The Road Less Travelled*

O P Bagaria**

This article being a speech delivered on the Thirteenth Anniversary of Atma Nirbhar - Ek Challenge, a voluntary organization at Guwahati, by noted industrialist OP Bagaria makes for interesting reading. OP Bagaria is an industrialist with a difference, delving into eco-friendly community living experiments besides his industrial concerns, where too he shows a remarkable honesty, integrity, vision for the future and commitment to quality. As the title of the article itself indicates, Shri Bagaria chose the ‘Road Less Travelled’ and that has made all the difference in his life. This article is a must read for the aspiring younger generation as well as the powers-that-be in the industrial world.

A.A.

I offer my greetings and salutations to all of you who have been associated with Atma Nirbhar - Ek Challenge, a great and inspiring adventure for the soul, for so many years.

Kaushik Das has labelled me as An Industrialist with a ‘Difference’. Let me begin with an apt verse from Robert Frost’s famous poem to weave together some episodes of my life’s journey:

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I -
I took the one less travelled by,
And that has made all the difference.
Creating wealth for the nation

The eldest of eight male members of my generation, I was the only one who opted for engineering studies and that started me off on a life-long journey on the road less travelled. In 1963, immediately after getting my mechanical engineering degree from IIT at Kharagpur, in West Bengal, I plunged headlong into tea machinery design and development at Steelsworth in Tinsukia in Upper Assam. We soon established a name for our innovative products not only in India but in East Africa as well, where we were pitted against firmly entrenched British manufacturers, including Marshall’s and Davidson’s. My uncle, D. P. Agarwal, the founder of Steelsworth, really was an industrialist with a difference: he believed not merely in making money for himself but in creating wealth for the nation. We kept alive his vision and learnt that by maintaining high standards of quality and reliability we were already enriching the nation. The rewards for us were plentiful as well: in a decade, we grew into world leaders in our chosen field of tea processing machinery.

Turning the searchlight inwards

It was in 1972, when our ship had all but run aground as a result of a protracted battle with our workers’ union, that the idea of turning the searchlight inwards put across by a visiting MRA (Moral Re-Armament, now renamed as Initiatives of Change) team struck me like lightning. This led me to an honest apology to an ailing worker—and restitution—which resulted, quite miraculously, in an open-hearted dialogue and a swift resolution of all disputed issues. Mutual trust was restored and a hurricane of change followed. I learnt the precious lesson that the only place for change to start is within me; its ripple effects are bound to follow as day follows night.

A quantum technological jump

Soon thereafter, I moved to Guwahati to upgrade our factory there. A quantum jump in our technological capabilities took place when Mr. A. D. Adhikari, then the MD of Ashok Paper Mills in Jogighopa, Assam, awarded us a contract to fabricate pressure vessels for their caustic soda plant, in the face of stiff opposition from their consultants, only because he wanted Assam’s engineering industry to grow. The experience thus gained brought us much more sophisticated work for our Guwahati factory, now known as Buildworth. We learnt that whilst money-power could not accomplish anything of lasting value, we could win over new allies with our sincerity and integrity.

Refusal to bribe

My next outpost was at Ranchi (in Bihar in those days), where we were running a small steel foundry with a rotary furnace which invariably
failed to produce the exact melt composition. Castings could, therefore, be passed only by bribing our way. When I refused to do that, we had to close down the factory; our energies were thus liberated for doing more constructive work elsewhere.

Enlisting others to build a cleaner India

I then shifted to Coimbatore, in Tamil Nadu, where we set up a small workshop to make components for tea machinery, to take advantage of the large number of small-scale engineering units there. Power from the State run electricity board (TNEB) was not easy to get and I was told that the racket of kick-backs extended across the board, from the lowest level right up to the top. I made up my mind: if I cannot get power without bribing, I’ll manage without it. When I went to meet the concerned Executive Engineer, however, I was free of rancour or arrogance. I asked him: “Will one Mr. Clean, (as Rajiv Gandhi was at that time known), be able to clean up the whole of India or will he need the help of people like you and me?” I also offered him friendship in lieu of money. He was completely won over. As a result, we got power within a week without bribing and I found another ally in the effort to build a cleaner India!

Man’s loving relationship with nature

In Coimbatore, I got to know Swami Sahajananda, a textile engineer turned monk of the Chinmaya Mission and we became good friends. One evening at Chinmaya Gardens, Mr. T. S. Ananthu, a visiting Gandhi Peace Foundation research fellow, spoke about how man’s loving relationship with nature could reward him way beyond his wildest expectations. This seed thought captured my imagination and it ultimately sprouted into Navadarshanam, a scientific exploration of an alternative to the ecologically and spiritually damaging modern civilization. In less than two decades, we have been showered so richly with nature’s bounty that the 115 acres of once desolate land, 50 kms from Bangalore, on the border of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, has become a veritable sanctuary for plants and birds. We have learnt that through ecologically sound ways of farming, housing, energy and water conservation, we could make a world of difference.

So it is when you take the road less travelled: it is full of twists and turns, thorns and thistles, joys and sorrows, achievements and failures. But it is undoubtedly the adventurous high road. After all, the ship is quite safe in the harbour but it has to leave its moorings to be able to get anywhere. The key is a lifelong willingness to experiment with new ideas and to explore fresh avenues, learning and growing all the while.
That, to me, is what makes life worth living and it is also what makes all the difference.

Atma Nibhar - Ek Challenge is a noble venture that has made so much of a difference in the lives of so many hapless persons; kudos to Kaushik Das and to his dedicated team of tireless workers!

* A talk by O. P. Bagaria on 1st May 2009, at the Thirteenth Anniversary of Atma Nirbhar - Ek Challenge, a voluntary organization at Guwahati.

** Om P. Bagaria got his B.Tech. in Mech. Engg. from IIT Kharagpur way back in 1963, and was immediately ‘seized’ by his uncle who recognized the value of his design skills for the family business. Energetic and creative, he immersed himself in R&D work, leaving the running of the business to other family members - until a big strike jolted him into taking an active role in management-labour relations. During this phase, he was attracted to the Moral ReArmament movement, where he learnt that the union leaders who were traditionally seen as foes could actually become fellow-fighters for a bigger cause. When he turned the searchlight inwards, he began to see where he needed to change (‘remember, when you point a finger at others, there are three pointing at you’). Since then, he has divided his considerable energies between R&D work, which he still loves, and social causes. Apart from MRA, he has given a lot of his time to other organizations and campaigns (such as campaigning actively for Rajmohan Gandhi against Rajiv Gandhi in Amethi). He has also been an active spiritual seeker, learning skills in yoga and meditation from different sources. One spiritual teacher who gained his admiration was Swami Sahajananda, and at one of his visit to this Swamiji’s ashram, he heard a lecture on “The Tao of Physics” by T.S. Ananthu, from which time onwards the two have become very good friends.