

# The good life and more

**RR Shastri**, vice president, legal, and company secretary, Tata Industries, looks back with satisfaction and pride at the 33 years he has spent with the Tata group

**I**t was a cold January day in 1975 when Raghavan R Shastri boarded a train from Nagpur to Bombay, yet the weather was hardly a dampener. Like so many young men before him, he was chasing a dream and a destiny, exploring the possibilities that a different kind of India from the one we live in today had to offer. All he had to back him on this expedition into the relatively unknown was a master's

degree in commerce, three years of work experience and the ambition of earning a four-figure salary.

"It was a big amount in the 1970s," says Mr Shastri, vice president, legal, and company secretary at Tata Industries, explaining the significance of the amount for those unfamiliar with the size of pay packets in those meagre days.

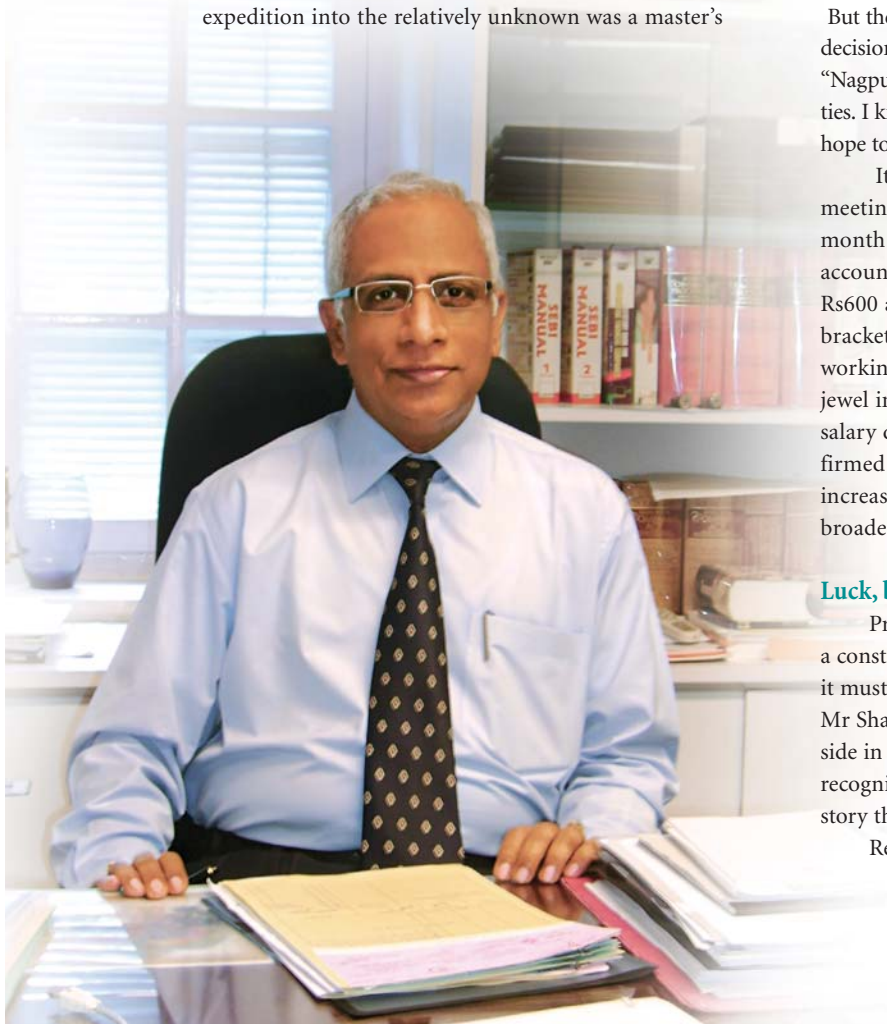
But there was more than money behind Mr Shastri's decision to say goodbye to the city he grew up in. "Nagpur offered little in terms of growth opportunities. I knew that it was only in Bombay that I could hope to get what I wanted."

It would not take long for Bombay to begin meeting Mr Shastri's expectations. Within a month of arriving he was working as a clerk in the accounts department at Tata Steel. His salary — Rs600 a month — was not quite in the four-figure bracket, but there was a certain cachet attached to working for a Tata company, and he was with the jewel in the group's crown. And the four-figure salary did not take long to materialise. "I was confirmed at the job in six months and my salary was increased to Rs1,000," recalls Mr Shastri with the broadest of smiles.

## Luck, but not by chance

Progress on the professional front has been a constant for Mr Shastri in the days since, with, it must be added, a fair bit of luck for assistance. Mr Shastri believes good fortune has been on his side in terms of the challenges he has had and the recognition he has received, yet there's more to the story than mere chance.

Realising early on that a master's degree was



not the passport to success, Mr Shastri focused on improving his academic and professional credentials. He took a correspondence course and acquired a company secretary's degree. This was far from easy: it took him several attempts to get through the examination, given that he was working while studying (and he also got married around this time).

Mr Shastri went on to acquire a degree in law and added a diploma in export management to give himself even more academic clout in the corporate world. "I was never keen on studying and was not a brilliant student either," he says, "but I had this ability to study hard."

The books he devoured and the efforts he put in paid off handsomely for Mr Shastri. In the 21 years he was with Tata Steel, Mr Shastri handled a variety of responsibilities, including the human resources portfolio, dealing with labour issues and interacting with government departments. There were more contributions, though, for Mr Shastri to make and he would soon move to Tata Sons and, then, to Tata Industries.

### Help from above

Mr Shastri has fond memories of the people he worked under, and he reckons that the best bosses are those who believe in your capability and have a participative style of functioning. "Mr [Ishaat] Hussain, who was my boss at Tata Steel, would give an assignment and then trust me to deliver good results," he says. "That helped me develop confidence in my abilities early on in my career."

JK Setna, a former director with Tata Sons, is another leader who evokes much respect. "His knowledge was indubitable and he had this ability to bring out the best in people, to motivate and encourage them," says Mr Shastri.

"He made me feel a part of the team no matter how small my contribution." Mr Shastri worked with Mr Setna on the brand equity and business promotion programme that did so much to change the way the Tata group operated in the years following the liberalisation of the Indian economy.

Mr Shastri sees his current boss, Kishor Chaukar, the managing director of Tata Industries, as another mentor of merit. "He is a boss who believes in your capability, gives guidance when required, and lets you work on your own." And he insists that Mr Shastri spend less time in the office.

### Lessons from life

When he looks back at his initial years of struggle, Mr Shastri most remembers the lessons he learned along the way. Among the important ones, he says, involves guiding his younger colleagues, mainly by drawing on his own experiences. "I feel I must help

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develop the potential that my colleagues have, give them insights on how life can be lived in a better way, and tell them all about the pitfalls I could not sidestep."

Mr Shastri recalls the advice he once gave a young TAS manager: "It is assumed that you are brilliant, since you have been selected for TAS, and also that your knowledge is greater than some of your colleagues who have been here for a long time. But remember that these people have their own skills and capabilities, and respect them for that. Don't try to be a broom, just sweeping away the old. If you wish to do things differently, communicate it in the right manner and spirit; it will make people more open about accepting new ways."

The value of communicating effectively is something Mr Shastri swears by. "It is vital for a boss to let his subordinates know what he expects of them and to acknowledge and appreciate their work." He recalls how Mr Setna would always find five minutes after work to chat about personal matters, a disarming trait that would inevitably make people feel special. Mr Shastri, for his part, builds relationships by doing "small but crucial things".

Mr Shastri is convinced that you have failed if you cannot do your bit for those who need help. It's a doctrine he has imbibed from his spiritual guru — who's also a friend, philosopher and guide — and he tries to follow this credo in his professional and personal life. "There can be no greater satisfaction than helping people accomplish a task or make their life easier," he says.

### At the end of the day...

Mr Shastri, a team player to the core, considers his ability to work with others his biggest strength. What about weaknesses? That would be his inclination to do everything the right way. "My friends at work would never ask me to organise a party, because there would be no drinks and the food would be vegetarian."

Thoughts about the years after retirement tend to occupy Mr Shastri a bit these days. You can be sure, when he gets there, that there won't be many minutes for regrets. "I feel satisfied with what I have achieved," he says. "It's been a good way to live." ●

*Sujata Agrawal*