Educational entrepreneur, S.B. Mujumdar still uses his first car, a 1977 Ambassador. He lived in his old two-bedroom flat, clambering up and down the staircase for three decades, till sciatica forced him to move house. As the tall, distinguished man, clad in his signature white khadi shirt, walks towards you, it takes a while to register that this simple septuagenarian is the chancellor of a university with a budget in excess of ₹1 billion, campuses stretching across 400 acres and 38 institutes teaching 200 courses. EDU brings you face-to-face with the man who single-handedly built Symbiosis, a multi-disciplinary educational institution of international repute.
at Gokhale College, Kolhapur, I heard of a vacancy for a Botany professor at Fergusson College. I applied, despite lacking the required experience and was luckily selected. I completed my doctorate in soil microbiology while teaching at Fergusson.

Mujumdar's student years were lacklustre until his graduation. But they left some lasting impressions and shaped his future.

My Intermediate marks were not enough to qualify for entry into a medical college on merit. But those days you could get into a course in Manipal's Kasturba Medical College by paying capitation fees of ₹12,000. It was a big amount in 1954, but my father, a successful lawyer, could easily afford it. However, he refused, saying he was ready to spend even ₹1,00,000 on my education, but not a single rupee on capitation fees. I argued, quarrelled and wept! My mother also pleaded, but he did not budge. That incident taught me what it means to be principled and this influenced a clear policy at Symbiosis. No donation or capitation fee is charged for admission and we admit students only on the basis of merit, after an all-India entrance test.

Mujumdar believes that the secular atmosphere at his school helped conceive Symbiosis, an institute where students from different parts of the world would live and learn together harmoniously. He was inspired by the ideals of Rabindranath Tagore's Visva-Bharati and Antar Bharati, founded by Sane Guruji, a social activist and freedom fighter from Maharashtra.

The idea of Symbiosis was born during the Diwali vacation in 1969. I was then the Head of the Botany Department at Fergusson College and also rector of the boys' hostel. One evening, I noticed a girl sneaking towards one of the hostel buildings. She passed a small parcel to someone inside a room. When I went to investigate, I found a young student from Mauritius in the room, suffering from jaundice and weak. The girl turned out to be his sister. As girls were not allowed inside the boys' hostel, all she could do was pass him some food. The incident touched an inner chord. Days passed, but the uneasiness stayed. I did some research and found that more than 800 students from 28 different countries were studying in Pune. I decided to look into their problems and see if I could make their stay a little less difficult. I found that most faced difficulties regarding accommodation, food, guidance and counselling. The experience was particularly unpleasant for black students, who faced discrimination. I constantly wondered how to ensure that these students did not leave India embittered.

On April 7, 1970, Mujumdar started an organisation for the welfare of foreign students, to promote friendship between them and Indian students. Among the facilities he envisaged were decent accommodation, meals of choice, medical assistance, instruction in English language and clear information about university courses and Indian culture, traditions and philosophy. He had no money, but was convinced that a good cause begets the resources it needs.

I started writing a column in Kesari, a Marathi newspaper started by Lokamanya Tilak, based on my interviews with overseas students. I soon realised that education was the best medium to bring Indian and foreign students together. But that needed a lot of money. In the next few months, I contacted everyone who could support the cause — newspaper editors, writers, artists, social workers, professionals and industrialists. I did not hesitate to ask for even small amounts of money, as I needed to quickly collect the ₹15,000 that we had to pay initially to claim the one-acre land granted to us by the State government. It wasn't easy. Once, an industrialist in Pune invited me to his home with a promise of ₹2000. He not only sent me away empty handed, but also heaped insults on me just because his wife was upset that I had stepped on her rangoli by mistake. Another industrialist would keep drinking fruit juice and eating, while making me wait for hours without offering me even a glass of water! I learnt to swallow all the humiliation and criticism as I believed I was working for a larger cause. If you have faith in your mission, you can tolerate anything. Great dreams and faint hearts do not go together. The three Ps that helped me in starting Symbiosis were — patience, perseverance and prayer.

Sheer perseverance and hard work transformed Mujumdar from a professor hooted at by students during his initial days at Fergusson College to an extremely popular one whose lectures were attended by students even of other colleges.

When I started out, I was in my late 20s and had replaced a 60-year-old professor. Students didn't take me seriously. Pune students also found my English pronunciation funny as I came from a rural background. My popularity later was not accidental. I used to spend four to five hours preparing for each lecture. Also, having a role model like Professor S.A. Pandarekar, my teacher at Rajaram College, helped. From him, I learnt that the role of a professor is not to merely disseminate knowledge, but to teach in such a way that students fall in love with the subject. From Dr T.S. Mahabale, the Head of the postgraduate Botany Department at Pune University, I learnt that one 'should never show your back to the class'. I found that when you speak extempore,
you connect better with the audience. It doesn't matter if you forget a few points in the process.

Many of his students went on to become doctors, some of them well known in their field. A few retain his notes to this day.

The majority of the successful doctors in Pune have been my students at some point. Dr Shailesh Puntambekar, one of my students, is the first surgeon in India to have performed a laparoscopic operation with the help of robotics. Today, there is not a single place I go, be it in India or abroad, where I do not meet one of my students, either from Fergusson or Symbiosis. Recently, a student walked up to me at a mall in Singapore, saying, "Sir, I was your student," and touched my feet. Seeing students succeed is the biggest reward for my efforts. I am convinced that education is the mother of all reforms and universities are cradles of creativity and engines of economic growth.

Mujumdar is a firm believer in coincidences that shape the course of events in one's life. But he worked really hard to enable chance to favour him. His complete devotion to Symbiosis helped it develop, in just three decades, from an international cultural centre into an international university, where around 30,000 students from 80 countries are studying. However, he did not set out to start an educational institution. That happened by chance.

Established Symbiosis in 1971 with a contribution of Rs 250 each from me, my wife and five friends. It started from a room in my house on Fergusson College campus. Then, the aim was to provide a "home away from home" for foreign students in Pune and promote friendship between them and Indian students. I named my concept Symbiosis, a botanical term that means the co-existence of two different organisms for mutual benefit. But to be viable, it had to run on its own steam. So, we started English Language Teaching Institute for foreign students. It was an instant hit and freed Symbiosis from dependence on philanthropists. It also marked the beginning of the transformation of Symbiosis from a cultural centre to an educational and cultural organisation. But it was only after we set up Symbiosis Law College that we started generating excess funds for further expansion. That happened by chance when Maharashtra Education Society did not take up Pune University's suggestion to establish a law college. I was initially taken by surprise when it was suggested that Symbiosis start one, but soon warmed up to it. We persuaded Atur Sanghani, a builder and philanthropist, to construct three classrooms, a room for the principal and one for the staff (the minimum infrastructure required for a college) in a record time of 28 days! Since then, we have been growing at the rate of one new institute per year. Once I am possessed by an idea, I do not rest until I find a satisfactory solution.

Mujumdar has always been far ahead of his times. He set up an organisation for the welfare of overseas students over four decades ago, when nobody
gave much thought to attracting foreign students. He introduced evening classes in Law to enable working people to study further, years before the phrase "executive education" gained currency. He was also the first to start a management institute exclusively for defence personnel and their dependents.

I have always had the knack of picking up relevant ideas from my readings and conversations. I have almost always been successful in gauging market demand and in meeting it. I constantly meet experts in various fields to gather information, which helps identify emerging trends and judge their social impact. It is important for educationists to be sensitive to opportunities and to the needs and aspirations of people.

Mujumdar feels that every failure or calamity in life can be turned into an opportunity if one has the willingness to work hard, with courage and tenacity.

I felt bad when trustees of Deccan Education Society, which runs Fergusson College, denied me a life membership. But now I realise it was a blessing in disguise. Had they made me a life member, I would have, at best, become the principal of Fergusson College. Similarly, I did not like it when my UGC scholarship was withdrawn at the last minute. But had I got that, I might have become Head of Botany Department, Pune University, and been content with that. I also lost the battle for the post of Vice Chancellor of Pune University in 1977-78. Had I won, I might not have been able to build Symbiosis.

Mujumdar acknowledges the role his wife, Sanjwani, and her untinted support have played in his success. She quit her PhD in Zoology, despite a UGC scholarship, to take care of all household responsibilities and left him free to pursue his dreams.

Mujumdar believes that education does not flower without autonomy. At home too, I deliberately practise democracy. All decisions in my family are arrived at by discussion. I have never forced my daughters, Vidya and Swati, to study this course or that, marry this person or that. One was able to persuade Vidya and her husband, Rajiv Yeravdekar, both doctors, who returned after a successful stint in Oman to start a hospital in Pune to help with the administration of Symbiosis. In 2001, Swati too quit her job with Nortel Corporation and came back to India after 13 years in the United States, to give a new direction to our distance education institute.

Mujumdar is not one to rest on his laurels. No mission is ever completely accomplished, according to him. His unfinished agenda includes spreading the Symbiosis umbrella across the country and giving a fillip to research.

My wife has always looked after our finances and other household responsibilities. I think I failed miserably in maintaining a work-life balance. Initially, I was very involved with teaching and was also active in university politics. I fought elections to various university bodies for 20-25 years. At one point, I was chairman of some 55 committees! Soon, Symbiosis became an obsession. There was a time when I used to give lectures at Fergusson in the morning, do university work in the afternoon and then drive to Mumbai in the evening to meet officials in connection with Symbiosis. Finally, in 1981; I gave up my job at Fergusson and decided to stay away from university affairs to devote myself to Symbiosis. I hardly had any time to sleep, forget any spare time, and so things like going to the cinema and family trips were unknown.

The secret of Mujumdar's success according to him, is his policy of giving total freedom to the heads of his institutes to operate as they deem fit, which helps them develop a custodianship of their respective units and come up with innovative solutions.