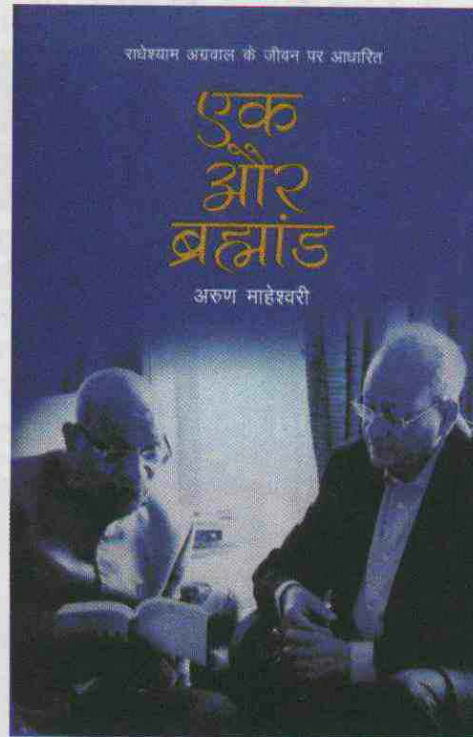


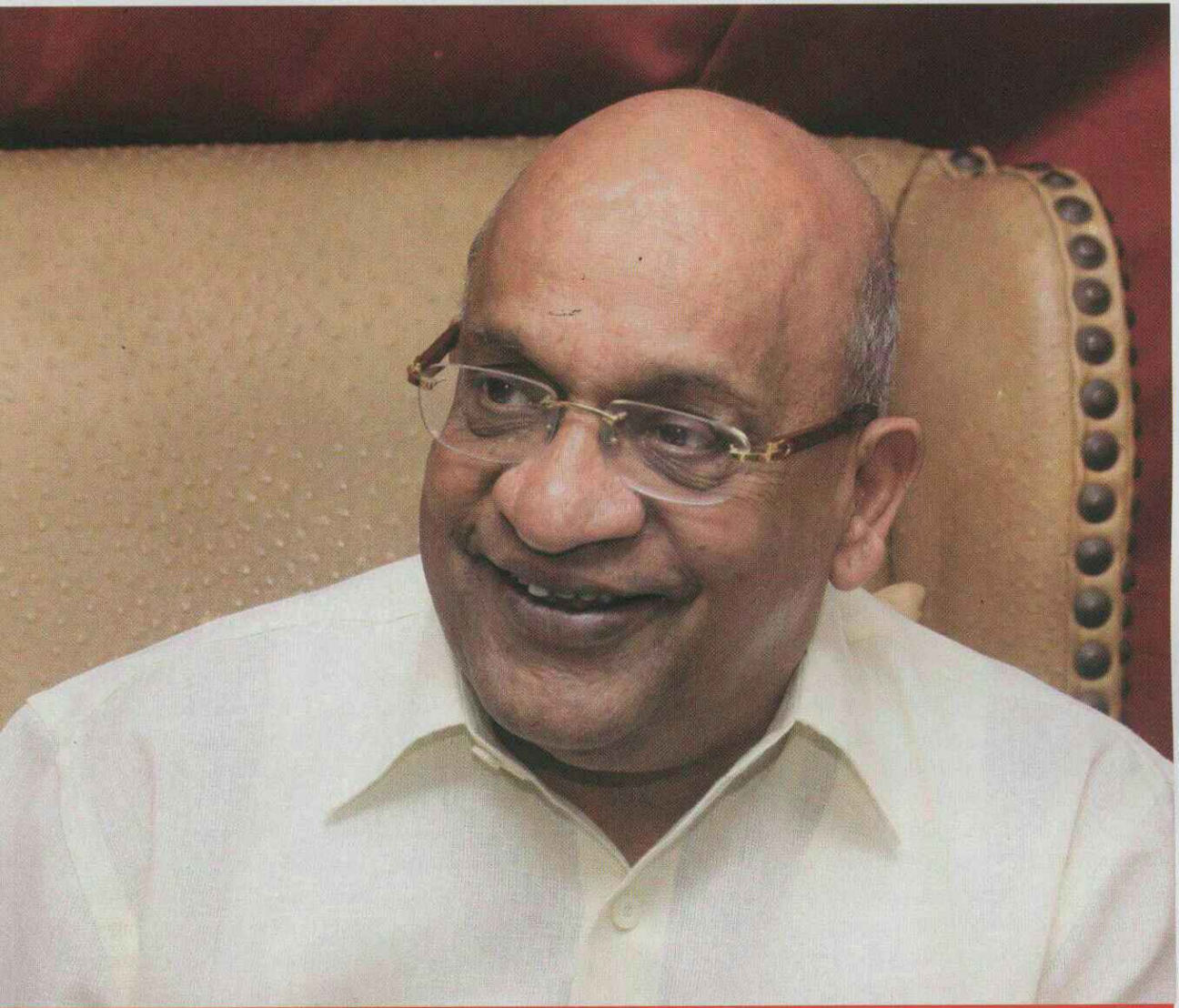
booked



# Yet another Universe

BY SUDESHNA CHAKRAVARTY

*In an exclusive interview to Society, RS Agarwal, Emami's head honcho, speaks about his new biography, Ek Aur Brahmand*



PHOTOGRAPHS: AMIT SRIVASTAV

Some people remain bound to their roots no matter how high their flights may be. RS Agarwal, the Kolkata based Chairman of Emami Limited, still remains doggedly bound to earth, though his company, meandering through the ebbs and tides, has reached its place in the sun. Recently, his biography, *Ek Aur Brahmand*, written by Arun Maheshwari, hit the stands. Even though the talk of the town was its 10-page chapter on the AMRI fire, the entire book is quite an 'unputdownable' read even for a person like me with a basic ability to understand Hindi. The book meanders through such happenings of the businessman's life that are, at the same time, both interesting and inspirational. It is the story of a meteoric rise from a humble beginning to the zenith of riches!

"There were many people who approached me to write my biography," says Agarwal, when we manage to meet him for an interview. "But, I told them that I wanted a person who wrote biographies and was good in Hindi. I found Arun's Hindi quite good, though of course, I was not taking a test," he adds with a laugh.

Interestingly, his biography is in Hindi. While most frontline biographies and autobiographies often address a wider international audience with English as the language, I asked what made Agarwal go for a bio in our *rashtra bhasha* (national language). "Most autobiographies I have come across are in English. While it is good for a certain section of the society, it is not for those who are not at home with English. Seventy per cent of the population of our country knows Hindi. So, I opted



for the language of the masses and wanted my biography to be written in the common man's language," he says, much like his products which have a wide mass appeal.

*Ek Aur Brahmand* tells the story of how two men with the same first names, Radheshyam Agarwal and Radheshyam Goenka, created a business empire from scratch to make Emami a household name in India. The book, in fact, chronicles the initial hardships and struggles and gives an insight into the business policies and strategies, their family values and philosophies. In fact, two friends, RS Agarwal and RS Goenka, began their business with an amount of ₹ 20,000 given by Goenka's father. "The initial foundation of partnership which that amount sealed continued for the next 40 years to become an example of friendship and partnership," he says. The book also gives a lively account of the unique and close relationship of the two partners and their families.

Agarwal seems quite candid in his revelations about his life. The book relates how he was rejected by MP Birla for a job, for not having good looks and an impressive personality. The book relates an interesting incident where MP Birla asked him in Marwari whether he did not know how to wear a tie. He, however, relates his wonderful work experience with Aditya Birla and his work with Birla Brothers, where he became the golden boy of the group with patronage from Aditya Birla who had said, 'He is a very brilliant boy. Give him all possible support.' The whole book is peppered with such rivetting anecdotes.

Agarwal however insists that while he unconditionally gave inputs on his life, he refrained from interfering in the writing. "Arun showed me whatever he wrote," he says. "But, I was clear in my mind that as far as the facts were true, I should not intervene. I stuck to my *sankalp* (resolution) and got it written in the manner he would have liked to write it." However, he adds, "I was happy with the outcome."

The book has a 10-page chapter on the much publicised and painful AMRI hospital fire which killed 91 people trapped inside. The hospital was co-owned by Emami. Soon after the event, four of the Emami directors were arrested. RS Agarwal, who was undergoing treatment at a city private hospital, was shifted by the police to the government owned SSKM hospital. Looking back at the entire issue, Agarwal seems philosophical, "I did not feel aggrieved of the fact that AMRI closed down. But, I do feel sad because of the loss of lives. I feel remorse that in spite of the hospital being equipped with the best of facilities, the accident happened. The fact is that the hospital was well-equipped in all aspects, including fire fighting, for which there can be no space for argument. *Phir bhi bame paschatap tha aur bamne uska prayaschit kiya.* (But, I still had regrets and I underwent redemption). We are realistic...we believe in the fact that what has happened was in the past and the consequences have to be faced. Gita says about '*sthit pragya* and *turiya avashtha* which mean we need to accept things the way they are," says the ace businessman reflectively.

I could not help but quiz him about how he felt in those days lying in the general bed of the government hospital. He smiles as he says, "After the first five to seven days, I had no feeling of suffering. I was doing *yog nidra* and meditation, and was being as cheerful as anybody can be. But, the remorse of the loss of lives remained."

I was keen to know what was happening with the future of AMRI hospital. He says enthusiastically, "We are trying our best to open it and God willing, sooner or later, it will. Our dream is to be the biggest hospital chain in the country." He smiles, adding, "My dream is to make Emami one of the biggest companies in the world in consumer goods. I don't know whether this is a realistic dream or not, but if God is with you, unrealistic dreams also become true," he smiles, as he rises to go.

I stop him by asking how it felt to build an empire from scratch. He stops in his path and ponders for a moment, before he says, "I believe that I have not built any empire. It is my destiny that the empire has been built. Every empire built is destined to be destroyed—maybe in a century, two centuries or three centuries. As you can see, the biggest monarchs of the country have gone. I can say, I have built this empire with my intelligence, but the intelligence also has been given by God. He can make you do anything. I have seen Jyoti Basu, such a powerful man, lying unconscious in a hospital bed in a sad condition. So, this can happen to any person. So, I accept all the decisions of God with humility. It is not me, but him, who is doing everything," he ends. <<