

**M**anoj Gajanan Tirodkar's day starts early, a childhood habit inculcated by his parents. It gives him a head start because it allows him the time to think about the day ahead, exercise, plan his activities, check e-mails, and make phone calls to colleagues in the Far East who have been up for some time.

It's also a peaceful time for watching the pearly grey of dawn emerge as the sun rises. Living in a high-rise apartment in Mumbai, he enjoys a beautiful view of the sunrise which he follows up with a hearty breakfast. "The moment I reach the office, the rest of the day is spent in discussions and reviews, meeting business colleagues from abroad," says the chairman and managing director of GTL Limited.

Tirodkar's busy schedule does not allow for much leisure but when it does, he enjoys gardening, interior decoration, listening to music, reading and travelling.

Tirodkar studied till the age of 17 and then joined his father's shipping business. He believes that education only helps a person learn the "process" of learning and that there are innumerable other, non-academic sources of learning.

While his formal education may have ended with college, that did not mean that his learning stopped. "The experiences that I have had, the people that I have met, and the surrounding environment have taught me more than any formal environment could have taught me," he says.

After one year of training, he convinced one of his father's international business associates to give him a management trainee job. That was in 1980. After two years of international assignments and learning the nuances of international trade, he decided to come back to India and focus on starting a business here.

Tirodkar has been an entrepreneur throughout his life. He started GTL in 1985 when he was 21. "From early on in my life, I have been fascinated by creating and building things, whether it's a building, changing a barren landscape, or setting up a new business. I love being able to build things that excite people."

"The turning point in my life was when, during my international assignment, I saw a fax being sent. A paper inserted into one machine, and paper coming out from a different machine.



## Staying Connected

Manoj Tirodkar's enduring fascination with the communications business led him to set up GTL in 1985 when he was just 21. The company has today grown into a global group, providing telecom services and infrastructure for telecom operators in 36 countries...

The message getting conveyed instantly and commerce happening. I was amazed by the power of communication and still am. It was this fascination that started me thinking about doing something in the field," he says.

Tirodkar started selling fax machines because it was a product that vastly improved normal communication. His basic entrepreneurial drive and ambition have remained constant. All that's changed is that his areas of interest have

kept expanding.

Today, he leads around 25,000 employees across the global group. GTL is the flagship of the group, which consists of six operating companies that provide a wide array of services and infrastructure for telecom operators. Two of them – GTL and GTL Infrastructure – are listed companies. The group has operations across 36 countries, revenues in excess of \$601 million and a balance sheet size of over \$1.7 billion.

Having viewed the sector from up close, Tirodkar is only too well aware of the many challenges before it. “The challenges facing the industry are underpenetration in rural and semi-urban areas, the need to bring down the cost of provisioning cellular services and upgrade technologies, spectrum constraints, and capital expenditure,” he says.

“In the current global scenario, operators will require huge investments in telecom infrastructure and are also looking aggressively at minimising their operational expenditure,” he adds.

With the expected rollout of 3G services, the need for investment in telecom infrastructure is only going to increase. Tirodkar says he wants the fruits of the telecom revolution that India has enjoyed to reach everyone: “We are continuously looking at new ways of helping service providers lower their capex and opex and help them reach the hinterland, especially to people at the bottom of the social pyramid who live in rural areas. GTL Infrastructure is rolling out approximately 23,700 towers, which should help expand connectivity to the poorest of the poor in rural India at affordable prices.”

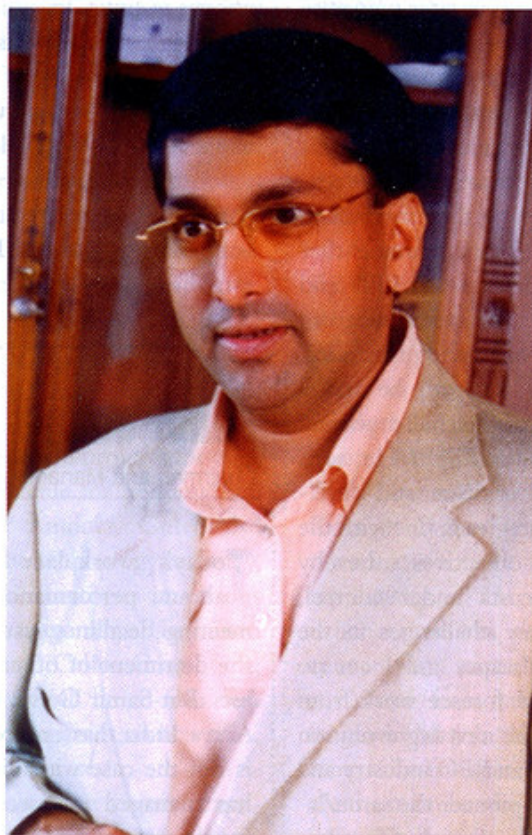
As the telecom success story continues to unfold in India, Tirodkar is pleased that it is throwing up interesting opportunities for companies like his own to deploy networks to cover new regions, optimise the existing networks and upgrade them in order to enhance the quality of service.

Having been in the business for more than 21 years, providing solutions for leading wireless carriers and service providers, GTL has strong relationships with almost all the leading technology OEMs (original equipment manufacturers) including Alcatel-Lucent, Nokia Siemens Networks,

Ericsson, Motorola, Huawei and ZTE.

“We are India’s largest network service provider to the world. Our networking expertise, customer base, long-standing relationships, and project management expertise are some of the USPs that our customers value,” he says.

Tirodkar believes it is his company’s hands-on experience of different technology platforms that has given it an edge over its competitors. “Due to the fast-changing industry structure, impacted by the convergence of different technologies, it has become crucial to anticipate rather than be opportunistic to survive in the long run. With 3G already at the doorstep and 4G network technologies in the pipeline, GTL



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has taken steps in that direction by acquiring Genesis Consultancy,” he says.

Tirodkar is keenly aware of his strengths and weaknesses. The former include the ability to add value, offer a new perspective in whatever he does, and a willingness to change and adapt. On the negative side, he admits to impatience and occasional bouts of impulsiveness.

“I am a great believer in teamwork and people. It has been my constant endeavour to form, nurture and develop this culture at all levels in the organisation. I always try and look at the positive side of people and help bring out the best in them,” he says.

He also encourages participative decision-making and attempts to motivate top performers constantly. “I ensure that the decision-making process percolates down the organisation. I also like to create new entrepreneurs. Wealth creation is the key to retaining quality people and spreading the good feeling around. The organisation is a different place to work in when one owns stock in the company,” he says.

For Tirodkar, aside from business success, what has also been immensely satisfying is the corporate social responsibility activity undertaken by the MGT Foundation that he set up.

“The Foundation is involved with numerous social causes. It helps bridge the digital divide and improve the life of people living in rural areas. We do this by focusing on creating employment opportunities and helping with health and education, especially computer education,” he says. Close to 7,000 children in rural areas have had the chance to learn about computers through projects such as GYAN IT and Project KNOW.

In 2000, at the age of 36, Tirodkar won the World Young Business Achievers Award at the Epcot Center, Disneyland, Florida.

After all his success, the business of communication continues to excite him. “For me, it’s wonderful to be in this business because connectivity not only allows people to talk to each other and stay in touch, it also has a positive impact on the economy. Whether it’s a farmer getting a better price for his produce or corporations conducting their businesses globally, connectivity is a lifeline.” ▲