

A career that mirrored India's transformation

Some people's lives tell a story of a life well spent. A few of them capture the story of a nation's evolution. Vineet Nayar's story did both. A civil servant, development economist, business leader and philanthropist, 85-year-old Nayar passed away last week in Delhi. His six-decade career, starting as a district magistrate in Haryana in 1961 and culminating as a business leader, tells a dual story. I interviewed Nayar in 2011 for my column on CEOs and their workspaces in *Mint*, when he was vice-chairman of Tech Mahindra. We had stayed in touch since then.

Nayar was a pioneer — a global Indian at a time when the phrase didn't exist. He was comfortable working with multilateral organisations, state governments, and the corporate and social sectors.

Born in Batala, Punjab in 1938, Nayar's family moved to India at the time of Partition. He started his career as an IAS officer in the Haryana state administration in 1961, and gained a Masters in Development Economics from Williams College in 1971, before being hand-picked for a posting at the World Bank in its energy and infrastructure groups in 1978, where he worked on large international projects such as the Three Gorges Dam power project in China.

After a decade with the World Bank, keen to impart his learnings, he moved back to India as founder-chairman of GAIL in the 1980s, where he was responsible for the ambitious Hazira Vijaiapur Jagdishpur (HVJ) pipeline. This was followed by a move back to the World Bank, and then a radical shift to technology in 1994 with long-time friend Shiv Nadar, leading HCL and HCL Technologies for two decades, including taking the business public.

"I've always viewed life as a cross-section of different experiences. One learns as one goes along. And I do believe that I've been fortunate enough to do so many things. So learning is a part of life," he said when asked how he operated in so many sectors.

Almost ready to retire, Nayar then joined Tech Mahindra in 2005. This tenure was defined by the bold acquisition of the troubled Satvam Computer Services and its

subsequent turnaround, and then a senior role at the embattled IL&FS in 2018.

Throughout his career, he built institutions, several from scratch, and always with a sense of humour. "We started GAIL in a small hotel called Samrat in Delhi with 4-5 rooms. Putting one of the world's largest and longest pipelines. I had to do it in a years' time when I had no knowledge, I wouldn't recognise a gas pipeline even if I fell into it! But it was fun and we did it in a record time of 10 months. I lived in a trench all the 10 months, I was young and it was such a great adventure," he said.

HCL was a startup too. "We all started in a one-room shop in HCL and we grew and grew," he said.

His successful transition, from being a career bureaucrat to a tech titan, serves as an apt metaphor for India's economic growth over these 50 years: From state-sponsored infrastructure development to the rise of the software industry. Nayar's professional life mirrored India's growing contribution to the

global economy, on the back of large-scale institutions.

He spoke the language of global business, yet was deeply committed to India. For example, he characterised his management style as that of a panchayat of a long-standing team of senior managers. "There's a lot of personal friendship and equality in our work. There's really no structure in the senior management, it's like a *panchayat*. If you come to our meetings no one will take us seriously at all, we're laughing most of the time."

Despite operating in complex environments, Nayar was known for his impeccable business ethics, was a staunch feminist who moved countries to support his wife's career, a passionate philanthropist who set up many schools, and a fitness enthusiast who insisted, even in his seventies, that he had a gym next to his office, to keep up his energy levels during hectic workdays. An inspirational legacy, in every way.



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Aparna Piramal Raje is a Mumbai-based writer and public speaker.

The views expressed are personal

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