



Telecom Enthusiast

A technology aficionado, Partho Banerjee, president and managing director, Hughes Communications India, has been an integral part of the country's telecom landscape. Having been associated with the company for over a decade, he believes that a large part of telecom's future in India lies in satellite-based technologies...

Partho Banerjee is something of a tech junkie. Familiar with most gizmos available in the market today, he is clearly quite passionate about the latest product launches. Our sleek digital voice recorder, for instance, sparks immediate interest in him. "Is it digital?" he asks, spending a few moments examining it with interest as we embark on the conversation...

For the president and managing director of Hughes Communications India Limited (HCIL), the telecom sector is not just his bread and butter, it is an addiction. At the same time, he doesn't believe in being a slave to technology or devices. "There is a saying that to break a wall you don't have to bang your head against it. Use

a hammer instead. Ultimately, the decision of usage lies with us. What differentiates the growth of one company or person from another is how wisely technology has been tapped to achieve its best potential."

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He gives the example of Henry Ford and what he did in the early 1900s. "He put the conveyor in the workshop to different use. The conveyor always existed, but he put it on the assembly line. And the rest, as we know, is history. So, it is all a question of how you use technology and how effectively you deploy it."

Banerjee, who has worked with Hughes for over a decade, has been instrumental in the growth of back-end services, which in many ways is the basis for rapid growth in other sectors. The first ATM was installed on Hughes' VSAT, Banerjee claims. So was the first SAP implementation. Almost 70 per cent of the big corporates (mostly multinationals) in India

depend on Hughes for their back-end support, Banerjee says. "The entire banking sector, the Bombay Stock Exchange, major brokering houses, manufacturers like Hindustan Lever Limited, Coca-Cola and now, new branded retailers like Reliance and Pantaloons all run on our networks," he says with pride.

Network and satellite availability has indeed been instrumental in increasing IT uptake in India. "As a leading vendor, Hughes has immensely impacted the lives of those working in the enterprise segment. It is now reaching out to the consumer segment as well," he says.

On the consumer side, HCIL has been doing good work in the education and rural services sectors. Its Fusion initiative, for example, is making a significant impact in remote areas. "Most of the remote, suburban areas do not have access to telecom facilities due to lack of infrastructure. Here, satellite has a distinct advantage over terrestrial alternatives, not only in terms of reach, but also because the traffic on this medium is comparatively less. We have set up multi-service kiosks offering access to the internet, rail reservations, banking, stock market details and educational facilities. Although it hasn't been widely publicised, the Fusion programme is quite active and locally well known."

Similarly, HCIL's e-learning programme has made strides in promoting distance education. It offers the next best thing to a real classroom. For this project, the company has collaborated with the IITs as well as some of the top management institutes such as the IIMs and XLRI to offer long distance learning programmes for professionals. The programmes, which include facilities such as audio-video interactivity and interaction with experts in various fields, have been extended to Dubai and Sharjah as well. In the future, 10 more countries will be wired in.

So, what next? Plenty, actually, says Banerjee. For one, he is looking forward to the launch of

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networks for Indian Railways' freight operations. He, moreover, sees a huge role for telecom in the future. Businesses can no longer be run without a very high level of technological deployment. The power of the mobile is evident in financial and banking transactions in the country, so much so that the credit card will come under threat from the mobile industry in the future, believes Banerjee.

But then, a lot depends on the regulatory environment. "I feel that a bit more regulatory support would go a long way in making the Indian telecom scenario

more dynamic," he says.

Banerjee's entry into the telecom sector was more fortuitous than planned. "I was working for Philips in the area of electronics. A senior of mine was picked up by the Tatas to run their telecom business. And he pulled nine of us from Philips to work with him. That started it all. These nine people, now spread across various companies, are leading the telecom sector. I feel the Tatas started very well in telecom. There were others too, for example, Sunil Mittal. He was in the same building as us in the 1980s, when we were making electronic exchanges and he was into telephones," he recalls.

It's been a long haul since then. But Banerjee's enthusiasm for telecom has not waned. Although routine work, attending to files and endless meetings can be somewhat mundane, business planning, strategy and speculation continue to stimulate him. "I consider a day well spent if I am able to think and contribute, to figure out opportunities and mistakes, aside from the routine meetings, reviews, etc." He is also happy that there is a lot of

freedom at his workplace, with the company fairly independent of the American parent firm's functioning.

Banerjee believes in maintaining high standards of work, but does not feel that only long hours culminate in success. "When I joined HCIL, it was in its start-up phase. A crucial time, there was firefighting to be done every day. Taking out time for the family then was a real challenge. Things are different now because the situation has stabilised somewhat," he says.

Having travelled extensively on work over the years, Banerjee now prefers short getaways to the hills with friends and family. He enjoys watching sports, or then adding that extra touch to his Gurgaon home, "maintaining and realigning" things, putting in a lighting system, etc. Anything that will keep his brain cells whirring and fuel his continuing fascination for the world of technology and gadgetry. ▲

