

Boardroom battles to Frank Sinatra, life of Tata 'patriarch'

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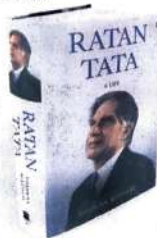
A fortnight after Ratan Tata passed away, his much awaited biography by Thomas Mathew is out. The book, running into more than 600 pages, was completed close to two years ago but was not published. Concerns over "controversial content" may have delayed the book's release, sources believe. Mathew, a former bureaucrat, who had first met the patriarch of the salt to software group some three decades ago and stayed connected with him, was at Tata's funeral earlier this month.

Published by HarperCollins, *Ratan Tata: A Life* spans decades — from his childhood to his first love, to being appointed chairperson of Tata Sons and then as head of Tata Trusts. Also, Mathew's work — based on a series of interviews with Ratan Tata, his family, friends, colleagues, and business associates — offers a glimpse into the social and political scene of the times.

The saga around Cyrus Mistry, who was removed as Tata Sons chairman in 2016 by Ratan Tata, plays out dramatically over several pages on finding a successor and then dealing with the situation that arose thereafter. The author writes that after a year of "parallel running", Tata began having second thoughts about "Mistry's suitability".

"Deep down, he pondered if it would be prudent to appoint a man whose ethos could potentially conflict with that of the Tatas."

One of the reasons given for the fallout is that Mistry had assured that he would establish a legally tenable framework to disassociate



himself from Shapoorji Pallonji and Co. After becoming chairman, however, Mistry behaved in a different way from his father and grandfather, who had shown the utmost respect

The book opens with the early years. "He lived like a prince, spoilt for comfort and in infinite luxury." Despite the luxury all around, the author notes that "young Ratan had no room to himself."

Mistry while removing him: "This is not what I wish things would come to but I think the time has come for us to part ways."

for the seniormost Tata in the group, the author writes. "But Mistry targeted Ratan, the man who had elevated him from virtual oblivion into the mainstream of the Tatas, supporting him at every turn." The confrontation and sacking of Mistry have been detailed precisely. Nitin Nohria (then a board member) recalls what Ratan Tata had told

Another controversy that's covered is the one surrounding the leaked conversation with Niira Radia (corporate lobbyist) during the 2G telecom spectrum allocation case, and Tata's fight for right to privacy, with details of the issues he was quizzed on.

On the Nano experiment, the author pins its failure on "unimaginative marketing and advertising".

The meeting between Ratan Tata and Tata Sons chairman N Chandrasekaran ahead of the Air India buy is captured well. "I run things past him (as) he may not offer advice unless you ask him," Chandrasekaran is quoted as saying. The author writes that when the proposal was discussed, Tata "did not show excitement", nor did he say "somehow we should do it". But he was "extremely supportive" and "wanted it to happen", yet "he did not want to force" his decision. What Tata instead asked was: "Can you run it as a financially viable (company)?"

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lived like a prince, spoilt for comfort and in infinite luxury." The micro details on Ratan Tata's house, which was often called Tata Palace for its style and splendour, catch the reader's attention. Despite the luxury all around, Mathew notes that "young Ratan had no room to himself; the elaborate passage doubled as one for him, but it had no doors that he could shut to make it into a proper room. As the passage had no bathroom, he shared the one attached to the cupboard room that Jimmy (his younger brother) used."

The story of Ratan Tata's lonely childhood is juxtaposed with a conservative social backdrop. "Ratan's parents had had a love marriage, a rarity in the socially conservative India and the equally traditional Parsi community of the pre-Independence era. But their whirlwind courting could not survive the normal vicissitudes of marriage and in 1944, they separated..." Soonoo (his mother) filed for divorce when Ratan Tata was 10 and Jimmy 7.

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Tata biography: Tracing a patriarch's journey

The writer brings out the trauma for the children. "Both Ratan and Jimmy were ragged and humiliated in school by their peers. Ratan recalls that they were made to feel conspicuous and outclassed."

According to Mathew's account, Ratan Tata confessed to him that he hardly had any friends. Zubin Mehta, orchestral conductor, and Behram Dubash, shipping industry veteran, are among the few friends he had.

There are interesting details from his student days at Riverdale and then Cornell. Ratan had learnt judo and he was known for his "adeptness" at the hand slap game. Going into his studies, the writer says: "For Ratan, studying architecture was not only exciting, but it also prepared him for his future role—as the leader of the largest conglomerate in India." On flying, the book narrates how he started his flying classes when he was only 14.

After he returned to India in 1962, his father had remarried and had a 5-year-old son, Noel, the book says drawing one into the complexities of the Tata family. "It was not that Ratan was taken by surprise. In 1955, when Ratan was on a visit to Bombay for his holidays, Naval Tata had confided to him that he intended to marry Simone Dunoyer."

Noel Tata, Ratan Tata's half brother, is now the Tata Trusts chairman.

The book picks up pace once Ratan Tata is fully entrenched into the group. That was around 1974 when he became director in Tata Sons. His interactions with then chairman JRD Tata and the faceoffs with Russi Mody, Sumant Moolgaokar, Darbari Seth and Ajit Kerkar make the book engrossing. "The house that Jamsetji built had moved from 'being a relatively cohesive entity into an assemblage of increasingly independent companies—what some Tata executives describe as fiefdoms', wrote the *Wall Street Journal*." And, Ratan Tata began working on a new 'Strategic Plan'

for the group.

In the chapter on Taj, the book says Tata questioned the "shotgun" approach of Ajit Kerkar, chairman and managing director of Indian Hotels Company Ltd (IHCL), who had taken over its reins in the 1960s. After Kerkar's exit in 1997, Tata took it upon himself to transform IHCL through "expanding, branding and marketing", growing overseas but also selling some foreign assets to protect the brand's reputation.

Many chapters are also dedicated to the major acquisitions under Tata and how they came about — Tetley Tea, Corus, Jaguar and Land Rover — with Ratan Tata looking at these acquisitions as "a bit of the empire striking back". But unlike the Empire, the author writes, he loathed being seen as a conqueror.

It is in a later chapter that the writer deals with the horror of the 26/11 Mumbai terror attack, when the Taj Mahal Palace Hotel was besieged for three days. This chapter is as much a salutation to the manner in which Tata responded to the crisis as it is to the Taj employees.

A man who believed in taking everyone along, is how the writer presents Ratan Tata through anecdotes. For instance, during a tense meeting to discuss the Corus acquisition, Tata said there would be no formal vote until the entire board was for the proposal. "He went from chair to chair," Ishaat Hussain, former director of Tata Sons and Tata Steel, recalls in the book.

And then, there's the other side to him. Ratan Tata loved jazz and among his favourite singers were Nat King Cole, Ella Fitzgerald and Frank Sinatra. And well, it was his father who gave him the moniker of 'patriarch' when he was a young man. He was formally dressed and had a serious air about him, as his sister Shireen recalled in a conversation with Mathew, explaining why 'patriarch' suited him.