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### **An Immigrant's Journey: The Inspiring Story of My Grandfather, Rajvir Singh**

Rajvir Singh's life is the quintessential example of a rags-to-riches story. He started in a tiny, poor Indian village still under British rule and ended up in swanky offices in Silicon Valley. His big dreams, hard work and entrepreneurial spirit drove him to succeed beyond his expectations as an Indian immigrant in America. In doing so, he also helped pave the way for other immigrants, especially tech immigrants from South Asia. Singh's story also shows that immigrants are a net benefit for America and can help to create wealth for all.

Singh led a quiet childhood in a small village in Northern India called Idrispur. Life was not easy for Indians. When Singh was born, India was still under British rule and wouldn't gain independence until August 15, 1947. British colonists had extracted much of India's resources, turning it from a rich country to a poor one. Thus his father, like many of the small farmers in India's predominantly agrarian society, received few resources or help from the newly-formed Indian government and didn't have much family wealth or savings to fall back on. "My grandfather would wake up at the crack of dawn and work till dusk in the fields, toiling away just to be able to put food on the table

for his children,” recalls Mona Singh, Singh’s eldest daughter who was born in India and spent her early childhood there.

Singh didn’t have much growing up - some pajamas, a couple of pairs of clothes, a pair of school shoes and slippers - constituted his entire wardrobe. TV, phone, and even electricity were unavailable in his household; food was cooked on a mud stove which used cow dung as fuel. But his mother gave him loads of love and affection and his father taught him the value of hard work and endurance. Growing up, Singh focused diligently on reading and doing his schoolwork, which earned him high grades in school. He excelled in his studies and often ranked first or second in his school. The village lacked basic amenities like electricity and running water, so he used to complete his homework by the light of a lamp at night. Singh’s high school was six miles away, and he would have to walk or bike there and back every day, even in inclement weather. “If it is raining, we had not an umbrella, but a polythene sheet or piece of plastic,” Singh recalls as he reminisces how he and his siblings had to manage in the wet monsoon season.

Singh’s good grades would earn him entrance into the Electrical Engineering program at Roorkee University, some 75 miles away from his village. Although his father’s earnings through the farm were meager, he was able to afford college through the help of a scholarship which paid for half his tuition. He actually lost it at one point due to some shenanigans that he got in trouble for, which posed some problems for him as he did not have enough money to pay the tuition. But he used his tenacity and charm

to convince the university administrators into getting his scholarship back. Upon graduating from college, Singh joined the Navy as an officer in the electrical branch but decided to leave the Navy in the mid-1970s after serving for two years. He became restless with the rigidity of navy life and was able to talk his officers into an early release from his post, again showcasing his perseverance and tenacity to be able to change his life direction and circumstances.

After leaving the Navy, Singh started a small business venture with a friend, using up all his savings, and some even of his father, but which failed. In an interview, Singh's daughter remembers her father telling her about some of those hardships, recounting that "He came from a family who just had a small farm and his parents worked really hard for him to get a good education, and so every setback was huge and stressful." However, he did not let these setbacks deter him from his vision of becoming an entrepreneur. He persevered and did not lose hope.

In the meantime, his parents arranged his marriage, as was a common practice in India at that time, to a young lady from a nearby town - someone he met for the first time only on the actual day of their engagement! (Thus far, they have been married 52 years and have raised three children.) After marriage, the couple moved to New Delhi, where he completed his diploma in Mathematics at IIT Delhi, an elite public university that admits only the brightest students. Interestingly, many of today's tech movers and shakers in the USA attended one of twenty-three IITs in India.

Singh was a dreamer. And he didn't let his humble upbringing restrict his vision of where he wanted to go. And where he wanted to go was America. "I knew that America was the dream place...that gives you opportunities - it gives you an environment, infrastructure of education," Singh says.

Indians were only allowed to immigrate to the USA after 1965. According to the Migration Policy Institute, "Large-scale Indian immigration to the United States is relatively recent, following the move by Congress in 1965 to abolish national-origin quotas that largely limited immigration to Europeans" (Hoffman & Batalova). So, shortly after his marriage in 1969, he learned of these changes to US immigration law and took the opportunity to apply to study for his master's degree in the US. He was thrilled to be accepted at the University of California at Berkeley! Alas, he had to use up all the money he had saved up to help his parents pay for his sister's wedding and thus could no longer afford the plane ticket. Thus he had to turn down UC Berkeley and forgo the dream of moving to the US...for now.

After working for a few years in India, Singh moved to the Middle East with his family and worked as an electrical engineer. While there, he again applied to the US and was granted admission into a computer science program at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis. This time he did have the money to buy a plane ticket, but only one ticket, so the rest of his family would have to join him a year later when he had been able to save enough of the small salary he earned as a teaching assistant.

Singh was part of a stream of Indian immigrants around that time. The historian Vijay Prashad states in *The Making of a Model Minority* that, "...from 1966 to 1977, about 20,000 scientists immigrated from India to the United States, along with 40,000 engineers and 25,000 physicians" (qtd. in Venugopal). Most of them had a few things in common: they spoke English, were from middle-class or upper middle-class, had the educational background required, and were able to pay for the journey. Singh shared a few of these traits, but not all. He did not grow up speaking English like many of the other educated immigrants who went to "English-Medium" schools. Additionally, he had to wait many years to save the money to pay for his airline ticket since his family was not well-off enough to provide it for him. Most other Indian immigrants were able to migrate earlier, usually before they had a family and children to take care of. This made his journey a bit less typical and somewhat harder.

After finishing his Masters, he secured his first job in Silicon Valley and moved his family of five to Santa Clara, California. The company sponsored him and his family for an H-1B immigration visa, which is a visa that allows employers to petition for highly educated foreign professionals to work in "specialty occupations" that require at least a bachelor's degree or the equivalent. Singh founded several startups over the years, including one where he stayed for six years. The startups included: StratumOne Communications (sold to Cisco), InterHDL Inc. (sold to Avant!), Advancel Logic (sold to Noise Cancellation Technologies), and Fiberlane Communications, which was later split into Cerent Systems (sold to Cisco) and Siara Systems (sold to Redback Networks). These companies were at the forefront of innovation in Silicon Valley. Whether it was

chip design, networking, communications or processors, Singh was at the center of all these companies. Not only were these companies at the head of innovation, they even inspired the creation of more innovative companies. Singh also co-founded and served as president of Comstellar Technologies, an incubator for technology startups.

In between his day job, Singh co-wrote a technical book, "Digital Design with Verilog HDL," which taught the popular Verilog language used widely in the Semiconductor industry. The first publisher he met turned him down, claiming that no one would read a book by Indian and Jewish authors! "So I decided to publish from home and it became a bestseller and many saw my book flourishing," Singh recounts. He did not let this instance of discrimination dissuade him and found a way around this particular obstacle.

At this point in his life, Singh was financially and personally settled enough to be able to take the leap of finally starting on the entrepreneur journey that he always dreamed about. He founded his own companies including one called Fiberlane (Cerent) which was acquired by Cisco for a price that was higher than any private company at that time. This created a lot of jobs and wealth for everyone that was employed at the company – even the secretary became a millionaire overnight! Singh was committed to being generous to all levels and rewarding everyone equally for their hard work.

Singh believes, “Immigrants come here and they all want to succeed because they migrated to do something to be successful, to make money, to have a good living for their family. So they work hard and they don't give up...” Singh draws attention to the reality that many immigrants arrive in a new nation with a strong desire to prosper and support their family. Since they lack a support system of family or other resources, this motivation often pushes them to work hard and endure despite the difficulties.

“...And they know that they have to work hard. They know that they have nobody to fall back upon. So it's all about themselves by themselves. That's why they succeed...” Singh explained. Singh is emphasizing the sense of personal responsibility that immigrants experience. They understand that they cannot rely on a safety net or support in the same way that people who were born here can.

Singh highlights that many Indian immigrants arrive in a new country with a solid educational background and important skills that can benefit the economy: “...They are highly educated people and the best of the breed in those countries. They get admission to colleges, they get local education, then they pick up local jobs and then they try to perform better because they have come here with a dream and they want to fulfill their dream. Like in Silicon Valley, many Indians have started new companies...created new jobs, and became a role model for the next generation.” Immigrants are frequently strongly motivated to achieve and consider entrepreneurship as a way to succeed. According to an MIT article by Peter Dizikes, “...per capita, immigrants are about 80 percent more likely to found a firm, compared to U.S.-born

citizens. Those firms also have about 1 percent more employees than those founded by U.S. natives, on average.”

Vivek Wadhwa, a well-known American Indian author on this subject, explains this trend as it relates to Indian-Americans in an article, *Why Indian-born leaders dominate American tech's top ranks*. According to Wadhwa, “In a land of more than a billion people, most of whom are hampered by rampant corruption, weak infrastructure, and limited opportunities, it takes a lot to simply survive, let alone to get ahead...Entrepreneurship, along with the creativity and resourcefulness required to deal with all the obstacles, is part of life.” Singh similarly explains, “In India, what we encounter...life and then financial difficulties and hard way of living. If you live through many of these situations ...you gain experience. And that comes in very handy here.”

Singh points out that many Indian immigrants have made important contributions to the Silicon Valley tech industry and have become role models for others. For example, Vinod Dham, an Indian immigrant, invented the famous Intel Pentium Processor. Sabeer Bhatia co-founded Hotmail, the first web-based email service. They inspired other immigrants just like them to reach for the same types of achievements. According to Vivek Wadhwa, author of *The Immigrant Exodus: Why America Is Losing the Global Race to Capture Entrepreneurial Talent*, “The first generation of successful entrepreneurs—people like Sun Microsystems co-founder Vinod Khosla--served as visible, vocal, role models and mentors. They also provided seed funding to members of their community.”

Singh's own role models have been the founders and CEOs he has worked with over the years, such as Vinod Kholsa whom Wadhwa references. Singh believes that if they can do it, there was a chance for him too. In a Forbes article published in 1999 that is about "The fiber Raj" (Rajvir Singh), it states, "The company was started with seed capital of \$250,000 from the legendary venture capital firm Kleiner Perkins Caufield & Byer." Khosla (who himself was another IIT graduate and Indian immigrant) was a partner with Kleiner Perkins and chairman of the Fiberlane board and helped take Singh's startup to astronomic heights. Indians, and more broadly, South Asians, were helping and inspiring each other. Singh then went on to help fund over 100 companies in the USA and guide countless entrepreneurs who wanted advice and contacts.

Today, Singh is semi-retired, but still meets regularly with budding entrepreneurs from all backgrounds who seek him out for his guidance, hoping to help make a difference and give back to the tech community that has given him so much over the years. His daughter is very proud of his magnanimous nature. "He's very generous and he's well known in the Valley for just being a generous, kind person who freely gives advice and his time," Singh's daughter says.

Some people might think that your 70s are a time to take it easy, but not Singh, who thinks of himself as a "restless" person. He has become an avid traveler over the last five years, sharing that he has "finished 77 countries and I'm about to go out on another trip. My goal is to travel to 100 countries by the end."

Rajvir Singh's immigrant success story is one of many Indians who have come to America in the last five decades to create a better life for themselves and their families, and in the process end up giving back to their adopted country as much as they have received, if not more. His journey showcases perseverance, hard work, ingenuity, and assimilation which are common traits in many of those who come here to pursue the American dream. America started with immigrants who brought with them their unique cultures, talent and perspectives and made it the great country it is today, the envy of many nations around the world. We should continue to welcome those who seek to make America their new home - just like Rajvir Singh - otherwise, we will miss out on the potentially amazing contributions they have to offer. Singh dreamed big dreams in his little house in a little village in India and, with conviction and hard work (and a US visa), was able to live a reality even bigger than his dreams—the American Dream.

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