

Summary Report 5th BS Das Memorial Lecture organized by ARSIPSO at India International Centre, New Delhi

Date: February 15, 2025

Title of Lecture: The Times and Legacy of Ratan Tata

Speaker: Dr. Thomas Mathew, IAS (Retd.)

Honoring a Legacy of Public Service

The 5th BS Das Memorial Lecture, hosted at the India International Centre, paid tribute to Late Shri B.S. Das, a pioneer of the Indian Administrative Service, known for his distinguished diplomatic service and role in the integration of Sikkim. The event was graced by civil servants, diplomats, scholars, and members of Shri Das's family, reinforcing the commitment of ARSIPSO to honor ethical leadership in public life.

Exploring the Life of Ratan Tata

This year's lecture was delivered by Dr. Thomas Mathew, IAS (Retd.), a senior bureaucrat and author of *Ratan Tata: A Life*. Drawing from over 140 hours of personal interviews and archival research, Dr. Mathew explored Ratan Tata's journey—from his privileged but emotionally complex childhood to his rise as a globally respected business leader. Ratan Tata's upbringing was shaped deeply by Lady Navajbai Tata, who imbued in him values of humility and ethical responsibility. Even as a child growing up in affluence, young Ratan showed an aversion to ostentation, often choosing to walk to school rather than ride in luxury cars.

Academic and Emotional Crossroads

Educated at Cornell University, Ratan Tata initially studied engineering but later followed his passion for architecture. A key personal episode during this period was his romantic relationship with Carolyn Emmons, which ended due to family obligations and geopolitical tensions between India and China. This episode symbolized a recurring theme in Tata's life—sacrificing personal desires for greater responsibilities.

Corporate Apprenticeship and Grassroots Learning

Returning to India, Ratan Tata worked on the shop floors of Telco (Tata Motors), earning the respect of workers and managers alike. Dr. Mathew highlighted how Tata's early innovations, such as setting up internal "growth shops" for machine repairs, demonstrated his practical mindset and desire to bridge operational gaps from within.

Transforming the Tata Group

Dr. Mathew emphasized Ratan Tata's role in transforming the Tata Group from a federation of loosely connected entities into a modern, globally competitive conglomerate. Upon succeeding JRD Tata as Chairman in 1991, he implemented key structural reforms—raising Tata Sons' stakes in subsidiaries, introducing performance systems, and insisting on centralized ethical oversight. The 1983 Strategic Plan laid the foundation for these changes, signalling a shift towards long-term institutional strength over short-term individual fiefdoms.

A Leader of Principles

A pivotal moment underscoring Tata's ethical compass was his refusal to pay a bribe of ₹4 crore for mining clearance—an incident that showcased his belief in clean business, even at the cost of lucrative deals. The Tata Code of Conduct became a hallmark of the Group's governance, setting standards for transparency, conflict of interest, and social responsibility.

Going Global with a Human Touch

Under Ratan Tata's leadership, the Group's revenues soared from \$5.4 billion in 1992 to over \$100 billion in 2012. He led the acquisitions of Tetley, Corus, and Jaguar Land Rover—deals that redefined Indian corporate identity on the global stage. Dr. Mathew recounted how, despite initial scepticism from foreign analysts, Tata's vision and humility won respect worldwide.

Audience Engagement and Personal Stories

During the Q&A, audience members reflected on Tata's decision to remove Cyrus Mistry. Dr. Mathew explained the complexity of this decision, pointing to governance concerns and fiduciary duty. Attendees shared stories of their own encounters with Mr. Tata, including his early passion for computers and his hands-on leadership. Some of the most memorable moments came from personal anecdotes—Tata walking guests to their cars, dining with household staff, and his devotion to his pet dogs. These stories painted a picture of a leader who never let stature cloud his humanity.

Enduring Impact and Philosophical Legacy

Dr. Mathew concluded that Ratan Tata stands apart for blending industrial ambition with human empathy. With two-thirds of Tata Sons' profits owned by charitable trusts, his model of stakeholder capitalism channels wealth into education, healthcare, and rural upliftment.

Key Messages from the Lecture

- **Ethical Enterprise:** Ratan Tata's success proves that integrity and profitability can coexist in business.
- **Long-Term Thinking:** His reforms focused on building institutions that outlast personalities.
- **Personal Restraint:** Tata's private life reflects conscious sacrifice for public service.
- **Global Indian Vision:** His global acquisitions helped position India as a credible economic force.
- **Philanthropic Core:** Social development was not an afterthought, but a foundational pillar of Tata's business vision.

Closing Reflections

The 5th BS Das Memorial Lecture was not only a tribute to Ratan Tata's legacy, but also an affirmation of the values upheld by Shri B.S. Das—service, humility, and ethical leadership. The event celebrated the rare alignment of moral clarity and institutional impact in both public and corporate life.