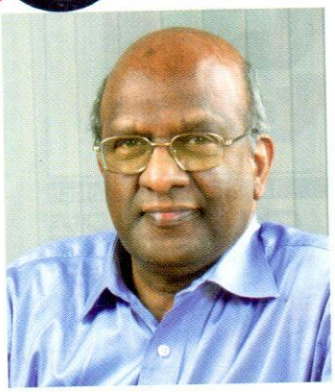

DR SRIDHAR MITTA, CTO & MD, e4e India

On The Early Years of Indian IT

When the first computer in India was acquired by the Indian Statistical Institute, Kolkata in 1956, I was still a student in high school. Then, I completed my bachelor's and then my master's degree in electronics engineering and traveled to the US to pursue higher studies. I returned to India soon after my PhD at Oklahoma State University in 1973. At that point of time the Indian economy was closed and faced several constraints. Companies required licenses to start businesses and import materials, had to pay very high customs and excise tariffs and face severe governmental controls. The basic infrastructure was inadequate and supporting ecosystem was absent. In addition, the market size was too small and did not get the attention of multinationals. It was difficult for foreign companies to come into India and equally tough for Indian companies to venture out to address global opportunities. The whole focus was on indigenization, import substitution and Indian market. I was looking for the right place to work.

Thanks to the vision of India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, the government laid a strong foundation for development of science and technology by starting departments of Atomic Energy, Space and Electronics. However, the department of Atomic Energy had to face severe technology controls from advanced countries due to prevailing cold war environment. Dr Homi J Bhabha took the challenge and built Atomic Energy Research Centre in Mumbai. One of its new recruits was Dr S Srikantan who just returned from the US after doing his PhD from Moore School, University of Pennsylvania which was involved in developing early computers. He developed India's first digital computer using transistors, which was named as TDC-12. BARC transferred some of the scientists, including Srikantan, to Hyderabad to set up ECIL.

Around that period, the computer industry was still nascent with IBM and ICL peddling unit record machines. ECIL started commercial production of third generation version based on transistors called TDC-312. ECIL introduced India's first microprocessor based computer called Micro-78.

Srikantan had imbibed from his mentor Dr Bhabha the skills of developing a great vision and sharing it with a bunch of dedicated bright minds to fulfill it. He was able to excite and assemble some of the bright Indians from the US and Japan to join his team to build India's own computer industry virtually from nothing. I had the privilege of joining ECIL Computer Division.

Srikanatan pioneered many new ways to succeed against heavy odds. For example, he started one-year in-house computer training program for fresh graduates, as there were no colleges offering computer courses at that time. He partnered with other Indian organizations such as TIFR, IIT Kanpur and IIM Ahmadabad to add value. ECIL supplied computers to many projects of national importance in Defense, Space and Atomic Energy Departments.

In the Nehru era, the government laid a strong foundation by starting the departments of Atomic Energy, Space and Electronics

When the computer industry was opened to the private sector in 1980 many companies relied on ECIL to get their core teams. I joined Wipro along with a small team to start its IT business. It is appropriate to state that the brain-ware for Indian computer industry was contributed by ECIL. Soon after his retirement, Srikantan served state governments of Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka to promote electronics industry in its early days. He passed away recently at the age of 74 after a brief illness. The Indian IT industry owes a great debt of gratitude to this great person who laid a strong foundation in early 70s. Indeed, Srikantan is an unsung hero of the Indian IT industry! ■