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Reaching for the cosmos

At the helm of India's first space start-up, Sanjay Nekkanti and Narayan Prasad aim to unleash the potential of private space research and development in the country.

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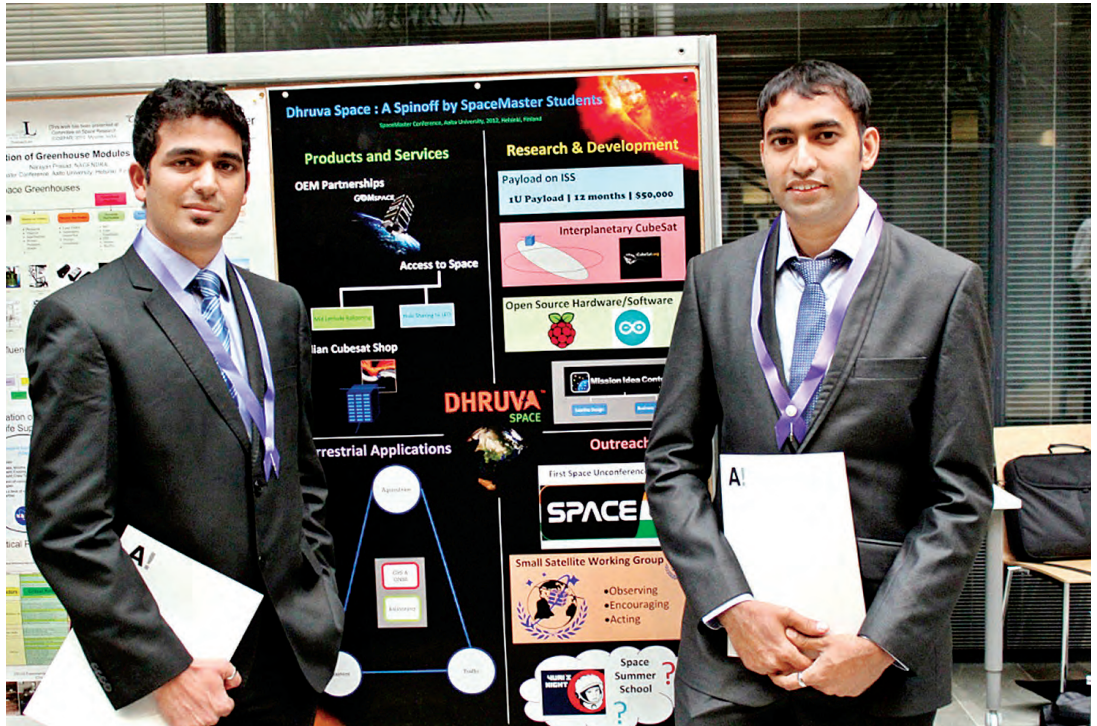
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"When we tell people we design satellites, they ask us what our app is called. And we have to explain there is no app, that we design actual satellites that will go into space. Then, the reaction sets in and they go 'oh'," grins the duo behind Dhruva Space, the first start-up of its kind in the country which is dedicated to R&D in space science and technology.

Sanjay Nekkanti and Narayan Prasad met in 2010, when they were among the 10 Indians to be chosen for the coveted Erasmus Mundus SpaceMaster programme. The international course enabled them to study, work and network with space communities in various countries including Germany, Sweden, France and Singapore. Over the course of the next two years, they realised the immense and untapped potential of the private space industry, especially in the Indian arena, and decided to do something about it.

"We realised that we could either do what all the previous batches of Indian spacemasters had done before us — work for some international space agency — or we could start something new. The choice was easy," says Narayan. Turning down extremely lucrative work offers and PhD invitations, they returned to India immediately and launched their start-up, Dhruva, in Bangalore.

But the decision was hardly impulsive. Having already designed a satellite in his college days for SRM University, Sanjay gained valuable experience studying the playing field. "There is a huge demand for satellites, especially small satellite technology in the world today. India is an especially huge market, considering that it is among the cheapest launchers in the world. Not to mention the tremendous price parity between a satellite built say, in Europe, and here. We aim to bridge the demand-supply gap,"



explains Sanjay.

But it's not just satellites that interests the two unconventional engineers. Their portfolio seeks to include a host of products and services using space-based technologies for the benefit of emerging economies. One of their latest projects nearing implementation, for instance, are devices on balloon-based platforms that would provide continuous and real-time imagery/data to be used in times of natural calamities or intelligence gathering for various purposes, at half the cost of a satellite orbiting in space.

But by the virtue of having ventured into uncharted territory, the duo first has a more immediate mission to accom-

plish before their plans can take flight — create public awareness and garner interest in the subject among the academic community and of course, the powers that be. "The first challenge is getting people to understand what we do. Next, there has been this incredulity about our projects which has led people to believe it cannot be possible. But almost all of the players in other countries who serve as private counterparts to their national agencies have been college spin-offs, just like ours. So, we have to show that it's very much possible," says the duo.

In the four months since they launched, they've already had the distinction of holding India's first Space Up, an 'unconference' focused on space exploration, which was a runaway hit. Their next project is Yuri's night — a global celebration of Yuri Gagarin's birthday on April 12. It is, however, one of the many things in the pipeline for Dhruva, which is already a team of four

staffers and seven consultants.

"In the beginning, it was a little shaky. One week, I would be down in the dumps and Sanjay would pull me up and the next week, it was vice

versa. But now, we've settled a little bit. Looking at the pace of things, it looks like we're here for the long haul. But that's okay, there's nowhere else we'd rather be," they say with a smile.

