

My 150 year journey back to India – Ray Newal



The Hooghly River Port; Calcutta, India circa 1870, marks the beginning of my entrepreneurial journey.

Between 1838 and 1917, hundreds of thousands of people, my great grandparents among them, boarded ships in the port city of Calcutta on India's east coast. They did so as indentured servants, taking a contract to serve as paid labourers in exchange for a better life.

Most who boarded the ships had little idea of where they were heading. 'Somewhere better' was the optimistic view, though death seemed a very plausible and more likely outcome. One can only imagine the life they were seeking to improve.

My relatives found a temporary home after 4 and half months at sea, in Guyana, South America. In the century that followed, their grandchildren dispersed to the west, continuing the journey in search of a better life to Europe, North America, and places as far off as Australia. My parents landed in Toronto, Canada in the early 1970's, taking advantage of Canada's open immigration policies, and proceeded to build a life that would more than substantiate the risks taken by my great-grandparents.

Yet, in 2010, I found myself on a one-way ticket to India, the first in three generations (and hundreds of relatives) to return for more than a short visit. Ironically, I was leaving Toronto—a city rated amongst the best in the world to live, to seize a business opportunity in what the World Bank ranked 133rd on its Ease of Doing Business Index, just behind Malawi. The Internet at that time was still inaccessible to most of the world's population and I thought the next billion users were going to come from places like India. Access to information was going to have wide reaching, life changing impact for people who had previously been deprived of education, banking, health care, and entertainment and I set out to stream it to them on their feature phones.

What was then a hunch about India being a gateway to the next billion users, is now gospel. Next year, 400 million people will connect to the internet at 4G speeds or higher. This has given rise to more than 6000 startups, which will help double India's economy in the next 7 years to \$5 Trillion. In fact in an ironic twist of fate, next year India will displace the UK to become the world's 5th largest economy.

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My years in India taught me more about business than any other time in my life. I learned about the difference between macro market strategy, and street level customer engagement. I learned that sometimes products can be over engineered, when its distribution and business model that require innovation. This is part of what I liken to being a problem-first startup, as opposed to a solution-first startup, which I will write more about in a subsequent post. I learned that the freemium model doesn't work when most of your users are unbanked, or have low disposable income. I also learned that Indian entrepreneurs are some of the most resilient in the world, managing patiently through fundamental setbacks and challenges that would leave the rest of us ripping our hair out. Building a successful business is always a long game, and staying in the game long enough to succeed is on its own a superpower.

Great founders can come from every corner of the earth, and great companies can be built anywhere. With the recent Flipkart exit, we have proof. Finally, we have evidence of the enormous potential for Indian startups. It's validation for Indian entrepreneurs and investors, and as a transaction will have a significant trickledown effect in the Indian startup ecosystem as a whole. More importantly, in Flipkart, Indian founders will have an example to which to aspire, which will inspire many more to take the plunge into building businesses.

Once again I find myself on my way back to India, this time to lead the launch of the first Techstars Accelerator in the subcontinent. This time, instead of building a startup of my own, my interest is in providing support to founders who hail from emerging markets, who are themselves building problem-first companies. This is more than a job to me, it's an opportunity to empower people like my ancestors—those putting it all on the line, in the quest for a better life, for themselves and their communities. The journey is a different one, but no less harrowing or self-defining than the one my ancestors took.

Over the years, I have yet to come across a group that is more dedicated to supporting founders than Techstars. Started in 2006 by Brad Feld, David Cohen, and David Brown in Boulder Colorado, Techstars has invested in almost 1500 companies (including PillPack, Classpass, Sendgrid, and DigitalOcean), and supported thousands more through its Startup Weekend programs held in emerging startup communities around the world. Indeed at its very heart, Techstars is a platform that serves to help companies rise to greatness from anywhere in the world.

As Managing Director of Techstars Bangalore Accelerator, it is my priority to provide founders with the tools they need to succeed in their journeys, whether it be qualified advice, capital or simply access to the right people ready to provide an unbiased listening ear.

Ray Newal is a globally inspired entrepreneur and early-stage tech investor. He started his career in leadership roles at DoubleClick, MSN, and Yahoo, and after a decade decided to become an entrepreneur. In 2008, Ray started Jigsee, a startup dedicated to bringing new internet users in India and South East Asia online through streaming media applications which ran on popular feature phones. Following the sale of his company in 2015, Ray has been advising, mentoring, and investing in founders across the globe. He and his family currently reside in Bangalore where he is Managing Director of Techstars India.

