



**He could see the future way back in 1981 when he set up NIIT —bringing computers and people together was going to be the key to progress. Innovation remains his chief driving force as the NIIT founder chairman focuses on harnessing global talent**

# THE TECH VISIONARY

**E**VEN AS informal meetings go, the one with Rajendra S 'Raji' Pawar, was truly exceptional. Not just in terms of understanding the chairman and co-founder of NIIT Group, the man who saw the future way back in 1981, but also in terms of the time he spent with us. Over six hours. Winding up at 2 in the morning, it began over wine on the terrace garden of his well-appointed Sector 32 office in Gurgaon followed by a dinner, past midnight, 15 km away from the NIIT head office at the Sheraton in south Delhi.

As we settled into the rich deep cherry coloured leather sofas in the corner office, we couldn't help asking about a bright painting that occupied most of a side wall in his office. It turned out to be a personal favourite. "That's from Vietnam where I was on a holiday with my family recently. It's a \$1,000 lacquer work and is typical of the region — people wearing conical hats, paddy fields, water and so on," he elaborated.

It's one among the many artworks that Pawar, 56, has collected over the years, which he was clearly proud to show us. Spread over the fourth floor corporate office where the NIIT top management sits, they include Abani Sen's horses (which he invested in about 15 years ago and occupies pride of place behind his chair), water colours by Suhrid Mukhopadhyay, green paintings by Akmal Hussain, and Benares captured in various hues by Soumen Dutta.

Of course, there are also three by his versatile 15-year-old daughter, Unnati, the youngest of his three children, which only this year moved out of his office to the wall just outside his room. In fact, as he walked us through the fourth floor, it was clear that there was a pattern in the art work.

And he happily shared the theme he's trying to develop for the floor — heritage — cultural, national and intellectual. The last category will find expression in the boardroom as well, where he wants artists to create intellectual concepts. That is work in progress, as are couple of other important tasks that have NIIT Group's founder pretty occupied these days.

The Rs 1,681-crore group encompasses two businesses: NIIT Ltd, the learning services organisation, and NIIT Technologies, the software business. An important agenda on Pawar's menu is to shift from an IT training company to Global Talent Development, a concept that he was obviously quite intense about, we realised as we chatted through the evening.

The other important tasks concern building a software factory on a 25-acre plot in Greater Noida and an educational project over 100 acres. Like the head office which has lot of open spaces and has been neatly done by architect Mohit Gural, Pawar wants the software factory and the education project to also to become benchmarks.

Over a quarter century ago, it was a similar quest that motivated the 1972 IIT Delhi alumnus to set up NIIT along with batchmate Vijay Thadani, after stints at DCM and HCL. P Rajendran, two years their junior at IIT, joined in 1984. "I moved to HCL's head office looking at corporate planning and that's when I began to look at the growth of the computer industry," reminisced Pawar. "To me it was very obvious that the constraint was talent. That's when I got the idea that the constraint to growth is actually an opportunity. I convinced Vijay to leave

his job and the two of us got full time into it."

"You also have to appreciate the play of chance," he continued. "Rajiv Gandhi arrived on the scene and created a big thing around computers. The 1990 foreign exchange crisis happened. Then Y2K happened. These are events that shaped the industry and gave us stability. Qualitative factors drove our growth."

The initial idea was to bring computers and people together and the young Pawar actually wrote the blueprint of NIIT in October 1981 during a holiday in picturesque Manali. Even now, the company has most of its brainstorming meetings in hill stations as he feels that's where the creative instincts are, well, their peak... He's from Jammu, so he should know.

After a walkabout through the office, commenting on every single painting on the way, he eventually led us out to the rooftop garden, just outside his office. There we finally settled down in wrought iron chairs, under the moonlit sky. Pawar had met us just after an AGM; so the suited Pawar excused

And Pawar, who is on the board of institutions like the Scindia School, ISB Hyderabad and IIT Delhi, plans to bring in lot of innovation to make that happen. Much like NIIT itself, that has grown with constant innovation. Between 2001 and 2004 — through the dotcom boom, bust and slowdown — the company saw maximum innovation in products, delivery, business model, et al.

Innovation came by way of schemes for loans to students, new learning initiatives, online teaching and NIIT's award-winning 'hole in a wall' experiment that took computer literacy to the underprivileged and the slums. Some of these initiatives will take NIIT much beyond just IT learning too.

In fact, just last year, as the company completed 25 years, it decided to embark on a new direction. "It's a huge repositioning process from IT talent development for the developing world to Global Talent Development. Last year we launched the first of the three initiatives," he told us.

The first is to train people for the banking industry, a JV with ICICI Bank. The second is NIIT Imperia, to hone mana-



**By 2020 the world will have a shortage of 47 million working people; India will have a surplus of 45-50 million. To seize that opportunity, we need to innovate and change the education system**

himself for a bit to change into a more casual beach shirt. The patch of green there, we learnt, was where Thadani, an avid golfer, wants a one-hole putting green!

A hockey player and captain of the IIT Delhi hockey team, Pawar is no golf fan. "I have two iron giraffes on the grass who are protecting the lawn," joked Pawar as he poured another glass of his favourite Grover La Reserve. Apart from red wine and art, Montblanc pens are another passion. And there may soon be an Audi TT in the garage too, next to his Honda Civic and Accord, if he listens to his son Uday, also an IIT alumnus, now working with Microsoft Research.

From small beginnings, NIIT is now present over 32 countries with 60% of revenues coming from outside India. Pawar has now set larger goals. "Global Talent Development is our new obsession," he asserted, not surprisingly. While the West may have all the technology, they don't have young people. By 2020, the shortage of working people in the world will be to the tune of 47 million. The surplus that India will have will be 45-50 million. To seize that opportunity you need to innovate and change the education system."

gerial talent at the supervisory and mid level, via a JV with the IIMs. And the third initiative called NIIT Litmus is on testing and assessment.

Pawar's aspiration — for Global Talent Development and to train millions of people — will take the company to another goal: by 2011 NIIT hopes to cross a \$1 billion in revenues. Will it also see his son become part of the company, much like Rishad Premji at Wipro? "I have no plans to induct family into the company. Unlike some other companies, we are much broadly held," he replied. "Anyway, my children want to chart their own careers."

It was 2 am by the time we polished off a sumptuous chicken curry meal as conversation veered to paths diverse as astrology and psychology. He's a recent convert to psychology thanks to his daughter, Urvashi, soon off to London to pursue higher studies in the subject, by the way. Pawar hadn't flagged a bit. As we prepared to head home, he still wanted to make sure he had got his latest personal obsession across: Global Talent Development. We assured him he had.

**SHELLEY SINGH & SHUBHAM MUKHERJEE**