The Straits Times, Monday, 4 June 2018, Page A14

THE ACCIDENTAL INDIAN TECH BILLIONAIRE

He has been a life full of twists and turns for Indian tech billionaire Senapathy "Kris" Gopalakrishnan, but the co-founder of IT giant Infosys says embracing those challenges and working hard have taken him to where he is today.

An alumnus of the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Madras, Mr Gopalakrishnan’s path to becoming one of the world’s richest men was not always clear.

He initially aspired to become a doctor, but when that did not pan out after he graduated from the Government Model Boys Higher Secondary School in Thiruvannamalai, in the state of Tamil Nadu, he obtained a degree in physics from the University of Kerala.

He subsequently set out to clear the difficult entrance exam for the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad.

However, when his interview did not go as planned due to his poor command of the English language at the time, Mr Gopalakrishnan trained his sights on IIT Madras, which also has one of India’s toughest entrance exams, he recalled in an exclusive interview with The Straits Times at the Marina Bay Sands Expo and Convention Centre last Thursday, where he was attending an Indian High Commission business event.

IIT Madras did not have an interview component, and Mr Gopalakrishnan joined the premier university’s Master in Physics course.

At the university, a chance suggestion by a professor that he attend a five-class on the Fourier computer programming language sparked his interest in programming.

Subsequently, Mr Gopalakrishnan joined the Master in Computer Science programme at the university. It was at his first job after graduation that he met the men with whom he would go on to found Infosys in 1981, including fellow IITians N R Narayana Murthy and S D Shibulal.

Infosys went on to become one of the bellwethers of the Indian IT sector. It had a market cap of close to US$40 billion (S$55 billion) on June 1, and reported revenues of US$10.4 billion for the financial year ended March 31.

“My journey has been one of twists and turns, and fortunately for me, all of that worked out, so I was probably very lucky. But everybody else is, believe, a life of trials and if you passionately embrace those turns, accept those challenges, work hard at it, I believe the probability of success increases,” Mr Gopalakrishnan said.

Turning challenges into opportunity, hard work will pay off, says Infosys co-founder Arvind Jayaram

One of the Singapore start-ups he has invested in is Banyan Tree, which has come out with a big data-based digital personalisation engine.

On the coming generation of entrepreneurs, Mr Gopalakrishnan said: “I would advise them to actually make sure they can afford to be an entrepreneur. Because being an entrepreneur means that you may actually have to forego a salary for maybe three to five years, especially in the beginning stages of forming a company. So are you able to take that risk? Do you have the wherewithal to sustain yourself and your family on the journey to building a business?”

He said the key to success as an entrepreneur also hinges on having an idea, or one that solves a societal problem, as well as the passion to create a business around it.

He urged future entrepreneurs not to give up as well, indicating that finding other people with whom to embark upon the difficult journey was worth the effort.

“The last thing is he will prepare, be thoughtful, ask questions, learn from others and take advice so that you don’t make the same mistakes that others have already made and learnt from. Choose a good mentor to work with and ask for advice,” he said.

Mr Gopalakrishnan is one of India’s leading philanthropists, with significant donations to research on artificial intelligence and machine learning. In addition, he has been active in the field of neuroscience and clinical neuroscience on the brain, particularly with respect to neuro-degenerative diseases like Alzheimer’s, Parkinson’s and dementia.

Last Friday, he made the largest donation of $4 million by an Indian for research at Nanyang Technological University. He was also named a Nanyang Professor of the Practice, a programme under which he will teach students at the university.

arvind@uts.com.sg