

On a high note

With a deep love of Indian classical music, and a strong belief in education and ethics, **Banmali Agrawala**, executive director, Tata Power, translates culture and education into a management style

Some months ago, when Banmali Agrawala was looking for a new job, he was sure of what he wanted: an industry that was big and growing rapidly, a company with a global outlook, strong ethics and values, and a job based in India. His current position as executive director (strategy and business development) at Tata Power is a perfect match.

The new entrant to Tata Power's board is a man who claims that all one needs to get ahead in life is "a proper upbringing, a solid education and a value system". Mr Agrawala's own success bears out this belief. At the age of 45, he has made it to the top echelons of a large global company and also holds the post of chairman of the Confederation of Indian Industry (western region).

Married with two children, Mr Agrawala has been with Tata Power for more than six months now and is extremely positive about the company and its future. "I have never seen a company with so much possibility for growth. In business development, my problem is not how to find projects and opportunities, but how to select a few to focus on." This plethora of opportunities can sometimes pose strange dilemmas: recently, Mr Agrawala found himself staring at his calendar, trying to figure out how to be in Bhutan and Amsterdam at the same time, same day! It's a challenge managing in such circumstances but "very few companies get this kind of opportunity" and Mr Agrawala is making sure Tata Power makes the most of them.

Campus culture

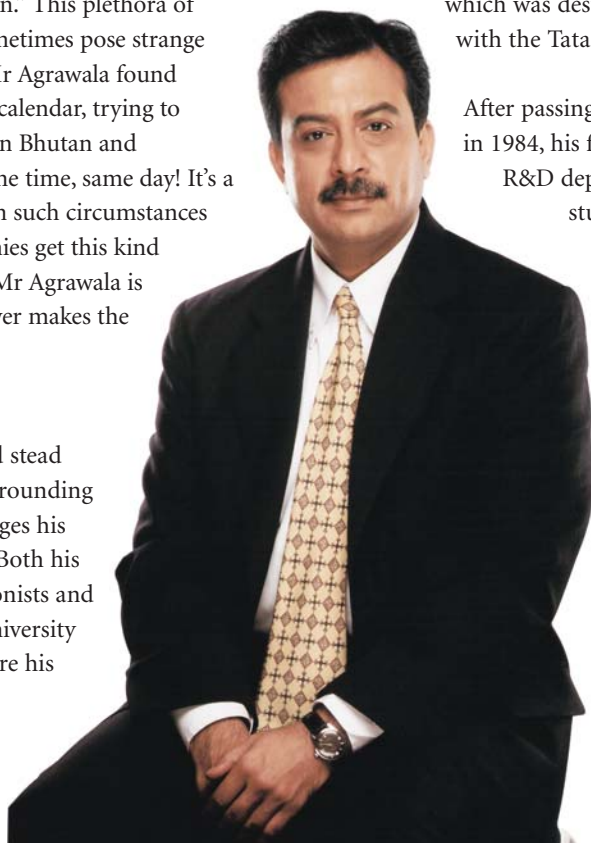
Standing him in good stead now is the excellent grounding in facing life's challenges his childhood gave him. Both his parents were educationists and he grew up on the University of Pune campus, where his

parents were teaching. Studying at the Loyola High School gave him a solid foundation in discipline and values, says Mr Agrawala: "I dare say it's one of the finest institutions in the country. The Jesuit priests that ran the school had an incredible sense of purpose. I attribute much of my sense of discipline and duty to my time spent there."

After school, Mr Agrawala moved to Mangalore University at Manipal, where he worked at picking up a distinction in mechanical engineering, and also played hockey at the district level. It was also a time devoted to his first love — singing Indian classical music. "I think I sang my way through my ragging years and after that took part in every possible musical competition," Mr Agrawala remembers. He cherishes the education he received there because of the emphasis laid on practical learning. The importance of this he realised when he noticed that his approach to engineering problems was different from that of other engineers, even IIT-graduated colleagues. In his second year at Manipal, Mr Agrawala landed an internship with Tata Motors, which was destined to be the first of his encounters with the Tata group.

After passing out with a distinction in engineering in 1984, his first job was at Pune with Bajaj Auto's R&D department, where he was involved in a study of emission control measures for two-wheelers. But after contracting a bout of jaundice that took six months to overcome, he realised that the lab environment did not suit his health and he moved to the planning and design division.

His next career shift, in 1987, saw him at Wartsila India, an arm of the Finland-based Wartsila Group. This move proved to be extremely fortunate; it gave him his first shot at a marketing job, and put him on the



fast track to the top. Mr Agrawala became the managing director of the company in 2003 and steered its fortunes for the next five years. "A lot of people questioned my decision to stay in the same company for 20 years. But I climbed my way to the top, starting from the lowest rung just like any ordinary salesman, writing sales letters and maintaining visiting cards," says he, with simple pride.

The turning point came in September 2006, when Mr Agrawala was appointed vice president of Wartsila Biopower. He realised that it was now time to part company with Wartsila: "I was managing director and also on the board. The next logical move up the Wartsila hierarchy would land me in Finland and that was something I didn't want for my family. I realised I had to move on."

Moving on led him to his current posting at Tata Power where he is well satisfied with the choice he made: "My assumptions have proved good. The company is growing, it has a global footprint, and its ethical tradition is solid and proven." He stresses that anyone who belongs to this Tata company has a tremendous platform to build on: "I see Tata Power among the top two or three players in India." He cites the company as being one of the most credible in the infrastructure space and that trust and admiration for the company is only set to grow more.

Mr Agrawala's job involves engaging with several teams, such as the business development team, which is small but growing and constitutes some of the brightest young sparks at Tata Power; the senior leadership at Tata Power including managing director Prasad Menon; and the eastern region projects team that handles projects in remote areas. This last is a new challenge for Mr Agrawala with difficult variables — impoverished people, land takeovers, the Naxalite movement, etc. What he finds reassuring is the fact that the same locals who were once hostile are now welcoming, a fact he attributes to the Tata reputation and the socially-responsible manner in which the company operates in these areas.

Challenges and opportunities

Mr Agrawala feels the only real challenge at Tata Power is that of human resource. With most industrial sectors riding the development boom and enough employment opportunities going around, it is not easy to attract good talent to the power industry. (If the current global economic crisis persists, the situation may change, but that remains to be seen.)

The solution to this issue, Mr Agrawala feels, lies in demonstrating to potential employees the value

proposition that Tata Power offers. As he explains, "Our people know that this is a great place to work in; they are familiar with the systems already in place. They also know the company is growing at a tremendous pace. In fact this is why we need to have a regular pipeline of talent flowing into the company. We need to build that pipeline by communicating the advantages of working here to potential employees."

Another challenge that Mr Agrawala feels may be a big issue in the future is that of re-orientation of present employees to the changing market place with its growth-driven scenarios. "We need to appreciate that we have a fairly large number of people within the organisation who may not have witnessed growth at the pace it is now likely to acquire. They need to be prepared to face this change, to develop new skills and a mindset that is customer-focused," he elaborates.

Looking to the future, Mr Agrawala is keenly interested in renewable energy. "It's the flavour of the day. It's interesting and everyone wants to be a part of it. For Tata Power, it is a new focus area as well as part of the overall sustainability agenda," he explains.

Fully aware of the issues of climate change and global warming, Mr Agrawala is deeply committed to the environmental cause. He expatiates on Tata Power's climate change programme, "I can divide it into three parts. First, finding ways to burn coal more efficiently and cut down the carbon emissions per unit. The second is finding renewable sources of energy where power generation does not emit any carbon gases at all. In fact, by the end of the year we will have almost 200mw of power from wind energy, and more such wind power projects are being commissioned. Solar energy is also a thrust area and we are exploring investments in geothermal projects. The third part is finding methods of storing or absorbing carbon emissions."

Life and leisure

The future is heady and exciting, both professionally and personally, for a multifaceted man like Mr Agrawala. Although kept busy by the demands of the job, he still manages to find time for his family. He starts the day early and goes for a morning run before he reaches office and his hectic schedule takes over.

Looking back at a satisfactory career and a happy personal life, Mr Agrawala has but one regret — his love for music has found no opportunities for striking the high notes. "Music is my first love; if I could make a living out of it I would chuck my job," avers the man who personifies today's global manager. ●

Christina Fernandes