

Mindtree co-founder Subroto Bagchi has his eye on the big picture

Tech entrepreneur turned philanthropist and public servant, Bagchi talks to Pavan Lall about learnings from corporate existence and why Covid-19 planning needed more attention and foresight

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If it was a task organising the logistics for “Lunch with Business Standard” before the pandemic, doing so at a time when the country is in a vice- like grip of a virus is even harder. Yet, it’s an endeavour that Subroto Bagchi, former

chairman and co-founder of multinational technology firm Mindtree, has sportingly agreed to.

Those who know him would opine that not doing so would have been uncharacteristic of a man who, along with his wife, recently committed hundreds of crores in charity for the setting up of a cancer hospital.

As my screen comes to life, I see the 64-year-old Bagchi dressed in a light green shirt, trousers and barefoot (not uncommon for him) sitting at a wood-and-glass table in a large government-sized office. On the wall to his left is a white board with dozens of “to dos” and notations listed on it. And behind him are several plaques, crystal awards and certificates. I cannot help but ask him who made that table, expecting him to reference designers such as Charles Eames or Isamu Noguchi.

“The kids at ITI (Industrial Training Institute) in Cuttack crafted this, and I love it and honestly, it should go to the chief minister’s office,” he says, adding that it’s amazing what local artisans can create.

There is no one way to describe Bagchi. We know he’s the tech entrepreneur who co-started Mindtree, which is now a \$4 billion (market cap) player owned by Larsen & Toubro after a fierce and not-so-amicable takeover. But there is also Bagchi, the author, who has written nine business books on everything — from sales to mergers and acquisitions and entrepreneurship. There’s Bagchi, the philanthropist who, along with his wife Susmita, has pledged to donate ~340 crore for healthcare facilities in Odisha. Then, there’s the latest Bagchi, the government official who is the chairman of the Odisha Skill Development Authority. So, how does he describe himself. “I’m just a good guy. A good human being, and it’s important to be that. I think I can leave it at that.”

His father, he says, was a “small-time government servant in the state” for whom values were paramount, and who was a fan of the British and actually felt remorse when the Union Jack was pulled down and the English left. His mother was entirely the opposite. Bagchi went to school in Odisha, attended college at Utkal University (Bhubaneswar) where he studied political science and then trained with the Parachute Regiment of the Indian Army.

We are briefly interrupted as lunch arrives for us on both sides of the screen. For him, it’s a glass of aam panna made with the locally grown raw mangoes. The very desi starter is sprouts and a mix of carrots, onion and tomato, while the main course is pomfret cooked in mild coconut gravy, Konkani style, accompanied by a bed of long grain basmati cooked with a dash of zafran

(saffron). Mine is less exotic, with potato-stuffed parathas, yogurt, stewed lentils, and tomato and cucumber salad. We dig into our food.

It is possible to be a good guy and still be successful, Bagchi says, adding that he witnessed this in vivid 3D in the form of his former boss, Azim Premji, when he worked for Wipro.

I spy a couple of Oxford black-and-white diaries on the table and Bagchi shares that thanks to them, he can trace and recall what he was doing down to the hour decades back. This is something he manages himself, charting out manually every single page, recording practically every minute of the day.

Bagchi's wife, an Odia fiction writer, also runs Mo School, an educational government programme, while his two daughters are studying in the US.

Does he miss the rough and tumble of the corporate battlefield? After all, he has been privy to what is regarded as the land's first hostile takeover when engineering conglomerate Larsen & Toubro took over Mindtree in 2019.

He answers, cautious but circumspect. "Having moved on, my current feeling regarding the whole situation is that I continue to be a significant shareholder in Mindtree and that takes away my ability to denigrate a company and its management," he says, adding that he anticipated I'd ask him this question. I press on. What was the learning from the takeover? "The hostile takeover happened 20 years into the life of the company. We never thought this would happen and never engineered the firm to be prepared for it because we had supporting promoters."

That an investor who is at risk can create risk for an entity was not thought of and in retrospect, the only way to avoid something like this is to structure yourself accordingly from time to time, but it's now water under the bridge, he says.

We tuck in and silence ensues. Does he have lots of friends in Odisha?

"I'm not a great networker like, say, Nandan Nilekani," he replies. "He's phenomenal and he takes it very seriously. When he took over as UIDAI (Unique Identification Authority of India) chairman, people wanted to work for him free by the thousands. I will never be in that league."

If Sell was the name of the top-selling book that Bagchi wrote a few years ago highlighting the importance of salesmanship, then "Humility" could well be the title of one for the future.

But what Bagchi can do is read the interplay and see the way things unfold, and the way the future will pan out. This is something friends testify to. He's a thorough big-picture guy.

He pauses to say how divine his chhena poda pitha is. An utterly Odia indulgence, it is prepared with chhena baked overnight with sugar syrup, so that it turns a gentle brown, grainy and soft inside. Unlike the rasgulla, no Bengali can stake claim to the origin of this one. The desert is caramelised from the outside and is brilliant.

Have you ever been to Odisha, he asks. No, I say guilty, and promise to do so once travel is easier — and safe.

Our lunch is done and the conversation veers towards the biggest challenge we are facing: Covid-19. How does Bagchi see that getting resolved?

“Pandemics have taken as long as four years to recede, and the way to look at it is to see what we are doing differently to control it, besides vaccines,” he says.

“In January 2020, it was evident that we would experience the pandemic. Had we planned for the next four years to come, we would have thought differently. But when you don't have a time view of the occurrence, you won't plan,” Bagchi says. “The other issue is the propensity of Indians to trivialise everything and that we as a people are attention deficit. To truly fix a problem, you have to pay high-quality attention to it.”

More so now, when we are dealing with a Category One faceless enemy.

“India will live on. People will die. Most will survive, many will be infected, some will be infected multiple times but India will live on. But not because we did it right; it will happen irrespective of that,” he says.

I cannot disagree with that.