

STYLE

Will Bikram Dasgupta ever sell a box again? It's a question that a lot of people in the infotech industry have been asking themselves lately, because the answer could well influence their own sales graphs. This New Year's Day Dasgupta pulled out of PCL, which he had helped make the biggest PC vendor in India, and set up shop for himself. He's now planning to sell something far removed from his core competency: tortillas and chili con carne. And he's also pushing what looks suspiciously like industrial real estate. He calls it Infinity.

BIKRAM DASGUPTA

THE MAN WHO SAW INFINITY

So is Dasgupta safely off the PC battlefield, or will he be back with a flanking movement? He just might be. "I see no reason not to sell boxes," he says. "Provided I can come up with a completely new marketing tool."

After putting in 17 years in selling boxes, this is the real core competency that Dasgupta has identified for himself — not an understanding of the PC market but the ability to make an intuitive leap. In Global Synergies, his new company, he classes himself as "the man who goes into the illogical aspect of the business, looking to exploit a gap in the traditional logic."

And he's developing a new specialisation that he feels will be in increasing demand in the days ahead — enterprise management.

Of course, Dasgupta insists that he is only extrapolating from his work at PCL. "There's no question of a sharp break and a fresh start," he says. But according to the grapevine, there was a very sharp break. Because over the last couple of years, he had become the public face of PCL, and was automatically being given

credit for a lot of work put in by his partner Dadan Bhai. Today, Dasgupta refuses to talk about the last days at PCL: "There are some things that you simply don't go public with — like family. But these days, I'm addressing a lot of the myths that surround me."

"Anyway, I believe in looking ahead," he continues. "The entrepreneur must always look to the future, because what will work in today's business environment may not work in tomorrow's. So if you're born with the ability to look beyond normal operations, that's what you should be using."

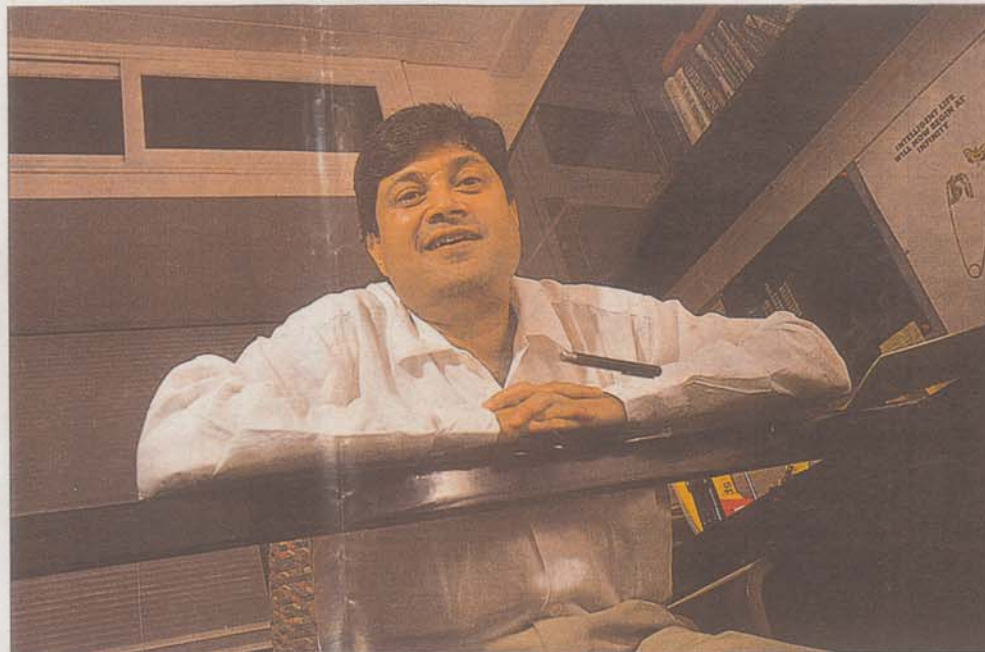


Photo by PRADEEP BHATIA

Bikram Dasgupta: "Right now, I'm looking to exploit gaps in the traditional logic of selling"

servers; the homes are the clients. Or the people could be the software, the infrastructure the hardware. Put them together and you have a solution." Later, that solution will be extended to smaller projects in towns like Nagpur that will function as leased think tanks.

It's a solution that Dasgupta expects the MNCs to like. "With this, I'm telling them it's time to stop trickling in by ones and twos, testing the water with their toes — and time to stop body-shopping," he says. "They can come in en masse, take project-specific leases, pay our professionals what they deserve, complete their project, take their money and go back. It's a system that offers infinite possibilities of growth."

Dasgupta is front-ending Infinity, going in with his sleeves rolled up, but in most other enterprise management projects he expects to be sitting at the entrepreneur's shoulder. "Earlier, the investor or the operations guy became the visionary of a company," he says. "But things are too complicated for that these days — you can't do without a third man. And it makes for streamlining: you have three people worrying about the project, but only one running it."

But isn't that what consultants are for — worrying? "What I'm doing is more than consultancy because I'll always have a personal stake

The boxwallah has found himself a new core competency, discovers Pratik Kanjilal — the art of illogical thinking

Dasgupta believes he was born with that ability and is now trying out the new gameplan on his old turf, infotech. This week, he is in the US with Jyoti Basu and Somnath Chatterjee, meeting the expatriate Bengali community in Washington and in Westchester, New York, to plug his brainchild, Infinity. A Rs 350 crore project using construction technology from Singapore and slated to come up in Calcutta's Salt Lake City, it is intended to bring a new work culture to the information-related industries. "I've been selling PCs long enough," says Dasgupta. "Time I did something to leave a mark."

At the core of Infinity is a pair of 22-storey intelligent buildings, with 1,200 intelligent homes built around them. But this isn't the architectural definition of intelligence working here, Dasgupta hastens to explain. The focus is not on louvres that shut themselves at midday, or on dimmers that turn the lights on in the evening. "Webel (which has picked up 20 per

cent equity in the project) had all those ideas but they hadn't thought of an enmeshment," says Dasgupta. "On the other hand, I approached the problem as an infotech man, not an architect. I'm making an environment, not a building."

So what the project guarantees is connectivity, the first criterion of the industry. "I'm looking at the needs of the software guy who's sitting at a keyboard, and the needs of the MNC who's hiring him," says Dasgupta. "Then I'm trying to create a high-tech, low-cost environment that hikes his productivity." IT development professionals, he points out, don't need to punch the clock and huddle with their teams every day. So the homes at the Infinity complex are wired to the LANs of the main buildings.

"Complete flexi-timings, and you no longer have the career breaks that maternity, for instance, brings on," says Dasgupta. Right through, the infotech attitude shows clearly: "The main buildings, with their people, are like

"I'm telling the MNCs that it's high time they stopped trickling in by ones and twos, testing the waters with their toes"

on the ventures. And it's less than complete commitment because I'll have the option to cash out of the game after the first round."

Dasgupta finds his new operational style entirely to his liking. "You're basically a facilitator, so you don't get bogged down. Instead, your value diminishes as the company grows, and you're left free to follow your own curve. You don't end up with piles of cheques to sign and files to push. And my job takes up just two

The professional visionary

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hours of my morning."

Dasgupta's Mexican food venture, which aims to set up restaurants right through Southeast Asia, will operate on those lines. It's expected to start up in a few weeks in Delhi — "there's just a siting problem holding it up." It's also being used in Dee's Home Shopping, which has brought telemarketing to India. And to make life easier for housewives, he's bringing in

these to net Rs 700 crore in foreign investments.

Despite that, however, he's still looking for fresh options. "I always get this urge to flush myself out, move off in a fresh direction," he says. "I like to move into uncharted territory. I like to stick my neck out. It's been good for me so far."

So even today, he takes time off only for music and reading: "Pretty heavy stuff — behavioural science, psychology, human relations; it starts me

"It started with some of us professionals getting together at Pubworld, and we found ourselves writing out our manifesto on table napkins," he recalls. "Then we called a meet two months later in Bombay, and 44 people turned up. Suddenly, it was a serious deal. We realised it was a forum where we could talk without the usual office backbiting." Back home in Delhi, however, he has been refusing to socialise for the last two years, "because you get caught



consumer goods, starting with a kitchen degreaser.

With a little help from the Ganapati Group, Dasgupta is also pushing through India's biggest production line for printed circuit boards, capable of churning out 135,000 square metres of PCB every year. Indal, his closest competitor, makes just 65,000 square metres. "I see it as a global infrastructure facility," he says. "In fact, you won't find the word 'India' used much in the business plan." Along with other ventures, Dasgupta expects

"This way, your value decreases as the company comes of age, leaving you free to follow your own growth curve"

thinking." And he makes time for BAIT, the Beer Association of Information Technology, which he founded willy-nilly three years ago in Bangalore.

in this pointless loop." And because it leaves him more time for the projects in his pipeline.

Among them is what he started out selling: the box. And Dasgupta may have found the marketing vehicle to load it onto. "You could call it the virtual supermarket," he says. "We start with a consumer database, move on to direct marketing, telemarketing and mail order. You could sell anything through this channel, even boxes. It'll bear thinking about." Clearly, Bikram Dasgupta hasn't cashed out of the PC sweepstakes yet. ■