

INTERVIEW**Incredible India**

What is India made of, today? I still don't know, but this is the question I ask myself every time I am travelling in the Indian subcontinent. Is it still the same India of heavenly beings and spirituality, of old and sacred temples, of the Sadhu?

Yes, it is; but the "Mother House of the Absolute" that Giorgio Manganelli speaks about in his book *Experiment with India*, lives nowadays among great conflicts, incredible and fast-moving changes: cities are being transformed in a sprawl of skyscrapers, luxury malls, amazing Italian cafés where good cappuccinos can be sipped in suffocating traffic. Modern, gritty cars dart everywhere, forced to brake sharply one close to the other before buses full of passengers, tuk-tuks, carts, scooters, bicycles, and even before cows, completely unconcerned about this frenzy.

History and magic, fascination and beauty live together with this vital and original Indian chaos.

There is more than one reality we can feel. In order to understand at least a piece of this country, we should start walking. As Folco Quilici used to say: "if you really want to perceive India, you have to walk it." Getting through the slow rhythm of the small villages, the lonely countryside, the frantic cities, helps to understand how India can make everything coexist with its exact opposite: hope and resignation, past and present, spirituality and technology. It is a multi-layered India, and here lies its wonder.

Sonia Bernicchi

Calcutta. Every time I go there, I am stunned. It's a cosy and hospitable city, where thousand-year old temples can be found near palaces and monuments from the time of British colonialism. And Calcutta is India. Everywhere people show such energy and a special and generous soul: we just have to see beyond poverty, street life, pollution and never-ending traffic. Every time I visit, I find it changed: new and sparkling buildings, luxury hotels, new highways. Only the Ganges runs unflappable, slowly following the everyday life of the people. Calcutta is very much part of the astonishing Indian miracle everybody is talking about.

Sitting on the steps of the Victoria Memorial I look around: gardens in front of me, many Indian tourists in their typical clothes with colourful turbans all around. Suddenly I find myself hypnotized by a powerful building, not far from me: in big letters the words Tata Steel as its top, strong and vigorous. This is the modern India, the India of successful entrepreneurs. Business leaders who innovate and move in global scenarios, known all around the world for their extraordinary buyouts. Dynasties of Indian capitalism, a microcosm of families owning an economic macrocosm. Tata, the oldest, Mittal, Birla, Ambani: families successfully involved in various fields.

Among these is also the Thapar family, who owns the group bearing the same name and about whom nobody really talks about. Once just big, today stronger and in continuous expansion thanks to its Chairman and CEO, Gautam Thapar.

The empire established by his grandfather Karan Chand Thapar (which has not always witnessed happy periods) has been renamed Avantha and groups together companies that work in many different sectors: from food to chemicals, from energy to paper. Bilt is the name of the paper division; with 700 million dollars of total turnover, it's the most important producer of printing and office papers in India. In 2004, Avantha started its international climb, buying companies in Belgium, Hungary, Malaysia and Ireland; and new investments are in the air.

A lot has been written on Gautam Thapar: about his studies in the United States, about how he started working inside the group and on his career. On the surface it would seem easy to be a Thapar. We could think that everything comes with no effort. But it's not always this way. It must not have been easy for this young entrepreneur to start working for the group knowing that his uncle Lalit Mohan Thapar's successor had already been chosen. It must have been difficult to emerge in such a centralized and almost feudal system. But good results come to those who wait.

When he got the chance, Gautam Thapar showed his skills. He managed to pass from a strict family structure to a more global and flexible one, with a less traditional managing group. Everything happened without superfluous talk or self-promotion, fully complying with his typical low profile habits that have always distinguished him. Shy and reserved, he has remained in the shadows for years, facing tough and interesting challenges: from the group renovation, which, by his decision, has been divided into many companies to better handle the diversified needs of each field of activity, in order to build a new group, up to its globalization. He shows qualities that make him an undisputed leader in the Avantha group: the ability to risk, to change path when necessary and to decide rapidly, with no sentimentalism. He trusts strongly in his skills as an individual and he can create motivated teams who believe in what they do. He listens, he is patient, authoritative but not autocratic and he is always open-minded. And, most of all, he has a natural-born charisma. Gautam Thapar's personal success today is widely acknowledged and completely deserved. He has new challenges to cope with and ambitious projects to face, but I'm sure that this young businessman will reach his goals as always and that in the future we will hear a lot more about him and his group.

In this interview, exclusively granted to Perini Journal, Gautam Thapar talks about himself and about the philosophy both concerning his company and his life.

PERINI JOURNAL (PJJ): IS THERE SOMETHING THE AVANTHA GROUP ISN'T AS EXCELLENT IN AS WE WOULD THINK? DOES THE GROUP HAVE LACKS OR FLAWS AND HOW DO YOU BEHAVE TO REMOVE THEM?

GAUTAM THAPAR (GT): The Avantha Group will always present points of excellence as well as flaws. This is simply because both excellence and flaws are moving targets and co-exist. Just when you begin to believe that you have reached excellence, or overcome a flaw, another target appears. Business and organisations are dynamic: nobody should ever believe that he or she has nothing left to improve upon. The Avantha Group has its own value system. The group, its leadership and its performance must reflect these values. We're young as a group, but have older companies in it. We're still a work in progress.

PJJ: IS THERE AN ERROR THE GROUP HAS MADE AND THAT EVENTUALLY TURNED OUT TO BE INTERESTING AND EVEN USEFUL?

GT: About twenty years ago, we ventured into the business of producing lightweight building materials using fly ash. And this was long before the issues of global warming and climate change became fashionable. The problem was that not enough analysis was performed before making the investment. Unfortunately, it was also too early for the market. Yet for one reason or another we've persevered with the product, modified it, reduced the cost and innovated. Today it is a very fast growing and profitable business. And fashionable, too!

PJJ: WHY CAN'T YOUR COMPETITORS REALLY COMPETE AGAINST YOU? WHICH ARE, IN EVERY SINGLE FIELD, YOUR ADDED VALUES, IF COMPARED WITH YOUR COMPETITORS?

GT: The reasons why they may not compete effectively are many. They range from the completeness of the products we offer to the knowledge and technology we bring to our manufacturing, from the depth and penetration of our marketing and distribution to the innovation in our business model. We are constantly changing, introducing new products or new marketing and sales innovation. And all this is done while constantly reducing cost.

PJJ: WHAT WILL AND WHAT WON'T THE AVANTHA GROUP DO FOR SURE IN THE TISSUE FIELD? AND IN THE OTHER FIELDS IT'S INVOLVED IN?

GT: The tissue field in India is nascent and has a small base. While it will continue to grow, it will require extensive marketing and brand building. Some of our personal hygiene habits will require changing in order to make the market grow faster and more in-depth. One should not expect this to happen fast. So you will not see us investing in expensive plants and machinery yet.

PJJ: IS THERE AN AREA OR A COMPANY YOU GET INSPIRATION FROM?

GT: In India companies in the pulp and paper business are not allowed to own land for tree planting. We have innovated a business model that allows farmers to grow trees for us and get paid for doing so annually, instead of when the tree is mature. Since trees are hardy and resistant, the farmers are protected to an extent from the vagaries of weather and are not in the clutches of money lenders. Their chance of pulling themselves and their families out of poverty improves dramatically. The ability to influence so many lives while still benefiting the company yields a tremendous feeling of satisfaction.

PJJ: HAVE YOU EVER FOLLOWED A WESTERN DEVELOPMENT MODEL AND DO YOU THINK THERE ARE SOME THAT CAN BE EXPORTED TO THE EAST?

GT: It is difficult to say what is a Western development model. All the Western countries follow different versions

of democracy and capitalism. There is always something to learn from other countries, even if only to avoid the mistakes they may have made. Ultimately, our chosen development model will always take a path that reflects the culture, demographics and society we live in. It is as hard for us to adopt a Western model as it is to impose a model of development on any country.

PJL: WHAT DO YOU KNOW AND LOVE ABOUT ITALY?

GT: Tuscany, the food, the weather between May and September, the people who are friendly and warm and their impeccable style.

PJL: DO YOU THINK THAT THE INDUSTRY WORLD SHOULD KEEP ITSELF WITHIN SOME SORT OF LIMITS? IF SO, WHAT ARE THESE LIMITS?

GT: If you choose capitalism and Western style democracy, then the limits are defined by the Constitution you adopt and the regulations you put in place. There must always be checks on absolute power, on the exploitation of the weak and less fortunate by industry and on those behaviours that break laws. The communications revolution of the 20th century has left its impact on the 21st. We are far more reactive, but with less time to react. There is really very little time for serious contemplation.

PJL: DO YOU THINK THAT HUMAN BEINGS SHOULD LIMIT THEMSELVES? AND ARE THERE HIGHER DUTIES WE SHOULD CARRY OUT?

GT: That is too broad a question! Limit ourselves: in which way, in which context? Personally I believe that we all should serve the higher purpose of helping those less fortunate than ourselves. Not by charity alone, but by giving them the power to earn a living, stand on their own feet and develop self-respect and the confidence that goes with it.

PJL: AS AN ENTREPRENEUR, HOW DO YOU COPE WITH THE WEST/EAST DIFFERENCES: AS IF THEY WERE AN OBSTACLE OR AN OPPORTUNITY? AND WHY?

GT: The differences you speak about are an opportunity, not an obstacle. The ability to live and learn from other cultures, the Eastern or the Western one, is also very helpful in business. It broadens the mind and removes the stereotypes we build up about other cultures. We have a lot to offer each other even if we may not realise it immediately!

PJL: PHILANTHROPY ISN'T JUST GIVING TO OTHERS, IT'S A PROJECT, A WAY OF LIVING: HOW DO YOU RECONCILE YOUR BEING A SUCCESSFUL MAN WITH YOUR BEING AN ENTREPRENEUR STRONGLY INVOLVED IN SOCIAL ISSUES?

GT: I believe that if you have the ability to contribute to society, to give back, regardless of whether you are an entrepreneur or a professional, a student or a housewife, you must do so. It is almost your duty to do so. There is no conflict between success and social obligations, and there is no connection either. You should be able to give back regardless and in whichever way you choose to.

PJL: THAPAR UNIVERSITY IS AMONG THE TOP ENGINEERING SCHOOLS IN INDIA: HOW DID IT START AND WHICH ARE ITS OBJECTIVES?

GT: Thapar University was started over 50 years ago by my grandfather at the invitation of the government of Punjab. Since then the University has stuck to the role of preparing engineers and scientists for the task of building India. That is what we were set up to do and that is what we continue to do. We have never wavered from that, not even during the heights of the Punjab terrorism problem. And not even today, when we are teaching about 4000 students.

PJL: DO YOU BELIEVE IN INSPIRATION, IN SOME KIND OF SIXTH SENSE OR IN THOSE FEELINGS WITH NO EXPLANATION?

GT: I believe we all have an inner voice. Some call it sixth sense, some intuition, some inspiration and some luck. Regardless of what we call it, it is important to learn to listen to it and often be guided by it, not blindly. The great Brazilian storyteller Paulo Coelho captures the essence of this in his book *The Alchemist*. In most matters our minds are the limiting factor.

PJL: INNOVATION, AS HUMAN LIFE, ADVANCES IN TWO WAYS: ONE IS REVOLUTIONARY, WITH GREAT BOOSTS OF CHANGE; ONE IS FOR THE SUBSEQUENT ADJUSTMENT, WHEN THE INNOVATION, IF THERE'S ONE, BECOMES AVAILABLE TO EVERYBODY. IS THE PRESENT A REVOLUTION OR AN ADJUSTMENT MOMENT, IN YOUR OPINION?

GT: We currently are in revolutionary times. This has been brought about by information technology, by computing

power and by telecommunications. Unfortunately, those in the forefront of this have not yet put in the governance system for balance so that the revolution does not consume itself. The speed at which things change also makes it very difficult. This is going to be our challenge for many years to come.

PJL: FOLLOWING THE SAME THOUGHT, DO YOU THINK THAT THE TISSUE FIELD IN INDIA IS CURRENTLY CROSSING A REVOLUTION OR A MOMENT OF ADJUSTMENT?

GT: Tissue is a long time away from being a revolution in India!

PJL: WHICH IS YOUR POSITIVE FLAW, THE ONE WHICH SEEMS A MERIT OF YOURS?

GT: I have no idea. I believe I have many flaws. Good or bad is a matter of perspective. My culture and the religious philosophy of Hinduism give me one set of values; society, through its morals and laws, gives a second set. I try to live with these as my boundaries.

PJL: IS THERE ANY DIFFERENCE BETWEEN YOUR ACTIONS AND YOUR THOUGHTS?

GT: Generally no. What you see is what you get! I have a reputation of being direct and honest. Let's just say that I'll never be mistaken for a diplomat!

PJL: AND BETWEEN YOU AND YOUR ROLE?

GT: I don't see that difference. But I am the wrong person to ask this question. Those who work with and for me or those who have known me most of my life are better able to answer.

PJL: AS IS WELL KNOWN, YOU'RE FOND OF GOLF: CAN YOU FIND SOME SIMILAR FEATURES BETWEEN A GOLF GAME AND THE COMPETITION IN THE BUSINESS WORLD?

GT: In golf you compete against yourself and against the golf course. There are many different ways to play a hole, just as there are many different routes to success in business and life. You need to have the confidence in golf that you can execute the shot you want when you want; and in business you need to have the same confidence about your ability to execute your strategy. So: yes, I guess there are many similarities.

PJL: WHAT'S YOUR GOLF HANDICAP? WHICH IS YOUR FAVOURITE GOLF COURSE? IS THERE AN ITALIAN ONE YOU LIKE?

GT: My handicap is 12, although I don't play as well as I used to. I have never played in Italy. I loved playing Pebble Beach, in California, and Loch Lomond.