



Jayant Sapre

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, KIRLOSKAR BROTHERS LIMITED

Date of birth: 11 July 1945

Education: B.Sc, Fergusson College, Pune, 1966

Career: Ordnance Factory, Dehradun, trainee, 1966; manager, 1972; Cummins Diesel Sales & Service, service manager, 1976; Kirloskar Cummins Ltd, manager, reliability, 1987; Kirloskar Oil Engines Ltd, associate VP, 1993; VP – marketing, 1996; Kirloskar Brothers Ltd, VP – exports, 2000; executive director, 2005 till date

Passionate innovator

In his 37 years with the Kirloskar group, Jayant Sapre has been there, seen it all – he moved from the old Cummins Diesel Sales & Service (CDS&S) to the erstwhile Kirloskar Cummins Ltd (KCL, now Cummins India Ltd, CIL), then Kirloskar Oil Engines Ltd (KOEL) and finally pumps major Kirloskar Brothers Ltd (KBL), the 125-year-old parent company of which he is now executive director. “You must go in for a change every four or five years!” says Sapre, who is 68 going on 16: that’s the age he gave a ‘bunch of youngsters’ who asked him how old he was while cutting a cake in the office on his birthday this year. KBL chairman Sanjay Kirloskar recently teased him, saying he was getting old – to which he retorted:

“What matters is how I behave” – and they had a hearty laugh. As the oldest employee in the group, neither is the group ready to let him go nor is he ready to hang up his boots. The only group entity he has not been in is Kirloskar Pneumatic Company Ltd – it just didn’t happen.

Actually, Sapre has not been a victim of the four-or-five-year itch syndrome he talks about: he spent a decade each in his first two jobs: the Ordnance Factory (OF), Dehradun, which he joined as a trainee immediately after his B.Sc, and in CDS&S – no longer a separate entity but fully merged with CIL – which marked his entry into the now \$25 billion Kirloskar group. It was only in KCL that he stayed for only six years, followed by

seven years in KOEL; and he has been in KBL for 13 years now.

The most enriching learning experience in Sapre’s career was at his first job, where he learned to deal with people from all over the country. For a 21-year-old from Pune, which was still basking in its twin reputations of ‘Oxford of the East’ and ‘pensioners’ paradise’, going and working far away in the north of India was a daunting prospect. “I was the only Maharashtrian in the factory,” he recalls. “I found things very difficult in the beginning – but I learnt to not only survive, but conquer the situation.”

Working on optical instruments at OF, Sapre rose to become a manager responsible for some advanced

technologies, including for the MIG-21 fighter aircraft project. The shift back home to Pune – and a totally different industry – marked a big change in his working environment, too: “In Dehradun, I had been working in a very clean job; a service engineer – and even later, as service manager – CDS&S was really messy, and I learned how to get my hands dirty!” he laughs. But this was an immensely enriching experience: he met different types of customers and travelled across the length and breadth of the country.

Having begun his career in manufacturing – both clean and messy – and subsequently moving to marketing and setting up a distribution network, Sapre had to put systems in place as reliability manager at KCL. “I set up a huge network for CDS&S’s spare parts and service for diesel engines,” he says. Then, after creating and nurturing a market for KOEL’s engines in India, he ventured abroad to help KBL take its first steps into the export market.

Sapre took KBL’s pumps into Africa, where it still has a major presence. “We helped Senegal, for instance, increase its rice paddy production five- or six-fold,” he says. He remembers a film advertisement that shows an African looking at a photo of a very dry land, standing on land that is actually lush green. “And then one tear rolls down his cheek – with a subtitle that says Kirloskar pumps not only bring water, they also bring in joy of satisfaction,” he says. “We also did a lot of work in Southeast Asia.”

People often ask Sapre how he found the switch to pumps after spending 27 years working with diesel engines. “I tell them that despite the move, the colour of the money has remained the same!” he says. “The whole job is to learn how to manage both geography and money.”

Sapre was instrumental in establishing a number of KBL companies abroad – in Amsterdam, Bangkok and other parts of the world, too. He now continues to be a director on the Boards of Micawber 784 (Proprietary) Limited, founded in 2009 in South Africa, a holding company which manufactures and supplies pumps, spares, and white metal bearings

through its various subsidiaries like Braybar Pumps (Proprietary) Limited, as well as Kirloskar Brothers International BV in the Netherlands, Kirloskar Brothers Europe BV, Kirloskar Brothers (Thailand) Limited, South Africa, and SPP Pumps (MENA) L.L.C., Egypt. It was in Egypt that Sanjay Kirloskar recalls having been asked, while checking into a hotel on one trip, whether he was part of the company that made the eponymous pumps.

It was under Sapre that the ₹2,612 crore KBL created the world’s largest irrigation project which was commissioned in March 2007 – the Sardar Sarovar Dam project for the Gujarat government’s Sardar Sarovar Narmada Nigam. The following year, it commissioned the world’s second-largest water supply system with the world’s highest head, in Andhra

extends to the international markets and global strategy.

Innovation, Sapre believes, is often about small improvements. For instance, KBL has over 350 regular distributors who stock most of its products. The company has created a detailed database, and ensures that someone calls on each of them on his wife’s birthday every year – on the telephone, or in person with a bouquet – which is a little thing, but goes a long way in earning the distributors’ loyalty. “We reckoned that dealers are not necessarily English-speaking people. So we now communicate with the dealer in his local language,” he says. “You have to go beyond just product innovation and be innovative in the processes you follow as well.”

KBL came up with other simple things that have created a big impact,

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Pradesh. The company is associated with India’s nuclear programme and has made canned motor pumps for pumping heavy water which are deployed at Indian nuclear power plants. It is also was the first Indian company to get FM certification for its valves, and is a supplier of FM UL certified pumps along with its subsidiary SPP Pumps (UK). Another historic achievement is that it is one of the first pump companies with an all-woman manufacturing plant – its newest facility, in Coimbatore, is completely operated and managed by women.

Sapre is also a director of Kirloskar Constructions and Engineers Ltd and The Kolhapur Steel Ltd, and a member of the audit committee of Kirloskar Constructions and Engineers Ltd. And as ED of KBL, he is responsible for all the project sectors and manufacturing plants that the company has in India, the marketing sectors of distribution, industry, building and construction and customer service support. His responsibility also

too. It started a scheme which entitles any retailer who sells 400-500 pumps, to a motorcycle – which is delivered the very next day at his doorstep. “Innovation is something that I am passionate about – innovation in every sphere of life,” Sapre says. “There is innovation in ‘process’ too.” The company recently won an award at a marketing conference in Hong Kong for its innovative marketing and distribution initiatives.

When Sapre is not working, he uses the swimming pool in the KBL facility. “I am a sports fan,” he explains. And away from the office, he loves listening to classical music, cooking and dancing. “I’m on the floor pretty quickly if there is something catchy playing,” says the sprightly sexagenarian. His wife is a retired State Bank of India officer, while their only daughter works in KBL, looking after corporate communications and marketing. Meanwhile, Sapre continues to enjoy life. “It has been fun!” he adds. “It still is, very much.”

♦ SEKHAR SESHAN