

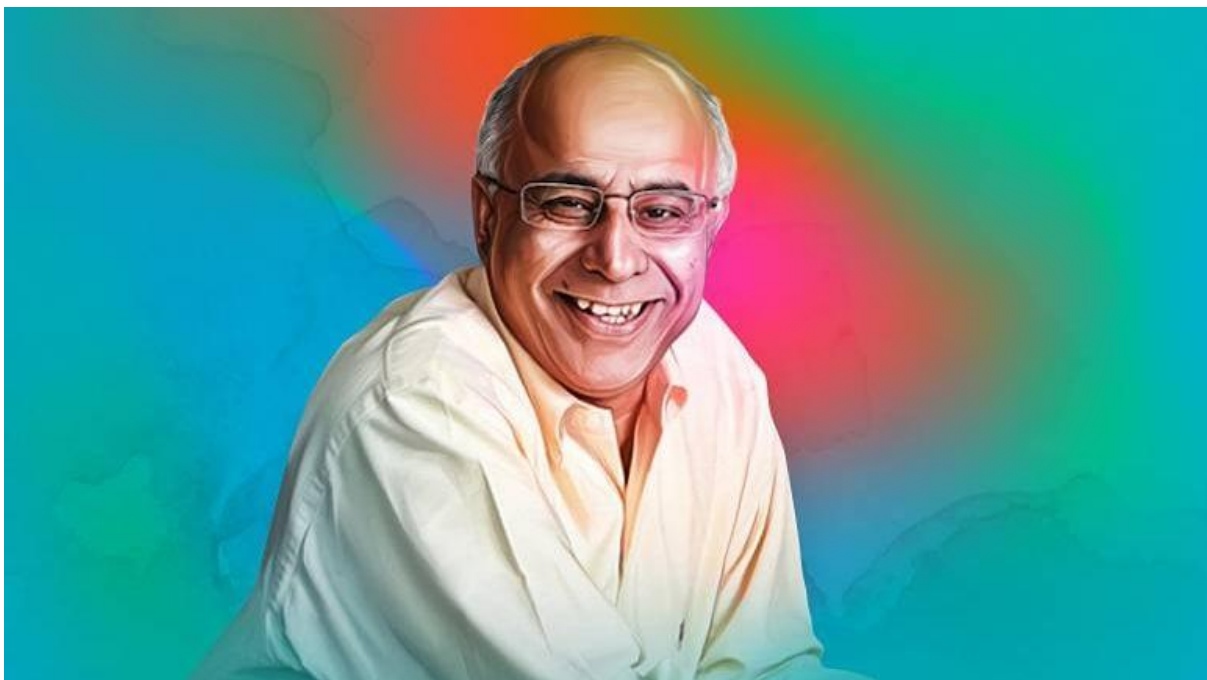
Veterans Unpacked | Subroto Bagchi: 'The more virtual the world around us becomes, the more real leaders must be'

Subroto Bagchi on how India/Bharat has changed since the 1970s, gaps in our understanding of the government's reach and why the C-suite must also be 'I-suite' or India-suite.

MONEYCONTROL

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BY [PAVAN LALL](#)



Note to readers: *How do corporate leaders surf life after hanging up their boots? What do they do next? What are the lessons they learned in their eventful journeys? What advice do they have for the current crop of leaders? Veterans Unpacked is a new series of interviews aimed to offer readers lessons from retired bosses on life outside the corner office.*

Subroto Bagchi, former chairman and co-founder of IT company Mindtree that later got acquired by Larsen & Toubro in a hostile takeover, hails from Odisha and is a staunch supporter of its culture, future and people.

In 1981 after serving the government of Odisha in its industries department, he joined the computer industry and worked across different companies until 1999 in sales, marketing and operations. At Wipro he became the chief executive of Wipro's Global R&D before working for chairman Azim Premji as corporate vice-president, mission quality. He left Wipro in 1998 to join Lucent Technologies. He left Lucent a year after to start Mindtree in 1999 along with other co-founders.

Aside from his corporate life, the 63-year-old entrepreneur authored multiple books on business - some of which have become bestsellers. Recently, Bagchi along with his wife pledged to donate Rs 340 crore to set-up a healthcare facility in India.

What have you been up to since you hung up your boots?

I stepped down as Mindtree's executive chairman on March 31, 2016. It was a planned succession. The co-founders and the board asked me to stay on as a director. That piece was a given in terms of some Mindtree involvement, but largely I would have had white space. I thought I would take some down time for myself and after that give myself to reading, writing, travelling, and teaching. But that fanciful idea lasted all of four days. On April 4, Naveen Patnaik called me and asked me to come, set up the Odisha Skill Development Authority and become its chairman. We shut our house in Bengaluru, packed four suitcases, and moved to Bhubaneswar. Ever since, I have been

here. My present charter is to create employable skills for 1.5 million youth by 2024. Most of them school dropouts.

What keeps you busy now?

On an average, I spend 10 hours a day on work, or work related things. Before COVID, a lot of it was outdoors. The first four years, I spent a lot of time in the field, I was in the districts. In the last one year, that has got restricted. But even now, I go to the office and thanks to the government quarter I have, there is an office set up in the garden, away from the main house. That office is fully equipped with digital infrastructure. Both me and my wife, who also works full-time but pro-bono with the government, have a very structured life. We like the idea of a daily routine. We like order. Beyond work, I read a lot. My reading is curated by my two daughters the same way a dietician works for physical nourishment. At any point in time, I am reading a book suggested by them. I do not go to a gym or a club and have never played golf. The physical exercise is usually a walk every day. I potter in the garden. The lovely thing about a one-acre government quarter is the walking path it has. I learnt yoga and was quite a regular except that I have gone easy on that for a year now. I love to watch TED. I am not a movie buff. I am in bed by 10:30 in the evening and try to get seven hours of sleep. As you age, that is a challenge.

Looking back, can you tell us about three interesting events or anything that has stayed with you since?

What preceded my joining was itself interesting. In Odisha, there is a platform called Odisha Knowledge Hub (OKH). This is for the top bureaucrats to listen to someone from outside the system, in eclectic fields, as part of learning from unusual sources. On April 2, 2016, I was there, delivering the OKH talk. As a practice, the chief minister

does not sit in because he wants a freewheeling conversation. But this time, he decided to listen in from his room and that led to the April 4 call.

The second interesting experience was my consultations with four individuals whom I respect for their ability to guide me before I said yes to Patnaik. One of them was Nandan Nilekani. I had told myself that even if one of the four said, it is a bad idea, I would not take on the job. Nandan heard me out on the entire saga, the call, the charter, etcetera. Then he asked me a question that threw me off balance. He asked, do you speak the language? I said yes, I speak it well because I studied in an Odia medium school. But why do you ask, I queried. Because however you may be qualified for it, you should take the job only if you speak the language, Nandan said. Otherwise, the system will chew you and spit you out before you know it. Every day for the last five years, I realise how true Nandan is.

The third incidence that deeply stirred me took place when I visited a remote district where I was speaking to a group of 42 nursing trainees. The government had built 40,000 square feet, a brand new nursing college. At the end of my interaction, one young lady raised her hand in question. Why, she asked me, was she taunted when she went to the district hospital for her afternoon duty for on-the-job training? Why do people call her a girl of loose character because she has chosen to be a nurse. While saying this, she started sobbing and the whole class started sobbing. I was stunned and speechless. In any civilised country, her choice of career would be honoured by society, ahead of an IT engineer. Here is a country that has a nursing skill gap of unbelievable magnitude. Dr Devi Shetty says that in India, nursing is a dying profession... We have a shortage of nearly four million nurses in the country. The young nursing trainee reinforced my early stint lesson that Indian society must go a long distance before we respect skilled professionals. Our attitude towards skilled people, be it

a cab driver, a delivery man, an electrician, or a nurse, is pathetic. We do not think they truly matter. It begins where it matters most: we pay our skilled workers a pittance. An ITI kid gets paid Rs 7, 8 may be 10,000 at the start point. A peon gets Rs 19,000 in my state. After I joined the government, every day, I have learnt something new, every week I had a new and interesting experience and every month, an epiphany. I am inspired with stories of young men and women that have broken through the clouds, people of character that would inspire even the hardest cynic. The stories are myriad and would fill an entire book. In all this, the defining aspects are two: how little the private sector knows about developmental issues and challenges and how powerful the government is, how deep is its reach and work, even though we are raised to think of the government as a sloth and a villain.

What do you miss most about the C-Suite?

I do not miss anything. I would not trade-in the last five years for the first 40 years of my corporate life, because I have moved on. When you see the average government functionary, an ASHA or Anganwadi worker in the field, you realise how much of a bubble we risk living in. I always thought I was quite clued into the larger, national issues, about development. I didn't even know the basics. I wonder how many people in the so-called C-Suite know the meaning of the words “stunting” and “wasting” and what they do to a child’s learning outcomes and the fact that India is the stunting and wasting capital of the world. We must get engaged in a more substantive way to know about the country and her people and engage in ways that are substantive, not symbolic. The C-Suite must first be an I-Suite. I mean “India Suite.” Businesses cannot succeed if societies fail.

If you had to relive your corporate career, what would you do differently?

I have been enormously lucky to be in the right place and right time with the right people. Angels always sat on my shoulder and guided me. I have no regrets and would not do anything differently.

Honestly, no.

What are the changes in the corporate world that you see now that are vastly different from your time?

I joined the corporate world in 1977 when I was selected as a management trainee in DCM (Shriram Group). From 1977 to 1984, were the last vestiges of a post-colonial past, licence raj, monopoly, and constraint-driven thinking. You needed to know a member of Parliament to get a gas connection and a telephone at home. 1984 was the beginning of change as far as the Indian IT industry goes. Rajiv Gandhi started talking about the 21st century, the IT industry sprang up thanks to visionaries like N. Vittal and N. Seshagiri, selfless bureaucrats who saw possibilities when even we were seeing problems. But as we stepped into the 1990s, the industrial climate and the economy were still an extension of the past and then the big shift happened when economic reforms started. Standing where we are today, the past is a parallel universe. The discontinuities, the tectonic shifts, are in terms of government policy, the arrival of the knowledge entrepreneurs, of venture funding, the ability to go in and out of the country, the freedom to start a business, the social legitimacy of an entrepreneur, the massive physical infrastructure that has cascading economic impact. Yes, the two Indias, one of the last century, and one now do not look like siblings. The Bharat then and the Bharat now, do look like siblings from the same parents.

Which business leader in the current crop impresses you?

There are many names, thanks to the cloud burst of high-profile start-ups that are massively well funded. Many of their founders carry significant promise to be memorable business leaders. But there is an inherent difference in being a Unicorn entrepreneur and a great business leader. You travel that gap only in time. I am sure we will see a great harvest of a breed of statesman-business leaders emerge from the younger generation as we go along.

Is there anything you would tell your younger self?

I would tell myself to be more self-observant. Hang out with the right guys; it is true that you are the average of your best five friends. Your spouse is your best partner. Respect her even before you love her. There is no substitute for love. Love a lot. Love all you can. There is no compartmentalizing the personal and the professional. It doesn't work like that if ambition matters to you but you got to interpret the idea right. You cannot be a first rate boss and a third rate spouse. You are whole only when you are consistent. Integrity at work and in your life outside work, eventually pays. It isn't a touchy-feely thing. It makes great business sense. Do not do the right thing the wrong way. It will come back to haunt you. Doing the right thing the right way may be inconvenient at a given time and space but it returns someday when you need a rescue. When you are cliff hanging, it is the rope on a dark, windy night.

How did you plan for life after retirement?

When you are in an intense job, the moment you talk about retirement the power is withdrawn from you, especially if in a position of consequence. I truly didn't even think about it and understand that I was executive chairman for the last four years before I left.

What is your advice for the next cadre of corporate leaders?

Be real. The more virtual the world around you, more real, leaders must be.