

I'm Changing Track, Not Pace: Manwani

Manwani joined HUL as a trainee in 1976, he will retire next month after serving 13 years, longest in the company's history, as chairman

Sagar.Malviya@timesgroup.com

Mumbai: For Harish Manwani, joining Hindustan Unilever more than four decades ago was like an extension of his own humble origin. Son of an Indian Railways officer, he maintains HUL still has the soul of middle class India.

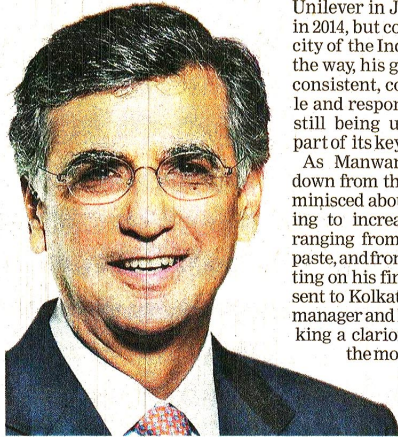
"In terms of values, HUL is an extension of your family, and in terms of intellectual engagement, it's an extension of college life," said Manwani who will retire next month after serving 13 years, the longest in HUL's history, as chairman. When asked if he recalls his first day at HUL, then called HindustanLever, he said, "Of course, it was June 1, 1976. It was my dream company to join. No question."

Manwani joined the maker of Rin

detergent and Lux soaps as a trainee in 1976, armed with a master's degree from Jammalal Bajaj Institute of Management Studies. HUL was then a ₹200-crore firm; last fiscal, its revenues exceeded ₹35,000 crore. But what has not changed is the fact that HUL remains one of the top five valuable companies by market cap.

Born in New Delhi in 1952, Manwani went to the only boarding school in the capital then — St Xavier's School and did his bachelors in Statistics and Economics from the Mumbai University. About 42 years later, he drew a parallel between HUL and his university, both following meritocracy and valuing intellectuals' progress and capability over any other criteria.

He was appointed first COO of



Unilever in June 2011 and retired in 2014, but continued in his capacity of the Indian arm. And along the way, his guiding principles — consistent, competitive, profitable and responsible growth — are still being used in Unilever as part of its key strategy.

As Manwani prepares to step down from the Indian arm, he reminisced about a career spent trying to increase sales of brands ranging from detergent to toothpaste, and from tea to soup — reflecting on his first year when he was sent to Kolkata as a young branch manager and leading a team to make a clarion call during one of the most competitive laundry

battles in Latin America. He still remembers his 91-year old fat-

her's advice — the purpose of life should be to make yourself useful.

Would he have liked to be part of a different company? Or a different trajectory within Unilever. The answer is an emphatic no. But would he have done things differently? "Of course. Not everything, I did was successful. But when you look back, a lot of things you did well were not as good a learning experience than what you didn't do well," said Manwani.

Over the years, HUL has given more than 500 CEOs to India Inc and even outside the country. Then why didn't Manwani leave? "To put it simply, I never had one of those offers that you can't refuse," he joked borrowing a phrase from The Godfather.

Manwani kept up with the move towards globalisation, shifting

away from India to both developed markets such as North America to Europe and into emerging markets like Asia and Latin America. While his first day 42 years ago is still vivid, will Manwani help HUL when he sees it in trouble or just be a bystander?

"That is the worst thing you can do. The context always changes. The solutions that I thought of today will not be relevant tomorrow. But if they seek my advice, I am available," said the 65-year old who was the brain behind the company's successful challenge to Colgate's dominance in personal care segment in India in the 1990s. He implemented a marketing plan that brought Lever within striking distance of Colgate and boosted the firm's already strong position in shampoos.