

Tata Veteran Focuses on Building Knowledge in India

Integrative thinking, characterized by the ability to create novel solutions in the face of seemingly intractable challenges, finds an impressive champion in Dr. **Faqir Chand Kohli**, commonly known as the father of India's IT industry. Former vice-chairman of **Tata Consultancy Services (TCS)**, Dr. Kohli shared his thoughts on the challenges of creating, nurturing and growing India's software industry in a session of the *Rotman Integrative Thinking™ Speaker Series* on October 5.

Born in Peshawar, Pakistan, Kohli joined TCS in 1969, after receiving engineering degrees at Queen's University and MIT. In his three decades at TCS, he transformed it from a 10-person operation to Asia's largest IT consulting, services and business-process outsourcing organization, with 80,000 employees working in India and around the world. The company's phenomenal growth was achieved despite early resistance from the Indian government, which viewed computer technology as irrelevant to the needs of the nation's largely rural, impoverished

population. In 1974, when TCS won a contract to design software for **Burroughs**, the American-based computer manufacturer, the actual computer model that the software was intended for had yet to be cleared for import into India. Without the ability to test their software, Dr. Kohli's team had to rely on a significant degree of guesswork, and yet the software, once delivered, worked almost flawlessly, and the contract led to dozens more with Burroughs and other firms.

Dr. Kohli credits his own personal resourcefulness on an ability to "learn how to learn," developed during his days as a university student. In his efforts to build TCS into an IT giant, he has been aided by the natural strengths of the Indian population: "We Indians not only speak English, we can think in English," he says. The agrarian bias of the Indian economy has also proved to be a surprising blessing. "We missed out on the industrial revolution, so we lacked the constraints of that revolution, namely the mechanical mindset," says Dr. Kohli. "Information technology, above

Photo: Stephen Watt



Dr. Faqir Chand Kohli

all, demands the capability to think clearly, which we have in abundance."

Since officially stepping down as chairman of TCS in 2000, Dr. Kohli has focused on advancing engineering education in India. With the Indian Institute of Technology, Bombay, and India's Ministry of Information Technology, he initiated a project to graduate 3,000 microelectronic engineers annually at the master's level. He has also promoted efforts to produce affordable computers and open source software in Indian languages, to help spread the benefits of the technological revolution as widely as possible. His current brainchild is to use computer aided sounds and images to impart basic literacy, particularly to illiterate adults, in a matter of months. "Your education never ceases," says Dr. Kohli. "If one has learned how to build knowledge, one will never become obsolete."

by *Stephen Watt*