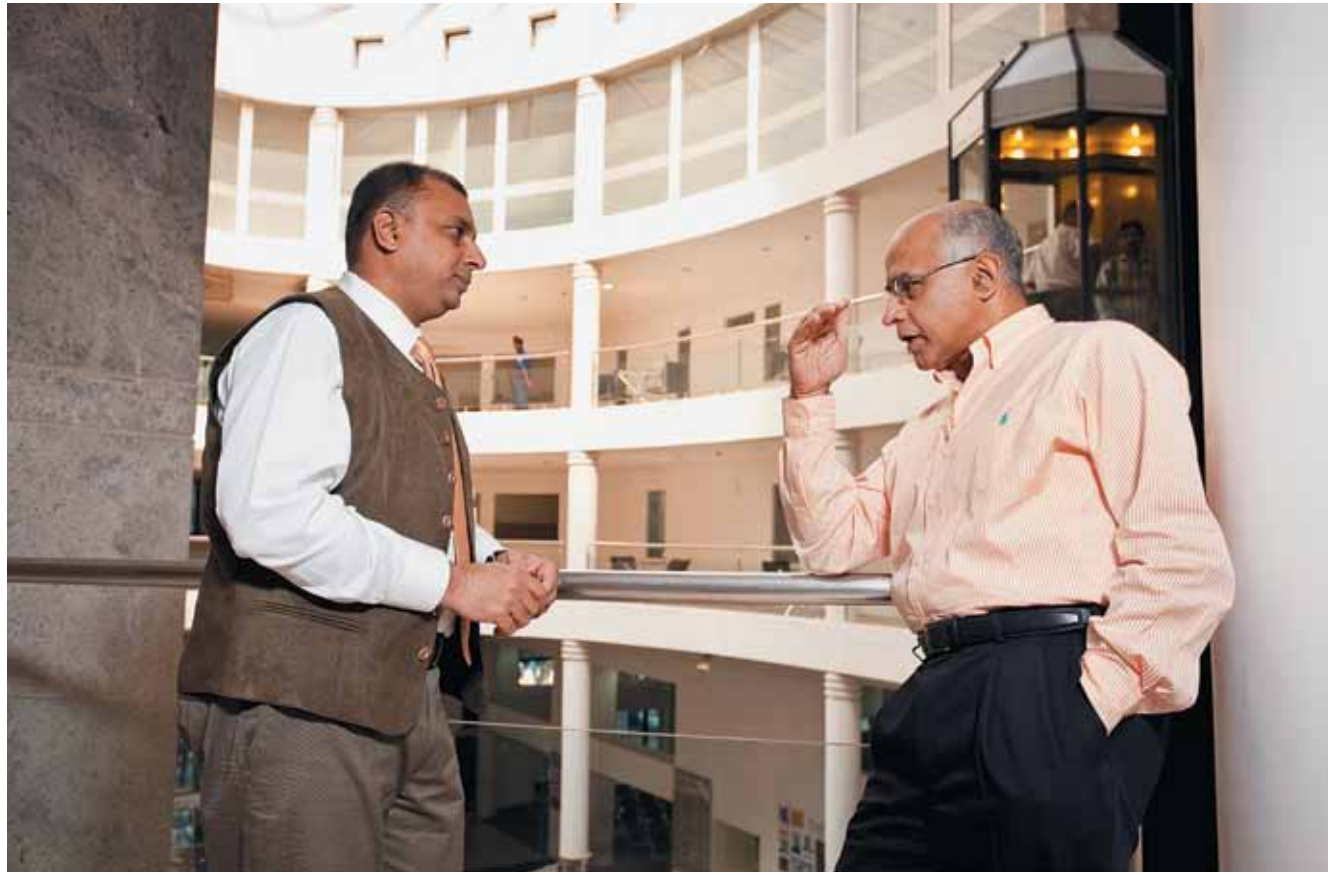


Photographs: Mallikarjun Katakoti for Forbes India



Hope, Faith & Love

DR. SHARAN PATIL talks about his journey from being a surgeon to a medical entrepreneur, and what it takes to become a leader

DR. SHARAN PATIL

Profile:
Founder, Sparsh Hospital

- He says:**
- I have always preferred honestly over efficiency, candour over subordination and the opinionated over submissive individuals.
 - We must be transparent and not hesitate to ask for help. You need to have expertise and professional inputs in the areas of specialisation and that includes finance if you want to build an enterprise.

Lakshmi is the goddess of wealth. Her arrival is not associated with fear and hopelessness: Unless, of course, her name is Lakshmi Tatma. She was born with eight limbs to parents in Araria, a remote Bihar village. The villagers revered her as the incarnation of the Goddess but the parents realised there was something seriously wrong.

They took her to one of the best state-run hospitals

in Delhi. The hospital wouldn't advise a life-threatening procedure to remove the parasitical twin, without a head, growing in Lakshmi's body.

Even as the parents were coming to terms with this, they were hounded by unscrupulous elements who wanted to buy the child and sell her as a curiosity. They panicked and fled back to their village.

When word reached Dr. Sharan Patil in September 2007, in Bangalore, the

man left his work at Sparsh Hospital, which he had started a few years ago, and travelled to see Lakshmi. It was a near impossible mission to deal with the villagers who wanted her the way she was, parents who were scared, and a procedure that could only potentially, not certainly, save the baby.

Patil managed to persuade the parents to get Lakshmi to Bangalore. The rest is history. A team of doctors surgically

removed the parasitical twin through a 24-hour procedure. National Geographic Channel broadcast the story in a two-part film that would make people across the world take note of India's medical competence, and want to see Patil.

That is how I am here today. To get a sense of what makes him do what he does, I must enter his world. After an hour of conversation in his office, I don the surgical gown and we get into the operation theatre. Patil has three procedures today and I must get him in-between them. The first procedure is a knee replacement.

For the next couple of hours, he cuts open the man's knees, tries out fitment for artificial knee caps and then fixes special steel caps that will make the patient get back his life. After the procedure, I ask Patil, how soon can the man walk again? "Tomorrow, we will make him walk a few steps," he answers.

Surgery over, we return to the beginning, so to speak: Sharan Patil's move back to India from Liverpool, Britain, where he trained to perform miracles.

"I never thought of staying back in the West. I was fairly clear; I needed to acquire knowledge, and whatever else is good to take it back home. Coming back home meant bringing back a lot of new ideas, implementing them in an environment

where the need is huge and the emotional connect is instant."

"Talk to us about the seeds of entrepreneurship. What were the drivers?" I ask.

"Coming from a family of professionals, I never realised I had it in me to be an entrepreneur. My wife Meena, who comes from a family of businessmen, has been a great support for me in my weak moments in this journey. When I came back to India, the single goal was to work in a state-of-the-art set up, where along with other professionals I could put to use all that I had learnt.

"I joined the Manipal Hospital and built a fairly lucrative practice quite quickly. However, restlessness started creeping in: My service was limited to those who could afford it and I was restricted in a department of five consultants.

"These circumstances were limiting the phenomenal possibilities of expanding the science of my specialty in tune with what was happening in the rest of the world. I also felt disconnected with a large section of our society which could not afford the medical practice I was involved in.

Dr. Devi Shetty had moved into the Manipal Hospital from Kolkata almost at the same time as I did in 1997. We would sit together and ponder over the limitation we had. In 2001, he moved

out to build the Narayana Hrudayalaya. Though restless, I continued in my comfortable job.

"In 2003-04 came the tipping point when I decided to take the plunge and start my own hospital, which finally came up as part of the Health City. The greatest attraction to join Health City was its low-cost model.

"My vision for Sparsh Hospital was to create a model of delivering state-of-the-art healthcare to as many people as possible."

"How did you evolve as a leader from being a great surgeon to medical entrepreneur? What are the top three key lessons from the first five years as an entrepreneur?"

"Leadership, I believe, has to be a part of any surgeon's personality. A surgeon has to build a rapport with the patient, earn the confidence and build a reputation. In the operating room he has to take charge and

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put together a team of anaesthetists, assistants, scrub nurses and many others. He has to carry the responsibility of the outcome of the entire team's work. I believe these are the very same qualities that will need to be amplified for a successful entrepreneur.

"One has to learn the art of multi-tasking and at the same time compartmentalising different aspects of the business of running a medical establishment. There is a very thin line between what is necessary equipment for patient care and luxury for medical personnel. Being a specialist has helped me minimise wasteful expenditure.

"The highest standard of ethics has to be spoken and practiced unflinchingly by the leadership. It creates an atmosphere of purity in thought and clarity of action amongst all the employees. This in turn is palpable to visitors — patients, their relatives, suppliers and associates. This forms the greatest

asset; your brand. Trust is the all-important attribute in the healthcare industry. The choice of team makes all the difference. I have always preferred honesty over efficiency, candour over subordination and the opinionated over submissive individuals.

"We must be transparent and not hesitate to ask for help. You need to have expertise and professional inputs in the areas of specialisation and that includes finance if you want to build an enterprise."


In the time since Sparsh came into being in 2006, the doctors there have done over 10,000 procedures, 80 percent of them on wheeled-in trauma victims. Unlike many other businesses, Patil does not choose the customer, the time and shape of arrival. I want to know, how does one maintain motivation to deal with life each time it is at its very worst?

"I started by settling the most important issue in my own mind: Who is it for? I told myself and then others that we are

creating a patient-centric hospital. That led to a culture of responsibility and compassion. At Sparsh, we seek academics and accreditation of our work against the best in the world. We recognise and appreciate the efforts by individuals. A place like ours must constantly focus on creating a team and involving people in decision making; in empowering. Responsibility without power is no equation."

In the past few years, Patil and his team have expanded into two hospitals. They've been reaching out to the hinterland and seeking out crippled children in distress and retired teachers through annual events called Sparsh Vachana and Guru Namana. Every year, dozens of world renowned doctors fly in at their own expense and provide their services for these two events at no cost.

We shake hands and I am about to step out of the hospital. I ask Patil one last question. What is Sparsh all about? "Hope, Faith and Love," he says. "They come to us with hope. We must create the faith in them that we will attend to them, we will do our best and we must do so with abiding love for the work we do."

In that one instant, my mind goes back to a Biblical saying that reads somewhat like this, "In the end, three things will last: Hope, Faith and Love. And Love, will last forever". 



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Subroto Bagchi is co-founder & gardener, MindTree and a best-selling author. His brief: Every fortnight, exchange tales of the road with successful entrepreneurs
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