

ET PROFILE

K BALASUBRAMANIAN
Head, Corporate Banking, HDFC Bank

A Banker with Mossad's Exploits for Handbook

Saloni.Shukla@timesgroup.com

Mumbai: That Aditya Puri runs HDFC Bank with an iron fist is well reflected in its bad loan numbers at 1.04% of total advances, the lowest in the industry. His hands just got strengthened. K Balasubramanian, a former Citi banker, has been hired to head the corporate banking operations as it prepares to fish in troubled waters.

The 45-year-old tennis enthusiast is no stranger to the world of corporate banking, which is holding the economy back from taking off. Having handled the business of lending to companies at Citi, he knows the task of separating wheat from chaff. But only the turf and scale are different.

If HDFC Bank has remained a gold standard all these years, it is mostly because it has greater proportion of retail loans than its peers and it chooses its clients. There was rarely an urge to 'keep up with the Joneses', in other words, indulge in adventurism. The mistakes of others over the past few years have opened up an opportunity for the bank - in the form of the many good corporate credits that are also being ignored by the dominant state-run banks because of their high bad loans. "We need to grow from the current plane to the next plane and create a bigger difference between us and number two," says Balasubramanian. "And then start growing incrementally from there. This window of opportunity will not be there for more than 6-7 quarters."

Bala, as he is known to friends, is a chartered accountant by qualification and has worked for over 20 years in Citi. But the experience has been wide with hands-on role in three corners of the country - Mumbai, Kolkata and Chennai.

While he grabbed the best offer after completing his CA with an internship at PriceWaterhouseCoopers, it is his return to his childhood town of Kolkata that shaped his outlook on business and the art of banking - saying no without saying so. The capital of Marwari businessmen, says Bala, taught him

FACT FILE

Age: 45

Grew up in Kolkata

Studied at St Xavier's Collegiate School and graduated from there in 1992

Loves sports, is a tennis enthusiast and a runner, likes to indulge in physical activities

Loves to read thrillers, especially non-fiction ones

Likes travelling to places of historical importance

Worked with Citi for over two decades

Became youngest manager in Citi to be given independent charge of a regional market, Chennai

Headed the South India market for Citi - its second-largest business generator in India. Then moved to Mumbai as co-head of western India

more banking and business than anything else. "My two years in Kolkata were the best two years in my career," says Bala.

As a student, Bala was no different from other middle-class children of the 1980s when Science and Mathematics dominated the discussion and aspiration of family members. After growing up with a desire to be a scientist, Bala realised physics and chemistry were not his cup of tea and that he may not be able to do justice either to the subjects or his aspirations.

"Originally, I wanted to be a scientist... but when I was moving over from 10th to 12th standard, I realised that I may not be cut out for that," says Bala. "Then finance was a big thing and everyone that I moved along with said that is where the next big change is going to happen. My entry into finance was due to a combination of my inability to pursue the aim of wanting to be a scientist and what was happening in the country then, to which I tagged along."

In this new role as the head of HDFC Bank's corporate banking, Bala may have to sacrifice some of his interests, at least in the first few quarters as he tunes the business.

But why did he quit such a lucrative job at Citi. "If you want to become big in a country like India, you really need to attach yourself to a large local player of international size," says Bala. "Honestly, when this offer came, I didn't even have to think too much before deciding to switch."

One of the most memorable trips for Bala, who likes to travel to places of historical importance, has been the visit to Mauthausen-Gusen, a Nazi-era concentration camp in Upper Austria.

"I have read almost all the books on Mossad - the Israel intelligence agency," says Bala. "These are not normal things and that really excites me."

