

For media baron **Ramesh Chandra Agarwal**, who virtually started from scratch to establish the ₹7,000 crore Dainik Bhaskar Group (DB Corp), life is what you make out of it through your toils, sense of commitment and perseverance. With four leading language dailies that have a combined readership of 40 million and presence in the FM, digital media, textiles, power, and real estate sectors, his company ranks among the foremost in both the media industry as well as India's mega corporations. As of April 2015, the group had a market capitalisation of over ₹8,000 crore and its annual turnover for FY'14 was ₹2,500 crore. Going by its robust growth history and an expected 8-10 per cent YoY growth in FY'15, it would seem the best is yet to come for Ramesh Chandra Agarwal and his equally able and committed sons.

Text ✱ Joseph Rozario

THE NEWSMAKERS

SCIONS OF MEGA CORPORATIONS, GROOMED ever so watchfully, rarely disappoint when it comes to augmenting their bequests. But to give form and shape to one's lofty ambitions and create a corporation with a handful of coins and a bagful of dreams calls for nothing less than blood sweat and tears. So it was for Ramesh Chandra Agarwal when, in the 1970s, he decided to take his father Dwarka Prasad Agarwal's modest printing business to something more significant.

Dwarka Prasad Agarwal owned a printing press in Jhansi from where he ran his business of printing notebooks. Parallely, he also ran a little-known newspaper, which was more from social considerations than commercial. The newspaper started fetching profits nevertheless, and this was an eye-opener for the Agarwals. "When we observed that media business involves not just social work, but if run successfully, can also be profitable, we decided to focus mainly on the media business," says Agarwal reminiscing about those early years.

Inceptive years

The Agarwals' presence was nominal back then. "In the seventies, the media business was in the hands of a few people and was not so developed; regional media was quite weak and confined to single states only," says Agarwal. But things started looking up with the Agarwals importing a web offset machine in 1977. Three years later, Ramesh Agarwal's eldest son, Sudhir, joined his father as a lad of 15. In 1987, his second son, Girish, then 16, joined them too while still in school. Pawan, the youngest of the three brothers, however, was told to stay away and instead concentrate fully on studies. Later, he was sent to the USA for higher education, after which he joined the family business in 1996. The three brothers have since graduated to be adept at corporation building and are today acknowledged as the driving force behind Dainik Bhaskar Group's robust growth. Understandably, father Ramesh Agarwal is happy with all of them.



Above: Ramesh Chandra Agarwal (sitting) with sons (L-R) Pawan, Girish and Sudhir Agarwal



DB Corp today boasts four dailies—*Dainik Bhaskar* (in Hindi), *Divya Bhaskar* and *Saurashtra Samachar* (in Gujarati) and *Divya Marathi* (in Marathi)—with a combined readership of 40 million. But back in the eighties, when the Agarwals were limbering up to take on the market, *Nai Duniya* was the largest circulated newspaper in MP, and taking on its might called for serious effort. This was necessary to not just stay relevant in the market but also successfully compete against it in order to grow. But thanks to their diligence and hard work, their efforts paid off and soon *Dainik Bhaskar* had taken the lead to establish itself as the largest read daily in Bhopal city. Emboldened, in 1983, the Agarwals launched their Indore edition. These were followed by the Raipur and Bilaspur editions in 1988 and 1993 respectively. Within a couple of years, *Dainik Bhaskar* emerged as the foremost newspaper in Madhya Pradesh—according to the National Readership Survey (IRS)—and also was the fastest growing daily in India.

Motivation and commitment

Agarwal attributes these achievements to team spirit and a sense of commitment and purpose that he has inculcated in his sons and colleagues, not to forget the legendary Marwari risk-taking ability, dedication and an uncanny knowledge of business. “There is a proverb in Hindi that ‘If you have to go to heaven, you have to die yourself,’” he says. “There are a lot of hurdles and difficulties in any business and we too had to face problems, but we managed to overcome them with the cooperation of our team. I feel that we should do our work with 100 per cent commitment and one should take full responsibility for one’s work. Therefore, when we accept a challenge, we motivate ourselves to accomplish it with an inner passion.”

In 1996, Ramesh Chandra Agarwal’s youngest son, Pawan, joined the family business after graduating in

industrial engineering from Purdue University, USA. With all the three sons now in the business, the company took on a formidable dimension. “After 1996, our media business acquired a professional outlook. Our growth multiplied at that stage,” says Ramesh Agarwal. “My father was a traditional businessman with a good sense of business and vision and so was I. But the advanced systems and professionalism came through my sons.”

As of now, the foursome makes a daunting team whose responsibilities, though demarcated, overlap in a unifying spirit. Girish explains: “All of us brothers play the role of MDs. I am the MD of the power company, my elder brother is the MD of the media company and my younger brother is the joint MD and also the MD of the radio as well as the digital and the textile businesses. We keep interchanging our roles depending on the time and how things are going; but everyone is responsible. Also, we have our family board system, where we all meet formally once a month and present our developments to the board.”

Growth and consolidation

With their forces multiplied, the Agarwals took on the unnerving task of launching the Jaipur edition of *Dainik Bhaskar*. For this, son Pawan was deputed by his seniors to launch an ambitious door-to-door survey-cum-sales

Clockwise from top left: Dainik Bhaskar Group corporate office in Bhopal; the group’s leading dailies (Dainik Bhaskar, Divya Bhaskar and Divya Marathi); Dainik Bhaskar office in Jaipur



campaign, together with a team of dynamic youngsters from schools and colleges to create awareness, find readers' likes and dislikes and convince people to read the newspaper. The result was overwhelming. Though pitted against the city's reigning 42-year-old daily, *Dainik Bhaskar* launched with an incredible first day sale of 1,72,000 copies, establishing itself as the leading newspaper right at the outset! The stupendous success of the initiative marked a turning point for the company, altering its strategy and helping it redraw its future growth plans. It has also been used as a case study since by reputed institutions, including the Mudra Institute of Communication, Ahmedabad. Reflecting on the enormous success—which incidentally he rates as his most cherished achievement in life—Ramesh Agarwal says, “We connected with the people with the help of the survey and changed the model of the newspaper industry which prevailed at that time. Hawkers sell all types of newspapers, so they cannot convey our views to people as well as we can.”

Following the successful launch in Jaipur, other editions were soon launched in Rajasthan. Before long it was the turn of Haryana and Chandigarh. Again, the publication was able to pip rivals. In Haryana, it became the leading daily within a year (as per IRS 2001 figures) and in Chandigarh, it was able to refute the popular perception that the city had an inherent propensity for English dailies, by convincingly beating its (English) rival.

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The next important milestone was the launch of a new Gujarati daily, *Divya Bhaskar* in Ahmedabad. Yet another hugely successful foray, the Jaipur model was replicated here too with some 12 lakh

households being surveyed to find out about their choices and expectations from a newspaper. In the process, a whopping 4,52,000 copies were booked! The launch was so successful that it has since been used as a case study at the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad.

Milestones galore

One can go on and on about the many subsequent launches that has taken DB Corp to its present height, where its four dailies have a combined presence in 14 states with an incredible 58 editions, but to make a long story short, some of the group's major achievements and milestones include the launch of *Divya Marathi* (in Marathi language) in Maharashtra, in 2011; launch of the Hindi magazine *AHA! Zindagi*, the first of its kind on lifestyle and positive thinking, in 2004; acquisition of the 60-year-old leading daily of Saurashtra, *Saurashtra Samachar*, in 2004; launch of *My FM* in 2005, the group's FM radio business; launch of the group's digital media business, DB Digital, through the group's subsidiary web media company, I Media Corp Ltd, in 2005; launch of the English daily *DNA* in Mumbai in partnership with Subhash Chandra of Zee Group, as a franchise, in 2008; launch of the highly successful maiden public issue of DB Corp Ltd in 2009, which was oversubscribed by over 39 times; listing of DB Corp Public Issue on Bombay Stock Exchange (BSE), which went onto become one of the best listings of 2009 and 2010. The only blip on the radar was the partnership with Subhas Chandra of ZEE to publish *DNA*. The Agarwals have since exited the company.

A trio to reckon with

Given the breakneck speed with which DB Corp has grown, Ramesh Agarwal's three sons' efforts in its incredible growth story become all too evident. Girish, who has taken over as the operating MD of the group's

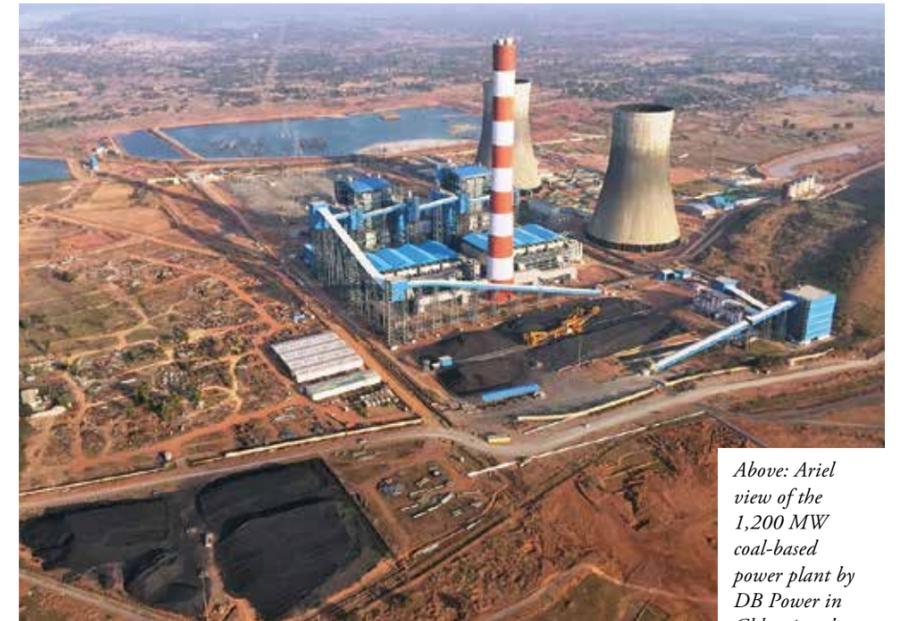
thermal power division (the group has recently set up a 1,200 MW coal-based power plant in Chhattisgarh—its first of a series—with an investment of ₹8,000 crore) after years of shouldering the marketing responsibilities of the media business, says, “I would say, my father and we were working as one generation, because the entire growth of our business happened from 1984 till now—it really is a 30-year story.”

Apparently, there has been a major contribution by the eldest of the three brothers, Sudhir, who is widely spoken of in the company as an indefatigable worker and a “perfectionist”. Girish, who himself has a stint as president of the MP Chapter of Indian Newspaper Society (INS) and an ‘Ernst & Young Entrepreneur of the Year’ award (in the ICE category) to his credit, apart from shouldering considerable responsibilities towards the setting up of the Chhattisgarh power plant, waxes eloquent about his elder brother, Sudhir, from whom he says “he's learnt a lot”. “Even if it's 2 am and we are all tired and sleepy, he [Sudhir] will tell us to go home, but stay up himself to finish the job at hand, rather than postpone it,” says Girish. “And if you take a 10-line Hindi letter for approval to him, he will make at least a dozen corrections and want to see it again after the corrections have been made, before finally approving it.”

Sudhir, now MD of the media division, is actually credited for a slew of innovations in the group's dailies, which have not only won accolades from the highest office of India's ruling political party, but also made his publications immensely popular among more enlightened readers. The most noteworthy of these is the newly ushered ‘No Negative Monday’ concept of reportage, whereby positive news is highlighted on the front page of all the 58 editions every Monday (with other news segregated under a clear header). “It's a new endeavour initiated

by Dainik Bhaskar to encourage a more optimistic environment and usher in every new week with greater enthusiasm and positivity, as Monday, the first day of the week, sets the tone and pace of activities for the entire week,” says Sudhir. “While it is important for our readers to be aware of adverse or undesirable occurrences, which will continue to be reported, this initiative has enabled us to create a better environment every day by focusing on value-creating developments. We have already begun to see a marked response to the quality of news being covered, and we are confident that this simple endeavour will help our readers bring more positivity in their lives,” he adds.

DB Corp's commitment to bring innovative, unbiased and objective news to its readers in fact reflects in its overall image as a company, which has a highly motivated and capable management at its helm, a reader-centric journalistic approach and makes constant endeavours to create value for the reader. No wonder then that Dainik Bhaskar has been voted the Most Trusted Brand for 2015



Above: Ariel view of the 1,200 MW coal-based power plant by DB Power in Chhattisgarh and (bottom) DB City Mall in Bhopal



Below: Fully automatic KBA printing machine in Jaipur



(in the Hindi newspaper category), according to a study conducted by the Brand Trust Report, India Study. It is precisely this reader-oriented approach which has helped it grow to its gargantuan size.

All this brings to question the infrastructural facilities required to serve such a huge and spread-out market and the mind-boggling logistics involved. It is here that Pawan's expertise comes to play as the head of the technical wing of DB Corp. According to Pawan, this has largely been made possible by diligently following a professional work structure that was instituted in 2004, which not only helped in effectively controlling so many geographies but also innovating them. Also, he feels that "human capital is far more important than creating

Below: Ramesh Chandra Agarwal receiving Rajiv Gandhi Lifetime Achievement Award in Journalism from parliamentarian Jyotiraditya Madhavrao Scindia and film-maker Madhur Bhandarkar; Bottom: (From left) Brothers Girish, Pawan and Sudhir Agarwal



infrastructure". Accordingly, each geography has its own editor and CEO "who act as the eyes and ears" of the management and thereby help in effective decision-making. On the technological side, installation of cutting-edge printing facilities (this includes fully automatic KBA machines that can print as many as 85,000 copies per hour) at its high-volume printing facilities such as in Jaipur and Ahmedabad and use of shared facilities for editions with lower print runs help in economising costs.

Apart from managing the technical aspects of the print media division, Pawan also is responsible for managing the group's 17-station *My FM* radio network which brings tailor-made programmes to local listeners, apart from interesting news snippets related to the city. Though *My FM* is restricted to non-metros only, given the fact that the government is granting more FM licences to cover smaller cities as well, Pawan foresees the already-profitable business growing to 50 stations at least by 2020. "We want to basically also open up the radio experience to

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listeners in those smaller towns which have a population of one to four lakhs. Right now, radio stations are in cities that have a population of over five lakhs," he says.

And finally there is DB Digital, the Dainik Bhaskar Group's popular digital media business, which again is Pawan's responsibility. The basic rationale behind creating the digital media business, Pawan says, was to keep readers constantly informed with up-to-the-hour developments in varied interest areas, in view of the ever-growing hunger for knowledge. In fact, this craving for digital content has seen a tremendous boost with the advent of the smartphone age. "We have created a content powerhouse, where if you click on 'Sports' or say 'Politics', you will find 20 sport-related or politics-related stories and lots more in terms of content and pictures," he explains. Given the fact that it already boasts "30 million unique visitors a month, from India as well as outside India", Pawan sees the business growing in leaps and bounds in the years ahead.

Way to go

Pawan's optimism in fact permeates the entire DB Group, as becomes evident when patriarch Ramesh Agarwal says, "I am a happy man and my children are highly capable industrialists. I have full faith in them and I am confident that the group will continue to expand under their leadership." Now mellow with age, not only have his life's labours borne rich fruit, but his dreams have also been realised way beyond his expectations. ✱