



# **Ashish Dasgupta MBE**

Interviewed by

**Richard Sharpe**

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*Welcome to the Archives of Information Technology where we capture the past and inspire the future. It is Monday, the 16<sup>th</sup> of May 2022. I'm Richard Sharp and I've been analysing, covering, writing about, and being part of the IT industry since the early 1970s. It is not often that we get somebody onto the archives who has had an un-an uninterrupted career of over 32 years in one of the giants of the European IT and technology industry; that giant being Philips. And the man making his contribution to the archives today is Ashish Dasgupta, MBE.*

*Ashish was born in India but as his name shows you, he is part of the great Gupta Empire of the 5<sup>th</sup> century. There was a massive empire in the top of India in the 5<sup>th</sup> century, which was famous for its dramas, its epic poetry and its great culture. Dasgupta contains part of that name.*

*Now, Ashish, you were born in what was then Calcutta on the 14<sup>th</sup> of March 1938.*

[00:01:19]

That's correct.

[00:01:20]

*To quite a large family, eventually, erm, the family had 9 children?*

[00:01:24]

Yes, eventually, they had 9 children, yes.

[00:01:27]

*Erm, and I would say from the background that you gave us, your paternal grandfather was a police inspector, your father was a chartered accountant. You were part of that very important Indian middle-class within the British Empire.*

[00:01:40]

Sometimes it didn't feel like it but yes, it is true, by-by history, I am part of the Indian middle-class, yes.

[00:01:48]

*What was that feeling then that you had about the Indian Empire of Britain?*

[00:01:54]

The Indian Empire of Britain, when we were in Lahore, er, er, that was my early life in Lahore, that was a very good part of the Indian Empire, but when the partition came, the partition disrupted the life very, very badly indeed and that is the time it didn't feel like a comfortable middle-class Indian life.

[00:02:23]

*Erm, the, erm, independence came in 47/48, erm, and, erm, the-the whole of the continent was ripped apart into two main parts, erm, India, and-and Pakistan, Eastern Pakistan, and West. You happened to be, did you not in what is now Pakistan at the time of the split?*

[00:02:44]

That's right, er, we were in Lahore at that time. We came back to India, which is now India but in Delhi; erm, very, very soon, er, after the communal disturbance started and we were very lucky that, er, my father was a very good bridge player, and his bridge partner was a prominent Muslim called Rogan Khan, and he happened to be the police commissioner of Lahore. But for him, we probably would not have been able to get out of Lahore. So, for him, you know, he-he came with his personal bodyguards and everybody and he took us back to Amritsar, which is the nearest border between Pakistan and India. We were escorted to Amritsar and that is how we left Lahore to come to Amritsar and from Amritsar we came to Calcutta.

[00:03:52]

*Right, okay. So, there was that great split then, between Jinnah wanting to have a Pakistan and erm, others, including Secularists and congress wanting to have India, but which was mainly Hindu. So, you are mainly Hindu?*

[00:04:08]

That's right, yes.

[00:04:09]

*Your family is Hindu?*

[00:04:11]

Yes.

[00:04:12]

*How important was education to your family for you?*

[00:04:15]

The education, in my class of society in India, education is everything. If you don't education, you have nothing. So, people spend the very last penny of their funds to any UK children, for two reasons. One is to educate them to get on at life, but secondly, which is also a very important reason. That is almost an insurance for the old age because, in those days, the social security and the pensions and things of that nature was not even heard of in India. So, therefore the only old-age insurers the operation had is to well educate the children who are successful and they would look after the elderly. So, those are the two main reasons why education was so important.

[00:05:07]

*So, there was a family responsibility to look after your parents or your grandparents, rather than a state responsibility?*

[00:05:18]

Oh, it was most certainly so, yes.

[00:05:23]

*How much did your particular caste have an impression upon you; what after all, was your caste in the structure of Indian Hindu society?*

[00:05:37]

I think that if you were to have this class, er, as such in India, but particularly in the Hindu society, the Hindu society has basically got four classes, the Brahmins, which

is the priesthood they're the priest classes. Then the Vaishyas, which is me, which are the professionals, and the doctors, and the accountants and the medicines and so on and so forth. And then the Kshatriyas, which is the clerical side of the population, and then the so-called Untouchables, who do the menial jobs, and so on and so forth. So, we came from the second strata of the class society if you like, and the-all the, erm, professional population, mainly came from the-our class of population.

[00:06:32]

*Okay. How did your parents manage to provide education to so many children?*

[00:06:41]

Well, I think it is almost a matter of course in this sense, that, erm, my parents, they were not very rich, er, because my father was the oldest of the, er, his siblings, and in India, in those days it was joined family. And as a consequence, he had the responsibility of his siblings and his own family. So, therefore, he never was in a position of being very rich. So, we would scrape by, but in scraping by, somehow the schools were maintained, that is the best description I can give you.

[00:07:23]

*Okay. You went to the South Suburban School in 1948.*

[00:07:30]

Yes.

[00:07:31]

*And in 1948, er, in 1948, erm, Manchester University was beginning to play with a computer, Cambridge University was beginning to play with a computer and Claude Shannon had published an excellent paper on the mathematical basis of communications which is important for you in your work in Philips later on, although you wouldn't have known it in 1948. And you stayed there for five years doing, erm, your O Levels. Did you like school?*

[00:07:55]

I-I did like school because I-I was a good student, I mean, erm, not brilliant, but good student. Er, I was always amongst the ones which the teacher said, "He will do well" kind of thing. Er, I enjoyed my schooling because I not only, participated in the education, but I also played, er, football and cricket with the school and as a consequence, I had a pastime interest in the school communities as well. So, yeah, school was enjoyable, whilst it lasted.

[00:08:29]

*Okay. Was it a boy's school or a mixed school?*

[00:08:32]

No, it was a boy's school only.

[00:08:34]

*Right, and purely Hindu or what?*

[00:08:37]

Oh, no, no, it was a mixed school, we had plenty of Muslim people, there-there-there was-there was no barrier there, it was a joint school, everybody could come.

[00:08:45]

*What language did you speak at home?*

[00:08:49]

At home, er, it's a combination because generally, we spoke Bengali with my mother, but my father was very keen that his children would be fluent in English from the very beginning, because he himself was an extremely, er, good in English language, very, very fluent indeed. So, he never spoke to us in-in Bengali, he never wrote to us in Bengali, it's always English. So, with him, it's mainly English, but with my mother, and our siblings from time to time, it's Bengali.

[00:09:42]

*So, classically, you have a mother tongue, which is Bengali, and a father tongue, which is English?*

[00:09:49]

Er, you can put it that way, yes.

[00:09:52]

*[laughs] yes. Now, you've studied, English, Bengali, maths, history, geography, and Sanskrit at O Level; did you do well?*

[00:10:05]

Erm, I did alright in O Level, Sanskrit got me down because they, unlike here, you don't get the paperwork, paper grade, you get an overall grade and I did very well everywhere except in-in Sanskrit, I just crept through and as a consequence, that brought my average down quite a bit. So, I didn't do as well as I had expected to do, but it wasn't bad.

[00:10:35]

*You were able to go on and do you're A-Levels?*

[00:10:37]

Yes.

[00:10:38]

*At Charuchandra College, 1954 to 1956.*

[00:10:42]

Yes.

[00:10:43]

*What was India like in the early, in the mid-1950s?*

[00:10:47]

In the mid-1950s, the-the India was beginning to shape, er, for the future. The-the-the backlog of the Empire was beginning to break down and the-and the general population, the sense of being India, and sense of being India of an independent India, was beginning to emerge and as a consequence, life was taking a different turning if you know what I mean. And as a consequence, there was a lot of euphoria and a lot of hope and-and, erm, enthusiasm for life. Unfortunately, that didn't match with the scope which the young population want, because the growth was very, very slow and in my day, it was almost non-existent. And as a consequence, to be able to get on, you had to do either extremely, extremely well, in the educational field or have huge amounts of money to be able to get on, or, last resort, have a huge network of very well-known who help you to get on and we had none. So, therefore, life was a bit grim from that point of view, but it was full of hope and-and scope and everything.

[00:12:27]

*You did you're a-Levels in English, Bengali, physics, chemistry, maths, and biology, that's quite a-quite a lot.*

[00:12:33]

Quite a lot, er, because those were... I mean, unlike here, er, English and Bengali, up to graduation level was compulsory.

[00:12:48]

*Okay.*

[00:12:50]

And then you had to choose your subject. And, although I chose my, er, subjects being physics, chemistry, maths, and biology because there was an expectation from the family that I would be a doctor. Erm, but as soon as my A-Levels finished and I got my grades, I realised I would never be a doctor because the tests results weren'[unclear 00:13:25]. Er, so, I made... I realised that I made a mistake in selecting su-such, er, subjects. So, I transformed it into the commercial subjects for my-my graduation.



[00:13:38]

*And so, from '56 to '59, erm, you did a Bachelor of Commerce degree at the same college?*

[00:13:46]

Yes.

[00:13:46]

*And what drew you to commerce?*

[00:13:52]

Because I came to the conclusion that if I am not fit to be a technologist, which I wasn't, if I had not enough imagination to be a-a-a-a writer, or a poet or whatever, for the-for the, erm, art subjects, then the only avenue really left for me, was c-commerce and I was good at the commerce, in-even in those days, I was good with money, er, erm, and my family circumstances made me almost, er, good with money. Er, and my father was an accountant, so, all those, erm, separate things together, made me feel that maybe commerce would be a better direction for me and which I think, I was right in taking the decisions.

[00:14:54]

*Erm, and you graduated?*

[00:14:56]

Yes.

[00:14:57]

*And the year you graduated, 1959, we have the COBOL programming language, erm, and the very, very important, er, development of the Planar semiconductor manufacturing process, which are rather dependent upon today, in all types of technologies, are we not. What-what job did you do once you had graduated?*

[00:15:18]

Well, this is where this story gets complicated because I came to the conclusion that as far as I could see, that at-at the time I was graduating and I was studying, I could not see any opening of mine in India for a successful career. Although one can say, hang on a minute, you could be a chartered accountant in India and be a successful chartered accountant, and so on and so forth. But I couldn't see that and as a consequence, I came to the conclusion that I will go abroad. That was a joke in my family, er, at the dinner table—But when is your plane going to leave for-for-for England kind of thing. Because everybody knew that I wasn't interested in-in staying back in India, I will go abroad. And as a consequence, what I did do, I took any job which came to me and as a result, there was an advert in the Indian Railways, that they needed some clerical people and would you believe that for that, 500,000 people sat for the [unclear 00:16:54] examination; for 38 vacancies.

[00:17:00]

*[Laughs]*

[00:17:01]

Now, 38 vacancies and 500,000 people sat for the exam. Er, I thought to myself, there is no harm in sitting for the exam, I know I wouldn't get it, but it will be good fun, let me try. Funnily enough, I was one of the 38 who got the job.

[00:17:21]

*[Laughs]. Now, this, the Indian Railways, must have been a vast organisation, a huge organisation.*

[00:17:27]

It is a huge, huge organisation, it is mindboggling, er, er, big and complex and-and-and very, very, very, erm, a time-consuming organisation to be-even begin to understand as to what it was like.

[00:17:45]

*Once you were in Indian Railways, surely, you had a job for life?*

[00:17:49]

Yes, in fact, when I got the job, everybody said, "Look, he has a government job, secure job, pension at the end and he will get a government quarters soon. So, settle down and get on with it and stop this stupid nonsense of going abroad." But you know, being a clerk for the rest of my life, or even if I got a promotion to the superintendent in the office, I saw them and they said, I could not possibly visualise myself spending er, the rest of my life in those kinds of positions, no.

[00:18:41]

*So you have this ambition which drives you forward?*

[00:18:48]

I have this ambition from the very beginning because as I said to you before, that because my father had the responsibility of his family and his sibling, we were never rich. In fact, we were never even sufficient, we barely got on and I quite resented that fact that we were just barely getting on. And I wasn't prepared to accept that for the rest of my life and that is what it was... That was the start of my ambition. And then, as I was getting along, I-I began to understand and see things and I could see, I could do those things, if I get an opportunity I could do-do those things. The opportunities in India in those days were absolutely not available for my kind of people. So, therefore I was determined that I would come abroad and look for opportunities.

[00:20:01]

*So, after two years, erm, in the, erm, Indian Railways, in 1961, you did get on board that plane or that boat, and you did leave; was it a plane or was it a boat?*

[00:20:11]

A boat.

[00:20:12]

*A boat.*

[00:20:13]

I couldn't afford a plane.

[00:20:16]

*[Laughs] [coughs] and you went to Germany first?*

[00:20:18]

Yeah, that because the-the problem was that just before I leave, erm, the government of India, er, banned the exchange clearance for the accountancy studies o-overseas because their notion was that you can study accountancy in India. And the government of India at that time was suffering very badly from the shortage of foreign exchange so, they stopped allowing foreign exchange for accountancy students. And as a consequence, I could leave, but I could not have any money at all, er, and I knew that coming straight to England, and looking for a job, would be an extremely difficult proposition because at that time, already, because this was 1961, '60/61, already rumbling of the immigration and things of that nature was-was, er, very strongly being muted all over the place.

So, I had no option but to look elsewhere and in desperation, I just went to the German Consul's Office in Calcutta, and went to the reception and just boldly said, "Can I see the Consul General, please?" The receptionist was almost flabbergasted that this guy, this small little Indian guy, he walks out from the street, and wanting to see the Consul General. She was quite perplexed and rather interested. So, she said to me, "Wait, and I'll see." So, she went in and I don't know what she talked to or who, er, er, and the fact is, that the Consul General's son... She was a lady as well, she showed me and I told her, I was-I was frank with her and I took all my papers with me, I was frank with her. I said, "Look, I don't care what job it is, I just simply wanted a job so that I can go to Germany and earn some money before I go to England.

Obviously, the Consul General lady was impressed because otherwise, things wouldn't have happened. She said I can't promise anything but give me all your details, come and see me in two weeks' time. And she got me a few forms to sign, I didn't know what I was signing, but she said, "Sign this, sign this, sign this" and I signed those things. Two weeks later, I did get a telephone call, "Come and see" I went and saw her, I had a job in Stuttgart as an unskilled labourer, mind you, you know, nothing gl-glory about it, it's an unskilled labourer, 2DM 40 Pfennig per hour

remuneration. And she said, "If you accept this job, er, you signed all the forms, so, I've got you a visa and work permit and everything sorted out and you can leave in two weeks' time."

[00:23:37]

*So, you went to Germany, but then, er, you really wanted to get to the UK, er, but the UK was a bit fractious at the time, erm, there was a growing, mounting, degree of racialism in the country, particularly in the Midlands and so on. Erm, and then the UK changed to the law which meant that you couldn't get in beyond a certain date.*

[00:24:00]

That's right.

[00:24:01]

*So, you managed to get into the UK before that law was enacted?*

[00:24:05]

Yeah, erm, the law was coming in force on the 4<sup>th</sup> of January, the 4<sup>th</sup> of er, April 1963, erm, 1962 and I was in Ger-Germany in September '61 and I had the intention of staying there for longer, but I cut my-my journey short and I made sure that I was here before the end of March because the 31<sup>st</sup> of March was the cut-off point.

[00:24:40]

*Okay, where did you come into, the UK?*

[00:24:42]

Where?

[00:24:43]

*Yeah, where did, sorry, where did you live in the UK initially?*

[00:24:47]

I came to Dover, I spent, er, er, one shilling from, er, erm, Dover to-to-to Euston Station and then from Euston Station I came to, er, Belsize Park because that is what I

was directed at all the overseas students and they-they live in Swiss Cottage, Belsize Park and things in those days. So, I came to Belsize Park and I was lucky enough, the second door I knocked, I got a room there, so, that is where I stayed, in Belsize Park.

[00:25:24]

*Good, okay. Let us now fast forward, you're in the UK, let us fast forward to the magic year of 1966, when you joined Philips.*

[00:25:38]

Yes, that's right.

[00:25:40]

*Did you find Philips or did Philips find you?*

[00:25:42]

No, I did find Philips because, er, by that time, I did pass my intermediate examination for the CIMA and I gathered some experience and I knew England by now, by that time, reasonably well, er, to gather enough confidence to face reality. So, I started to apply for bigger jobs, and believe it or not, I applied to various people including Standard Telephone Company in those days, STC, er, and Philips together. And I got jobs from both companies, both companies offered me a job and the only reason I chose Philips is because it was easier for me to travel to Belsize Park to Philips in Shaftsbury Avenue, and the STC was in Enfield, which was more difficult to travel. And that was my decision-making process and that is the best decision I took, as it turned out to be.

[00:26:44]

*[Laughs], a good decision. Now, in 1966, how did-what was the feeling of Philips, what was it like to be a Philips employee in 1966 in the UK?*

[00:26:56]

I-I think-I think Philips has always been an extremely good employer and, erm, everybody in Philips, I did not see anybody... That is maybe a slight exaggeration, but nonetheless, I will say this, I didn't see anybody in Philips being desperately unhappy being employed by Philips, we by and large had a good time in Philips. They are good-they are good employers, they were not the best paid but they were not the worst either. Their terms and conditions of the-of the employment was very good, their pension rights were very good, so, everything was positive rather than negative.

[00:27:47]

*Now, the... I-let's just deal with Philips, your whole career for a moment if we can.*

[00:27:54]

Right.

[00:27:54]

*It's been said of Philips, erm, during this period and during its whole life, it didn't quite know what it was. Was it a consumer goods company with the famous cassette of 1963 and the Philishave, or was it a telecommunications company, or was it a semiconductor company? There was really no telling at that time.*

[00:28:18]

I think you have now asked the question which Philips asked themselves later, er, in life. Philips started as a lighting company to start, which is by and large consumer good and Philips supplied professional lighting as well. And it-it basically was a consumer-orientated group at that time, Philips television, Philips cassette player, Philips this, Philips that, so, by and large. And in those days, Philips made an enormous amount of money, so, it started to diversify in the professional field because the telecommunications is coming; were coming up in the market place and telecommunication was also becoming a very lucrative part of the business and Philips saw opportunities in telecommunication. As a consequence, Philips started to expand in telecom and after expansion in telecom, they started to go into the medical systems, the semiconductor business and so on and so forth. And before you know where we are, Philips became a combined-a combination of both consumer electronics and the professional electronics division.

[00:29:41]

*It was always a very, erm, technically-driven company, did you find that?*

[00:29:46]

It is, Philips was extremely technical, erm, technically-driven company. The research lab, and I know, was an extremely interesting place to visit and as a consequence, the technology was very high class technology. Er, even in the consumer electronics field, where Philips lost out in terms of say, for video recorders and things of that nature to Sony and other people later. Technology-wise, Philips was always superior, but the products were highly technical and it did not have the marketing tool to support the technology in terms of the mass appeal which Sony had and the other people had. And that is where the deficiency started to show up.

[00:30:36]

*Right. Where was the focus of power in Philips, was it in a product division or in the national subsidiary?*

[00:30:49]

Er, you have asked a very good question and even after spending 35 years in Philips, I cannot give you a direct answer to this.

[00:31:02]

*[Laughs]*

[00:31:03]

In some cases, er, the product division plays a-a-a big part and in some cases, the national organisation played a big part. All the technology and product side, the technology came from the product division and there was no compromise on that score. But the marketing, finances, strategy situation, and the taxation matters, the national organisation played a very big role. And quite often, those two roles didn't quite go hand-in-hand, so, there was some conflict as well, which in those two-two-two parts of the organisation. By and large, they-they, er, lived happily side by side with all the-all its consequences.



[00:32:10]

*I remember interviewing some senior people on the products division side of Philips and they said dealing with the national sales unit is pretty awful because if they don't make their numbers towards the end of the year, all they do is to put on another advert for Philishave and they make their numbers and then they're okay. We can't get them to have a more strategic view of what Philips should be, so, those were the types of tensions, were they not, within the corporation?*

[00:32:36]

I think that-I think that to a certain extent, that is true, the tension is that the product division wanted to make their products successful and their technology successful. But unfortunately, national organisations were at the end, responsible for their bottom line, and their bottom line didn't always coincide with the marketability of the product division's very high-tech sometimes high-priced products. And so, erm, I would not quite blame the N O bosses who wanted to make their bottom line at the end, by selling extra dozens of Philishave or extra dozens of cassette recorder or whatever.

[00:33:31]

*We've laid the foundation, erm, up to the point of 1976, when his career in Philips, that giant of, er, European technology corporation, er, really starts to take off in 1976. This is your first break in 1976, erm, after a decade in Philips, you were made the financial director of a small group of companies in Philips, what was your role, what was your job to do in there?*

[00:34:03]

Well, firstly, er, these small companies were scattered all over the place, erm, and we-I was based in Canterbury at that time, er, looking after two small companies, er, and the brief from the board was that er, myself and my managing director, the two together, should get together and put some of those small companies into other large uniform components manufacturing company. Erm, and when we did that, and I became the financial director of that combined enlarged companies company and my managing director became the same. And my job was to look after the finance IT and the-and the, er, administration of the, er, various site functions of the enlarged company, erm, and to make sure that the merger was working properly and-and, er,

with a view to having an even bigger mer-merger later. Er, it was an extremely interesting assignment and I learned an awful lot, not only about the financial management and the IT management of the, of-of the company, but how to organise, how to man-manage and how to solve difficult problems and so on and so forth, which stood me in very good stead professionally.

[00:35:42]

*What is the management style of Ashish Dasgupta?*

[00:35:48]

Erm, that is a difficult thing to say. I like to think that I had been a good manager throughout my life, er, because one of the-one of the accolades, which, if I can call it, er used to be that I moved fairly rapidly through Philips, three or four years, every three or four years I moved jobs. Every time I moved jobs people used to say, "Bring back Dasgupta, all is forgiven."

[00:36:20]

*[Laughs] okay.*

[00:36:23]

And that-that's the one set of circumstances, and the second set of circumstances are if-if there is a difficult thing to manage, Philips tended to send me there as either finance director or managing director, call it whatever you like to say, "See what you can do." So, my management style has been I have never tried to throw my weight around, I have always started by trusting people, which two views, one is just because I am not throwing my weight around, do not ever take advantage of me. And b) that I am trusting you because I want you to trust me, but you can only break my trust once, there is no-is, not a second chance for breaking the trust. And I have maintained that throughout actually because I have put one of my very close friends; he was my close friend, he was one of my chief accountants at one time. And he forged my signature and my managing-my managing director's signature to-to steal some money. And despite the fact that he was one of my very good friends, he was put behind bars because he broke my trust and nothing can repair that, nothing. So, those are the two main principles I had.

[00:38:05]

*Sometimes managers have to make people redundant, are you a good butcher?*

[00:38:13]

I have had my share of redundancy, erm, sometimes voluntary, sometimes compulsory. Erm, on compulsory redundancies, I tried my best to look after them as well as I possibly could. And most of the time it worked, sometimes it didn't work, er, but unfortunately, that's life.

[00:38:42]

*We have a number of other people who have worked with Philips who have made their contributions to the archive already, Ashish, one of them said that Philips was always prepared to take risks, was that your experience?*

[00:39:00]

Philips took risks to a certain extent. Erm, Philips took big risks when their finances were in very, very good shape because when they expanded into professional field and those were big risks you know, and-and-and those were a leap of faith in a very good, big way involving millions and millions of pounds, so, they took risks there. But when the... In the 1990s the times became tough, at that time, Philips became a lot more cautious about these things.

[00:39:54]

*Another one who has worked with Philips, you might have come across him, Doctor Edwin Candy.*

[00:39:59]

Oh, Ed Candy?

[00:40:01]

*Yeah.*

[00:40:01]

I know him very well.

[00:40:03]

*Good. He said, quite often, different product divisions were talking to the same customer and there was no real coordination of marketing; that happened often?*

[00:40:15]

I think that the marketing coordination did not always happen but quite often it did happen too. Er, er, and Ed Candy, erm, er, had a different view, er, I-I-I know him extremely well actually, erm, but yes, sometimes, er, different people went at different times, with a single, erm, view in mind, was when the, er, combin-combination of views with a combined approach could have been better. Erm, and quite a few times it happened, but sometimes it didn't.

[00:41:11]

*It would never have happened in IBM.*

[00:41:19]

No, that's right, you know, I-I-I could not obviously comment about, er, IBM but I think that if you-if you went, erm, in fact, I know for a fact that I had faced a situation where, erm, we went to see the customers or the clients but they were so specific that if I went with three other people, with three other opinions, three other products, then things would not have happened.

[00:41:50]

*Yeah.*

[00:41:51]

It's a difficult-a difficult call to make.

[00:41:56]

*I remember interviewing a Philips employee many years ago, and he had just left Siemens and he said, "What a relief to be in Philips after Siemens" in Siemens, your*

*desk had a number on the side of it and that is where you must sit and that is where you must work from.*

[00:42:13]

And that's-and that's the reason why I said in your previous answers that I think Philips had been a very enlightened, er, employer and company from that-from that point of view. I think that it could have done a lot worse, er, in many, many other companies, erm, and I have found it myself that after retirement, er, myself and some of my colleagues, we found ourselves in fairly big demand in the market place purely because of our background in Philips. There was nothing special about Ashish Dasgupta, but what was special about Ashish Dasgupta was that he had 35 years of very good knowledge, of a management, er, style of an extremely enlightened company.

[00:43:02]

*Did that enlightenment and that rather liberalism, which also you could, er, I would associate with the Netherlands, and that background from the Netherlands, do you think that that meant that Philips did not have that rough edge that needed to succeed and that it is no longer the power that it was?*

[00:43:26]

Erm.

[00:43:28]

*Big question I know.*

[00:43:30]

I think it is a big question, and, I think it is an extremely difficult question to answer. But I-I think that where the sickness was necessary, strict discipline was to a certain extent there. But if you ask me was there any roughness, I would say no. There were strict but they were not rough, no, I have never found, in my whole lifetime in Philips, er, that they were rough with people, or they were rough with me. You know, we have been very strict, erm, they have been very strict, erm, many times, I have been told, Mr Dasgupta, talking time is over, now it is doing time, that means, stop talking,

go ahead and do it now. So, that kind of, erm, discipline is there but I have never been faced in a rough situation in Philips.

[00:44:45]

*Your career, erm, Ashish within Philips seems to have this period of three to four years, you moving on; now, is that your choice, or was your career managed by Philips?*

[00:44:57]

I think that is-that is a very good question and-and-and-and my wife and I, we always talk about this, even-even today, we talk about it after 25 years of retirement, that I believe that whilst I was ready for a move at the time I moved, but my move came, almost because I was the right person in the right place at the right time. So, it's a combination of both Philips doing something and I was ready for it.

[00:45:30]

*In one of your moves, er, you became the Group Financial Director of the Scientific and Industrial Division?*

[00:45:36]

Yeah.

[00:45:37]

*And you made some acquisitions, mainly in the USA?*

[00:45:41]

Yeah.

[00:45:43]

*My experience and this is a cartoon of it, my experience is, the Americans only sell us rubbish.*

[00:45:54]

I think-I think that you-you-you might be right there, erm, and the acquisitions which we-we, er, went off to-to, er, acquire, erm, what did happen is that we acquired something which we sold in the first place. So, the-our divertissement didn't work out and, er, there was a close-- And as a consequence, we brought something back at a very, very advantageous situation. Erm, but by and large, you are right because on two other occasions, we were on the verge of acquiring something but we backed off because it wouldn't have worked.

[00:46:52]

*One of the high points of your career, erm, may have been, I don't know, I'm going to ask you this, the fact that you were involved in major products, er, project of opening a new manufacturing plant in, of all places, Calcutta in India?*

[00:47:12]

Yeah.

[00:47:12]

*And, erm, you were the director in charge, can you tell us about that, please?*

[00:47:18]

That was one of my biggest achievements and the, erm, er, yes, let's stick to achievement first of all. When I became the-the Group Financial Director of-of Philips Telecom, communication, er, we had a factory in-in India producing the telecommunications product, which was 19<sup>th</sup>-century products, to be quite honest with you. But because India didn't know very many other things, they were making good sales with good profits and the-and the company was 40% owned by Philips and 60% owned by a company in West Bengal, [coughs] so, it's a joint venture with the company. And with the new digital product coming in, Philips decided [unclear 00:48:14], a-a-as a matter of fact because our product was one of the newest, that probably, to do it better, to introduce those products in India by a) opening up a new factory because the old factory, these new products simply would not have been possible to manufacture in that dirty old condition, it needs clean air, clean this, clean that, and everything. They did-did need a new factory, erm, and for that, we also did need a majority say. So, my first objective when Philips said, "Go and do it", my first

objective is to buy the government of West Bengal out, which we successfully did. It did cost us some money but not as much as—

[00:49:14]

*This is the regional government is it, of-of Western Bengal under the Indian government?*

[00:49:20]

No, West Bengal government under the Indian government, it was a complete regional government issue, not a central government issue. Er, and but, it did at-at the end when we decided the pricing of the transfer, er, I was very bold and I made it on condition with the chief minister. I said, “Right, we will pay this amount of premium but in exchange, you have to give us a complete guarantee that there will be no import duties, er, shenanigans. There will be no, erm, corruption in stopping imports and things of that nature. We will have a free hand in being able to bring in products to manufacture in a new building, a new factory because a new factory will cost us a lot of money and you have to give us the land to build the new factory.” So, we got the land free from the government of West Bengal and we got those assurances that yes, you will have free access to the transportation facilities. And we... It took us two years to-to build that factory and, I had a very proud situation that I was on the same podium as the Chief Minister of West Bengal, jointly opening up the factory.

[00:51:12]

*Now, that is one of your great achievements, what is the biggest mistake you have made in your career?*

[00:51:19]

Erm, would you believe if I say that opening up the factory in Calcutta?

[00:51:27]

*[Laughs], I would go on, why?*



[00:51:28]

Because if people in-I-in Hilversum said to me, in Eindhoven said to me, “Dasgupta, whatever you do, don’t go to Calcutta because Calcutta labour situation is the worst possible labour situation you can ever think of.” And we opened up the factory and the labour situation was such that getting things done in Calcutta, was an extremely difficult proposition. And maybe attaching those to an existing, more efficient plant in Pune or Bombay or somewhere else, would have been a better proposition, I don’t know, nobody will ever know. But it-it didn’t-it didn’t work the way I had expected it to work.

[00:52:20]

*You’re a bit of an, erm, if I may say so, a turnaround merchant, aren’t you? You’re a man who is able to turn around loss-making parts of Philips and make them profitable.*

[00:52:30]

Er, I have done that, a-a few times, yes.

[00:52:33]

*Quite a few times, what’s your magic?*

[00:52:38]

You see, magic is, er, I mean, let’s-let’s take the last one as an example, the-the caste system as an example and-and take it from there. And the caste system, when I went there, we were making millions of pounds of losses, and my brief was simply; go there, shut it, close it, do whatever you want to do, but we don’t want to see the losses anymore. Er, they said... Philips said, “Shut it, close it, do whatever you like with it, but we do not want to see those losses anymore.” I went there and it didn’t take me even three or four months to understand why those losses were there. And the losses are simply because the [unclear 00:53:53] his thing, they were pressed with a problem of delivery, logistics, and the logistics was that they, er, it was a car radio and the car entertainment and the-and the satellite navigation system business. And we had contracts all over the place with Mercedes. and Rover, and everything, BMW, with everybody. The Rover plant in Cowley, er, and we were based in Bicester, which is

not far from Cowley. The plant was completely automated, and as a consequence, the [unclear 00:54:34] had to be [coughs] in place, on time, to be able to-to get the automated deliveries, automated production sorted out. And every time the production cycle goes and our radio wasn't there, and it went with a hole in the dashboard, there was a penalty of £3. And we were paying hundreds of thousands of pounds in penalties because our deliveries were not on time and consequently, what happened? The management team brought in consultants as to what is going wrong. The IT system, er, why the IT system isn't coping with it, er, er, warehousing, er, er, a new warehouse [coughs] all of that. And it was, er, con-consultant galore, we had got 7 consultants working in different fields.

So, I looked at all of those and I said, "Why are we doing this? We are not experts in-in-in all of this, we are not IT experts, and this will not please you to-to hear me say that—" but that is what I said, where are all their ideas? why do we have all this system problem, this problem and that problem? Because we have got a contract with a logistic delivery company called Bibi,, which is one of the country's biggest names. Our job is to sell those radios into the end-users, Germany is manufacturing them and our job is to get them onto the shore, and as soon as they are on the shore, why don't we get Bibi to take the entire responsibility of the logistics that they will be responsible for picking up from the shore, er, boat to the end-user on time and we have put it back to that agreement with the logistical company that whatever agreement we have about compensation and things, that they had with the customer, they will have to abide by the same. And consequently, we don't need all these consultants, we don't need a big warehouse, you can get rid of all of that and-and say that's it. And I-I met the managing director of Bibi and I said, "This is what we want to do" and he said to me, "Ashish, that is what I have been asking them to do for a long time and this is not making our life any easier either because we are being taken from pillar to post. So, if you can implement that, yes, I am prepared to sign the back-to-back agreement."

We did that, I got to know all the consultants, almost overnight, without any contracts for compensation. A couple of guys threatened us through-threatened us through with these court cases, so we said, "take us to court, and we will see you in court" and moved onto the next thing, nothing happened. We got rid of the warehouse, a big

warehouse, which was costing us a fortune, we got rid of the-the IT consultant who was costing us an enormous amount of money, he was trying to sort out the IT situation. And within 18 months, a big loss, a huge loss was turned into a reasonably respectable profit.

[00:58:27]

*So, who was hauling for you?*

[00:58:30]

Sorry?

[00:58:30]

*Who was your contractor who was warehousing it and hauling it for you?*

[00:58:35]

Erm, the contractor who was-who was doing all that, er, thing before, was Bibi, but Bibi was surrounded by all the different system different opinions, and things of that nature. So, they were also in this-this same loop of mire and as a consequence, and-and in fact, I was-I was faced with the situation that this in fact... "Why are you paying so much attention to Bibi?" They said, "That's the only one we've got." But in the process, we did not make, apart from the-my-my predecessor or my superior, he was asked to leave. Apart from him, not a single redundancy took place.

[00:59:20]

Bicester; so, was that in Bicester?

[00:59:22]

Yeah.

[00:59:24]

*Was that why there is a big shopping place in Bicester, because that was where you were?*

[00:59:29]

No, no, no, no, no, no, we were-we were-we were, er, there before the-the shopping precinct was.

[00:59:52]

*Okay, right. A couple of last questions, number one, big question, have you faced racism in your career in Philips and how?*

[01:00:11]

Not so much in Philips to speak of. I have faced, er, ra, er, racism in my career, yes. If I said, no, then that would not tell you the truth, but in the '60s, '62, '63, '64, erm. But in Philips, there were occasions where I felt uncomfortable and I knew the person I'm working for has got a blank-blank spot in his mind. So, therefore, I knew that I had to be doubly as careful, I have on doubly as good as somebody else to be able to get on, but that is about all. Otherwise, in Philips, no, I didn't very much, no.

[01:01:00]

*Erm, and you retired from Philips in 1998 and since then, Ashish you've done a lot of work in-in the community and in the NHS and you were awarded an MBE in 2010 for your work in the community and the NHS.*

[01:01:14]

Yeah.

[01:01:15]

*One of the things you say you are now doing is you're writing a book, what's it about?*

[01:01:18]

It's about myself because I think that-I think that if I look back, erm, there are lots of stories I can-I can, er, remember and narrate on, with my very childhood even. And I thought that I have left India 60 years ago, so, therefore, even my siblings would not know what I have been through. And most certainly, er, the grandchildren and their children would never know that I even existed. So, I thought that if I write a book then

there is a family history somewhere which will tell them one day, what I have become.

[01:02:09]

*You've told us today and that's a really good advertisement for your forthcoming book, thank you very much for a lively and insightful contribution to the Archives of Information Technology, Ashish Dasgupta, MBE, thank you.*

*End of Interview*



