

An Inspirational True Success Story

Sudha Murthy, wife of Infosys Chairman Narayanamurthy, talking about her life and the story of how Infosys was born:

It was in Pune that I met Narayana Murty through my friend Prasanna who is now the Wipro chief, who was also training in Telco. Most of the books that Prasanna lent me had Murty's name on them, which meant that I had a preconceived image of the man. Contrary to expectation, Murty was shy, bespectacled and an introvert. When he invited us for dinner, I was a bit taken aback as I thought the young man was making a very fast move. I refused since I was the only girl in the group. But Murty was relentless and we all decided to meet for dinner the next day at 7.30 p.m. at Green Fields hotel on the Main Road, Pune.

The next day I went there at 7 o'clock since I had to go to the tailor near the hotel. And what do I see? Mr. Murty waiting in front of the hotel and it was only seven. Till today, Murty maintains that I had mentioned (consciously!) that I would be going to the tailor at 7 so that I could meet him...And I maintain that I did not say any such thing consciously or unconsciously because I did not think of Murty as anything other than a friend at that stage. We have agreed to disagree on this matter. Soon, we became friends. Our conversations were filled with Murty's experiences abroad and the books that he has read.

My friends insisted that Murty was trying to impress me because he was interested in me. I kept denying it till one fine day, after dinner Murty said, "I want to tell you something". I knew this was it. It was coming. He said, "I am 5' 4" tall. I come from a lower middle class family. I can never become rich in my life and I can never give you any riches. You are beautiful, bright, intelligent and you can get anyone you want. But will you marry me?" I asked Murty to give me some time for an answer. My father didn't want me to marry a wannabe politician, (a communist at that) who didn't have a steady job and wanted to build an orphanage... When I went to Hubli I told my parents about Murty and his proposal. My mother was positive since Murty was also from Karnataka, seemed intelligent and comes from a good family. But my father asked: What's his job, his salary, his qualifications etc? Murty was working as a research assistant and was earning less than me. He was willing to go dutch with me on our outings.

My parents agreed to meet Murty in Pune on a particular day at 10 a. m sharp. Murty did not turn up. How can I trust a man to take care of my daughter if he cannot keep an appointment, asked my father. At 12 noon Murty turned up in a bright red shirt! He had gone on work to Bombay, was stuck in a traffic jam on the ghats, so he hired a taxi (though it was very expensive for him) to meet his would-be father-in-law. Father was unimpressed. My father asked him what he wanted to become in life. Murty said he wanted to become a politician in the communist party and wanted to open an orphanage. My father gave his verdict. NO. I don't want my daughter to marry somebody who wants to become a communist and then open an orphanage

when he himself didn't have money to support his family. Ironically, today, I have opened many orphanages something, which Murty wanted to do 25 years ago. By this

time I realized I had developed a liking towards Murty, which could only be termed as love. I wanted to marry Murty because he is an honest man. He proposed to me highlighting the negatives in his life. I promised my father that I would not marry Murty without his blessings though at the same time, I cannot marry anybody else. My father said he would agree if Murty promised to take up a steady job. But Murty refused saying he will not do things in life because somebody wanted him to. So, I was caught between the two most important people in my life.

The stalemate continued for three years during which our courtship took us to every restaurant and cinema hall in Pune. In those days, Murty was always broke. Moreover, he didn't earn much to manage. Ironically today, he manages Infosys Technologies Ltd, one of the world's most reputed companies. He always owed me money. We used to go for dinner and he would say, I don't have money with me, you pay my share, I will return it to you later. For three years I maintained a book on Murty's debt to me. No, he never returned the money and I finally tore it up after my wedding. The amount was a little over Rs. 4000.

During this interim period Murty quit his job as research assistant and started his own software business. Now, I had to pay his salary too! Towards the late 70s computers were entering India in a big way. During the fag end of 1977 Murty decided to take up a job as General Manager at Patni Computers in Bombay. But before he joined the company he wanted to marry me since he was to go on training to the US after joining. My father gave in as he was happy Murty had a decent job, now. We were married in Murty's house in Bangalore on February 10, 1978 with only our two families present. I got my first silk sari. The wedding expenses came to only Rs. 800(US\$ 17) with Murty and I pooling in Rs. 400 each.

I went to the US with Murty after marriage. Murty encouraged me to see America on my own because I loved traveling. I toured America for three months on backpack and had interesting experiences, which will remain fresh in my mind forever. Like the time when I was taken into custody by the New York police because they thought I was an Italian trafficking drugs in Harlem. Or the time when I spent the night at the bottom of the Grand Canyon with an old couple. Murty panicked because he couldn't get a response from my hotel room even at midnight. He thought I was either killed or kidnapped.

In 1981 Murty wanted to start INFOSYS. He had a vision and zero capital... initially I was very apprehensive about Murty getting into business. We did not have any business background. Moreover we were living a comfortable life in Bombay with a regular paycheck and I didn't want to rock the boat. But Murty was passionate about creating good quality software. I decided to support him. Typical of Murty, he just had a dream and no money. So I gave him Rs. 10,000, which I had saved for a rainy day, without his knowledge and told him, "This is all I have". Take it. I give you three years sabbatical leave. I will take care of the financial needs of our house. You go and chase your dreams without any worry. But you have only three years! Murty and his six colleagues started Infosys in 1981, with enormous interest and hard work.

In 1982 I left Telco and moved to Pune with Murty. We bought a small house on loan, which also became the Infosys office. I was a clerk-cum-cook-cum-programmer. I also took up a job as Senior Systems Analyst with Walchand group of Industries to

support the house. In 1983 Infosys got their first client, MICO, in Bangalore. Murty moved to Bangalore and stayed with his mother while I went to Hubli to deliver my second child, Rohan. Ten days after my son was born, Murty left for the US on project work. I saw him only after a year, as I was unable to join Murty in the US because my son had infantile eczema, an allergy to vaccinations. So for more than a year I did not step outside our home for fear of my son contracting an infection. It was only after Rohan got all his vaccinations that I came to Bangalore where we rented a small house in Jayanagar and rented another house as Infosys headquarters.

My father presented Murty a scooter to commute. I once again became a cook, programmer, clerk, secretary, office assistant et al. Nandan Nilekani (MD of Infosys) and his wife Rohini stayed with us. While Rohini babysat my son, I wrote programmes for Infosys. There was no car, no phone, just two kids and a bunch of us working hard, juggling our lives and having fun while Infosys was taking shape. It was not only me but the wives of other partners too who gave their unstinted support. We all knew that our men were trying to build something good. It was like a big joint family, taking care and looking out for one another. I still remember Sudha Gopalakrishna looking after my daughter Akshata with all care and love while Kumari Shibulal cooked for all of us. Murty made it very clear that it would either be me or him working at Infosys. Never the two of us together... I was involved with Infosys initially. Nandan Nilekani suggested I should be on the Board but Murty said he did not want a husband and wife team at Infosys. I was shocked since I had the relevant experience and technical qualifications. He said, "Sudha, if you want to work with Infosys, I will withdraw, happily". I was pained to know that I will not be involved in the company my husband was building and that I would have to give up a job that I am qualified to do and love doing. It took me a couple of days to grasp the reason behind Murty's request. I realized that to make Infosys a success one had to give one's 100 percent. One had to be focused on it alone with no other distractions. If the two of us had to give 100 percent to Infosys then what would happen to our home and our children? One of us had to take care of our home while the other took care of Infosys.

I opted to be a homemaker, after all Infosys was Murty's dream. It was a big sacrifice but it was one that had to be made. Even today, Murty says, "Sudha, I stepped on your career to make mine". You are responsible for my success. I might have given up my career for my husband's sake. But that does not make me a doormat... Many think that I have been made the sacrificial lamb at Narayana Murty's altar of success. A few women journalists have even accused me of setting a wrong example by giving up my dreams to make my husbands a reality. Isn't freedom about living your life the way you want it? What is right for one person might be wrong for another. It is up to the individual to make a choice that is effective in her life. I feel that when a woman gives up her right to choose for herself is when she crosses over from being an individual to a doormat. Murty's dreams encompassed not only himself but also a generation of people. It was about founding something worthy, exemplary and honorable. It was about creation and distribution of wealth. His dreams were grander than my career plans, in all aspects. So, when I had to choose between Murty's career and mine, I opted for what I thought was a right choice. We had a home and two little children. Measles, mumps, fractures; PTA meetings, wants and needs of growing children do not care much for grandiose dreams. They just needed to be attended to. Somebody had to take care of it all. Somebody had to stay back to create a home base that would

be fertile for healthy growth, happiness, and more dreams to dream. I became that somebody willingly. I can confidently say that if I had had a dream like Infosys, Murty would have given me his unstinted support. The roles would have been reversed. We are not bound by the archaic rules of marriage. I cook for him but I don't wait up to serve dinner like a traditional wife. So, he has no hassles about heating up the food and having his dinner. He does not intrude into my time especially when I am writing my novels. He does not interfere in my work at the running of Infosys. I teach Computer Science to MBA and MCA students at Christ College for a few hours every week and I earn around Rs. 50,000 a year. I value this financial independence greatly though there is no need for me to pursue a teaching career. Murty respects that. I travel all over the world without Murty because he hates travelling. We trust each other implicitly. We have another understanding too. While he earns the money, I spend it, mostly through the charity. Philanthropy is a profession and an art... The Infosys Foundation was born in 1997 with the sole objective of uplifting the less-privileged sections of society.

In the past three years we have build hospitals, orphanages, rehabilitation centres, school buildings, science centres and more than 3500 libraries. Our work is mainly in the rural areas amongst women and children. I am one of the trustees and our activities span six states including Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Andhra, Orissa, Chandigarh and Maharashtra. I travel to around 800 villages constantly. Infosys Foundation has a minimal staff of three trustees and three office members. We all work very hard to achieve our goals and that is the reason why Infosys Foundation has a distinct identity. Every year we donate around Rs. 5-6 crore (Rs. 50 - 60 million). We run Infosys Foundation the way Murty runs Infosys in a professional and scientific way. Philanthropy is a profession and an art. It can be used or misused. We slowly want to increase the donations and we dream of a time when Infosys Foundation could donate large amounts of money. Every year we receive more than 10,000 applications for donations. Everyday I receive more than 120 calls. Amongst these, there are those who genuinely need help and there are hood winkers too. I receive letters asking me to donate Rs. five lakh to someone because five lakh is, like peanuts to Infosys. Some people write to us asking for free Infosys shares. Over the years I have learnt to differentiate the wheat from the chaff, though I still give a patient hearing to all the cases. Sometimes I feel I have lost the ability to trust people. I have become shrewder to avoid being conned. It saddens me to realize that even as a person is talking to me I try to analyze them: Has he come here for any donation? Why is he praising my work or enquiring about my health, does he wants some money from me? Eight out of ten times I am right. They do want my money. But I feel bad for the other two whom I suspected. I think that is the price that I have to pay for the position that I am in now. The greatest difficulty in having money is teaching your children the value of it and trying to keep them on a straight one is a difficult task.

Even today I think twice if I have to spend Rs10 on an auto when I can walk up to my house. I cannot expect my children to do the same. They have seen money from the time they were born. But we can lead by example. When they see Murty wash his own plate after eating and clean the two toilets in the house everyday they realize that no work is demeaning irrespective of how rich you are. I don't have a maid at home because I don't see the need for one. When children see both parents working hard, living a simple life, most of the time they tend to follow. This doesn't mean we expect

our children to live an austere life. My children buy what they want and go where they want but they have to follow certain rules. They will have to show me a bill for whatever they buy. My daughter can buy five new outfits but she has to give away five old ones. My son can go out with his friends for lunch or dinner but if he wants to go to a five star hotel, we discourage it. Or we accompany him. So far my children haven't given me any heartbreak. They are good children. My eldest daughter is studying abroad, whereas my son is studying in Bangalore. They don't use their father's name in vain. If asked, they only say that his name is Murty and that he works for Infosys. They don't want to be recognized and appreciated because of their father or me but for themselves.

I don't feel guilty about having money for we have worked hard for it. But I don't feel comfortable flaunting it. It is a conscious decision on our part to live a simple, so-called middle class life. We live in the same Two-bedroom, sparsely furnished house before INFOSYS became a success. Our only extravagance is buying books and CDs. My house has no lockers for I have no jewels. I wear a stone earring, which I bought in Mumbai for Rs100. I don't even wear my mangalsutra until I attend some family functions or I am with my mother-in-law. I am not fond of jewellery or saris. Five years ago, I went to Kashi where tradition demands that you give up something and I gave up shopping. Since then I haven't bought myself a sari or gone shopping. It is my friends who gift me with saris. Murty bought me a sari a long time ago. It was not to my taste and I told him to refrain from buying saris for me in the future. I am no good at selecting men's clothes either. It is my daughter who does the shopping for us. I still have the same sofa at home, which my daughter wants to change. However, we have indulged ourselves with each one having their own music system and computer. I don't carry a purse and neither does Murty most of the time. I do tell him to keep some small change with him but he doesn't. I borrow money from my secretary or my driver if I need cash. They know my habit so they always carry extra cash with them. But I settle the accounts every evening.

Murty and I are very comfortable with our lifestyle and we don't see the need to change it now that we have money. Murty and I are two opposites that complement each other... Murty is sensitive and romantic in his own way. He always gifts me books addressed to >From Me to You. Or to the person I most admire etc. We both love books. We are both complete opposites. I am an extrovert and he is an introvert. I love watching movies and listening to classical music. Murty loves listening to English classical music. I go out for movies with my students and secretary every other week. I am still young at heart. I really enjoyed watching "Kaho Na Pyaar Hai" and I am an Hrithik Roshan fan. It has been more than 20 years since Murty and I went for a movie. My daughter once gave us a surprise by booking tickets for "Titanic". Since I had a prior engagement that day, Murty went for the movie with his secretary Pandu. I love traveling whereas Murty loves spending time at home. Friends come and go with the share prices... Even in my dreams, I did not expect Infosys to grow like the way it has. I don't think even Murty envisioned this phenomenal success, at least not in 1981. After Infosys went public in 1993, we became what people would call as rich, moneyed people. I was shocked to see what was happening to Infosys and to us. Suddenly you see and hear about so much money. Your name and photo is splashed in the papers. People talk about you. It was all new to me.

Suddenly I have people walking up to me saying, oh we were such good friends, we

had a meal 25 years ago, they claim to have been present at our wedding (which is an utter life because only my family was present at my wedding). I don't even know all these people who claim to know Murty and me so well. But that doesn't mean I don't have true friends. I do have genuine friends, a handful, who have been with me for a very long time. My equation with these people has not changed and vice versa. I am also very close to Narayana Murty's family, especially my sister-in-law Kamala Murty, a school teacher, who is more of a dear friend to me. I have discovered that these are the few relationships and friendships that don't fluctuate depending on the price of Infosys shares. Have I lost my identity as a woman, in Murty's shadow?... No. I might be Mrs. Narayana Murty. I might be Akshata and Rohan's mother. I might be the trustee of Infosys Foundation. But I am still Sudha. I play different roles like all women. That doesn't mean we don't have our own identity. Women have that extra quality of adaptability and learn to fit into different shoes. But we are our own selves still. And we have to exact our freedom by making the right choices in our lives, dictated by us and not by the world.

Sudha Murthy