

TAS for two

While its common knowledge that TAS gives one a thorough grounding into various types of business operations, here is a tale of a merger of a different kind

She's from IIM, Ahmedabad, he's from IIM, Bangalore. She is a Bengali, he is a Kannadiga. The odds weren't too high that they would meet, and they did. In campus, they both took the same career decision and joined TAS. And when posted together at Tata Tea in Kolkata, they both took the same life decision and got married.

We are talking about soft-spoken amiable Abanti Sankaranarayanan, executive director and deputy CEO, Mount Everest Mineral Water and the intellectual Govind Sankaranarayanan, CFO, Tata Capital — married since 1994 and the only TAS couple in the Tata Group.

Fifteen years later, Govind and Abanti are still with the Tata Group. Somewhere along the line, they have found that belonging to the TAS cadre has enhanced their careers, their managerial skill sets and their marital bonding. How did this happen?

It was a combination of the diverse nature of Group companies and a flexibility on the part of Group HR. The first has had a tremendous impact on the managerial experiences of the couple. Govind has had training assignments with Tata IBM, Titan, Tata Tea, TSMG and Tata Motors. Thereafter he has worked with Tata Tea, Tetley, VSNL International and now Tata Capital.

As a result, Govind has had exposure to the Group's new

initiatives from the broader perspective of Tata Industries, an immersing in globalisation and privatisation as a VSNL [now Tata Communications] insider, and the learnings from pushing national-level start up, Tata Capital. "These are all very different situations. The ability to face those situations is what develops the manager. To face different management situations, moving across companies... that really is the definition of experience," says Govind.

And what helps is that partner Abanti is completely in vibe as she has had the same experiences working in companies of different sectors, cultures and management styles. "Personally I am very stimulated by the opportunity to learn how people can work within the same Group very, very differently. This is one very significant reason why I have stayed on with the Group. Some people like change and some people prefer to remain with the same company. TAS gives you that choice. It's a unique mental and intellectual stimulation," says Abanti.

TAS has provided them with the opportunity to work with stalwarts within the Group, which has influenced and impacted them both as individuals and professionals. In fact, this was a deciding factor when Govind chose to become executive assistant to RK Krishna Kumar at Tata Tea.



“I thought it would be nice to work with someone you admire,” he admits. Mr Krishna Kumar has been an influence on both of them and in fact he was one of the first who knew that the two would tie the knot.

Abanti continues to work closely with him even today and has enhanced responsibilities in moving the Tata Tea group into a more unified beverages business. Of the other people they have worked with, it is not just the management style but also their ethics that has influenced the couple. Govind particularly mentions N Srinath and Vinod Kumar at Tata Communications, Kishor Chaukar in Tata Industries and Praveen Kadle, his current boss at Tata Capital. “These are all people I have worked with over the years. Sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly, sometimes on the other side of the table, from some other Group company. I have enjoyed working with them and learnt immensely,” says Govind.

Abanti elaborates: “Several people in the Group, at very senior levels, have a lot to be proud of but they always put the Group before themselves, I think that stands out... and gives you a certain set of values.” The impact has been not only in terms of management style but also in the unwritten code of the Group. “The richness of the value systems that they have, their humanity, their exceptional dedication to work and the quality of intellect they bring... I have tried to imbibe a little bit of it,” adds Govind.

Over the years, the couple has found that being in TAS has opened up exciting and challenging work options. In 2000 they moved to Tetley, London. The marketing stint at Tetley as market planning and consumer insight manager gave Abanti exposure to the challenges of a mature market where corporatised retail is in a powerful position vis-à-vis manufacturing companies. In 2003, the couple moved to the US where Govind, as CFO of VSNL International, managed the Teleglobe, Canada and Tyco, USA acquisitions.

This wide diversity of exposure that is possible through TAS is something that both Abanti and Govind appreciate. Says Abanti, “CEOs at the Tata Group bring an exceptional amount of dedication, commitment, capability to work hard and single-minded focus on creating or re-creating whatever business they are in. Most of them are multi-faceted and can engage with you and hold a conversation or discussion on anything – work, philosophy, current affairs, what’s happening around the globe.” Govind agrees, “Its the combination of multi-dimensional skills that becomes more important as you become more senior. It might not pay off early in your career but clearly if you are heading a function or a company, you need those kinds of skills.”

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That there was a more understanding aspect of Tata Group HR was something Abanti realised when she had her kids. “When I returned to work after having my twins, I could choose an assignment which did not require too much of travel and would allow me to have reasonable hours. I got back to work in Mr Krishna Kumar’s office when he was MD of Indian Hotels. That is why I say the people in the Group have a humanitarian aspect to them. Knowing that people understand is a de-stressor in itself.”

But while TAS gives, TAS also expects. As Govind rightly points out, “In one’s career, one has to be willing to take on certain risks and challenging assignments that the Group gives. One can really leverage that to work on more and more significant assignments.” The couple has never turned down what the Group has asked them to do even though that meant changing 15 houses in the past 12 years and having the kids go to four schools in the past two years.

With such demanding work lives, do they find time for each other and for their nine-year-old twins? “A fair amount of time,” says Govind. “I enforce a certain discipline upon myself and try to switch off my mind for a certain period of time every day,” adds Abanti. The couple acknowledge that they experienced a better work life balance while posted outside India, in London or New Jersey, where they could spend more time with their kids and go for outdoor activities.

Back in India now, how do they unwind? Watching the kids grow up is actually quite interesting for both, along with meeting friends, eating out, reading and listening to music. Govind likes to go for a swim occasionally and Abanti loves cooking different cuisines.

As a couple, TAS has given their bonding a natural extension as it provides an additional commonality. Over the years it has allowed them to help each other grow and learn and manage situations; they both know the same people and understand the circumstances. Personally and professionally, this is one couple that has grown with the Group. ●

Shubha Madhukar