

SHANTANU SRIVASTAVA: *man on mission*

"No individual can do enough for the society. But if each one of us can put a smile on another's face, the world will be a much and truly happier place", according to Shantanu Srivastava. He himself stands a glowing testimony to his guiding principle, says **Vandana Nambiar**

The finer nuances of Shantanu Srivastava's character- the glint of mischief that lurks behind his characteristically pensive eyes, for example- may escape a casual observer, but what is immediately striking is his passion, high and unrelenting, to make a difference to the world he is living in. I, for one, was pleasantly surprised by his great hunger for life's challenges, as I only expected to meet a weathered, hardened business magnate as I walked into Ishan International's office in the heart of the business district in Hanoi, to meet and interview him, Shantanu Srivastava, unarguably the one Indian who has made the most difference to Vietnam and its people in the past 25 years.

The plunge

It is an amusing story how young Shantanu, fresh out of IIT Kanpur with a degree in Mechanical Engineering came to be, of all places, in Vietnam, and stayed here for almost a quarter of a century. He was offered a diplomatic position as the second secretary in the Indian embassy, in the Vietnam of 1982. The offer came as he was working with HCL in one of their first teams. Always game for challenges, Shantanu took it up immediately and boarded a plane to this mysterious nation, more heard about than visited, to face his uncertain future. The posting was for six months, as they needed time to trust this eager engineer in his early twenties with all the responsibilities that his position

entailed. It lasted, finally, for six years; and what years were they! "As I look back, I feel it is precisely the challenges of those years that made me stay on," says Shantanu.

Turning entrepreneur

At the end of his term in Vietnam, when talk was rife that the Indian Government was planning to send Shantanu to Moscow as first secretary in the Indian embassy in Russia, he allowed himself another sharp turn. The decision to give it all up and start a business was met with gasps and sharp disapprovals from his family. It wasn't easy, of course, but his dogged efforts paid off in time. Ishan International, the first seeds of which were sown in the Vietnam of 1988, is today a giant spanning several countries and continents, with major stakes in sugar industry, pharmaceuticals, power generation, heavy machinery, chemicals, textiles and raw materials.

It wasn't, however, just business on his mind. The period from '88 to '92 saw him making his sterling contributions. He acted as an unofficial honorary consul in HCMC, and helped set up the Indian Consulate. Right from the tennis championships that flagged off under his patronage, (Tennis is his pet passion and there weren't enough courts in HCMC in those days. So he simply built one, and dedicated it to the city), to the many children he helped educate and the houses he helped build for the poor, his contributions are the stuff that heroic tales are made of. But the high point of his entrepreneurial life was his tenure as the founding chairman of the Indian Business Chamber (INCHAM) in Vietnam, which was shaped under the expert guidance of Shantanu.

In 2001, The Vietnam government recognised his contributions by honouring him with the Friendship Medal, and he is the only Indian to have received the honour. Further in 2003, he was bestowed the Friendship Order of the Government, and Shantanu remains not just the only Indian but the only foreigner to have won this laurel.

New territories

The irrepressible message of my lively rendezvous with him was that this is, certainly, just the beginning. Shantanu relocated to India two years ago, -to New Delhi, to be precise-, but he visits Vietnam at least twice a month. So what does future hold for him in India? "I wish to start an NGO, a platform for doing something for the society in a really large scale." He wishes to dedicate his dream-effort to underprivileged children from the darkest depths of society. "Creating good human beings who are conscientious, responsible and able, is what I wish to do", he says, unsurprisingly.

It is evident that Shantanu is embarking on a fascinating journey on a road less travelled. "I'm sure you'd do it too with passion", I say. "Of course", he says, with that unique love of challenges that looks out from behind a misleadingly nostalgic gaze. ▶

