

For a man who could well have led a pretty successful life in the Silicon Valley, **RAJENDRA S PAWAR** chose the path less trodden instead and created NIIT, which today stands as a global talent development corporation



For

all the precision of his mind, Rajendra Pawar has an easy simplicity that he wears as casually as his khadi, Chinese-collared shirt. So his room at the swanky headquarters of NIIT (National Institute of Information Technology) in Gurgaon does have paintings from around the world, but done by students and fresh talent, his favourite being the Vietnamese fisherman on his sampan going with the ceaseless flow of the river. There's a putting green patch on the terrace outside, which is used by his co-founder for a spot of golfing but Pawar likes the foliage around it. In fact, he chooses the particular creeper he likes to be photographed with. And then he sips chai, brewed the Indian way, rather than the green tea that modern corporates serve even without asking.

The sum of these little sensitivities explains how the man, who could be a Silicon Valley czar, chose to stay back and pioneer not only computer education in the country but demystify the halo that information technology was the preserve of geniuses and create a demand for skilled professionals in the industry. NIIT, which was set up in 1981 to address a human resource challenge, is today a global talent development corporation that offers IT-enabled solutions to individuals, enterprises and institutions. NIIT now has a separate company, NIIT Technologies, for servicing the software and allied market at home and abroad. Now Pawar's passion is the NIIT University, which is a multi-disciplinary, research-based, solutions-oriented and seamless way of preparing industry-ready professionals. As somebody who gave ordinary, young Indians — no matter how far-flung or deprived they were — the belief that they could acquire the power to realise their dreams, Pawar embodies innovation that will see us through. Despite everything.

"One of my supervisors once told me, 'always use a defect as an effect.' And that stuck in my mind," says Pawar as we gather in his "War Room," so called because future planning is done here to battle potential crises in the nation's growth story.



**FIRST MOVES** Pawar is extremely matter-of-fact about the genesis of NIIT. "It may seem like a grand plan in retrospect but I would say success usually lends itself to dramatisation. There was nothing dramatic though," says the man who has grappled more grassroots realities than you can imagine. Groomed at Scindia School and having graduated from IIT Delhi, as an electrical engineer, he found himself on the shop floor of DCM as a textile engineer where he got some valuable management lessons, a big deal in 1972. Then Shiv Nadar gave him a window of opportunity, asking him to look after the western India operations of HCL. "I chose corporate planning as my forte, a nice hazy term but one which entailed tying up loose ends of business processes and conceiving market-oriented products. Joining the dots during those years of extensive reading, studying the industry and attending global conferences, we realised that while HCL would make very good computers, not many could use them."

Much of NIIT has since then predicted a logical conclusion of an industry move and thought of a way out. A lot of meetings, scribbling on napkins in cafes later, NIIT came up in 1981. "I remember our first multimedia campaign, which those days was just a colour TV. It went something like, 'If you have a college degree and no job then we can change your life.'" By the time the company was listed in 1991, the acronym had become such a strong brand that nobody pronounced it phonetically (knit) but as it would sound letter by letter.

It was not just about creating a workforce but even convincing the leadership teams of governments and corporations the need to apply the technology. Pawar, along with Arvind-Thakur, Vijay Raju and Dr Sugato Mitra met CEOs and held workshops on the imperatives of computerisation. "We started what we called 'fireside chats' with CEOs, knowing full well their time constraints. We usually met them in a club room or hotel, gave a 10-15 minute presentation and answered all their questions. Internally, we had a TMI blitz. I was writing quite regularly those days about the need for IT and my colleague would promptly convert them into nicely printed two-page 'Infotech Updates', pack them into neat folders and

## BUSINESS CARD

### TURNOVER:

₹2,982 CRORE

**X FACTOR:** PIONEER IN COMPUTER EDUCATION

### TOP DRAW:

INNOVATION AND REVOLUTIONARY IDEAS IN IMPARTING TECHNICAL TRAINING

**HALL OF FAME:** PADMA BHUSHAN IN 2011, MASTER ENTREPRENEUR OF THE YEAR AWARD BY ERNST & YOUNG IN 1999

ask company secretaries to put them on the top of their bosses' tables. It was an easy read and designed to make them want to attend classes. By 1986, we became the most popular company at IIM campuses for our training modules," he tells us.

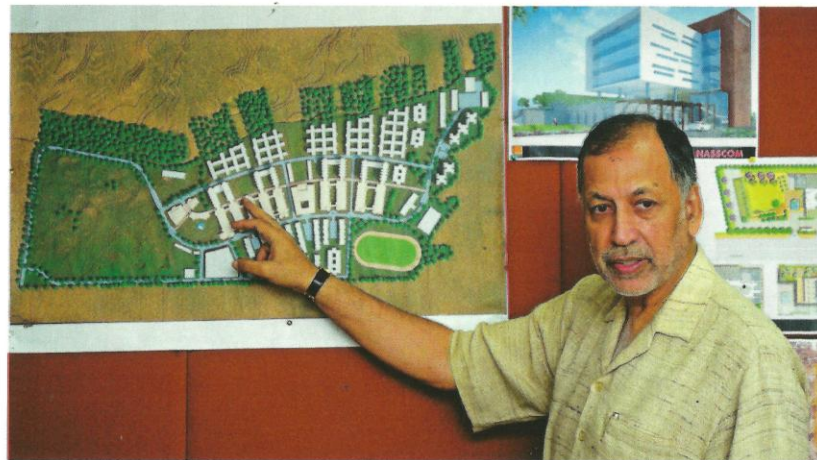
The engagement with corporate India showed. "The chairmen of Indian Oil, ONGC and large companies came to us. In fact, the then Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu called all his MLAs to a session, Delhi Chief Minister Sheila Dikshit came to our office twice for a two-day programme with all her bureaucrats and Ministers. Dr Mitra addressed legislators in Bengal although the Left was averse to technology cutting down manpower," he says. In short, NIIT was evangelising an idea and reshaping mindsets in its first decade with a dogged persistence. This often led to a consulting assignment and it created methodology and instructional software as well.

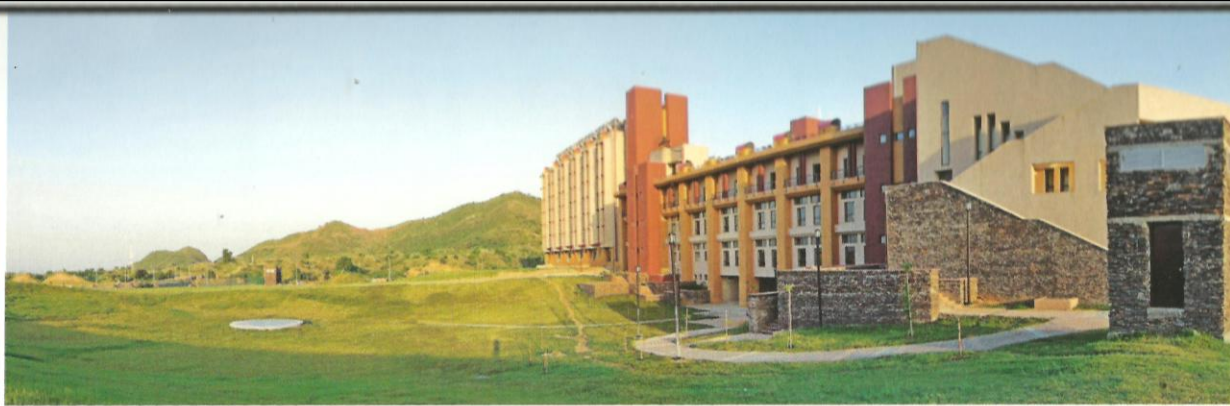
"Our journey into software began unlike other companies that were doing body-shopping. There was a programming shortage in the US and a fantastic opportunity for India which we have leveraged into a \$100 billion industry. But we were not in the mainframe business because we were teaching people about technology and we were helping Indian companies. It was only in 1991 that our first international operation started. When we focussed on software export, we did not want to lose our talent and made sure that our customers in the US were comfortable with what we made in India and dealing with us. For developing a sharp edge in software engineering, we tied up with international thought leaders like Edward

Yorden and worked with Sun Microsystems and Canadian companies."

If anybody thought NIIT was a non-mainstream education system, he was silently answered by high-paying jobs and placements of its students. The result-orientation is what made it pick Viswanathan Anand as its brand ambassador, determined to win despite the troughs, like the dotcom bust.

**CLICK OF AN INNOVATION** The Y2K bug meant a boom for the software business, causing NIIT to hibernate





specialised services as NIIT Technologies in 2004 from the learning business, which again extends to 30 or 40 countries. Meanwhile, the instructional software export expanded to cover non-IT subjects as well, an idea that was quickly assimilated in the GNIIT programme. This was a holistic jump to include the much in demand quality management, communication, team work and presentation skills, in short anything that would make for a global professional, not just a programmer.

“In the last decade, we decided to groom talent in the finance sector and partnered with ICICI. In a sense, we started delivering management education through technology outside the campus. Our first assignment was Imperia in 2006. Then we did a project for the Singapore police, which involved generating a programme telling you which laws get activated when you handcuff an offender, and a smart school project in Malaysia. We were the only Indian company to be invited for the multimedia super corridor project,” says Pawar.

The 80s were a period of unbelievable innovations at NIIT, hundreds of them as Pawar says. Its franchise operations, where individuals trained by it started their own ventures, were a spurt that earned it the sobriquet of being the “McDonald’s of IT.” Innovations happened further, like the recent Cloud Campus, which emphasises on an interactive, fun way of online learning that mimics a Facebook experience (It has an interesting tagline: “I’m not studying.”) The organisation, in the mean time, was continuously professionalised while the founders moved on to chase more rainbows.

But one thing still bothered Pawar, the need for research and development in a country that doesn’t much allow a spirit of inquiry in mainstream teaching. That was the germ of the NIIT university.

**THE BASE OF THE PYRAMID** “The university was born out of an idea for a higher end, not for profit. We have crossed a 1,000 students this year, so it is an important milestone,” says Pawar of his dream project.

Spread at the bottom of a hillock over 100 acres in Alwar, the institution is rather a philosophy. The green campus, complete with a self-devised, upward, drip-irrigation system, recharge wells and almost zero waste footprint, is a lesson in sustainability. The layout itself is in the shape of a spine with interlinked corridors and open courtyards, allowing for a free-flowing exchange of ideas. “It is more of a research laboratory, not only for education but also for a holistic integration of life itself. Our students are meant to engage with government schools and look after one pupil from each one of them. That is what we call the principal of seamlessness,” he says of his commitment.

What then is the future of skill development in India, good enough to generate a democratic dividend? “This is a layered problem. First is funding. If your job guarantees a certain amount of salary like IT does, you can borrow from your future to finance it. You will take a loan. But our problem in manufacturing is that we cannot get enough skilled people for something as basic as construction because we have mostly school dropouts at the lower levels who need much more input for one unit of learning. On the other side, their ability to pay is a third or fourth. So I call it the order of magnitude problem. Then there is a social stigma to specialised skills and an aura around degrees. It is not there in Germany and Switzerland, two countries that have solved the skill problem. In Germany, small and medium industries have brought stability to the economy. Second is the apprenticeship model which we need to follow ASAP. But our mindset is a millennial problem, not even decadal or centennial. And third, our manufacturing should be more sustainable. We should switch to using resources that are renewable than perishable. For example, we could look at scaling food processing and textile industries because the raw material is renewable and both are labour-intensive. Besides, mind is the most renewable. And the 21st century belongs to the Indian mind,” says Pawar, his eyes imagining a new reality. Fertile with possibilities.