

Journey through life



TAS manager **Sabaleel Nandy** goes through life taking on immediate challenges and leaving the future to deal with later. And why not?

Life, like happiness, is in the here and now

Sabaleel Nandy has never planned his life, and prefers to take things as they come. “I don’t think planning beyond 3-4 months makes sense,” says this IIM Lucknow alumnus. At college, Mr Nandy did not specialise in a particular field and was “more of a generalist”. When the time came to choose a company, he had three or four options including TAS.

Two things made Mr Nandy choose in TAS’s favour — apart from the fact that his father felt it was a more familiar brand name — first, the positives attached to being part of the Tata Group, and second and more important, the fact that it offered diversity and exposure across industries which very few companies could offer. “Since I was undecided about what I wanted to do, in TAS I got the freedom of deciding [my special area] later.”

But as he journeyed through TAS over the next two years, his appreciation and love for the Tata service grew stronger and stronger. He describes his voyage as one of discovery followed by intoxication; moving from close encounters of the business kind to stepping back and taking a macro view of the Group.

The discovery phase began with the ‘Bharat *darshan*’ as it was then called (“Today it has a more business-like

term, GOAL,” says Mr Nandy with a smile!). He spent two years doing projects in different Tata companies before joining Tata Motors. Having earlier worked for a PSU where the mindset is of working for ‘someone else’s company, Mr Nandy was pleasantly happy to experience the strong sense of belonging, unique to the Tata Group where there are many second generation employees.

Tata Motors was also where he got intoxicated with the automobile industry. “Cars were something I was always fascinated by and here I got deeply ingrained into the car market. It’s also one of the most happening industries and I slowly started becoming a motors man.” Mr Nandy was comfortably ensconced in his personal domain, heading car sales in the western region, managing 30-odd dealers and building personal relationships with them when an unexpected opportunity came his way.

It was the day before his marriage and the last thing he had on his mind was a new job profile. “I switched on my cell phone to check for missed calls when it rang and Rajesh Dahiya, head TAS and sourcing, said ‘Would you like to work with R Gopalakrishnan [ED, Tata Sons]?’ There was no reason for me to say no; it was a great opportunity and a challenge.”

Mr Nandy describes the change in profile as “suddenly orbiting at 30,000 feet from where you can see a lot of area but not much depth. While the insights you get into a lot of strategic matters is fascinating, the joy of details is missing.” But he added to his basket of learnings — getting to know how the Group works, the operations of the Group Corporate Centre, “and of course working with Mr Gopalakrishnan, who has his own elements of fun and challenge. In fact it was he who once told me ‘Happiness needs to be your companion not your destination’. It was one of the greatest ‘aha’ moments in my life.”

The years at Tata Sons marked a crucial phase in Mr Nandy’s induction into the Tata Group, having provided him with time to spend at a micro level with Tata Motors as well as at a macro level, developing insights into Group strategy.

Having been a TAS man for close to 10 years, Mr Nandy is clear that there are no explicit advantages to being in TAS — the opportunity to move from one company or one role to another is available to everyone in the Group. What is implicit is that a TAS manager, because he does projects in different companies and meets several key people, gets a wider exposure to the Group and an awareness of different pieces of the jigsaw puzzle and how they fit; he gets to know how the Group works a little bit more than a person who has joined and worked with a single company.

“Interactions with senior leaders across companies give you the opportunity to learn many things from them, who are role models in their own right,” acknowledges Mr Nandy. “The learning or the transfer of some of these qualities which you can emulate happens in a more accidental manner. The proximity helps in transfer of learning.”

Another aspect of a TAS manager is that most people assume that they are expected to perform at a particular level. “The expectations are higher and therefore the nature of the assignments, the challenges involved are higher. This aspect is both a positive as well as a negative; an opportunity as well as a risk.”

All this has undoubtedly lowered Mr Nandy’s curve of time spent on extra curricular activities. From being a competitive badminton player — he played the game at hostel level at IIT Kharagpur — Mr Nandy now plays it only on weekends with a group of friends. A keen public speaker and an avid writer (he was the governor of *Kharagpur Alankar*, the college English magazine), he no longer has time to indulge in these activities.

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He however believes that finding the ‘life balance’ is understanding what your hobbies are. “You need to do what you love to do; it could be playing the guitar or reading industry reports if that’s your area of passion. The important thing is to be engrossed with what you are doing.”

Mr Nandy says he was not into music, dramatics or singing, even in college. What he has managed to use successfully and build on is his organisational skills. An inadvertent organiser, Mr Nandy was always getting things done. He was the president of the Civil Engineering Society at Kharagpur and a member of the management committee of the hostel at Kharagpur and Lucknow. And these skills will help Mr Nandy in handling his new portfolio as head, strategy and business excellence in Tata Chemicals.

When offered this post, the pragmatic Mr Nandy’s first question to MD Homi Khusrookhan was ‘Why me when I have no previous experience in business excellence?’ And Mr Khusrookhan’s answer, ‘We need a fresh mind’ struck an answering chord in Mr Nandy, who thought the role was a unique combination, one that would give him a good and challenging profile.

Tata Chemicals which won the JRD QV Award in July 2007 is now gearing up for the next level and Mr Nandy, who remembers captaining his school house to victory, is just as excited and ready to repeat his feat. He compares Tata Chemicals to a runner who has just won a race and is taking a break, girding himself for the next race. “There is a fair amount of creativity that is required to be successful, a bit of a mindset change. To take it to the next level, we need a different set of tools and techniques and we trying to put that together. I am too new to judge my performance here, but I am having fun in my job.”

It’s clear that Mr Gopalakrishnan’s maxim continues to guide Mr Nandy’s life through its many ‘aha’ moments — ‘Happiness needs to be your companion not your destination’. ●

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