

The road less travelled

Mukund Rajan, managing director of Tata Teleservices (Maharashtra), is a man with a deep sense of humour, a passion for books and a love of movies

Mukund Rajan's life has meandered down some fairly unconventional paths. He learnt French before he learnt English; he grew up in Jakarta, Colombo and Brussels before settling down to schooling in Delhi; and he followed up an IIT stint with a Rhodes scholarship at Oxford.

Mr Rajan comes from a generation of Indians who revered education only if it led to a medical or engineering degree and so he duly followed his two older brothers to IIT. At IIT he was also captain of a sports team and president of the student union, and seeing his wide range of interests, a friend recommended that he apply for the Rhodes scholarship. His all-rounder qualities were, he believes, the reason he was "probably the only IITian who was accepted."

At Oxford Mr Rajan chose to study international relations, a subject that interested him, partly because the family had lived in many different countries and partly because of his father, an Indian Police Service officer in the intelligence wing who was usually posted undercover as a foreign service officer or commercial attaché. When asked if he ever wanted to follow his father's career path, the suave and dapper Mr Rajan who looks the quintessential corporate honcho quickly counters: "How do you know that they haven't recruited me? I could be a 'spook' masquerading as a businessman!"

Spook or not, Mr Rajan's study of international relations came at a most appropriate time. 1989, the year he joined Oxford, was also the year the political world map was redrawn. The Soviet Bloc started crumbling, the Berlin wall came down and "it was a fantastic time to understand why the world was changing." He followed his Masters with a PhD on climate change. His dissertation titled *Global environmental politics – India and the North South politics of global environmental issues* was "for some time ranked 1.7 millionth on Amazon's list of best sellers," he says with a broad grin.

Joining the family

From Oxford, where he also met his wife-to-be, fellow student Soumya, Mr Rajan found his way to the Tata group through a combination of familiarity [his brothers were briefly associated with the group] and luck [1994 was the only year that TAS advertised their

openings at Oxford and had a mid-year interview for overseas candidates].

During his TAS training period, he worked as executive assistant to DS Gupta (then head of Tata AutoComp Systems) and was followed in this post by near namesake and fellow TAS officer R Mukundan. For a long time many people thought they were the same person and this continues to date. "I am pleased to say that I received many congratulatory mails when Mukundan was appointed MD of Tata Chemicals," he says with a laugh.

When Mr Rajan had to select a Tata company to work for [after his TAS training], he remembered his first meeting with Tata Sons Chairman Ratan Tata at the final TAS interview, a meeting he recollects with great affection. "I wondered whether there would be a role working with him. I thought it would be great to get to know what he was doing and work closely with him."

He spent 12 years as Mr Tata's executive assistant, one of the longest tenures in that office. When he joined the office, his concerns about his lack of an MBA were brushed aside by Mr Tata who said to him: "The only thing you really need is common sense; the rest you will pick up on the job." Inspired by this very matter-of-fact approach, Mr Rajan took up the challenge. "I am a great believer in Edison's mantra: 'genius is 99 per cent perspiration,'" he quips.

Life lessons

Today he acknowledges that those years shaped his life and thoughts to a great extent. "I learnt invaluable lessons on life from Mr Tata," states Mr Rajan. "He gives you tremendous amount of autonomy. The effort he puts into every issue, the way he deals with people and most importantly his values which he lives to the full in personal life and public view is inspiring. He walks the talk and leads by example. His approach to handling the Tata Finance issue was an invaluable lesson in dealing with responsibilities of public money and towards investors."

Mr Rajan also acquired 'tools' that have helped him in business matters. Says he: "Decision-making is about having to make a logical choice between several options. To make a decision, you need an adequate amount of data, a logical approach, common sense, some amount of experience, and an ability to figure out who has got the



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experience and whose judgement would be useful or valuable in that situation.”

In January 2008, when he moved out of Bombay House as managing director to Tata Teleservices Maharashtra (TTML), he found several changes in his life. The biggest was the people factor. The years at Bombay House while fantastic and a tremendous learning experience were also somewhat lonely. “There is a lot of confidentiality about many issues in the chairman’s office and so you can’t be tremendously open with people. It required a fair amount of maturity and stability to manage.”

Steering the ship

At TTML, he has to manage and interact with 2,000 employees, more than 600 retail stores, 2000 odd distributors, over 13 million customers and 500,000 shareholders. “I am surrounded by people now,” he says.

Mr Rajan acknowledges that it’s been challenging to manage an operating company in a highly competitive space. “There has been little opportunity to consolidate operations and generate profits as the company has had to keep investing in new technology.” And that continues with the ongoing focus on the bidding for 3G.

But these have been two years of “tremendous fun and great satisfaction” for Mr Rajan. He is proud that TTML has played its role in creating the largest number of retail touch points in Indian economic history and that it has improved on many parameters — revenue and subscriber market share, operating performance and quality. He is particularly gung ho about the recently launched Digital Mumbai initiative, a recent Gallup employee satisfaction survey that records tremendous progress over last year and establishes some new Tata group benchmarks, and the fact that TTML’s legacy businesses of CDMA and wireline have become profitable for the first time ever.

Mr Rajan’s operating style is about delegation and making people accountable, and he encourages his

business unit heads to do the same. An ardent follower of JRD’s guiding principle of ‘leading with affection’, he takes pride in the fact that the team he inherited continues today. “I believe that it’s only when you empower people and do not lead them dictatorially, you see their full potential emerge.”

Though a part of the 24/7 telecom industry, Mr Rajan’s love for movies and reading has not taken a back seat to his work. He usually falls asleep with a book, and while he reads the odd bestseller, what he enjoys most are biographies as “they are inspiring and offer insights into human qualities and frailties”. His love for biographies spills over to his choice of movies. “If I see a movie where a character is portrayed well, I try to pick up or learn what I could do in similar situations.” A movie that he watches every once in a while is Charlie Chaplin’s *Great Dictator* because “it tore apart all that Hitler stood for in such a well-crafted way. It took great personal courage for Chaplin to make the movie when Hitler was at the height of his powers and I respect him for that.”

At 42 years, he also finds himself leaning towards the spiritual: “I have had too many experiences that I don’t have scientific reasons for. I do believe there are people who have parts of divinity within them, people who can uplift you or make you feel happy in a way that’s very different from transitory, such as a good laugh when someone cracks a joke or a movie that leaves you with a warm feeling.” He is seeking to understand such people. His more recent readings have included *Autobiography of a Yogi*, a reprint of a 1930s book called *A Search in Spiritual India* by Paul Brunton [on Ramana Maharishi] and *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins which “is a book that can worry you a lot because the author makes the case that all religions are humbug and there is no such thing as God.”

Mukund Rajan is a man who has set no goals or ambitions for himself but is enjoying the experiences and encounters along the path of life. “Let’s see where the road takes me...” ●

Sujata Agrawal