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FROM A SMALL-TOWN DREAM TO A GLOBAL BUSINESS: THE INSPIRING JOURNEY OF RITESH AGARWAL

Summary: How a young Indian entrepreneur turned a problem he experienced while travelling into one of India's best-known hospitality businesses.

Imagine being a teenager with an ambitious idea, limited resources and no guarantee that anyone will believe in you. Would you have the courage to pursue it? Ritesh Agarwal, the founder of OYO, built his entrepreneurial journey around precisely this kind of ambition. His story demonstrates how observing everyday problems, understanding customers and being willing to learn can turn an idea into a business.

A young boy with big dreams

Ritesh Agarwal grew up in Rayagada, a small town in Odisha. From an early age, he was interested in technology, business and entrepreneurship. Rather than following a conventional career path without question, he was curious about how businesses worked and how opportunities could be created.

As a teenager, he travelled to different parts of India and experienced the challenges faced by budget travellers. Finding affordable accommodation was not always difficult; finding a reasonably priced room that was clean, comfortable and dependable was another matter.

During his travels, Agarwal stayed in numerous budget hotels, guest houses and bed-and-breakfast establishments. These experiences helped him recognise a problem that affected many travellers: the quality of accommodation could vary considerably, even when the prices were similar.

Instead of treating this as an inconvenience that travellers simply had to accept, he began to see it as a business opportunity.

According to OYO's published founder biography, these travels helped him identify the lack of reliable quality in India's unbranded budget accommodation segment. This observation would eventually inspire his entrepreneurial venture.

Source: OYO's company history and founder profile — https://www.oyorooms.com/about/

From observation to opportunity

Many successful businesses begin with a simple question: **What problem are people experiencing, and how can I solve it better?**

Agarwal recognised that budget travellers wanted more than inexpensive rooms. They wanted some assurance that the accommodation they booked would meet basic expectations.

He began exploring ways to make budget accommodation easier to discover and book. In 2012, he launched Oravel Stays, a platform intended to help people find and book budget accommodation. However, the early business model evolved as he learned more about what customers actually needed.

The important insight was that merely listing hotels was not enough. Customers needed greater consistency and reliability.

In 2013, Oravel evolved into OYO Rooms, with a focus on standardising the guest experience at participating budget hotels. The concept involved working with hotel owners to improve selected aspects of the accommodation experience, including room quality, cleanliness and essential amenities, while making properties easier to discover and book.

This change illustrates a crucial principle in entrepreneurship: a business idea does not have to remain unchanged. Entrepreneurs must be prepared to adapt when they discover a better way to serve customers.

Source: Government of India's Startup India programme — https://www.startupindia.gov.in/

The challenge of building something new

Starting a business is rarely as glamorous as its eventual success stories suggest. Entrepreneurs must convince customers to try an unfamiliar service, persuade business partners to collaborate and find ways to operate within limited resources.

For OYO, the challenge was not simply creating a booking website. It was developing a system that could deliver a reasonably consistent experience across multiple independently operated properties.

This required building relationships with hotel owners, understanding their business concerns, developing operational processes and earning customer confidence.

Agarwal's journey also involved making difficult decisions about his education and career. He pursued entrepreneurship at a young age and was selected for the Thiel Fellowship, a programme that supports promising young people who want to pursue ambitious projects outside the conventional university pathway.

His selection gave him access to financial support and a network of entrepreneurs and mentors. However, the broader lesson is not that students should abandon college to start a business. Rather, it is that entrepreneurial ambitions require serious preparation, practical learning and informed decisions.

Sources: World Economic Forum — https://www.weforum.org/people/ritesh-agarwal ; NDTV — https://www.ndtv.com/offbeat/i-was-a-small-town-boy-with-big-dreams-says-oyo-founder-ritesh-agarwal-2193552

Growing beyond the original idea

OYO expanded beyond its initial operations in India and developed a hospitality technology platform connecting travellers with hotels and other accommodation providers in different markets.

Its growth demonstrated how technology could help organise a fragmented industry. Digital platforms made it easier for customers to discover accommodation, compare options and make bookings, while participating property owners gained access to a broader customer base.

OYO's development was not simply a story of rapid expansion. Like many businesses operating across multiple countries and property types, it has also faced operational and commercial challenges. Scaling a business requires maintaining service standards, managing relationships with partners and responding to changing customer expectations.

Recognising these realities makes Agarwal's journey more instructive. Entrepreneurship is not a straight line from idea to success. It involves experimentation, growth, setbacks and continuous adjustment.

Source: World Economic Forum — https://www.weforum.org/people/ritesh-agarwal

Five lessons every college student can learn

- **Observe everyday problems.** Agarwal's idea emerged from his experience as a traveller. Students can similarly identify opportunities by observing problems on campus, in their neighbourhoods or in industries they understand.
- **Start with the customer.** A business should not be built around what its founder assumes people want. It should respond to actual customer needs. Understanding those needs can help entrepreneurs improve their products and services.
- **Be ready to change your approach.** The transition from Oravel to OYO demonstrates the importance of adapting a business model when a clearer opportunity emerges.
- **Learn beyond the classroom.** Academic knowledge is valuable, but entrepreneurship also requires communication, negotiation, financial management, teamwork and practical problem-solving.
- **Think big, but build carefully.** Ambition can provide direction, but sustainable businesses need planning, reliable execution, responsible financial decisions and the trust of customers and partners.

Could the next entrepreneur be you?

Ritesh Agarwal's journey offers an important message to young people: entrepreneurial opportunities are not always found in complicated inventions or revolutionary technologies. Sometimes, they begin with a familiar inconvenience that everyone has accepted but nobody has adequately addressed.

A student who notices long queues in a college canteen might develop a better ordering system. Someone who recognises the difficulty small businesses face in promoting their products might create a digital marketing service. Another student might develop an affordable solution for waste management, tutoring or financial literacy.

Not every idea will become a large company, and entrepreneurship involves genuine risks. But learning to identify problems, test solutions, understand customers and improve an idea can be valuable even when a venture does not succeed commercially.

Conclusion: Ideas become powerful when put into action

Ritesh Agarwal's journey from a small town in Odisha to building a hospitality technology business illustrates the potential of curiosity, initiative and persistence.

His story is not a promise that every young entrepreneur will achieve similar success. It is a reminder that age and background need not prevent someone from identifying an opportunity and working towards a solution.

For college students, the first step towards entrepreneurship may be smaller than they imagine. It could begin with a question, a conversation with a customer, a simple prototype or a willingness to challenge an inefficient way of doing things.

You do not need to have all the answers to begin. You need to notice a problem, ask the right questions and have the courage to test a solution.

The next great business idea may not begin in a boardroom. It may begin with a student who sees an everyday problem differently.

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