

Natural Instincts

An audience with SP Hinduja, the notoriously private Hinduja group patriarch, is not your everyday occurrence. Despite the media storms the family's has managed to whip up over the decades, Hinduja and his band of brothers remain a largely unknown quantity. Mention that and you'll see a slightly tetchy side to him; there is a distinct feeling that they've been misunderstood as a family. Chatting with **Corporate Dossier** in the 5th floor boardroom of Hinduja House, from where the Mumbai skyline dominates the view, Hinduja seems to prefer talking theology and philosophy to business and it's easy to briefly forget that he sits at the helm of an expansive group with 50,000 employees and global interests ranging from truck building to banking and power. The Hindujas are known to follow a fairly rigid patriarchic structure and SP Hinduja runs a tight ship. Interestingly, he's throwing caution to the wind and writing two books to be released at the end of the year. While they're not quite the tell-all people are hoping for, Hinduja promises they borrow liberally from his personal history. One of them is tentatively titled 'What's your problem?'

What management credo would you live, and die, by?

I manage through my team. I believe that whether it is business objectives, culture or principles, they must all be driven down through the entire team. If it's just you leading and no team following, a lot of time is wasted.

What is your leadership style?

I never impose my views on anyone and always encourage diversity of thought. I believe that every human being has his pluses and negatives, the idea is to find those positives and then nurture them. It's the same in the family. Nobody is the family has ever been told to do this or that. Each person identifies a sector or business they're interested in and we find a way to accommodate them. One person likes banking, another likes IT, and that's why we're in ten sectors.

A family that works together stays together?

My ultimate goal is to keep the family intact. Today our fourth generation is on the way.

How do you ensure you keep learning?

My greatest learning has come from my father whose life was an open book. We learned by watching him conduct himself personally and professionally. In our summer holidays he'd bribe us with money to come and spend time with him at work. Today though, I learn mostly from watching nature.

Is it true that you learn financial prudence from watching squirrels?

I often feed the squirrels on my walks in St James Park and I always notice how if you throw two peanuts at them, they will always take only one and save the other. They finish the first, and only then come back for the other.

Why are the Hindujas so reclusive?

We're not reclusive; there's nothing to talk about. I have one complaint against some journalists. They're either ignorant or don't specialise in anything, so they come to their own conclusions. Ours is a privately owned group except for a handful of listed companies, so why do we need publicity? Having said that, when you do speak with me I am an open book.

Your take on philanthropy

You work to earn, and earn to give. But I don't believe in donating for charity sake. Always link philanthropy to economic growth.

Is there any such thing as an ethical businessman?

Our concern as a group has always been how to do away with corruption. It's a challenge to prove to others how to get things without spending a penny. There's no point pointing fingers at others, we must demonstrate by example. These principles also help keep the family together. We believe in complete transparency. The minute you let corruption in, you encourage them to manipulate, hide, lie; you're asking for trouble. That's how splits occur in family businesses. That's the price you pay.

So you believe corruption can be rooted out of business?

Corruption has been there since the Ramayana and Mahabharata. The question to ask at any point is: is evil greater than good or vice versa? Today corruption probably is greater than

good. In the post-liberalisation era we had applied for a private banking license for IndusInd. Manmohan Singh was the finance minister then and gave it because he liked the NRI concept a lot. The problem is that we had only 67 days to get it going; 11 April 1994 was the date set for opening and invitations were printed. Everybody including my team said it would be impossible. There were so many permissions to be taken, completion certification required to enter buildings we had purchased. Every step had potential for corruption but we did it without a single penny paid. We didn't even debit for project development. That set an example. Yes sometimes we have lost time — first mover advantage in certain sectors because we haven't been prepared to pay bribes but there are no regrets.

Your family is said to have some of the most influential people in the world for friends

Yes, people tend to say the Hindujas have access to all the heads of states, it bothers some people. When India started talking about nuclear in 1998 Atal Behari Vajpayee sent Principal Secretary Brajesh Mishra with letter to London to meet the labour government. I got a phone call when he arrived asking me whether I have good relationships with the labour government. I said we have good relationships, whether Labour or Tory and that I'd do my best. Within two hours I took him to meet with Blair who was leaving for Manchester to meet Bill Clinton. But we don't do this for publicity. Seeking personal mileage becomes a bad habit, it creates an ego and you'll want to be everywhere.

Does talk of political affiliations bother you?

We are not pro or anti any government whether Congress or BJP, Labour or Tory. We don't do anything political, just whatever's in the interest of the mother country. That's our basic principle on which we do good business. Even in the Islamic world we are respected despite our name Hinduja which can be misleading. We're not products of religion. We're products of nature. Still I don't criticise any religion.

What's the best piece of advice you've received?

From my father: Always do it yesterday rather than tomorrow.

What is your daily routine?

I sleep for four hours between midnight and 4 am. When I wake up I meditate for an hour, then go for a walk for an hour. The morning is the best time for being creative and innovative. I refuse to go for late parties; people are just fighting against what is natural for the body.

You're turning author; do you read a lot?

I don't read much. I believe too much reading will influence my own independent thinking. Don't ask me to read a 500 page book. If I really need to I ask someone else to send me a gift of it.

What is your most impossible dream?

To solve the problems around climate change, poverty and corruption. Is it a tall order? Well, I'm an ambitious guy.

Famous last words...

We don't do what others do

WHAT'S YOUR PROBLEM, ASKS HINDUJA GROUP CHAIRMAN SP HINDUJA, SWINGING BETWEEN CHARINNESS AND GOOD HUMOUR

