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OPINION

His passion: Teach, teach, teach

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Mr Rajendra Pawar, the current latest chairman of Nasscom (National Association of Software and Services Companies), has a lean and efficient look.

After all, if you have your fingers in so many policy pies, efficiency – like greatness is forced upon you.

Leanness, however, has to be acquired, which is perhaps why when we invited him to lunch at the spanking new Leela Hotel – it squats like a lotus in a grimy pond of shoddy government ‘quarters’ – he chose a fresh lime soda, tomato soup (albeit with cous-cous) and a seafood ravioli pasta.

TABLE TALK

He could have chosen the Qube’s speciality pizza, wood-fired and what-not. It costs ‘only’ Rs 9,999 because it has Canadian lobster, thyme scented mascarpone, Iranian beluga caviar and frozen blue goose vodka chaser.

Sadly, no such luck.

The NIIT Group Chairman and Co-Founder, who recently turned 60 and was awarded a Padma Bhushan for pioneering IT education in the country, does not see himself yet as a backbencher with an advisory role in his company.

“Absolutely not. Not now when we are in the midst of transformation at NIIT Technologies as well as NIIT Ltd and in high growth phase for both companies,” he says.

What sort of transformation, we ask?

BUSINESS REJIG

“In 2006, instead of being a tech-driven company we decided to make NIIT Technologies a domain-driven one. We took a hard decision to opt out of many businesses and go only for select chosen verticals. We got out of almost 45 per cent of the business then. Today, 87 per cent of the businesses we do are in chosen verticals,” he says.

Similarly, NIIT, the learning business, is now venturing into newer areas such as cloud campuses. Old is not gold any longer.

With recent events at Infy on our minds, we segue onto the no-no question. “Is there a succession plan at NIIT? Who will take on the mantle after him, co founders Vijay Thadani, P. Rajendran and NIIT Tech CEO Arvind Thakur?”

“That’s not an issue. We have very good leaders coming up,” he says quickly. “But one should never underestimate the complexities of succession,” he adds. We nod in complete understanding.

PET PROJECT

We eat while he talks about his pet project – the new NIIT University at Neemrana in Rajasthan – and which is about as designer a label you can get. The picturesque university on the Aravalis dovetails neatly into another of his pet ideas – that of making the Delhi-Jaipur highway into a knowledge corridor the likes of MIT’s Route 128.

The University itself, created as a post-industrial knowledge era campus, will be work in progress for the next 100 years, he insists. Talk about the long view.

Right now, though, it offers courses in computer science and informatics but going forward will have liberal arts courses, too.

“Behavioural sciences will be a big thing for India,” predicts Mr Pawar and adds how both his daughters Urvashi and Unnati have chosen psychology.

His son Udai, an IIT-trained engineer, has moved to Bollywood. “He worked on Sudhir Mishra’s *Yeh Saali Zindagi* – very good film,” he says, in a proud-dad voice.

PAWAR, PANWAR AND PARMAR

How come you are called Pawar if you are from Jammu, we ask. We get a short lecture on the origins of Pawars.

“Pawars are originally Agnikula Rajputs from Madhya Pradesh – a lot of them went to Maharashtra, some went to Uttar Pradesh where they became Panwars, some to Himachal



▶ From pioneering IT education to setting up a picturesque university in the Aravalis, Mr Rajendra Pawar is a well-travelled veteran on the knowledge highway.

where they became Parmars,” he explains.

“My ancestors came to Akhnoor. My granddad was the village head. My father joined the army and was in J&K State Forces and with Maharaja Hari Singh, while two of my uncles stayed in the village farming.”

That also explains Mr Pawar’s closeness to Mr Karan Singh, who is NU’s Chancellor and has chosen the university’s motto, ‘AnadiAnant’ (without beginning and without end).

VITAL VITTAL

We drag the conversation back to Nasscom.

Perhaps influenced by all that food around us, Mr Pawar says “Nasscom is like a well-baked cake with reasonable icing on top. We don’t have to re-bake the cake.”

But will there be a lot of lobbying with government involved now at Nasscom or is this industry treated more leniently? “The oft quoted joke is that thank god, the government was sleeping when we were building

the IT industry!” laughs Mr Pawar. But he does not agree with this view, and gives a lot of credit to Mr N. Vittal who was a hands-on secretary in the Department of Electronics.

“He was a liberal thinker. I was president of MAIT at that time and saw at close hand how he solved many of the teething problems of software companies. We would run to him with our requirements and he would always find solutions,” says Mr Pawar.

“Is this new responsibility a crown of thorns,” we ask. “Not at all,” he says, declaiming with customary enthusiasm about his three-point agenda for Nasscom.

NASSCOM’S DISTINCTION

An early member of Nasscom, which came up in 1987, Mr Pawar claims it is one of the few industry bodies that actually drive the industry.

Nasscom is an unusual organisation in the sense that many of the founders are still around. Success has given us enough el-

bow room and people are keen to collaborate,” he says.

THREE PRIORITIES

His three priorities, he says, are to provide visibility to the emerging companies – the SMEs of the IT sector. “We want to remove the covers and give them a platform for growth, advocacy.” The second priority is to flag off IT for India. “Many States have created IT departments and have an IT policy now, but we want to drive adoption by accelerating the supply side,” he says.

As an anecdotal example, he points how there could be a small IT company in Karnataka that has digitised land records of the State and has experience in this domain. But this may not be known to another State government looking for a similar vendor. “Nasscom now has an e-governance portal where 155 companies have put up their works on governance,” he says.

And the third priority is the skills sector – to scale that up significantly. Nasscom is working in tandem with National Skills Development Corporation on that.

SWEET TOOTH

We ask if Nasscom’s Vision 2020 for the IT industry to contribute up to 9 per cent of India’s GDP an achievable target?

“Do you know that the \$225 billion size projection for year 2020 for the Indian IT-ITES industry – in that 80 per cent will be from businesses that don’t even exist today,” says Mr Pawar. He means the less tapped verticals such as healthcare, utilities and new areas like cloud computing.

By now, thanks to the severe air-conditioning, we have almost frozen. The time has also come to order dessert. Our combined girth makes us pause but Mr Pawar is not having that. “I have an ultra-sweet tooth,” he says as he orders a *ras-malai* and eats it with gusto.

We give in and order home-made ice-cream, but at the end of the big meal, only Mr Pawar retains the lean and hungry look.