

The NON-CONFORMISTS

These four men realised the Great Indian Dream: an engineering degree. But as their tales tell, the well-trodden path was not what they were cut out for, making them change lanes and conquer new territories



Engineer-turned-toy-maker

Arvind Gupta followed the trend of his time when top scorers opted for science, and eventually, engineering or medicine. In 1975, this B.Tech. joined TELCO as a trainee, but Gupta soon realised that he wasn't born to build trucks. In 1978, he went on a year's sabbatical to work for a Village Science Teaching Programme in Hoshangabad catalysed by noted academics Dr. Anil Sadgopal and Dr. Yashpal. Then started his immersion in a movement to make science fun and activity-based using low-cost material, for government school children. Today Gupta is Visiting Scientist, Children's Science Centre, Inter-University Centre for Astronomy and Astrophysics, Pune.

"Toy-making is so beautiful and captivating," says Gupta in a telephone interview. The toy-maker says he didn't ever feel it would have been better to take a relevant degree (in design or literature) or a Master's qualification. "The IIT gives you an extremely rigorous training. We had five years of IIT. I had eight courses in social sciences — English, Development and Underdevelopment (etc) — so you are not uni-dimensional. The programme has unfortunately been shrunk."

How did his family and colleagues react to his decision? "My family... my mother was a great supporter. Our parents trusted us. My mother said, 'Very nice, you will do something worthwhile,'" says Gupta who informs that he always wanted to be a teacher.

Today, Gupta's website takes you into a fascinating world of about 1300 toys made with everyday items like discarded cola cans and toothbrush. Gupta has penned 13 books on improvised science activities and toys besides translating 101 books into Hindi, including *The Selfish Giant* (Oscar Wilde) and *The Last Leaf* (O. Henry), and helped reprint nine into regional languages. Gupta has held many workshops for students abroad.

Gupta says that "children must follow their hearts." He says students may opt for conventional programmes only as a "stop gap arrangement." This winner of many awards including the Indra Gandhi Award for Science Popularisation 2008, suggests that students should have (oueee!) "irreverence and disrespect for authority. You find that 90 per cent of the time, you are on track."

—Rahat Bano