OUTLOOK BUSINESS
THINK BEYOND. STAY AHEAD.

OB Cover Story: India's Biggest Family Conglomerates are Handing Over the Reins. Can Their Scions Rewrite the Legacy?

Many, many moons ago Alfred Tennyson, an English poet, had said, "The old order changeth, yielding place to new." This natural law is being reflected in India Inc. Not cataclysmic corporate coups, but a slow ushering in of a new crop of leaders from the wings to the centre stage. The past few years have seen a new generation being groomed and handed over the reins of various conglomerates.

India's rise has been nothing short of extraordinary. In just over three decades, the country has rewritten its economic script—from the brink of bankruptcy in 1991 to becoming the world's fourth-largest economy in 2024. This metamorphosis was powered not by state command but by private ambition.

Passing the Baton

The transformation is visible on the country's stock exchange. The combined market capitalisation of Nifty 50 companies has surged from just ₹13.5 lakh crore in the mid-2000s to about ₹201.8 lakh crore today, growing at an estimated compound annual growth rate of 14.9%, according to Sriram BKR, product head–distribution at Geojit Investments, a retail financial-services company.

The top half-a-dozen of these companies are together worth over twice the GDP of Pakistan—roughly $400bn. That scale was once the preserve of US giants alone.

And now, a generational shift is underway.

India’s largest business houses—Reliance Industries, TVS, Piramal, JSW Group, RPSG Group, Aditya Birla Group and others—are passing the baton. Their scions are no longer on the sidelines; they are shaping decisions, steering strategy and stepping into power.

As India works towards achieving developed-nation status, the shift of power within these families will play a crucial role with an estimated 85% of India’s incorporated companies being family-owned. In a 2024 report McKinsey, a consultancy, noted that family-run businesses are at the core of India’s economic landscape, contributing an estimated 75% of the GDP, a figure expected to rise to 80-85% by 2047.

Challenges Galore

Not all of these businesses are going to see a generational transition. Many scions today want to chart out their own path by starting up afresh or even pursuing passions beyond business. Mohandas Pai, a veteran India Inc executive, says that’s a good thing as everyone is not cut out to deal with the heat and dust of marshalling a large business.

“Every heir is going to be compared to their parents’ and grandparents’ achievements. Running a big business is a 24/7 job with a lot of complexity and the best way to preserve the legacy might be by employing professional managers like it is done in the US,” he says.

Pai goes on to add that the scions can always be a part of the board and retain their shareholding. However, they may not be best equipped to oversee day-to-day operations.

“Also, why would the best managers come and work at the company if they know that they will always play second fiddle?” he asks.

While many scions of India Inc are giving up the reins, a handful of young guns are choosing to remain in the driver’s seat. Over the next few pages, we bring you their stories and talk about their challenges.

Each profile in this special edition explores not just the business strategies of the next generation, but their ambitions and influences. Some, like Parth Jindal of the Mumbai-based JSW Group, are trying to recreate the scale and impact of legacy businesses in entirely new sectors.

Others, like Shashwat Goenka of the Kolkata-based RPSG Group, are pivoting traditional groups toward consumer-first, tech-enabled growth. At Bengaluru-based Kirloskar Systems, Manasi Tata is tasked with steering group companies such as Toyota Kirloskar Motor through the challenges of adapting to electric mobility and a fast-evolving manufacturing landscape.

And in the Ahmedabad-headquartered Adani group, a new generation of leaders, Karan, Jeet, Pranav and Sagar Adani, are being thrust into high-stakes roles amid global scrutiny, rising capex and questions of governance.

Meanwhile, at Reliance Industries, succession is unfolding gradually, with Akash, Isha and Anant Ambani beginning to take on defined roles across telecom, retail and energy sectors.

They inherit scale but must earn stature.

Grabbing the Opportunities

As AI reshapes the foundations of global business, India's next-generation leaders face a defining test. The age of contract-led capitalism, where staying close to the state could shield inefficiency, is on the wane.

If India is to graduate from aspiration to developed-nation status, its conglomerates must look outward, not upward. That means betting on innovation, capturing global market share and curbing the chronic drain of dollars, because in a volatile world, India remains just one West Asia flashpoint away from financial stress. The burden is generational, but so is the opportunity.

What makes this moment important is not just the scale of transition, but the complexity of the world this next generation is inheriting. Their parents built or expanded businesses during the liberalisation era when markets were just opening up, capital was scarce and competition was limited.

Today, the game is entirely different. The successors face a different reality shaped by AI, sustainability pressures, geo-political uncertainties and evolving consumer expectations.

"This is one of the most broad-based generational changes we've seen across Indian business groups. And it's happening at a very challenging time. We are in one of the most testing phases in terms of business environment and it's not likely to ease up. The turbulence may persist or even intensify. It could be economic, technological, political or social in nature or a combination," says Kavil Ramachandran, professor of entrepreneurship (practice), Indian School of Business.

Next-Gen Leaders

The signs of a generational shift have been visible for some time. In 2023, Mukesh Ambani formally inducted his three children onto Reliance Industries' (RIL's) board, and each has been tasked with handling defined verticals. Retail for Isha, telecom for Akash, green energy for Anant. At the annual general meeting Ambani spoke not of legacy, but of leadership, saying, "I see the flame of Dhirubhai shine in all of them."

As Mukesh contemplates a succession in his branch of the family, he wants to mitigate the chaos that unfolded two decades earlier when his father passed away without leaving behind a will. The business can't risk another fissure, especially now. It would endanger his vision for the conglomerate: RIL becoming one of the world's 30 most-valuable companies by metamorphosing into a deep-tech giant.

At JSW Group, Parth Jindal is emerging as the architect of the next chapter. While JSW Steel remains the bedrock of the group's profits, he is making deliberate moves into consumer-facing businesses. From JSW Paints, which recently acquired a majority stake in AkzoNobel India, to a joint venture with MG Motor India in the electric-vehicle (EV) space and plans to launch its own EV brand, Parth is racing to build the "next JSW Steel". All this amid global decarbonisation mandates, geopolitical volatility and rapid changes in technology.

Shashwat Goenka at RPSG is navigating a different set of complexities. While the group's power and carbon black businesses offer stable business to business cash flows, he is tasked with building the consumer-facing portfolio: from fast-moving consumer goods brands to retail. But execution remains fraught amid intense competition from giants like Hindustan Unilever and ITC, e-commerce majors and very agile start-ups. With a clear aim of growing the legacy 'significantly', Shashwat relies on data for decision making and believes that anyone who is not working with AI, will become irrelevant.

Rewriting Legacy

At Kirloskar Systems, Manasi Tata, one of the few women at the helm of a legacy industrial group, stepped into a leadership role at Toyota Kirloskar Motor after the sudden loss of her father, Vikram Kirloskar, in late 2022. Unlike many of her peers who had time to prepare, her transition was sudden and deeply personal. Today, she is focused on shaping the future of mobility and manufacturing, sectors that are facing upheavals from electrification, AI and supply chain disruptions.

At the Adani group, succession is unfolding across multiple businesses simultaneously. Karan, Jeet, Pranav and Sagar Adani have taken on operational roles in infrastructure, green energy and digital, amid a period of intense capital expenditure, public scrutiny and evolving investor expectations. Their challenge isn't just scale, it is also trust, transparency and long-term resilience.

"The next generation must be prepared to understand and evaluate this environment dynamically...The learning curve is steep and time is compressed. They must undergo accelerated learning. High-quality mentoring and coaching will be critical in making them truly capable leaders. And I do see this happening," says Ramachandran.

As this new order takes shape, one thing is certain: the scions of India Inc will be measured not by the weight of their last name but by their ability to rewrite its legacy, and India's growth story will no longer be written solely by those who built its industrial past but by those who will lead its future.

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Can Shashwat Goenka's Taste for Risk Forge a Consumer Empire?

A pall of darkness hung over Calcutta (now Kolkata) in the 1980s. Popularly called "load shedding", power cuts stretched for hours, and CESC, the city's main electricity provider, was seen as a symbol of dysfunction. It was in this chaos that a young Sanjiv Goenka made an unlikely bet.

Then in his late 20s, he quietly acquired shares in the beleaguered utility, keeping it from his father, RP Goenka, India's original takeover tycoon.

The story has become a family legend. RP Goenka was so rattled he skipped meals for two days, until his wife intervened. But the gamble paid off. CESC became the anchor of the RP-Sanjiv Goenka Group, now a ₹75,000-crore diversified empire.

DNA of Difficult Bets

That audacity is part of the family DNA. Decades later, it is Sanjiv Goenka's son Shashwat who is writing the new playbook. In 2013, at just 23, fresh out of The Wharton School, he took charge of Spencer's Retail, a business that had clocked losses of around ₹200 crore in 2012–13 and was up against deep-pocketed e-commerce rivals. The turnaround didn't come overnight. The pandemic nearly scuttled early gains.

But Shashwat didn't blink. In January 2025, after nearly six years of course corrections, Spencer's reported earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation and amortisation (Ebitda) breakeven.

The strategy wasn't a sleight-of-hand trick. It required pruning underperforming stores, doubling down on high-margin formats like gourmet retail and quick commerce, and instilling tighter controls. "You really need to understand what's going to work in the future for each of the business lines and if you can't be the first mover, then at least be [among] the early movers to take that advantage," he says.

His resolve also shows in the Naturali story. When first launched during the pandemic, the group's personal-care venture flopped, and most would have written it off. Shashwat didn't. He rebooted the brand as digital-first with revamped pricing, packaging and positioning.

The instinct to keep iterating until the model fits is core to the Goenka approach. Whether it was CESC, Spencer's or Naturali, they don't shy away from hard choices.

"The RPSG Group has indeed demonstrated tenacity in its business ventures. For Naturali, the brand's relaunch with a digital-first strategy has yielded positive qualitative indicators...However, Spencer's continues to face significant financial challenges," says Vinit Bolinjkar, head of research, Ventura, a brokerage.

What Each Arm is Worth

As the group sets its sights on a ₹2 lakh crore market cap, its listed companies reveal where things stand today

RPSG Ventures	₹3,110 Mcap
CESC	₹23,780 Mcap
PCBL Chemical	₹15,981 Mcap
Saregama India	₹9,815 Mcap
Spencer's Retail	₹549 Mcap
Firstsource Solutions	₹24,649 Mcap

Market cap (in cr) as of July 21, 2025 Source: BSE

Legacy to Leadership

Shashwat's leadership is analytical, collaborative and quietly disruptive. Like his grandfather, he's willing to enter unfamiliar sectors. Like his father, he's comfortable staying the course through cycles.

Under his watch, the group's consumer-facing pivot has accelerated. Too Yumm!, Evita, Naturali and other brands are being built from scratch. Meanwhile, Firstsource Solutions, the group's business process outsourcing (BPO) arm, has been repositioned to become AI-first, with its 'unBPO' model aiming to redefine outsourcing itself.

At the same time, legacy businesses like CESC and Phillips Carbon Black (PCBL) continue to provide the group with steady cash flows. Together, they give Shashwat breathing room to invest in long-horizon ventures like renewables, where the group has committed about ₹8,900 crore for 3.2GW of capacity.

But those bets come with complexity. Ratings agency Icra has warned about the high leverage and refinancing risk tied to these investments. "The capex plans are large and will expose the company to execution risks associated with land acquisition, right of way and transmission infrastructure;" Icra said in a June 2025 report.

However, Icra noted that CESC has a strong liquidity buffer, with ₹4,042 crore in cash and liquid investments as of March 2025.

Spencer's and the fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) portfolio are still in scale-up mode. Firstsource's transformation, while bold, is still in early stages and fraught with operational unknowns. While early-stage consumer businesses take time to mature, the group's diversified base allows it to take risks.

Still, managing capital allocation remains a fine balance for the group. RPSG Ventures, which houses the group's consumer brands, posted a consolidated loss of ₹49.04 crore in 2024–25.

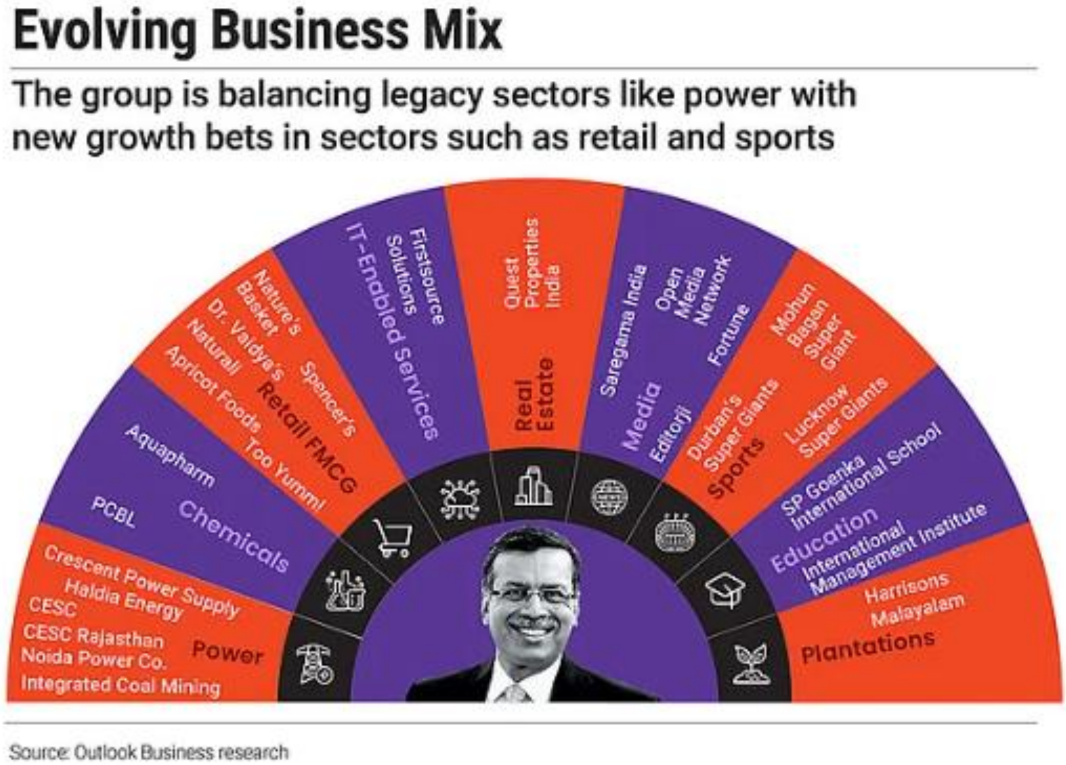
In its April 2025 report, financial-services firm Emkay Global said the group is entering a new growth cycle, driven by ₹50,000 crore in capex over the next 3–4 years and a sharper focus on value-added, higher-margin businesses. It noted that while some ventures will take time to deliver, the group's disciplined merger and acquisition approach, conservative stance on leverage and improving operational culture position it well for long-term value creation.

Early in his career, Shashwat helped spearhead a group-wide performance transformation, aimed at infusing sharper financial discipline and cross-vertical coherence into the conglomerate's legacy structure.

"What's changed is the role of data," he says. "Decisions are far more analytical, about where to allocate capital, what ROCE [return on capital employed] to expect, and how each move fits the broader portfolio." His decision-making process is methodical. In group reviews, he encourages contrarian thinking but demands accountability.

The rise of start-ups has unsettled even legacy players across sectors, and the RP-Sanjiv Goenka Group is no exception. Nowhere is this disruption more visible than in the FMCG segment, where nimble, digital-first brands have started to chip away at traditional retail strongholds.

Shashwat doesn't dismiss this threat. Instead, he's adapting to it. "In FMCG, we're a start-up ourselves. Same with renewable energy. We're starting out," he says. That means acting like a start-up: lean, responsive and willing to fail. "We're doing what start-ups do, including raising funds," he adds. His strategy isn't just to compete with new age disruptors, but to learn from them, especially their ability to scale quickly and with discipline.



Building for Tomorrow

Shashwat encourages sharper decision-making and a culture that values speed, agility, ownership and outcomes.

That urgency extends to technology. AI, he insists, is a non-negotiable. “I think AI is something that you have to look at to do things better. If you don’t, you will be irrelevant,” he says.

The group is mapping AI applications across functions, aiming for deep, practical integration. In manufacturing, it’s being deployed for predictive maintenance; in retail, for demand forecasting; and in BPO, to reinvent service delivery itself.

Firstsource’s unBPO initiative is especially ambitious. It seeks to replace legacy BPO models with domain-led, AI-integrated, outcome-based operations. It’s a high-stakes pivot.

“It [unBPO] puts Firstsource on a favourable trajectory but only if the model withstands operational scrutiny. In a climate where economic caution competes with digital urgency, what enterprise buyers want is auditability, flexibility and performance consistency,” says Sanchit Vir Gogia, chief executive and chief analyst, Greyhound Research, a technology-consulting firm.

Beyond tech, Shashwat appears alert to the unpredictable forces reshaping global businesses. “Geopolitical changes have always been part of history and will continue to be so,” he says. “The key is to identify and seize opportunities within that uncertainty.”

Whether it is policy shifts or digital disruption, his strategy is rooted in agility and foresight. His understanding of the Indian consumer also informs group strategy. With 70% of India under 35, the demand for experience-driven products is soaring.

This explains the group's philosophical shift from business-to-business to business-to-consumer. "Being consumer-facing is a mindset. It's industry agnostic," Shashwat adds.

While legacy businesses like PCBL export to markets such as Europe and the US, the larger ambition is to build global brands from India. The consumer arm may be small now, but it could shape the group's identity over the next decade.

Acquisitions remain on the table, but he's equally open to building from ground up.

Future Tense

In India Inc, succession rarely comes easy. And RP Goenka took no chances, dividing the empire between his sons while still alive.

Today, the group's future rests on four key pillars: renewables, IT services, chemicals and consumer brands.

In power, CESC remains a reliable contributor. But it lags its peers in both return metrics and expansion agility. Torrent Power and Adani Energy have outpaced CESC in returns on equity and scale.

Gujarat-based Torrent Power operates on a more capital-efficient model by relying heavily on franchise-based distribution and limiting its investments in generation assets. This asset-light approach boosts its ROCE.

As per financial-data platform Screener, CESC's ROCE stood at 10.9% in July 2025, compared to 15.9% for Torrent Power and 22.5% for Adani Power.

In retail, Spencer's now faces an aggressive quick-commerce wave. The group's newly launched quick-commerce brand Jiffy faces competition from Zepto, Blinkit and Swiggy Instamart, which have reshaped last-mile expectations. Spencer's bet on gourmet formats and premium offline stores will also need to evolve.

In music, Saregama's iconic catalogue has driven steady growth. But the rise of AI-generated content poses new risks. As music gets commoditised, traditional rights-based monetisation could erode.

The group's foray into sports with Lucknow Super Giants, Mohun Bagan Super Giant and a new investment in Manchester Originals (a cricket franchise), adds another layer of ambiguity. Visibility is high, but so are the costs; and the return metrics are still hazy.

For Lucknow Super Giants, the group expects the operating leverage will kick in once the broadcasting rights are re-bid in 2027. None of these are deal-breakers. But they're real. And they will test whether the Goenka instinct, to bet on tough businesses and stay the course, can weather a more volatile world.

As Shashwat puts it: "From a performance standpoint, we've scaled sharply. The group's market cap has risen from ₹3,000 crore (in early 2010s) to nearly ₹80,000 crore. Profitability is in double digits."

Shashwat seems ready. He speaks like a builder, who is aware that legacy without results is just nostalgia. The challenges are mounting. Capital-intensive bets. Tightening margins. New age rivals. But then again, ease was never part of the Goenka playbook.

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Within the Organisation We Value Agility and Adaptability, Says Shashwat Goenka

Did you always know that you would join the family business, or were you free to explore other paths?

I always knew we were part of a business family, but for much of my childhood, I didn't understand the background, size or scale of the family and the family business. In my head, it was normal.

We were never explicitly told that we had to join the business, but I think we grew up knowing that this is where we would get a lot of opportunities. Therefore, when I decided to go abroad for college, I was certain I would come back and join the family business, just not sure when. It wasn't something that was ever told to us, that you need to work in the family business, but maybe it was just assumed by both sides that that would be the case.

When you went abroad to study, did you explore other career options?

I did a lot of summer internships during college. I interned in India, including stints with Nestle [an FMCG major] and KPMG [a consultancy]. In the fourth year of college, I started thinking about whether I should work for two or three years before returning.

I always wanted to come back to the family business, but a few things influenced my decision. One was speaking to peers working in the US...the kind of work they were doing seemed to be stuff that I thought was fairly superficial in their first jobs. Real work began only in the third or fourth year. I didn't want to wait that long.

India, meanwhile, was where all the action was. The new government had just taken over, transitions were happening and a lot of policy changes were being implemented, which was exciting. So, I thought India is at a pivotal point and why would you not want to be part of that journey?

At that point, our group was undergoing a massive year-long exercise with [professional-services firm] McKinsey, across verticals. So I wanted to come back and work with Mckinsey to get that one-year consulting experience. But at a deeper level, I felt that the family business would allow me an opportunity to take on leadership roles at a young age, which I may not have gotten elsewhere.

What's your strategy when it comes to building on legacy businesses while also entering new ones?

Over the past 10 years, we've entered several new sectors like IT-enabled services through the acquisition of Firstsource [Solutions], and entry into FMCG, which was a greenfield venture for us. We've also moved into sports and media. Diversification is something which is innate in our group DNA.

Historically, our group has grown through acquisitions. What has changed is the role of data. Today, decisions are far more analytical. There is a lot more analysis around where to allocate capital across projects, businesses or entirely new sectors by evaluating expected ROCE [return on capital employed] and growth opportunities carefully.

As a next-gen leader, how do you navigate generational shifts?

What's changed over the years is the speed of innovation. We have realised that to stay abreast of the changes in the world, we need to be at par, if not better. How do you do that? For us, for every aspect of RPSG and in our businesses, we realised that we have to change our way of working to suit the current times.

You really need to understand what it is that is going to work in the future for each of the business lines, how you become ready for them and how you become, if not first movers, then at least early movers.

Within the organisation, whether someone has been here for decades or just joined, what we value is agility and adaptability, not age. They need to be agile enough to be able to change themselves. It's not about tenure; it's about the ability to adapt, evolve and lead change across roles and functions.

As India gains a stronger global presence, how do you see your organisation evolving?

From a globalisation perspective, we're clear that we want to be a leading business house not just in India but also create things for the world. For instance, Firstsource serves clients in the UK, Europe and the US. PCBL Chemical has clients in the US and Europe. The idea is how do we globalise our businesses and not just through our clientele, but also by building manufacturing footprints there.

What are the key challenges that next-gen business leaders face today?

The key is to identify and seize opportunities within that uncertainty [of geopolitical changes]. First, it's about understanding what the opportunity is and how to act on it. Second, with the pace at which technology is transforming business, you have to be agile. It's being able to foresee trends that are emerging which may disrupt you or which may present you with a new set of opportunities.

How are you integrating AI into your operations?

Each company in our group is evaluating how AI can be used in its business. But we look at it across the value chain—right from replacing certain processes to how to use AI to become more efficient. For example, for our consumer businesses, how can AI help with demand forecasting. We are now looking at AI in energy business as well.

At the group level, we've set up an AI cell to explore how AI can make us better across the board.

Start-ups are disrupting businesses, especially in FMCG. Do you see yourself competing or learning from them?

In FMCG, we're a start-up ourselves. Same with renewable energy. We're doing what start-ups do, including raising funds. Many of them have managed to grow rapidly and frugally. That's something we're consciously learning from them.

What do you think your family did right when it came to succession planning?

Thankfully, I don't have to worry about this right now. My kids are still very young, one is four and the other is six months old. So I have many years to go before I think about how I want to deal with it.

But I did see my grandfather handle succession thoughtfully. He split the business between his two sons while he was still alive. It was not something that happened post facto. That was great and it ensured that relationships between all of us stayed very good.

There was no animosity that crept in which you often read about in other scenarios. His decision helped prevent that, and it's something I think others could learn from: take the necessary steps while you're still there.

Where do you see the next phase of growth coming from?

I see four clear areas. One is energy, especially renewable energy. Second is IT and IT-enabled services, particularly AI. Third is the chemicals sector. And fourth is the consumer space which is essentially looking at the FMCG business.

How do you see retail and consumer-facing businesses evolving, especially with the differences between B2B and B2C models?

Around eight years ago, we decided to shift towards becoming a more consumer-facing conglomerate. That's why we entered media, sports, FMCG and similar areas. Even our legacy businesses are moving toward B2C or at least B2B2C models.

B2C businesses, I think, are poised for massive growth in India. Seventy per cent of the population is under 35, and 40% of that 70% is between 25 and 35 years, which is where the spending power lies.

Do you think your age helps you connect better with your target consumer base?

Yes, absolutely. We're targeting a demographic that I'm part of; that is an advantage. Secondly, we also have less experience than previous generations or even people in our organisation who have worked for longer, you don't have baggage or too many fixed ways of working. With fewer years of experience, you're often more open to trying new things and that allows for agility, experimentation and thinking out of the box.

What kind of legacy do you want to build?

First, I want to significantly grow the legacy I've inherited. Second, I hope to create something that has a positive impact on society, not just in India, but globally. Whether it's through our products, services or values, the idea is to contribute meaningfully. Ultimately, I want to build a legacy of excellence, in execution, relationships and in every other aspect.