

IT entrepreneur turns youngsters' mentor



A globally traveled personality, **BIKRAM DASGUPTA**, founder and executive chairman of Globsyn Group, has led and participated in many international delegations over the years, across industry bodies, and has been at the forefront of the evolution of IT hardware, software, training, and now, high-skilled career education. He talks to **Aditya Prakash Iengar** about his current passion and zeal to help and direct youngsters to face modern day challenges by absorbing technology and human values as an embedded solution.

What's your connection with the IT industry?

I've been involved in the IT industry since 1980, pretty much right from the inception, and I've seen almost everything that has happened over the last 33 years. At that time, there weren't any computers at all. We left India in 1977, and HCL was formed in 1978.

I've seen the industry move ahead enormously. In fact, when we started out, when there was almost no awareness about the computer and its benefits, people were worried that the computers would replace human beings! They would worry that computers would deprive people of their jobs! So I belong to that era when people would say, "I can't buy a computer, because then I won't need an accountant!"

So from that point to now, I have been a

witness to the journey that India has taken as a nation, and I've seen it from both sides of the table.

I've been an entrepreneur from 1984, which means that it has been close to three decades. Before that, I used to work in HCL, which was also formed by graduates of IIT Kharagpur. In fact, HCL co-founder Arjun Malhotra was my senior in college. A lot of people joined HCL at the time, because it was a computer company, and it was brand new, and I was one of them.

Tell us about the export contract with Dell Computers.

I got a lot of attention sometime around 1992-1993 because of the deal signed with Dell Computers. It was a US\$50 million contract for manufacturing motherboards, and till recently it was the largest export order in hardware in India's history. It was a huge order for the country, and got me an invitation for a cup of tea from Narasimha Rao, the then Prime Minister! We used to import 85 per cent of materials, which is why such a huge export order is a highly beneficial one to the country. And now, the new electronic manufacturing policy shows us that we're looking at ₹20,000 crore of investment, because otherwise India will have a serious trouble of imports by 2022. And this same logic was applicable then, it is only that the numbers were different.

What did you do after HCL?

In 1984, a few friends and I got together and started a company called Pertech Computer Ltd (PCL). Six of us started it, with ₹6 lakh as equity, with each of us putting in a lakh. I actually sold my wife's ornaments to get that money! I still remember that I got ₹32,000 from the provident fund after I left HCL, and the rest was from selling my wife's ornaments! I was quite sheepish about the whole thing, to be honest, given the usual reaction from society about such things, but we went ahead with it. If you're passionate about doing something, you have

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to pull out all the stops, no matter what anyone says.

PCL grew to become the largest PC company in India by 1993-94, which was just around 10 years after it was formed, and in 1994, we took PCL public. We were all partners, and I was the CEO driving the company, and I led the IPO. In those days, there was a policy regarding oversubscription, which meant that the SEBI would allow whatever money one collects over and above the subscribed amount to be kept in the bank

for a period of 45 days and then returned. That policy doesn't exist anymore. This meant that if oversubscription was substantial, and you earned a good amount of money as interest during the 45-day period, it could pay for the IPO cost. And this was exactly what happened in our case. We were oversubscribed 26 times! Actually we were coming to an IPO after 10 years of performance, and so everyone knew about PCL and how successful it was.

After the IPO, I left PCL. As an entrepreneur, I believe firmly in one aspect of entrepreneurship – that different people grow differently in life. The six of us who had joined hands back in 1984 for PCL had grown differently, our exposures had been different, and each of us was a different person 10 years later in 1994. Now I always believe that a company should be run by one person, and you have examples of this, in Narayan Murthy in Infosys, Shiv Nadar in HCL, Michael Dell in Dell Computers. This factor was quite important to



The Infinity Towers in Kolkata

me, and so I took the decision to get out of PCL after the IPO was quoted. And I remember that since I was a sort of poster boy for IT, I was quite a known face around the block, and so when I left, it was all over the news at the time!

What happened after you came to Calcutta?

After moving to Calcutta, which is the city of my mother tongue Bengali, I was generally taking it easy and meeting people and so on. It was around that time, around 1995-96 when I was asked to deliver a talk on the Dell contract at a seminar sponsored by the West Bengal government. After my talk, I was asked if I was interested in starting a venture in Calcutta, having left PCL.

I hadn't made up my mind on anything, and what I was doing at the time was just odds and ends; I was pretty much on sabbatical. People like me don't really get into anything unless we're convinced about what we want to do.

Now there weren't many investors in Bengal at the time, and the state wasn't really a very hot investment destination. But people were slowly moving from the hardware to the software end, which was a really new upcoming trend then. So the government then approached me, saying that they were raising a 22-storey building, and told me that they would give me one floor to start my software company, and that would be their equity in my company. And I wouldn't have to give them anything at that moment – "payable when able" was what they told me.

I told them that they were talking to the wrong person, and that if they gave me the entire building instead of just the one floor, I would be game! I told them that if they gave me the project, I would build it, I would finance it, market and promote it, in short, everything – I would create an IT park, I told them. This was how Infinity came into being, that very night.

You see, the majority of entrepreneurs know only how to start, but it is the continuing and sticking on that's vital. I believe that the journey of an entrepreneur is like sailing on the ocean where you can't see the shore. You could be anywhere, but you don't even know if you're in the middle or close to the shore!

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How did you prepare for such a project?

Well, Infinity was going to be an intelligent building, and I had to do my homework, the groundwork that's required for every entrepreneur. I travelled around the world to understand such intelligent buildings, from Germany to the US. I met a lot of people and tried to understand process control and how using computers, we can control an entire building, in terms of its air conditioning, lifts, everything that's going on inside the building. I'll give you an example. In Infinity, in those days, the lifts would be switched off unless there was someone standing in front of the lift. There would be a sensor near the door, which would indicate to the computer that someone wants to use the lift, and only then would the lift be switched on. So you don't really need the power to the lift when it wasn't being used, and this was a huge energy saving device.

What kind of problems did you face?

Actually, I was extremely passionate about Infinity; but it took me four years to build it. I did face some problems, because at the end of the day, I'm not really a real estate fellow. Also, I could realise that there were many who didn't want me to succeed because I was really hitting their pockets. You see, real estate is still perceived to be a dirty business, and then, amidst all of this, I came along, talking technology and

upmarket products, and at the same time, I wasn't charging much! So I suppose there were some people who felt threatened. But then these things happen. After all, when you do something, you just do it, because you *want* to do it.

What came after Infinity?

I thought to myself, if this was going to be a building where IT people sat and worked, in Bengal, where would they come from? I realised that we needed an institution to create IT professionals to work in Infinity. And that is how I built what I call the Technocampus, which later became the Globsyn Finishing School, and then came the Business School, and then Globsyn skills. All these are manifestations of the institution building exercise. IT is the fulfilment part, Infinity was the infrastructure

part, and then the institution part was everything else that we established. And this whole thing was amalgamated as Globsyn. That's what we do, we have knowledge, skills, technology, what we call innoventures, et al. It is a very horizontal group, not a vertical one. Our reach is worldwide, in fact, our New York office was established 15 years ago, and we have a base in Singapore. But we do deal in five businesses, each of them profitable on its own.

What do you mean by Knowledge Finishing School?

What came to my mind when I interviewed a lot of youngsters is what they study in college and what they land up doing at work is hardly connected at all. The undergraduate college in India does not look into your job market. It works on conceptual knowledge building. This is why you see so much of post-graduation in India. MBA has done well precisely because MBA is a finishing school. That is the concept. For instance, if I'm a Statistics graduate, and I want to stay in my line, what is my option? There aren't many, except do my master's degree.

So what knowledge finishing school means that it picks up your knowledge, and connects you to the industry through a programme. It gives you the domain knowledge and structure necessary for a particular field, and this is done through practical training. I designed with a system or a framework, and it is now trademarked under my name, called Knowledge Finishing School System (KFSS). For instance, in case of the domain of IT, I looked at the domain knowledge that someone has, and then figured out the framework through which the individual into an IT professional.

And in this there are four levels — acquisition, application, managing and performing, or the AAMP model. So in any domain of knowledge, through the KFSS, the

individual acquires the knowledge, learns to apply it, then manages a particular project in his domain of knowledge and finally performs in that project.

In this entire ecosystem of businesses, how do you function?

Well, my role in all of this is that my life is dedicated to youngsters, to those between 19 and 27 years. I live for them, and anything they need to grow and thrive is what I provide. I call it a business, because it physically needs money to be sustainable, but it's more what I can do for them.

I've seen that in this period of life, these youngsters do go through a tough time. In this period of life, you graduate from college and get out of your parents' stronghold and want to be independent. You either fall in love and meet your girlfriend or boyfriend. You get your first job, and might even get your first promotion or change of job with a higher salary. You might even get married, or even perhaps become a proud

parent yourself!
So there is such a lot going on in your life at this stage, and all of them are first time

experiences for you. You simply don't know what it means! You're

getting married for the first time, but you don't know what it means to be a good husband! You don't know how to excel at your job. In all these things, you're learning and trying to do the best you can.

So in this period, the ideal person you need during this period is a counsellor or a mentor, someone who isn't your parent or relative or boss and who has no motivational relationship with you. All of us need help at this stage, and that epitomises me, and through my businesses, classes, lectures, blogs, et al, that is what I wish and hope I do for youngsters. **A**

