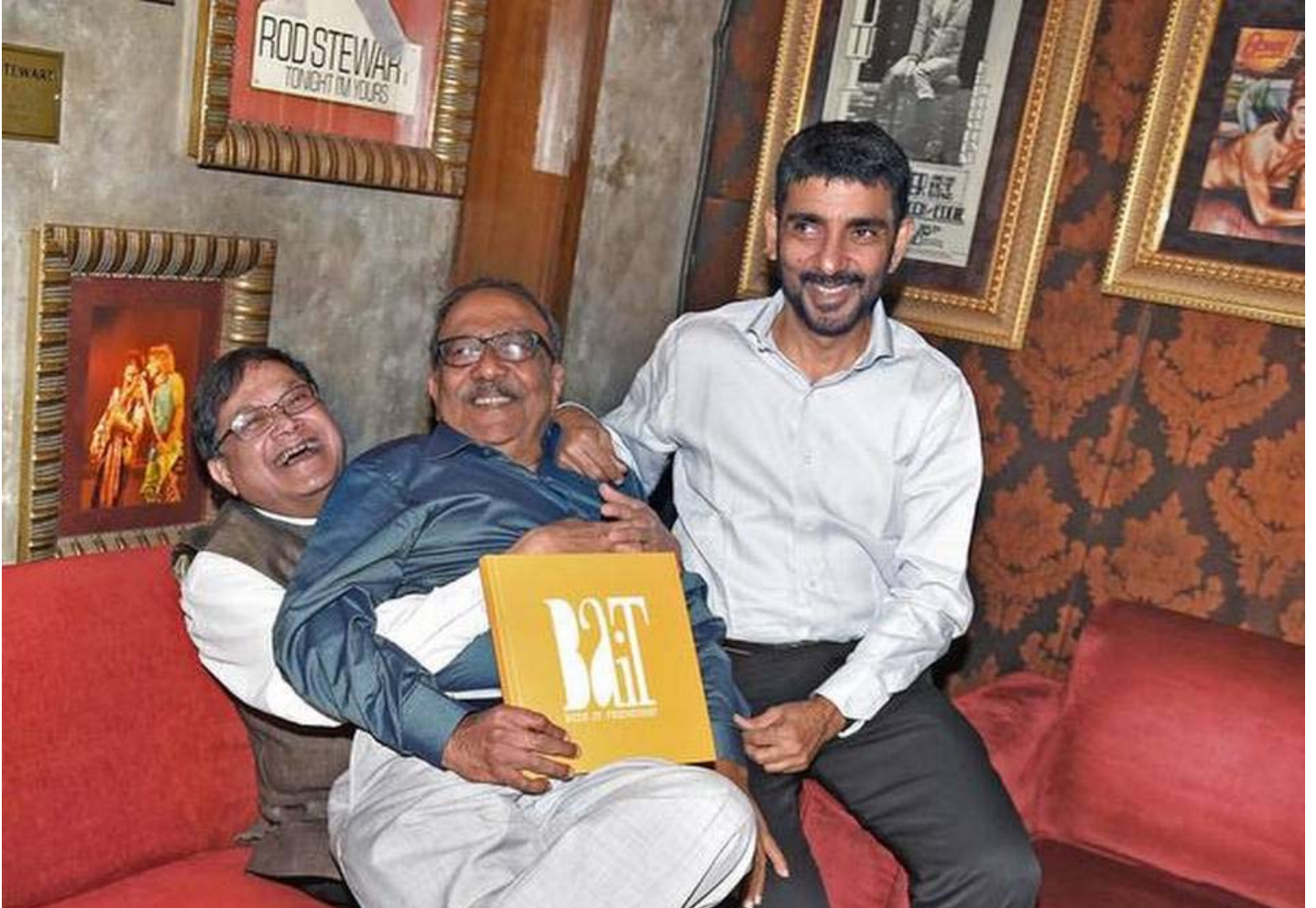


METRO PLUS

A culture of cooperation

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In the mid-90s, a group of CEOs came together to form an informal drinking group. SOORAJ RAJMOHAN quizzes them on how it helped hold the technology industry together through hard times

In July of 1993, a group of CEOs were in Bengaluru to attend an executive committee meeting of the Manufacturers' Association of Information Technology (MAIT). It was a bad time for the industry, and morale was low. This led to Pradeep Kar, Chairman and MD of Microland, Pravin Gandhi, co-founder of Hinditron Computers and now founding partner at Seedfund and Bikram Dasgupta of Pertech Computers Ltd. deciding to call an informal meeting of the attendees over a glass of beer. The trio made a few phone calls and after the MAIT meeting, a group of 11 CEOs convened at Pub World on Residency Road for the first meeting of what would go on to be called the Beer Drinkers Association of Information Technology (BAIT).

Over the next five years, BAIT would see their meetings held across the country, and the number of members grew to include industry stalwarts like Nandan Nilekani, Bhaskar Pramanik and many more. By 1998, the association had over 90 members.

Pradeep says the idea behind BAIT was for everyone to meet, discuss problems and find common ground. “We did not have a clear idea for it. As we mentioned in the minutes of the meeting, scribbled on a Pub World napkin, our vision was ‘little blurred but clear’. Even the terminology we used, DOS (Disk Operating System) became ‘Drown Our Sorrows’, because the industry was in bad shape. IBM’s motto ‘Think’ for us became ‘Drink’”

The idea remained light-hearted, and BAIT meetings had clear rules -- members had to consume six glasses of beer, and missing more than three in a row attracted a fine. But all of them agree that these gatherings also helped build lasting friendships among people who were also boardroom competitors. “This opened up a platform for discussion, and we began meaningful debates that helped overcome that inherent trust deficit we see in India. As we talked, we saw that we were all actually in the same boat,” says Pravin.

Pradeep concurs, “We shared our knowledge and discussed the loneliness and frustration associated with our business. And we developed a support system where we would not poach employees from each other and alerted each other of unreliable customers.”

They accept that things have changed since the simpler times when they would spend a day together drinking beer and discussing ideas. Bikram, who since founded Globsyn Group, believes the startup and funding culture has changed business significantly. “In those days you had to borrow from parents or the bank to build an empire, now you have an idea and look for funding. So the attitude and approach to doing business has changed along with society itself.”

“Today it is all about instant gratification,” Pradeep adds. “It used to take decades to build a company, now people expect results the next morning. This leads to a lot of competition that does not leave time for building a friendship. If the guys today got together and said ‘Let’s stop killing each other and losing money in the process and work together’ things would be a lot different.”

“That is the message we are trying to send out,” Pravin explains.

The founders and a group of regular BAIT attendees got together in the city earlier this week for the launch of a coffee table book that chronicles the activities of the group during its operations throughout the latter half of the ’90s. They still meet informally, and know each other’s families from the many off-site retreats that were organised.

The ways of the trade may have changed since the time BAIT was active, but a glimpse of the shared camaraderie nearly two decades later reinforces the belief that friendship and business can go hand in hand, with a little help from beer.