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Asha Motwani: Silicon Valley crusader- investor

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Asha Jadeja Motwani

By Rajiv Theodore

New Delhi, Dec. 3, 2018: She is not your average angel investor who has money to burn and then seeks quick profits.

Meet Asha, wife of late Stanford Professor Rajeev Motwani who mentored Larry Page and Sergey Brin, the co-founders of Google Inc in 1998. Asha is the founder of Dot Edu Ventures, a venture capital firm, along with her late husband. She also runs an annual Rajeev Circle Fellowship, to create a corridor of entrepreneurship, collaboration and community between Silicon Valley and South Asia.

In a freewheeling chat with Matters India, Asha Jadeja Motwani talks about her ongoing work in the start-up ecosystem. She positions herself more as a crusader than a Silicon Valley investor. She lives at Palo Alto, San Francisco

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and is credited to be the only individual in the world to have won the shares of Google.

Today she works with a singular zeal to help launch Indian startups with special focus on helping young, fledgling entrepreneurs who have that fire in the belly to reach for the skies. In particular she wants to create a space where they can flourish and prosper. She was also mobilising other Indian-origin start-ups in the Valley to go back to their roots and invest in homegrown startups. For Asha, Indian startups are like rocket ships that have the immense potential to soar. It is for this reason that she has committed 40 percent of her investments for Indian startups scaling up from the earlier target of 20 percent. For the records, Asha has already invested in several start-ups across the globe since 1998. Some of her big-ticket portfolio include Pinterest, Weebly, GwyneeBee, AppDynamics and PayPal who have touched many peaks of success.

In India, she plans to invest in a structured manner. The plan is to put on table \$5 million and request the Indian government to match the amount which can then be invested across startups in the area of big data and artificial intelligence. The investments will be distributed across three tiers—the first would be low-risk startups, founded by seasoned and repeat entrepreneurs. The second would be e clone companies that have worked elsewhere. “For instance, when a company which is doing well in Indonesia comes to India, chances are that it is going to do well. For this tier, the ticket size would be between \$ 100,000 and \$ 300,000. Tier 3 is a ‘seeding-a-forest’ kind of investment. This segment needs funding without strings attached. Here, the investment will be between \$10,000 and \$ 50,000.

Asha Motwani believes in creating a space for entrepreneurs where they have the ability to grow and prosper. With her huge experience in the start -up ecosystem, Asha Motwani created the kajeew Circle Fellowship designed for

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young entrepreneurs. “It’s a two-week long fellowship in Palo Alto and we’ve had some amazing young minds that have participated in the programme. “ She was also instrumental in setting up the MakerFest India and MakerFaire Africa to encourage young entrepreneurs.

For Ahmedabad born Asha life revolves around mentoring younger entrepreneurs. “If I feel his/her vision is something that will make a change in the world or in society, I’m willing to put my money behind him/her.” In particular the areas she is looking to invest are in software, blockchain technology, water, Artificial Intelligence (AI) and quantum energy.

Hyderabad, Ahmedabad and Pune are some of the cities of her choice where she would like to invest. Dressed casually she packs an informal aura and seems to be at ease with a room filled with young enthusiastic entrepreneurs rather than with a bunch of formal looking businesspersons. In fact, she loves spending time with youngsters brimming with ideas.

She launched in India an institute that enables annual exchange between top scholars at Stanford University and their counterparts in South Asia. MITLI (Motwani Institute of Thought Leadership in Innovation) has “A total of \$ 30 million been invested as an endowment to set the institute in place,” she said. the institute will facilitate exchanges in key academic fields such as computer science, political science, material science, international security, and education. As part of this exchange, faculty from Indian universities will be able to spend a year or two in Palo Alto, which, in turn, will help the startup ecosystem in India when they return. “The idea is to make them work with like-minded faculty, and the purpose is to stretch the frontier of research in India,” she said.

As the country seeks to build Startup India, it needs more, not less, of angel investors. Angel investing has seen multiple waves in India. The first saw Silicon Valley successes such as Kanwal Rekhi making investments to get homegrown startups going. Then, a second lot, who had tasted success with their businesses, like Deep Kalra of MakeMyTrip, got into the game, followed by venture capitalists like Gupta of Helion. Entrepreneurs like Sachin and Binny Bansal, founders of Flipkart, too, backed startups in segments ranging from health tech to electric automobiles.

For entrepreneurs, angel investors can make the difference between a business taking off the ground or crashing and burning. The initial fund injection helps ventures validate their business models and build pilots. Angel Investors or Angels are not only motivated by profits but also by the joys of seeing the entrepreneur succeed. Angels usually contribute much more than pure cash - they often have industry knowledge and contacts that they pass on to entrepreneurs.

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