The Maverick Effect

The Inside story of India's IT Revolution

HARISH MEHTA

Harish Mehta came back to India from USA when he was 29, he is the founder of Onward Technologies and the first elected chairman of NASSCOM

I came back to India, tried my father's movie distribution business, looked at manufacturing, but finally started a one person IT consultancy business.

Glaxo and Nerolac paints were my first clients.
Both were looking to automate work.
In 1977, I joined Hinditron as a partner.

In 1979 I said in an interview with Financial Express that India's software exports could be as much as the diamond industry.
Financial express spelt it as "softwear" in its headline!

A life mirrors the time it is lived in and the people it is lived with.

After my engineering in Poona, I went to do an MS in Computer science in Brooklyn Polytechnic, New York, USA.

The Vietnam war was on, with flower power I saw the open dissent via peaceful demonstrations. Coming from India, I could not visualize such open dissent against the government.

I pursued management courses at Rensselaer Polytechnic, specializing in finance and marketing.

No one understood software in the 80s, I met Vijay Mukhi and a bunch of people would gather at his house to discuss the technology opportunity. This became the Bombay computer club and the seeds of NASSCOM (National association of Software and Service Companies) was born.

I mooted the idea of a software services association to work with the government to bring about changes needed to grow the sector.

Some people thought FC Kohli was autocratic, but I thought he wanted people to do their homework before they spoke.

Nasscom started by 40 founding companies transformed an industry, it transformed India, it created a new work culture that is more egalitarian and global.

Nasscom built a India frost strategy, we invited bureaucrats to out member company premises so that they could see the problems the software industry faced. This was they became 'us'

I got to know Dewang Mehta, chartered accountant , working as EDP manager in Orissa cement and got him to Nasscom as President.

As Nasscom got rebranded and built, Dewang's brand also got built. We aimed to have the finesse of international events at every Nasscom event.

Dewang became the face of India's software revolution.

Dewang was the go to man for all industry related matters. He became a close advisor to several ministers. He had reached a stage when he would get uncomfortable if he didn't get mentioned in the Economic Times of the day.

In 2020, the IT industry employed 4 million people directly and about 8 times that indirectly.

It was tough to rein in Dewang, but the task was mine.
If there was one important quality I would pick in Dewang, it was his complete disregard for the impossible.

In 1988 when Nasscom was founded, IT services exports were $ 52 Million, today it is $ 150 Billion, the same as what Saudi exports via Oil.

I was eased out of Hinditron and I didn't see that coming. I felt betrayed.

I started Onward Technologies.

In Nasscom, we tried to collaborate while we competed with customers. The larger good was more important. This happened because members had integrity, trust, and respect for each other.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the IT industry's annual bandwidth is what a teenager would consumer over a weekend today.

In the 1980s, we roped in Shammi Kapoor as brand ambassador to build the awareness of the internet and its uses. He travelled with us to many cities and presented brilliantly.

In consumer goods, quality can ascertained beforehand, in services it is experienced after it has been paid for.

The mindset for success needs to change. A software entrepreneur mut trust a large number of people within an organization, build systems and relinquish control.

Y2K was a big boost. The biggest dividend was not the money the Indian companies made, but it was a positive impact on brand India.

One of the Nasscom tag lines was "come for the cost, stay for the quality"

Companies come for the cost but stay for the quality. Nasscom requested every software company with over 100 software engineers to get the SEI CMMI Level 5 certification.

In 1999, with Kanwal Rekhi's help we got TiE into India and set up the first chapter in Mumbai.

One of the reasons that China failed to compete against India's software services industry was its lack of respect for IP.

Nasscom lobbied aggressively for fundamental changes and finally succeeded. In the early 1990s the copyright act of 1957 was amended to include software. At that time it was estimated that 75 % of the systems in India used pirated software.

The country must never forget that the biggest casualty of its earlier disregard for copyrights is the continued lack of original thinking by its entrepreneurs.

Nasscom is in Dewang's debt , not just for his daunting tireless work but for his flamboyance.

In death too, Dewang has stirred up a media storm. Every news channel had non stop coverage of the day.
I lit the funeral pyre.

The Satyam case was our Houston moment. Som Mittal the Chairman worked tirelessly to ensure that the industry image was not tarnished. He convinced the media and government that we had to rescue Satyam and put it back on course for the sake of India Inc.