A source of inspiration during A. Seshagiri Rao's early years was his father, who had a difficult childhood owing to the early death of his own father and had to pull himself up through grit and self-denial, including walking 5 km to school. After getting a job as a clerk, he had worked his way up quickly, retiring as a magistrate. "He used to narrate stories about the challenging times he faced and how he never let them ever shake his faith in what can result from hard work and righteousness," says Rao.

Rao is also the product of a government school. He still remembers the time when he was in Class II and the teacher would hand back answer sheets while calling out the marks. He had to strain to hear his marks amid the classroom din. "Only when I used to hear that I was still the topper of the class would I relax. Those were simple times, but we learnt some very valuable life lessons, which have shaped my approach to dealing with challenges. I think struggle makes you more humane and somewhat non-judgmental about others too," he says.

An electronics and communications engineering graduate from Jawaharlal Nehru Technological University, Andhra Pradesh, Rao's early ambition was to do something novel and big rather than take on a monotonous job. He joined Bharat Heavy Electricals Limited as an R&D engineer in 1981, but felt that he was not making full use of his faculties and so switched to the railway services through the UPSC.

It was here that his worldview widened as he made his way through multifarious assignments. His career spanned pretty much every facet of construction and operations. He commissioned several signalling and telecom projects across South Central Railway and in all divisions up to Pune.

Given the almost mythic status of the railways as the single largest employer in the country, Rao has been "constantly humbled" by the recognition his work has received from his employer. He was singled out for the prestigious Railway Board award, to mention only one of numerous distinctions.

Later, after being posted to the headquarters in a routine job, Rao moved to RailTel, which, at that time, was in the embryonic phase and posed a lot of challenges.

“I was solely responsible for setting up RailTel’s southern region in 2002, and by 2011, I had brought it to a turnover of Rs 1 billion. Innovation was always key for me and I ended up commissioning the earliest data centre there, which was also Tier 3 certified,” he says.

In 2012, Rao was promoted to director, marketing and planning, RailTel. During his tenure, the turnover almost tripled, leading the company towards becoming a total system integrator from a simple bandwidth provider.

Having successfully worked in RailTel, at both the zone and corporate offices, he was looking for another challenging opportunity when Telecommunications Consultants India Limited (TCIL) offered him the post of chairman and managing director.

Here, he is excited by the role telecom is playing in pushing the Indian economy to another level. “Telecom is the core for Digital India, Skill India and Universal Internet Access. It is important for India to have a robust telecom network to power ahead of the rest of the world as a digital economy. As we head towards a data-centric future, telecom is destined to throw up new opportunities and challenges. As most of TCIL’s business comes from telecom projects, the growth of the industry will drive growth and new project volumes for the company,” he says.

For a start, the roll-out of 5G technologies is expected to create significant business opportunities for telecom companies. TCIL continues to leverage innovation in technology, adapting to new developments. With its proactive approach to innovation, the company has shown its ability to adapt to the rapidly changing world of technology, which it has to successfully customise for its clients.

In addition to network investments, Rao says TCIL is focused on creating business efficiencies and streamlining processes. It has been a pioneer in setting up next-generation wireless services like smart Wi-Fi, VoLTE as well as mobile applications in rural and remote areas in geographically difficult terrain such as Arunachal Pradesh and Jammu & Kashmir.

“We are committed to connecting the unconnected to realise our government’s vision of a digitally enabled country. The biggest challenge is competition from both the private and public sectors, and TCIL, with its experienced manpower and skill sets, is ready to overcome that,” he says.

Going forward, Rao predicts that connectivity will soon be seen to be as important as air and water. Telecom companies will have to massively change their services to offer not just “digital transformation” but a complete “digital journey”.

Other trends to watch, he says, are the increasing push towards a cashless economy that has already mobilised the usage of mobile wallets and mobile banking transactions; cybersecurity becoming a top priority for governments and businesses alike; the emergence of BWA technologies such as Wi-Max and LTE; India being poised to become the second largest market in 5G services, after China, in the next 10 years; and “green telecom” emerging as a key technology to reduce the carbon footprint of the telecom industry through lower energy consumption.

“The government is also planning to develop 100 smart cities, wherein the internet of things will play a vital role in their development. Artificial intelligence (AI) will bring the next big leap in technology. It will allow smartphones to perform highly sophisticated functions such as augmented reality, speech recognition and indoor navigation,” says Rao.

As most of the players in IT and telecom are migrating towards full-service operations, market competition is becoming fiercer, he concedes. To survive, it has become necessary to build quality networks, meet user needs and offer more innovative services. Quality of experience, he says, is key.

All Rao’s career decisions have been guided by the desire to help his company scale new heights. “I believe that hard work and a proactive and innovative approach are essential. But the key is teamwork, without which growth is neither robust nor sustainable.”

Rao does not subscribe to any one style of management. He feels that situations and teams are so fluid that one particular way of functioning may prove to be inappropriate and ineffective. Agility and flexibility are more important. “A fluid, dynamic approach, flexibility and a fine

balance rivets the capability to render miracles for the organisation. It is also vital that the leader barrels through any resistance that cripples the organisation owing to today's rapidly transforming times, keeping it young, hydrated and equipped throughout to scale an exponential progressive run," he says.

In terms of assignments that stand out in his memory, one has to be when he started the southern zone of RailTel single-handedly in 2002, after switching from a senior position in the railway services to venture out into an absolutely new zone.

"Heading a new zone meant that there wasn't even a peon to clean the only room that served as my office back then. That zone developed into a Rs 1 billion organisation during my tenure with all state-of-the-art technologies and four other full-fledged territories were opened in four states of the southern zone. It was a highly satisfying milestone for me."

Rao's day starts at 5 a.m. with a morning walk, a visit to the temple, the newspapers and then the office. At the end of a packed day, he unwinds by watching TV and reading magazines. "I never sit free for more than 10 minutes," he says. Asked what his wife thinks of this busy schedule, particularly as it's only the two of them at home now as the children are grown up and working in the US. "That is a question you should be asking my wife!" he laughs.

"My wife is my pillar of strength, providing me wise counsel and strong support whenever I need it. She understands my long working hours. She is an extremely talented person herself and pursues many hobbies. She trains regularly in Indian classical music," he says.

With just two children, his family experience as an adult has been very different from his own childhood when he grew up with three siblings. As the youngest brother, he was able to learn a lot from his brothers, particularly from his eldest, who was something of a star and won lots of prizes in school.

"His example inspired me to secure first rank and prizes all through, from my first standard to engineering. He used to teach me Hindi when I was studying in fifth standard. The value of Hindi was unknown to me at the time, but I eventually understood the true value of those basics when I was posted outside my native state. As I lost my father when I was 20, my dream of doing a Ph.D remained unfulfilled and that still continues to haunt me. But life has been good

and I have no regrets.”

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