

Allirajah Subaskaran

TALKING HIS WAY TO SUCCESS



Allirajah Subaskaran established Lycamobile in 2006 with a mission to create the world's biggest mobile virtual network operator (MVNO). After successfully launching in 21 countries across America, Africa, Asia, Australia and Europe, where it covers 80 per cent of the market, Lycamobile now has a customer base of over 15 million.

A BRITISH-SRI LANKAN ENTREPRENEUR, THE FOUNDER AND CHAIRMAN OF LYCAMOBILE AND WIDER LYCA GROUP, ALLIRAJAH SUBASKARAN, 45, IS, ACCORDING TO SUNDAY TIMES RICH LIST 2015, WORTH £180 MILLION. A MODERN DAY RAGS-TO-RICHES STORY, SUCCESS HAS NOT COME EASY FOR THE MAN WITH THE MOBILE TOUCH BUT WHEN IT DID, IT CAME BIG.

"Born in Mullaitivu, Sri Lanka to a working class family, my beginnings were humble. I lost my father at a young age and was brought up by a single working mother," says Allirajah, recalling his early days.

"During my childhood, Sri Lanka suffered from internal conflict caused by the civil war and my hometown was a major conflict zone. As a result, my family decided to migrate in the hope of finding safety and so increasing our chances of having a positive future."

In 1989, Allirajah followed his brother to Paris and was joined shortly after by his mother and sister. There, after studying for a time, he began working for a company that provided communication support and infrastructure for exhibitions, doing tasks such as setting up cables and running errands. In time, his family, led by his older brother, started a restaurant. It was to be the beginning of his entrepreneurial endeavours.

"It was entirely family-run. To this, we quickly added a grocery shop that began selling calling cards for people who wanted to call abroad. Initially, a distributor was providing us with the calling cards to resell. However, they unexpectedly stopped providing the cards creating a sudden vacuum. We quickly recognised that there was still a demand for the product and

identified an opportunity for us to distribute the cards ourselves."

The business consisted of a retail shop for calling cards, where customers could also use the phone booths to call abroad with their cards, and there was also a distribution office-based upstairs.

"From here, I decided to branch out from the family operation. In 2002, I started Lycatel in London. By 2006, with advancements in technology and the emergence of the MVNO market as a result of government regulation, there was a void to be filled. This is how Lycamobile was born."

Since its launch in the Netherlands in 2006, Lycamobile has experienced exponential growth leading to more than 15 million pay-as-you-go customers worldwide and from 10 employees to more than 4,000 staff members. Allirajah's leadership, however, continues to drive the business with the same passion and resolution as on the first day – he recently oversaw Lycamobile's 21st country launch in Macedonia.

With revenue of €6 billion in 2015, the Lyca Group now includes Lycamobile, the world's largest international mobile virtual network operator (MVNO); Lycafly, an international travel service; Lycacargo, a pan-African cargo transport service; Lycahealth, a premium customer-centric private healthcare enterprise; Lycachat, a new VoIP app enabling users to send messages, video call and share files; Lycamoney, a prepaid MasterCard; Lycaremit, an online international money transfer service; Lycamedia, including LycaTV, the world's largest ethnic entertainment provider, and Lycaradio, the largest Asian radio network within Greater London; Lycadigital,

delivering digital marketing campaigns, and Docklands Data Centre Limited, an internet service provider; and Lycaproducts, an entertainment company producing and distributing films made in India. In 2017, Lycalotto – a syndicated lottery platform – was launched.

Most recently, Lycamobile reached number 42 on The Sunday Times HSBC Top Track 100 league table, signifying a 16 place climb since 2014. The list ranks Britain's leading 100 private companies with the biggest sales in the past three years. The brand was the only telecoms provider to be listed on the prestigious table, which includes other successful names such as John Lewis, Specsavers, Arcadia, and Dyson.

Allirajah's role in this success has received regular recognition, including winning him the Asian Achievers Award for 'Best Overall Enterprise' in 2010, the 'Business in the Community Award' on behalf of Lycamobile in 2012, and the English Asian Business Awards' 'Social Entrepreneur of the Year' in 2012. He has also won the gold trophy for 'Executive of the Year' at the International Business Awards in 2013, and in 2014, he was included in The Sunday Times Rich List, ranking in 315th position and is also on the member list of the Institute of Directors.

By Allirajah's own admittance and looking back on his younger days, he never had any specific plans for his future – he did not plan to be in the telecoms sector nor did he dream of any success at all, "I simply took advantage of the opportunities that came up before me, because that was all I had. Today, I continue to look for more."

For a man who did not plan his success, his is some achievement. ●