira](#) in Mumbai—cab services with women drivers for ladies and old people. I drove the cab myself for the first ten months until I could raise the capital to expand. Today, I have 65 cabs plying across Mumbai and Delhi. My target is to create employment for thousands of needy housewives and single women by running cab services and training academies across 40 major cities in India.

*Ms. Ground-to-sky* [Krishna Patil](#):

Every year since childhood, I had been going to Himalayas with my parents for vacations. When I was 15, I enrolled at [NIM](#) for basic and advanced training in mountaineering. At age 18, I became the youngest Indian to scale [Mt Satopanth](#). The next in line was every adventurer's ultimate dream: [Mt Everest](#). Not many people would know, but an [expedition to Everest](#) is a very expensive proposition. The attempts of my parents to secure a sponsorship for me were in vain, so they took a bank loan to support my climb. Up, pushing myself on the mountains, I knew I had to succeed... for I kept thinking of the loans that my father had taken to get me on "top of the world"! Today, I am credited for being the youngest Indian to climb Mt Everest at the time (the record was subsequently broken by [Arjun Vajpai](#)). Now with sponsorships snowballing, I am on a mission to conquer many heights— starting with my quest to become the first woman to scale the [Seven Summits](#), the highest peaks of seven continents...all in one year!



(L-R): Krishna Patil, Ritu Nathani, Sarathbabu and Revathi Roy at the CII-India@75-Yi Conclave “Nurturing the Positive Powers of India”

Three lives, three inspirations! Each one an incredible achiever in his/her own way. So what was common between them? For starters, they all had high intellect—I noticed that in the panel discussion. But was there anything unique that was binding them together? Yes. In fact, three unique characteristics...

One, they all were inherently passionate about the line of work they chose from an early age—Krishna enjoyed climbing mountains as long as she could remember, Revathi was driving rally-cars for three decades, and Sarathbabu dabbled from being an Idliwala to a mess secretary from his school to college days.

Two, while none of them came from a financially privileged setting, all of them were surrounded by an emotive ecosystem. Krishna had her immensely supportive parents (later on, sponsors), Revathi had her in-laws and friends (afterwards, banks), Sarathbabu had his mother and sisters (and eventually, Narayan Murthy 😊).

Three, in the defining moments, their backs were against the wall. And what do we do when we can't go backward? Go forward! Krishna visualized her father-in-debt's face as she struggled with her penultimate summit steps, Revathi had her kiddo's faces flashing in the taxi's rear view mirror, Sarathbabu just could never forget the sight of his aanganwadi mother-in-slum.

*Passion, Support, Cornered.* Three primary particles of dust clouds in which Stars are born! A simple, intuitive management lesson indeed, I came back from the session pleased with the takeaway. Yet later that night as I was replaying the day's proceedings in my mind, something felt terribly amiss....

I suspect there must be other intelligent, focused Everest ex-climbers, perhaps in their thirties now and members of the 'unfairer' sex, how come I have never heard their names? I am sure that country-over, there must be thousands of bright, hard-working taxi drivers who would have attempted starting their own mini taxi companies, but today might be buried under such depths of debt, that you and I can't even see them! And the dreams of rising-from-slums Sarathbabu are shared and acted upon by millions of India's talented middle-class youth, but how many Narayan Murthys are there to jump-start their dreams?

So many questions, one simple answer. None of these other aspirants got the advantage of media frenzy that the three "underdog" heroes of our story had. And that frenzy got this trio the brand. The brand in turn helped them garner further support, momentum and fuel astonishing opportunities.

As my mind played havoc, the rebellion heart still rooted for their glory and snubbed such spoilsport analytics. But I learned a long time back that "matters of the heart" is not a rational way to gauge humans. I needed to apply my brains for the answer to the question: **Did this trio truly deserve the heights of its success?** I struggled, but my mind refused to be enlightened. Fortunately, the help was only two weeks away, for destiny had taken the effort to arrange none other than the people's president of India to come and ignite my mind.

*While we await our beloved President's magical session, here is a coffee-break question—amongst the three professionals, whose achievement you will rate the highest: a) Sarathbabu; b) Revathi Roy; c) Krishna Patil?*