DELHI BELLY FOR BOMBAY KA BABU

"In retrospect, I was fortunate to have been at the right magazine at the right time, when India was taking off," says Raju Chellam, who remembers the glory days of the 1980s and 1990s

I think I first met Pradeep Gupta (PG) in the summer of 1985 at an IT conference in London or Paris. We knew each other through our respective publications. He was publisher of *Dataquest*, India's first computer monthly; I was with *The Economic Times* in Bombay, where I had started contributing India's first column on computers in the mainstream media. *The Economic Times* ran my column on computers *(CompuTalk)* – and another on science *(ScienTalk)* every week from 1984 through 1989.

PG was in Europe on business; I was visiting on an invitation from the British government to write about its IT industry and had appointments to meet with top executives from International Computers Ltd (ICL) and Sinclair Research (it's landmark XZ80 PC was launched in January 1980).

THE 1980s
While PG launched the first issue of *Dataquest* (DQ) in

December 1982; two years earlier in December 1980, Bennett Coleman & Company, publishers of *The Times of India, The Economic Times, The Illustrated Weekly,* and a slew of other titles hired me as an intern.

In December 1980, Ronald Reagan was preparing to take office as the 40th President of the United States, and Indira Gandhi was elected Prime Minister of India for the fourth time. In the IT arena,

Microsoft released its first programming language, Microsoft QuickBASIC, for the IBM PC, and the US government set up the Federal Computer Investigations Committee to investigate computer-related crimes, a precursor to the current scourge of cybercrime.

THE 1990s

In 1989, a national business magazine offered me a job as a senior technology correspondent based in New Delhi; they would pay my relocation costs, my house rent, and provide me a company car. I was eager to accept and told two of my closest friends – Vijay Mukhi, who was just about getting into the business of IT training, and Shashi Bhagnari, DQ's business and editorial chief in Bombay.

It was also by chance that DQ's editor, Shyam Malhotra, was then visiting Bombay. I think it was Vijay who suggested to Shyam to consider hiring me. The next thing I knew, PG was on the phone (landline) making me an offer I couldn't refuse: "Would you like to join as Editor of DQ?" He said he would match the offer made by the business magazine. I accepted – maybe a bit too eagerly.

The job was cool; the new city wasn't. The DQ team was terrific; navigating the city was terrible. For a hardcore *Bombay ka Babu*, it was like migrating to Barcelona. The culture was different, the traffic was chaotic, the weather was alternately too hot or too cold, the snack choices were limited, and I seemed to suffer the "Delhi Belly" syndrome almost every month.

The other problem? Unlike Bombay, where local trains connected major locations, in Delhi, one needed to drive to get anywhere. I had learnt to drive on a Padmini with gears attached to the steering column. When Shyam and Dave Ghosh (then-editor of *PC Quest*) accompanied me to a car showroom to try a Maruti 800 (with gears on the floor), I promptly crashed the car into another – and had to pay the dealer Rs 1,000 to repair the damage.

The new decade had liberated India. In 1991, Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao and Finance Minister Dr Manmohan Singh reduced trade barriers, deregulated industries, and actively attracted foreign direct investment to entice IT companies from the US. According to the US Bureau of Economic Analysis, gross revenues of the ICT industry in the US in 1989 crossed US\$462 billion (in current dollars). The prevalence of PCs and the rapid rise of the Internet had fuelled the boom.

So far, so good. However, on the personal front, despite my wife being from Delhi and my daughter being born in Delhi, I never grew to like the city, no matter how hard I tried to. In June 1989, I took delivery of a second-hand Maruti 800. I had rented an apartment at Janakpuri, closer to my in-laws; but DQ offices were at Panchsheel Enclave. The hour-long drive was via Cantonment roads.

One morning in mid-June, while I was driving to work, a white Ambassador rear-ended my car. The impact hit a jawan who was cycling alongside, flinging him into a ditch. Soon, military and civilian cops descended on us and threatened to arrest me and the other driver for injuring a jawan. I explained it was not my fault that I had braked to let the jawan pass; the Ambassador driver had failed to brake in time. My explanation in *Bombaya* Hindi greatly amused the cops – as well as the injured jawan.

There were no mobile phones then. The cops contacted DQ. Shyam and PG took the trouble to drive over and settle the situation. The cops let me go and arrested the Ambassador driver. Shyam offered to drive me whenever he could, while my car was undergoing extensive repairs. PG got his staff to handle the post-accident issues and ensured the insurance company reimbursed me.

THE TRIUMPHS

When I was in *The Economic Times*, I had written a series of ten short stories featuring biorobots and a bunch of Indian scientists trying and failing to control them. Called *The Indus Project,* it had the usual masala elements (vicious villains, idiotic sidekicks, suspense, a dash of horror, and a romantic quadrangle). I gave the bunch of stories to PG to read and forgot all about the matter.

One winter evening in 1991, PG invited me to his office to meet his friend who had completed filming a serial that had debuted on *Doordarshan National* in 1989. The friend was Shah Rukh Khan, and the serial was *Fauji*. PG asked me to narrate the rough script and story arc. I did, in English. Shah Rukh Khan asked me whether I could rewrite the screenplay in Hindi. I said if I did that, the series would turn into an unintended comedy with all the actors speaking *"tapori"* Bombay Hindi.

As expected, the project didn't go anywhere. But Shah Rukh Khan did, becoming one of the most famous and respected film stars in the world.

In retrospect, I was fortunate to have been at the right magazine at the right time, when India was taking off. A good friend and fellow journalist, Dewang Mehta, had taken over as the first president of NASSCOM. Prem Shivdasani, who I had known from his days as president of ICIM (Indian arm of ICL) and had co-founded MAIT, suddenly passed away in 1994.

Meanwhile, I was delighted to have interviewed the early stalwarts of the industry, including Dr N Seshagiri, Dr FC Kohli, Dr OP Mehra, Shiv Nadar, Raj Saraf, Pravin Gandhi, Ashok Soota, Harish Mehta, Atul Nishar, Hemant Sonawala (Hinditron), Apurva Parekh (Essen), Lalit Kanodia, and others who helped grow India's nascent computer industry.

The icing on the cake for me was putting together DQ's 100th issue, in April 1991, in which we got exclusive contributions from former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, Kenneth Olsen (founder of Digital Equipment Corp), industrialist SL Kirloskar, Azim Premji, Shiv Nadar, Dr PP Gupta (CMC), N Vittal (Secretary, Department of Electronics), Rajendra Pawar, BVR Mohan Reddy (OMC), Diwakar Nigam (Softek), and Adam Osborne, among others.

In retrospect, I'm delighted and humbled to have played a small part in the origins of India's ICT revolution. I'm eternally grateful to Pradeep Gupta, Shyam Malhotra, and my DQ team for this. 🅓🅠

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