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Thirty nine honorary doctorates and numerous international awards & honours are only glimpses of his extraordinary contribution to the field of science and engineering. As he retires from the Board of Thermax this August, *Fireside* had the privilege of a tête-à-tête with Dr. Raghunath Mashelkar on a Sunday morning, as he returned from an eventful week and was heading for another one.

The story behind the making of Dr. Mashelkar is an inspiration to many. Having lost his father at a very young age, his poor widowed mother could not afford notebooks or shoes, and he spent many nights studying under street lights, while he walked barefoot to a municipal school. Despite ranking 11th in the Maharashtra State Board (SSC) Exam, he was planning to give up studies to support his mother, when the Tata scholarship helped him pursue further education. “I never imagined that someday Ratan Tata and I will sign in the same book one after the other, as Foreign Fellows of the prestigious American Academy of Arts & Science”, he says. He left attractive academic positions and returned to India on a special invitation from the then

Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi as a part of the move to reverse our country’s brain drain. He joined the National Chemical Laboratory and the rest is history. His significant contributions to globally competitive technologies, particularly his breakthrough research on polymers won him accolades of the highest order. Some of his latest achievements include his becoming the first person from India to be elected to the US National Academy of Inventors and an invitation as a jury for the Queen Elizabeth prize, a Nobel prize equivalent in engineering.

When we asked him about the secret for excellence in R&D, he says, “Curiosity is fundamental as it leads to creativity and creativity triggers innovation. The quality of life we have today is an outcome of centuries of research and innovation.” He explained further by giving the example of his pathbreaking work in developing stimuli-responsive polymers, which paved the way for specialised applications, for example intelligent drug delivery systems. This research won him the *Fellowship of the Royal Society*, where he received the honour of signing a book bearing signatures of the

world's greatest scientists, including Sir Isaac Newton.

So, what stimulated the scientist in Dr. Mashelkar? "Once while demonstrating the experiment of focussing sunlight through a convex lens on a piece of paper till it burns, my science teacher Principal Bhavne turned to me and said that if you focus, you can achieve anything in life. This experiment opened my mind to the power of science and the power of focused efforts."

Speaking of his association with Thermax, he fondly remarks, "It was love at first sight; my life would not have been complete without Thermax. I first met Rohinton and Anu Aga in the mid-eighties and instantly struck a chord with them. I admire the way Anu steered the turnaround journey of Thermax. When she and Meher offered me the role of a director, I had no second thoughts and came onboard in 2008." Being associated as an independent director with over a dozen reputed companies, he considers Thermax as one of the most exceptional Boards, where meetings are like family gatherings!

"I knew Thermax for its three Es – *Engineering, Energy and Environment*. However, after joining the company, I discovered the additional Es, which created the foundation for them – *Excellence* in behaviour and governance; *Ethics* that has always triumphed over the lure of profits and *Empathy* for the

deprived sections of society. In fact, to me, the 'T' in Thermax stands for Trust."

At Thermax, Dr. Mashelkar brought together some of the great minds in India and chaired the 'Innovation Council' to make innovation the Thermax way of life. He helped the Chemical division in developing speciality polymers with reduced costs and superior performance, deriving more from less. He explains, "I term the traditional model of *doing well and doing good* as CSR 1.0, where a part of the surplus wealth from corporates goes back to people. However, the need of the hour is the next step i.e. CSR 2.0 which is *doing well by doing good*, where companies engage in the business that benefits society at large. Thermax is a unique company, which does both CSR 1.0 and CSR 2.0."

He is a strong proponent of 'Affordable Excellence'. Inspired by his mother's compassion he constituted the 'Anjani Mashelkar Inclusive Innovation Award,' after her demise which recognises inventions that are of high quality and at the same time affordable like an ECG scan for five rupees or breast cancer screening for a dollar.

"Unlike instant coffee, there is no instant success", says Dr. Mashelkar. "Even today I work 24 x 7 which barely leaves me with time for leisure, except for listening to classical music before going to

bed. I do not consider myself as a cricket fan but a fanatic and love reading biographies". His family comprises his wife Vaishali, who is an artist and three children Shruti, Shubhra and Amey.

On a concluding note, he conveys his message to Thermax saying, "As Thermax is on the path of a turnaround, innovation will be the key to take it to the next level of exponential growth and recreate the magic of 2011, when they hit the billion dollar mark with a 50% plus growth. Thermax has led the energy behaviour of the nation in the past, from oil & coal to biomass and can do so for the future with technologies like fuel cells, where Dr. Sonde and his team have made great inroads. All that is needed is trust and investment in innovation, bold decisions and the belief that 'yes, we can'. Speaking of his bond with Thermax he says, "You can take Mashelkar out of Thermax, but not Thermax out of Mashelkar. We are inseparable."

