

Image: Indian Express, 2006



## Coming to know an alternative India

**So there we were, my younger daughter Alice, and I: home alone; or more correctly home together, on a bleak winter's evening, in England. The other half of our neat nuclear family had escaped the intrigue and enthrall of endless British soaps on the box; deserting the island, leaving us marooned and at the mercy of tele-trivia.**

*"Dad, dad, what are you muttering about?"* I heard Alice say from somewhere beyond my thinking zone.

I was sitting on the sofa with blurred visions of the TV screen flashing in the background. My brain was wandering over a variety of more interesting things that I could do together with a 13-year-old, rather than stare at the mind-numbing box. Apparently, my inner thoughts were being aired aloud.

*"Oh, sorry Alice, I was miles away. I was thinking why someone hasn't thought of it before."*

*"Thought of what dad? You're not making sense,"* came the somewhat exasperated response, as she lifted her eyes from her latest book, to look straight at me. She was a

chip off the block, like her mother and myself an avid reader. I got the rather stark message that I was invading her space, and my mumblings were not welcome.

*“OK, well, you know Scrabble: the board game? We have one somewhere. I was wondering why someone hadn’t thought of putting letters on the board. It would make it a much more intriguing game.”*

*“Hmmm, I’m still not sure what you mean,” my daughter replied. “You need to explain it a bit more. Is it something we could work on together?”*

For a moment I deliberated on that. Indeed, the idea was only just forming in my mind, but yes, it was perhaps something we could work on together.

*“OK, I’ll try to explain. It could be possible for us to do it before the others get back. Do we have some A3 paper and a few felt-nibbed pens?”*

And that’s how it started: our assault on the corporate world of board games. Our introduction to the inventors Hall of Fame. Well not quite, but at least what we accomplished that evening, did set in motion a lengthy chain of events, which ended up with our board game on the shelves in Indian shops. We named the invention on that first night: *SQUBIT*. This was an inspirational choice, because the essence of the game, as well as language, focused on squaring and cubing numbers.

It was a new idea, based admittedly on the *Scrabble* concept. On that night it dawned on me that the people who had come up with *Scrabble* had missed an opportunity to create an even better game, by printing letters on the playing board to match the letters on the *tiles* (as they were called) that were placed on the board to form words. Having letters on the board opened up new possibilities to add a mathematical flair to a game that still remained focused on language.

Together, Alice and I worked through the logistics, and eventually, after several attempts, we had a draft form of the board drawn out on an A3 sheet of paper, using coloured pens. Then we found an old cereals box to make the *tiles*, cutting out small

squares and drawing the letters on each. We devised a colour coding system for the letters on the board and on the tiles, along with a numbering system for each, to show their value. Thus, as for *Scrabble*, more popular letters like E or S rated a low value, while X or Z rated high. But in total it was quite different to *Scrabble*, because of the element of matching letters on the tiles to letters on the board, with the aim of squaring the value: thus, a B would rate  $3 \times 3 = 9$ . We added further intrigue with special squares where numbers were cubed. This made it possible to achieve high numbers on the scorecard (of which we also made a draft). Thus, an X placed on a CUBE square would rate  $7 \times 7 \times 7 = 343$ . In hindsight it seemed remarkable now, that the work done on that first night - to dodge the television - remained largely intact, even as the game became more refined.

On subsequent evenings during that English winter, two, three, or four of us would sit to work through the basics and then try out the game. It always seemed extraordinary to me, that from the outset it worked so well. After a month or two, and with the onset of Spring, the original sheet of paper and cut-out 'tiles', along with coloured photocopies, were consigned to a cupboard, and more-or-less forgotten, until some months later when I made a work trip to the Indian Subcontinent.

In India, Kumar, the husband of a close friend and colleague - a particularly entrepreneurial type of guy - took more than a passing interest in the game. I had brought along a sample of the whole thing - board, tiles and all - to show him. Before I knew it, we were ensconced with a friend of his, who happened to own a company that produced toys and games for the Indian market. From there things began to escalate, so that within a few months the game was being manufactured in a small factory in the northern suburbs of Mumbai. I turned up there, on a subsequent visit, to watch the components coming off the assembly line, and then being collated by female factory workers into a purpose made box. It was incredibly exciting to see the idea that had grown from nothing - something to amuse my daughter on a cold winter's evening in Britain - actually come to fruition, in the form of a professionally manufactured board game, in India.

But there were a few more hurdles to surmount, the most important of which was developing a patent for our game, to keep the big boys at bay. We had often been told that the main players, Mattel and Hasborough – joint owners of *Scrabble* – had a habit of resorting to court action, if they felt there was any infringement on their own patents for games and toys. They were both known to be quite aggressive in this regard, so we had to be prepared for their major assaults on our comparatively miniscule undertaking.

Our preparation involved me sitting alongside an elderly Indian patents expert, to develop a puncture-proof patent for the game of *SQUBIT*, in a small house, somewhere in the backstreets of Mumbai, not far from the famed *Chowpatty Beach*. Each day I would disembark from the commuter train at Marine Lines station, one stop before the train pulled into Mumbai's busiest terminus, Churchgate. From there, I would walk across the tracks and through the narrow streets to the patent man's house. At the end of almost two weeks, the document we produced ran to more than 70 pages!

Alongside this daytime patent work, there were many evenings with Indian friends, where we all sat around a table, over a few beers, to test the game and work out how it could be developed to perform at its best. Should we operate with 7, 8, or 9 tiles per player? In the end we opted for 9. Should we set a time limit, for a player to lay the tiles on the board? We decided unanimously on one minute. And so on. This trialing *committee* was fortunate to have a language expert - and one of the country's foremost *Scrabble* players - in its midst; thus, when our captive guru declared *SQUBIT* to be a better game than *Scrabble*, we celebrated with unreserved abandon.

On a subsequent visit, the game was actually in bookstores and toyshops all over the country. I had arrived with Alice for a month's holiday in the North West of India; but before leaving Mumbai, we had to run the gauntlet of a number of interviews and photoshoots, to publicise *SQUBIT* across the print media. It turned out of course, that there was significant mileage in running a story which homed in on *SQUBIT* as the invention of a British teenager, thus needless to say, they were more interested in

photographing my blue-eyed, blonde-haired daughter, than they were her balding dad. As far as I was concerned that was just great!

So *SQUBIT* went through its first and second, then almost third generation. The second metamorphosis introduced a wonderfully coloured box with images of the game being played by a mysterious Indian hand. The third was due to have a bigger, brighter board, and new full-colour rule book, which I had spent days, probably weeks, writing and designing (the early version was a much more subdued, black and white, folded A4 affair). But then Shyam, the game's manufacturer got cold feet, and pulled the plug. Sales across India had not been as good as expected, so he declined to progress with the planned third generation. To compound this, I had not done as much as I should have to make inroads into the much more lucrative European and US markets. Unfortunately, as it panned out, I was much too occupied with other things.

Now 15 years later and looking back, I very much regret my part in not marketing the game outside India. I had always believed it was a brilliant invention, but neglected to match thoughts with deeds. Too tied down with a job that I liked, and which I prided myself on doing for a worthy cause ... and too locked into earning a safe, regular salary. But in retrospect I should have taken the risk; should, as I tended to often say: *'practice what I preached'*. Neither Richard Branson nor Elon Musk have become famous entrepreneurs by just talking about their ideas, they act their ideas out and take them through to their logical conclusion.

Some years later still, with the info-tech age upon us, Kumar and I opted to try to get *SQUBIT* up and running on Android and iPhone screens (much the same as digital forms of *Scrabble* and many other word games). There were two attempts at this, one Indian-based (I actually met the programmer in Dubai, where he was working for *Microsoft*), then later I contracted a brilliant java-script man in Kenya to do the job. Both these guys were young and extraordinarily talented, and both actually developed the game to the stage where it was visible on a laptop or phone screen. But then, both decided to 'throw in the towel', and (I can only presume) went away to do what they thought were other and better things. After these two rather disheartening experiences

– the last just a few years ago – I decided I had better things to do than waste my time over something which, though a brilliant concept, never quite seemed to make it over the finishing line.

I am told one should not have regrets in life, just experiences from which you learn. But I have to say that one of the few regrets of my own life has been to do with failing to pursue the *SQUBIT* concept through to its logical conclusion. Apart from not becoming as famous as Alfred Mosher Butts (the American architect who invented *Scrabble*, in 1938), I felt that I had let people down; those people who were dependent on me to take the idea forward: Kumar, my Indian friend in particular, whose unbridled enthusiasm for *SQUBIT* knew no bounds, but also Shyam, the games manufacturer, who expected more. And in a way I had a feeling that Alice, my daughter, was disappointed too. She had been there with me right from the start, and - I can only surmise - probably expected much more.

But on reflection there is another side to this story: this segment of my life which spanned in all, a decade or so. From start to finish, the adventure (shall we say), taught me new things and showed me new horizons. The venture showed me aspects of India that I would otherwise never have seen: the business world, in particular that part of it devoted to toys and games (from design and manufacture through to distribution and sales); the complexities of the patents world; planning strategies with Kumar and Shyam over lunch in downtown Mumbai; interviews and photo-sessions within India's vibrant media sector. These experiences expanded my horizons of a country which I thought I knew so well, but in actual fact, knew so little. On top of that, was the later involvement with two brilliant young men from the digital world, who showed me just how much dedication to the task was involved in getting an idea from worksheet to screen.

So, while I still wonder in my dreams if it might yet be possible to launch *SQUBIT* on an unsuspecting planet, I also realise through my waking hours, that some benefits in life cannot in truth be quantified. These are benefits which grow and multiply, somewhat unseen, like coral in an underwater ravine. And over time, these are the meaningful benefits which form the backbone for each and every one of us.