

AMONG YOUNG INDIANS, AWE AND admiration run deep for technology entrepreneurs. So there's palpable respect in the classroom when the lecturer is Jaithirth Rao, an IT baron in India.

Drawing from a career that included decades in banking, Mr. Rao lectures at the Indian Institute of Technology in Mumbai, a tough-to-enter academic beacon in India.

On this day, Rao is giving a brisk lecture on China and globalization. His tone is knowing and vernacular; his language closer to the street than scholar – the reverse of his appearance – and mercifully free of the Harvard Business School franchise of business English. An enemy of jargon, Rao quotes English poet W.H. Auden, who said “the duty of a poet is to keep faith with words, don't let words get corrupted.”

Rao happens to be a published poet, which makes him an outsider in India's clubby management circles. Many contemporaries have written books, typically about their own self-improvement or improving India. One bestseller became the blueprint for India's digital economy. But most are self-absorbed meanderings of careers well-traveled and well-rewarded. Few seem to have looked beyond their résumé for inspiration.

The running theme of Mr. Rao's poetry is exile, which in one of his own verses he describes as “a condition of the skin.” Mr. Rao lived and worked for 25 years in “multiple layers of exile” in the Middle East and North and South America. Nor was there respite when he returned home. For him, the mother of all exiles is Bengaluru (also known as Bangalore), India's IT capital whose emergence as the world's tech back-end was the very cause of his overseas postings. Now back in Bengaluru, he still feels rootless. “It's a new type of exile in (my) homeland,” says Mr. Rao.

His literary passions are well known in Indian business circles. A reporter for India's Economic Times declared after visiting Mr. Rao in 2012 that the CEO should win an award for the volume of books in his office. “From literature to management to history, they're crammed on shelves, strewn on the sofa, stacked up on the centre table.”

Mr. Rao, 66, universally known as Jerry, did not set out to be a pioneer in Indian IT. A classical schooling in Madras and professional education at the elite Indian Institute of Management, one of the schools where he now teaches, led to a peripatetic two-decade career with Citi. After

landing among the bank's top 50 managers worldwide, he accepted a role to seed Citi's proprietary IT services unit. Based in California, the venture offered a bridgehead to India, a time-zone separation that would nourish Rao's poetry.

This was in the late 1990s, the era that saw the rise of the India offshore services model, where a client in the US has technology back-end in India, joined by a technology supply chain that would transform paper-intensive activities. Bengaluru blossomed. Wall Street, an early and aggressive outsourcer, reaped the efficiencies. Business schools celebrated the model in case studies.

In this climate, the 20-year Citi manager was perfectly positioned to turn entrepreneur. The result was MphasiS, an IT services and call center company. A decade on, the company sold to EDS, which acquired a majority stake for \$380 million.

Throughout, Mr. Rao found time to write, his professional movements across borders strengthened by a detachment that yielded essays in magazines and eventually a published anthology of poems, entitled Gemini II. His move back to India and experiences creating MphasiS saw Mr. Rao develop an approach to communications at odds with the orthodoxy.

At Citi, “people spoke in jargon because they were part of internal cults and cults have their own language,” he says. But they spoke like that because “they were afraid or wanted promotion.”

AUDEN IN

Mr. Rao is remembered by Citi lifers for a presentation he gave that, in communication terms, spoke a new language. Rao presented an image of India containing 16 European countries (the EU at the time), to illustrate India's complexity and opportunity; on another slide, he showed images of bicycles (recreational in the US, essential transport in India) parked outside a factory and motorcycles outside the same factory years later, again to illustrate the potential for (Citi-funded) growth at the factory. There were no bar charts or graphs, yet the Citi-lifers were stunned by the clarity of communication.

JAITHIRTH RAO

Founder and former CEO of IT services company MphasiS, Jaithirth “Jerry” Rao founded Value and Budget Housing Corporation (VBHC), an affordable housing venture, in 2010, where he is currently Non-Executive Chairman. He is also a founder and former Director of HomeFirst Finance, focused on helping first-time home buyers. His book of poetry, *Gemini II*, is published by Penguin India.



EXILE

Mphasis founder and former CEO **JAITHIRTH RAO**, a published poet, tells **KHOZEM MERCHANT** of his fidelity to words

As the founder-boss at Mphasis, Mr. Rao had a different audience: brilliant, young, computer engineers, like those he teaches in Mumbai. Their English – the language of global IT – was typically the product of a technical education, not the literary one that had groomed Mr. Rao. They were precociously vulnerable to business jargon, which in its gross conceit creates “dishonest exaggerations,” he says.

The Indian IT sector and the expectations of its ambitious community of IT engineers were still maturing. After years of strong growth, hard times followed in 2001 with the dotcom crash.

ILLUSTRATION: LINCOLN AGNEW

When Mphasis was forced to announce cuts in salaries, Mr. Rao was prepared.

“Plain speaking: If you want respect from educated technical workers, you have to go back to Auden.” The plain speaking, he insists, contributed to attrition levels below the industry norm.

Mr. Rao’s other tool of language was a fat schedule of off-sites and other direct interactions with staff at Mphasis to ensure his message would be heard – literally providing vocal leadership.

While his current venture is in low-cost housing, Mr. Rao says he watches the quality of language at the successor to IT services, e-commerce, and sees even more democratization of words and usage.

“These guys will not be able to duck behind phraseology like traditional businesses did; they will have to say, ‘Sorry, we screwed up,’” he says of the start-up culture that has seized young Indians, attracting \$13.5 billion in investments in 2017.

Mr. Rao is obviously both passionate and respectful of words, which has helped him stem the spread of jargon in his own professional spheres. He has revealed, for instance, that in meetings his mind often drifts to Shakespeare, away from, say, Ram Charan (a popular Indian management guru). In another tilt against orthodoxy, Rao sees the Bard as an undiscovered management guru, whose smart thinking on team management and leadership runs through what were otherwise thought to be just great works of literature.

KHOZEM MERCHANT, former President of Pearson India and a correspondent for the Financial Times, is a Partner in Mumbai and leads Brunswick’s India business.

“WINTER OF DISCONTENT” (excerpt)

*Between menstrual moons
and the fear of a haunted
tomorrow,
we discover, rediscover
the warmth of lips, hands,
and soft wounds of silence.*

*Alone in exile,
among unfamiliar fears
androgynous lies
decapitated pride
we would have perished.*

*Together, we have touched
winter in a foreign land
and now together we watch
a tepid spring set in.
Fears still linger amidst*

*the million knots
in our intestines,
but together
we know
that beyond fear
beyond pride
beyond humiliation
east of sorrow
and south of anger
there lies a land
a country that wayfarers
gypsies, wounded men
can call home.*

*From out of the cold
towards that home
our journey begins.
– By Jaithirth Rao*