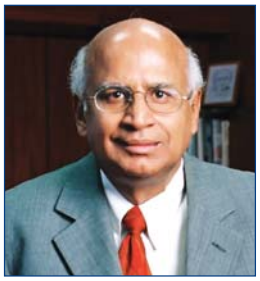
Connected to the social side



S RAMADORAI

Tata Consultancy Services chief executive officer and managing director **S Ramadorai** talks to *Christabelle Noronha* about the company's trailblazing efforts in reaching telephony technology to India's interiors.

At which stage of the Indian communication revolution did Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) get involved?

TCS has been involved right from the formative years of this revolution. We began in the late 1960s and early 1970s by creating simple software applications for Bombay telephones. We built a consulting application and ran it on our computers to produce bills and reconcile these with payments.

We had a large computer at our Air India building office in Mumbai and this was connected to a smaller computer at the Mumbai headquarters of Associated Cement Company [or ACC, which was then a part of the Tata group]. Telecommunications connected ACC and TCS even in those days, with a demonstration and a production system where people could run their jobs sitting in their offices.

On the international front our involvement started in 1971, when Bell Nortel Research, the research arm of Nortel, contracted us for the maintenance of their switching software. This was an important milestone; we were managing the high-end switch software of an offshore facility.

In 1996, when Tata Teleservices came into existence, we became their partners in providing for business processes within the organisation, the digitisation of those processes and, subsequently, all their billing, customer care and operational support systems.

What about the projects that make up TCS's societal commitments, projects that have social relevance?

TCS has adopted telecommunications as a medium to address societal parameters. In anything we do within the telecommunications technology context, we always look at the subject from the applicability-to-society point of view.

The first of these projects was AP Online, which makes available to citizens — anytime and anywhere — simple services such as applications for land records, birth certificates, new electricity or water connections, and payment of property tax and telephone bills. Another project, also in Andhra Pradesh, is the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme [NREGS], for which we created a solution to help monitor and facilitate activities such as the issuing of job cards, identification of work, generation of work estimates, work execution and wage payment.

The computer-based functional literacy [CBFL] programme for adults is a TCS-driven project that reaches out to thousands of people. Using computers, animated graphics and a voiceover, the programme teaches adults how to read in about 40 hours of learning. The programme has been developed in several regional languages and uses familiar cultural metaphors to enable beneficiaries to easily grasp what is being taught.

Then there's TCS Ignite, which trains rural science graduates — some of them the first from their families to go to college — to become software professionals through a digitised learning process and virtually mediated classrooms. Additionally, we are working on a project called mKrishi, a wireless advisory service for the farming community that delivers content in graphic and

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voice format in different local and regional languages.

Which of these initiatives would you say is path-breaking, with benefits for the company as well as society?

From the innovation perspective, mKrishi has been greatly appreciated. It won the Wall Street Journal 2008 Technology Innovation Award. The NREGS project has definitely been path-breaking and so too the CBFL programme. All three use telecommunication technology to make a difference to the lives of people across the country.

What are the challenges in developing and implementing these programmes?

The big challenge always is to get policymakers and people in government to adopt them. Different states may have different issues; some may adopt, some may not want to and some may just not react. The action on the ground is the most challenging as it involves rules, regulations, bureaucrats and political systems. The right leadership and the right mindset can definitely make things happen.

Can some of these initiatives be replicated in other countries?

Definitely, and we are talking about them in countries such as Egypt, Morocco and Vietnam.

Is working on socially relevant programmes part of your business strategy?

Yes it is. We assess what kind of technology will make sense, what kind of applications can be launched on a certain platform and, finally, the scale and size of the population it will touch. India is a country of more than a billion. If we can do a bank application where we touch, say, 85 million account holders, why can't we reach similar numbers through rural programmes?

What are these programmes about: touching learning, lifestyle or livelihood?

It has to be all three. People from different parts of the country and different strata of society want to evolve their livelihood category for the future. It begins with learning and brings in lifestyle changes as well, so all three have to be integrated.

How do you see the future of communication technology?

It's going to be phenomenal. With the advent of 3G and WiMax, we will witness the integration of video, voice and data. From the societal point of view — social networking, enterprise to individual, individual to individual and education, healthcare and agriculture — everything is going to be transformed. Communication technology will be the key enabler in the way we look at the future. ●

People programmes

mKrishi

This enables information and advice on agricultural issues to be delivered to farmers by way of graphic and voice formats in local languages. The farmer sends a query by either pressing an icon or responding to a voice or text menu. Experts access this information on their computers and reply with advice in the farmer's native language. Also, the rates of produce and commodities in nearby markets can be displayed on cell phones.

Computer based functional literacy programme

Ensures functional literacy for adults inside 40 hours of learning and is of great value to women, labourers, casual workers and all those who cannot spare long hours for study. Some 1,400 adult literacy programme centres are operational in Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh. The content has been translated into eight languages and more than 2 lakh people have benefited from it. The programme has also been used in foreign countries, among them South Africa and Egypt.

Ignite

A hi-tech, seven-month programme that aims to transform science graduates into software professionals. The trainees can time-shift and place-shift their training, making this an anytime, anywhere training programme. Most of the trainees are from rural and semi-urban areas, and some of them are first-generation graduates.

National rural employment guarantee scheme solution

This has automated the Andhra Pradesh government's rural employment guarantee scheme by providing online data on the rural unemployed. Under it, 35 lakh rural households in 658 *mandals* across 13 districts in the state will register for wage employment. The solution also enables the collection, storing, sorting and search of large volumes of data on people, jobs and wages, simplifying the issuing of job cards to rural households, identification of work to be undertaken, generation of work estimates, progress of work execution, and details of wage payment.