

# friday

## Life & Style | People

### V for Victor

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Dancing bears, elephants, monuments... all these did captivate Victor Lyons when he visited India. But after bicycling through rural areas, this British software developer realised there was another face of India which was largely ignored and which needed help.

By Nilima Pathak, Delhi-based writer  
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Friday



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Piyush Gupta

Dancing bears, elephants, monuments... all these did captivate Victor Lyons when he visited India.

**British national Victor Lyon's first visit to India was**

**as a tourist in 1991. He had read and heard a lot about the east that he was keen to learn more about the country's culture, people, heritage and philosophy first hand. But his first visit would change the course of his life.**

Victor was captivated by all that he saw and experienced. "The country was overwhelming. The street scenes in Jaipur, the camels, elephants, donkeys, dancing bears, owls, kids begging, Mughal monuments... everything is still firmly imprinted on my mind," he says.

Victor immediately made up his mind: he would one day return to spend a lot of time here. And he did: years later, after experiencing many ups and downs in his life, Victor returned to India to set up Tara Akshar, the fastest and most effective literacy programme in South Asia. He has helped over 44,000 women become literate across Northern India.

But before we open that chapter of his life, a brief flashback ...

Victor was born in 1949 in Leeds, north of England. "Leeds had a population of half a million people and lots of textile factories. There are few left now because much of the world's clothes manufacturing has now shifted to India and other parts of Asia."



His father, Abram Lyons, was a tailor and manufactured made-to-measure high quality suits for men and women. "I still have the unfortunate habit of getting a first impression of someone from what he or she is wearing," he says.

"My father worked all hours but did not enjoy it. He took pride in the quality of the clothes he produced, but hated being in business and having to manage people." So strong was his dislike of his job that he dissuaded his son from following in his footsteps. Instead, he wanted Victor to pursue a course in medicine or law.

"School was a strange experience. Half the time you were learning stuff that was useless. While some teachers were good, others did not know how to teach." Victor loved English and was good at maths. "I was lucky that our school did lots of drama (theatre) and I spent a lot of my time doing photography, which was a passion."

At 15, while at school, photography was his first source of income. He would take fancy studio portraits of anyone he thought had an interesting face. "My cousin would send streams of her girlfriends to me who would pay me fairly well for getting their portraits done."

At 17, Victor got busy running a 'Light Show' – a psychedelic concoction of photos, film loops and abstract patterns projected on to a 10x10m screen which was positioned behind a rock group that was performing at a concert.

But of course his parents, keen that their son should take up a proper profession, "brainwashed" him into enrolling at Bristol University Medical School.

"After two months of cutting up bodies, I switched to psychology," he says. But he found that course disappointing, too. He discovered that studying animal

behaviour did not tell anything about what made people happy or unhappy – a subject he wanted to explore.

"The university did not tell me how the mind works. I spoke to psychiatrists and learnt that one could categorise the symptoms of madness and the symptoms of depression, but what caused happiness and unhappiness remained unknown."

Spending several years reading and talking to experts, he eventually found a group of therapists in California who had a reasonably sensible model of how the mind worked. "They specialised in treating people, including war veterans who were suffering from post-traumatic stress disorders. The system of counselling they developed was called metapsychology, which is now used in many countries.

It is helpful for stress, trauma and depression, but not in cases of schizophrenia or other psychotic illnesses and personality disorders," he says.

From the early 1980s, Victor started practising in the south of England as a counsellor specialising in crime-related Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

"There happens to be an enormous proportion of the population [suffering from this]." At about this time, the personal computer made its appearance and Victor was fascinated by it. He soon began to juggle psychological therapy with software development. And then the 1991 trip to India happened.

Victor spent some time in a retreat in Kulu in Himachal Pradesh. But it was not all fun and enlightenment. He came down with a bout of dysentery. Though he got better, it kept recurring for many years. "I must have got it from a lassi I had in Rajasthan.

I went to the best hospitals in the UK, but could not get

rid of the dysentery till I came back to Delhi and consulted an ayurvedic doctor." However, his experience at the retreat had a major impact on his life. "The accumulated benefits of a lifetime of meditation came flooding out on a Himalayan mountainside.

It is an indescribable experience and I felt so much at peace with myself." After returning to England, he set up a therapy delivery centre for crime victims in South London along with his colleagues.

"Thanks to the metapsychology techniques we were using, particularly a technique called TIR (Traumatic Incident Reduction), we got remarkable results."

In 1995, he was invited to set up a therapy delivery centre in Miami, Florida – an opportunity that he grabbed. However, six months later, he ran into financial and visa problems. Fortuitously, he met a woman who was to become his second wife. (His first marriage took place in 1976.)

Together they began working on IT's hot new idea at the time – websites for the internet. Three years later, they launched one of the first online shopping sites called Merchandizer which went on to win a major award.

The publicity fuelled sales of their software and within a few weeks, they were outselling IBM's competitive offering.

"We had documents from Morgan Stanley's valuer saying we were worth \$17 million. And imagine, we were still working out of our garage! It was an exciting yet stressful phase."

But by 2002, the dotcom bubble burst. The stress showed in many ways. Being married to his business partner took its toll and Lyons walked out of his

marriage and his business.

"I spent a year being a beach bum in Florida. Every morning I would get up at sunrise, run barefoot on the beach, swim ... I took life easy. I strongly recommend this lifestyle to anyone who has just lost \$17million and a marriage," says Victor.

It was during this phase of his life that he met Dr Ashok Khosla, a leading expert on poverty alleviation and sustainable development in poor rural and urban communities.

Dr Ashok runs the Delhi-based NGO, Development Alternatives, an organisation established in 1983 to promote sustainable development in India.

Victor was keen to return to India to work, and meeting Ashok gave him the impetus to pursue his dream. By sheer coincidence, he bumped into a friend and former colleague in London, who had set up a software company in India.

A few weeks later, Victor was flying to India to work in his friend's company. He landed in Punjab and divided his time between working in the software company and wandering around villages learning about rural life.

"I wanted to do health education projects. But I was amazed to find that the villagers, especially women of child-bearing age, were clueless about simple health prevention measures including washing their hands and clearing stagnant water in areas around their houses. It became impossible to educate them as they could not read booklets and posters," he says.

So Victor decided to concentrate on writing a literacy program and moved to Delhi. In his spare time, he would bicycle around the city, exploring places and trying to get a feel of the place and its people. "I find

India strange in many ways. News reporting on poverty is appalling. I feel outraged that nobody, except a few NGOs, seems to be doing anything about child mortality.

"In India, about 700 million people, which is more than 10 per cent of the world's population, are either illiterate or semi-literate. But if a program is produced that can make people literate in an easy manner, it can turn the tide.

"Since illiterate people cannot read, it is not possible to lend them money on a contract basis. This is the reason why most illiterate women are taken for a ride financially by landlords, their own husbands, other villagers."

The program, Tara Akshar, began on an experimental basis. Local labourers were offered free lunch and Rs 100 – sops to get them to enrol for the program.

"Although we were able to teach them basic things within a week, we realised that it was not sustainable. It was not right or feasible to bribe people into learning. So, now they are taught the programme over a period of six weeks."

The program is administered by Development Alternatives which has set up 291 centres in Northern India, mostly in the backward areas of Bihar, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh. Colonel M. S. Ahluwalia, a retired army officer, is the man behind this network.

"His expertise in managing large-scale training operations has been vital to the success of Tara Akshar's implementation," says Victor. "To run centres in the most remote parts of India, and to get consistent results, you need relentless efforts and a military kind of discipline.

It is not possible to just tell people what to do and let them get on with it. You have to make them accountable and give them pride in their work.

Without these factors, projects are likely to fail."Fast forward to the present:Tara Akshar teaches illiterate people in the age group of 8 to 50 to read and write, says Victor. Eight students in each class study up to 100 minutes a day.

The first step was to identify the NGOs; then train the master trainers who in turn trained the instructors who then taught the students. The new system included the use of computer software, special playing cards and writing books. In villages where electricity is a problem, Tara Akshar uses flip charts as course material.

While in the past it had an average dropout rate of 12 per cent and an average pass rate of 70 per cent, now the drop rate is 2 per cent and pass rate has climbed to 90 per cent.

Victor now spends most of his time developing new programs. He has introduced Swasthya Gyan (health education). It trains and empowers the Tara Akshar graduates to become experts on health care. They instruct villagers on how to clear stagnant water that breeds mosquitoes; use proper toilets, set up water filter systems...

Angrezi Gyan is an English speaking course.

At several places that Victor visited in India, people implored him to write an English-speaking course. Having worked on it for two years, he has it ready now. "We are also writing programs in Hindi, Punjabi, Urdu and English."

I

I like the fact that there is never a dull moment in India.

On any street corner, or in any field at any time of the day there is something interesting to see – an exotic bird, a pretty sari, a camel, or just an interesting face.

I am convinced there is a cure for poverty in India. We just have to keep researching till we find a solution. I am convinced that step one is literacy classes, step two is health education and step three, maybe, is to link up companies in the cities with literacy graduates in the villages.

I treat life as a challenge. I have a formula. I ask the question, 'What is the biggest problem affecting a large number of people that nobody has solved?' And I work towards fixing it.

I respect people who go out on a limb, try something different and break the normal codes. My hero is the Indian scientist M S Swaminathan whose work on plant seeds with increased yields put a stop to repeated famines in India.

I am very serious about everything. And am not good at small talk. If I were, I would get more dinner party invitations!

I have no empathy for people who live only for themselves and their own careers and do not care about other people. This seems to be the condition that 99 per cent of the population lives in.

If I had the power, I would change the Indian government's mindset so authorities concerned would be held accountable.

In my spare time, I take photographs and watch movies.

## **Me**

### Me and education

An essential process that everyone needs. India's failure to educate most of its people is appalling. There is no excuse for it. It is only so because no one cares. Twenty five per cent teachers do not turn up at schools to take their classes. Why does nobody sack them?

### Me and the regrets in life

I have not been able to work towards making metapsychology and TIR popular. They are used in many places, but ought to have been on the syllabus of every university in the world.

Me and the awards I look forward to: I am only interested in the prize money, not the fame.

Me and the hardcore truths of life: I have discovered that I cannot be good at everything!

## **Myself**

People will not readily bear pain unless there is hope. What kind of pains did you go through after launching Tara Akshar?

I was convinced that Tara Akshar would work because we had gone back to the first principles and theoretically it just had to succeed.

But the initial times were tough, when things were not moving and happening. Once the reasons were uncovered, we were able to fix things and everything started working magically. The relief was enormous.

It is said that there is no end to learning. While teaching, what lessons did you learn? I must speak

slowly!

Mental reflection is so much more interesting than watching TV. But why do people think it is unimportant?

I do not agree. TV can be very interesting. You can learn an awful lot from watching TV. I do my mental reflection in my sleep. It works better that way.

Little men inside my brain are hard at work all night doing quantitative and qualitative analysis, so I wake up in the morning having solved yet another batch of life's problems.

– *Nilima Pathak is a Delhi-based writer*

A school in a rural area in northern India ... Illiteracy is the biggest hurdle in the path of development.