



GANESH NATARAJAN

IN TUNE WITH LIFE

The CEO of Zensar and chairman of Nasscom, Ganesh Natarajan, says the secret of balance in life is to fill it with diverse pursuits. His passion? He is a champion 'antakshari' and karaoke singer

Like his favourite author P.G. Wodehouse, Ganesh Natarajan—CEO, Zensar Technologies, and chairman of Nasscom, the Indian IT industry's apex body—has a tongue-in-cheek irreverence for reality. He says: "I never take life too seriously—it's the stress of going through the day that gets people down. It's important to step back and say, 'It's all part of a journey.'"

For the man who heads one of the top 25 software services companies in India and who, since April, has been steering Nasscom, the journey began almost 50 years ago, in the tiny Tatisilwai village near Ranchi, Bihar, where his father had a factory. The one redeeming feature of his "terrible" school was his brilliant English teacher, Mr Fitzgerald.

Thanks to the love of the language nurtured in the

inspirational leaders—apart from writing columns in the *Hindustan Times* and *Dataquest* magazine.

In 1973, Natarajan began studying mechanical engineering in Mesra, Ranchi, at the Birla Institute of Technology. Even before he could get over the brutal ragging there, the Jayaprakash Narayan movement shut down the college for six long months. It was, he says, in Wodehousian terms, "a jungle existence on campus."

A postgraduate degree in industrial engineering from NITIE, Mumbai, a PhD in knowledge management from IIT Bombay in 2005, and a stint at Harvard Business School followed. Natarajan says, "There's no contest that Bihar is where I learnt the most. There, I hung out with people, understanding local politics, discovering (that) life has multiple strands."

He also learnt in those fairly solitary early years that "the secret of balance in life is to fill it with diverse pursuits." Hence, he says, he is happiest doing five different things at the same time. Pointing out how he seamlessly did his thesis while being full-

These days, his activities include leading Zensar and Nasscom, connecting with all kinds of people, writing, reading and travel—he is currently working on two new books, and last year, co-produced a movie with Amol Palekar called *Quest*, which was sold to the UN.

Topping the list is an unusual pursuit, another bonus from his Bihar days. When politics temporarily put paid to his engineering studies, Natarajan and his batchmates killed time memorizing old Hindi film melodies from the golden age of Rajesh Khanna and Kishore Kumar. And that's how Natarajan, the crooner, was born.

Thirty years down the road, he is a champion *antakshari* (a song-based game) and karaoke singer. Opposing teams—whether Nasscom peers or his Zensar colleagues—fight to have him on their side. Lavanya Jayaram, head, corporate innovation, Zensar, says a core group of 12-15 colleagues meets at Natarajan's home on Friday nights to karaoke. She says, "The way you relax and bond by singing together would be unthinkable in a boardroom."

Earlier in the year, the Natarajans celebrated their 25th wedding anniversary at a weekend-long beach bash in Mumbai, with the mother-of-all performances by several friends and a band. Bowled over by Natarajan's singing, friend Ashwini Malhotra, executive director, Weikfield Industries, knew the moment had come. He invited Natarajan to join their exclusive singing club, Swaranjali, in Pune, and Natarajan readily accepted. Malhotra explains: "Our four-year-old group of 40 CEOs and spouses has great singers of classic Hindi film lyrics. We meet once a

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(moon) simply would not do! Next time we will do qawwalis. Ganesh knows almost every song in every category!"

Since 1994, Natarajan has been a member of the Nasscom executive council, where 24 CEOs of multinational and Indian IT companies work in unison to serve their industry. And, with several of them being music lovers, they also sing together at Nasscom socials. Ashank Desai, a founder member of the organization, and promoter, *Maatek Ltd.*, says: "I've known Ganesh for 25 years. The only time we compete is in singing, but clearly, he's the topper!"

Every year, at a retreat with spouses, executive council members visit a new country, interacting with local government to promote Indian IT. The golden business opportunities are interspersed with memorable singing moments: travelling on a bus together, a simple *farmaish* (request) will often flower into a full-fledged *antakshari*. Last year's retreat in Vietnam was poignant. Over dinner at a French restaurant, each person sang a song to bid farewell to outgoing president Kiran Karnik, a talented flautist himself.

Regional director Rajiv Vaishnav recollects: "Ganesh sang *wahan kuth hai tera, musafir* from the movie, *Guide*. It was an unusual choice, but apt. Like the songs he selects, his communication style is classy and distinctive."

Pradeep Udhas, head of markets at KPMG and former Nasscom executive council member—fittingly, he's also cut two music albums—recollects: Ganesh is an artist; his leadership style is

Game for a song: Natarajan with his karaoke buddies from Zensar.

threatened. People from the West are always amazed. When you sing with each other, you won't hesitate to pick up the phone to help one another."

Soma Mittal, who took over as president from Karnik and is a musical buff himself, recalls: "When I was the chairman in 2003-04, we began a programme to bring innovation to small enterprises. This became Ganesh's passion."

In fact, at Nasscom, Natarajan's focus today is to take the I revolution to rural India; he's also encouraging women leadership roles in the industry.

In a recent column in *Dataquest*, he wrote on pioneering work done by educationist Urvashi Sahni, who has set up a lab in rural Uttar Pradesh that successfully trains villagers to test software for a California company. Under Natarajan, both Zensar and Nasscom are looking at how this model, with its potential of creating thousands of IT and BPO jobs for rural India, can be scaled up. This singalong of inclusive growth gets going, Indian I will be the rockstar.



Personal Space runs every alternate Friday and looks at the pursuits beyond work of some of India's corporate leaders.

Name: Ganesh Natarajan
Title: CEO, Zensar; chairman, Nasscom
Age: 51
Education: Mechanical engineering from BIT, Ranchi; industrial engineering from NITIE, Mumbai; PhD from IIT Bombay; advanced management program from Harvard Business School
Pursuits: Travelling, reading, writing, singing and hanging out with friends
Claim to fame: Has spearheaded two global organizations to success—Aptech (1991-2001) and