

'RATAN TATA: A LIFE' BY THOMAS MATHEW

Ratan Tata's journey: Overcoming adversity and redefining leadership at Tata Group

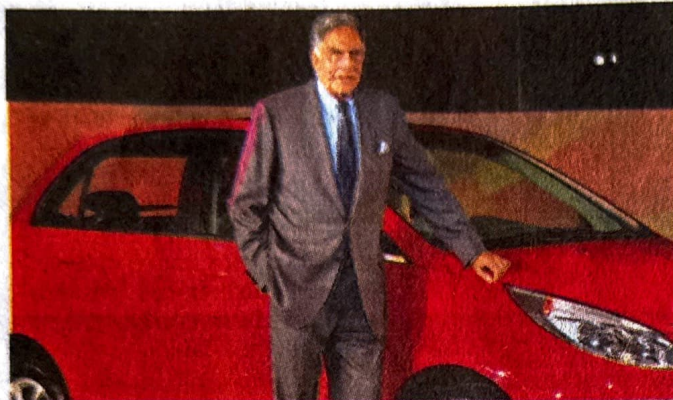
GEORGE MATHEW
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RATAN NAVAL Tata, who moved to Cathedral and John Cannon in Mumbai for high school studies in late forties faced some unusual problems as the school was 'too anglicized', 'never equated well with it' and was 'quite unhappy in Cathedral', according to Tata's biography.

The young boy's problems were compounded by his mathematics teacher, who treated him rather harshly. "But he had a favourite teacher too: an Anglo-Indian, Glenn Howell, his geography and English teacher. Ratan scored exceptionally well in these subjects, which became his favourites," writes former IAS officer Thomas Mathew in a biography titled *'Ratan Tata: A Life'*.

The author says both Ratan and his brother Jimmy Tata were ragged and humiliated in school by their peers. "Ratan recalls that they were made to feel 'conspicuous and outclassed'. After his mother remarried, he says that boys of the school said 'all kinds of things about both of them,' the author says.

Ratan hardly had any friends in Cathedral because his mother and father were separated and his brother and he would always tag along with his father (Naval Tata), so his friends became their friends. "I hardly ever had any



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friends (of my own). Of the three he says he had, Zubin Mehta, the famous orchestral conductor, and his brother, would occasionally come to Tata House. The other friend, Behram Dubash, is now a veteran in the shipping industry and involved in his family construction business," Ratan is quoted as saying in the book.

On why he was selected as the Tata Sons Chairman after the legendary JRD Tatas, the book says, "equally difficult was the research to get to the bottom of the reasons why JRD chose Ratan as his successor, when there were many one accomplished and experienced stalwarts (like Russi Mody, Sumant Moolgaokar and Ajit Kerkar) of the group at hand. The finding has upended the existing narrative that Ratan was chosen because he was a Tata, since at the time he was selected no one knew that he shared common ancestry with Jamsetji Tata, founder the

Tata group. "This work has revealed that Ratan was chosen for a variety of reasons, the least important being that he had a Tata surname; most definitely, it was for reasons that he had a scientific mind, a distinct vision and the potential to lead the group through the tumultuous time of economic liberalization," Mathew writes.

"Ratan, however, was still unsure of JRD's intentions. He says that he had always entertained the belief that it would be (Russi) Mody who would finally take over as Chairman, Tata Sons. But if Ratan was like JRD in many ways, he was also unlike the chairman in others. The young Tata was a man of few words, an introvert. JRD, on the other hand, was the life of the party," the book says.

On marriage, the book says that for a man who deep down feared marriage, unsure of how it might work out, Ratan got perilously close to wedlock more

than once. "Ratan muddled through a few relationships without the courage to culminate any into marriage. Fearing the unknown, he backed off," the biography says. "Yet, it is a little unusual that he, his brother, Jimmy, and his sisters, Shireen and Deanna, are all unmarried," the author writes.

He would then wait for the meeting to end, to watch the directors desperately moving their feet in all directions to locate their shoes. When they would fail in their effort, they would struggle to bend and reach under the table in search of their missing footwear, to the amusement of the rest of the room, Mathew writes.

On his nature, the biography says just as Ratan expects people to trust him, he too easily trusts others. "This, at times, made him a poor judge of character, said (J) Irani (former Tata Steel MD). [Ratan] sometimes has blind faith in the people who are close to him, he felt," the book says.

"Ratan is not generally perceived to be a man in a hurry. But he is. Yet, he is unlike most other achievers and as is his wont, rarely speaks about his accomplishments. This led to both positive and negative outcomes during his chairmanship," Mathew writes. It was an advantage as he let his work speak for itself, leading to a more convincing and enduring assessment of his capabilities. The downside was that he often re-

ceived less publicity for what he was doing than he could have, making him vulnerable to the uninformed public who believed his detractors' claims that he was a non-performer, the book says.

Commenting on his style, former US State Secretary Henry Kissinger said: 'He (Ratan) (is) not (as) dramatic as Jeh (JRD Tata), but he's a man of enormous solidity and a leading thought.' His manners are 'unobtrusive' and his views are designed to elicit 'cooperation' as opposed to it being viewed as an 'imposition'.

On Air India acquisition, the book says, "when the Air India proposal was discussed with Ratan, he 'did not show excitement', nor did he say, 'somehow we should do it', says N Chandrasekaran (Tata Sons Chairman). But he was extremely supportive' and 'wanted it to happen', yet 'he did not want to force' the decision, the present chairman adds. Ratan asked Chandrasekaran, 'Can you run it as a financially viable (company)?'

When the author requested Ratan to recall his most memorable day of his life, in an instant he said, "Amongst the happiest and most fulfilling would be the creation of the Nano." It was 'because everyone said that a one lakh car was not possible, and we did that,' the book says.

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