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Context to the nugget

Nandan talks about how he organizes his time currently and more importantly, the design principle behind how he prioritizes his time. He also talks about his journey through Infosys and Aadhaar to the current portfolio of initiatives that includes India Stack evangelization, EkStep, Philanthropy and investing in & mentoring select start-ups.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): Maybe a good place to start is having a sense of what your pie chart of time looks like today. What all do you do today, and more importantly, why do you do what you do?

Nandan Nilekani (NN): Sure. Maybe to answer that question, I'll just set some background. I have really been, for a significant part of my career, focused on one large objective. So, I spent close to 30 years in Infosys and at that time, I did Infosys with single-minded passion. I didn't do anything else. I didn't invest in other companies. I really was completely wedded to the Infosys dream. Then, when I worked for about almost five years in the government, I was completely focused on making the Aadhaar project successful. Then also, I didn't do any investments and so on. It's only now I've tried to follow more of a portfolio approach to my activities.

So, let me just give you how I break it up. I still spend the bulk of my time on what I would call public-service activities. There is no business involvement in that, that is, I spend about 40% of my time on essentially promoting the Aadhaar and India Stack ecosystem, because I believe that the future is how businesses, governments, innovators use the unique technology we have in India, to transform the way they do business, to reach more customers, to reduce cost, to deliver government services better. There are lots and lots of transformational possibilities and what I've realized is that evangelization of that is hugely required, because you can build something but unless everybody understands the power of what you have done, it doesn't get used. So, 40% of my time goes in activities related to that. Cashless... for example, when this whole demonetization happened, I played a role in how their digital, cashless economy could work. So, that's 40%.

Then, the other big thing which happened was after I came back to Bangalore, I was looking for something to do which was impactful and my wife [Rohini] helped me to find a challenge, which is the challenge of literacy and numeracy for children. India, as you know, is a country, where there has been huge progress in getting children to go to school. Enrolments in schools have gone up but teaching outcomes haven't improved in the last 15 years since the Sarv Shiksha Abhiyan was launched. She and I were in Boston, in Cambridge, one day, visiting edX which is a MOOC set up by Harvard and MIT. The people who're on edX are friends of mine, Anant Agarwal and Sanjay Sarma, and they talked about how online education is going to transform higher education.

DJ: This is different from HBX, is it?

NN: Yeah. HBX is the Harvard Business School's MOOC. They may be using some of the technology from edX, I don't know. But this is a joint venture for a general, classical MOOC, for all universities.

DJ: OK

NN: So, then, she said, why can't we do the same for the kids? If you're going to do this for learning differential equations or business strategy, why can't we do it for people to learn how to read and write, which is India's problem. And I asked her, what's the size of the problem and she said, 200 million kids. So, I said, that sounds like a huge problem to solve, because after the Aadhaar experience, I was looking for large problems to solve. So, that's how we set up this organization called EkStep, which is co-founded by Rohini, Shankar Maruwada, and me. We're seeing how we can use the latest technology to deliver personalized learning and education to millions of kids on a phone. So, we use smartphones, tablets, PCs, TVs; it doesn't matter what devices, it's an infrastructure. We are working with partners. Partners create different kinds of content, and other partners are deployed in the field. The deployment could happen by governments, by NGOs, by private players, doesn't matter to us. So, the idea is to reach millions of kids in a very short time. So, that's 20% of my time.

Then, I do spend 20% of my time on my various philanthropic initiatives. I co-founded a proposed university for urbanization called Indian Institute of Human Settlements, which is looking at urbanization, which is one of India's huge challenges and we just don't have the intellectual capacity of people. Also, urbanization is a very multidisciplinary problem; you have to understand many things. So, the idea is to create a multidisciplinary urban program, so that's one of the big things I do.

The other big thing is, I work with a foundation called eGovernments Foundation, which Srikanth Nadhamuni and I started some, more than, 10 years back, which is building a software platform for cities. My goal is to reach 2,000 cities by 2020. These are again scale benefits, because if every city's technology is on a much more sophisticated platform, then things will improve. So, that's 20%.

The final 20% is the only 20% where I actually engage on business, because I do believe that I should have some foot in the business world, mainly because the kind of skills that you need to be successful in business require different muscles to be used and I want to make sure that they don't atrophy. So, I work with about 10 or 15 start-ups where I am an investor and help them to scale up. So, broadly 40% on evangelization of the India Stack Aadhaar UPI and so on; 20% on EkStep, literacy and numeracy platform; 20% on philanthropy like IIHS and eGovernments Foundation...

DJ: Avanti [Finance] would be in this bucket of 20%?

NN: Yeah. It's more a philanthropic effort. And 20% is start-ups, which is actually working with young companies to see how they work. That's my time allocation.

DJ: And if I may double click on that and understand the design principle behind how you came up with this pie chart? Any criteria? One is clearly scale and impact.

NN: So, scale and impact is very important to me, because whether it was Infosys or Aadhaar, it all was about scale and impact. At the same time, I thought the time had come for me to have a broader palette of things to do rather than doing one thing, which meant I didn't want to go back and take a role in government, I didn't want to go back and run a company, and nor did I want to be on the boards of companies, because I didn't think that was the way I could add value. So, scale and

impact and creating a palette of opportunities, creating this multiprogramming approach. It was a conscious choice.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: It was interesting to hear Nandan talk about his single-minded focus in building Infosys for about 30 years, then a single minded focus in building out Aadhaar for about 5 years and then moving to a portfolio approach. In my limited observation of some of the other leaders, I have often seen the trend of "go narrow first and then subsequently go broad" on the specialization/generalization continuum. There is something to be said about building deep capability in one or two domains before one move to a portfolio approach.

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End of nugget transcription

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Nandan Nilekani - Nuggets

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About Deepak Jayaraman

Deepak seeks to unlock human potential of senior executive's / leadership teams by working with them as an Executive Coach / Sounding Board / Transition Advisor. You can know more about his work [here](#).

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