

No more fooling around

The IT Asia '94 in Delhi, which had all the trappings of a hi-tech exposition, proved that the Indian Information technology industry now takes itself seriously

The recently concluded IT Asia's exhibition held at New Delhi's Pragati Maidan proves one thing for certain. That the Rs4,000-crore Indian information technology industry takes its business very seriously. And just how seriously is indicated by the fact that this year the Manufacturers Association for Information Technology (MAIT), the apex body representing the computers hardware industry for the last three years, had to book 12,000 sq metres of floor space, twice that of last year, to accommodate all the players. Just about all the computer majors barring HCL-HP and the Tata group which has a host of computer companies namely TCS, TISL, Tata Elexi, TUL — were present. While HCL-HP felt that its road shows were a better way of reaching out to its customers, potential and existing, the Tata group of companies chose to stay away for reasons best known to them.

Barring this glitch, just about everything else went right about IT Asia '94. Over 215 companies participated this year, up from 143 in IT Asia '93. Though the exact head count is still being arrived at, it is estimated that around 200,000 business visitors, besides a few lakh of general visitors, visited the exhibition. This is up from 120,000 business visitors last year. Several small companies said they attended to over 2,000 customers in four days and had inquiries from all over the country. One such company, Tulip Software, went to the extent of saying that he expects to do four times next year as a result of inquiries generated from here.

Such statistics apart, IT Asia '94 has established another thing for sure. That India can host international class exhibitions. There was a VIP lounge, business centre, a full-fledged media centre with a press conference room and a work area with computers for the journalists and a

coffee vending machine for good measure. Besides, there were multimedia information booths where one could access snap shot profiles of companies participating and their location. Also, 24 computers were networked to aid the registration process. It had all the trappings of a hi-tech exposition. And for a change, most people spoken to had no complaints other than not having good toilets, which had more to do with ITPO and the structuring of Pragati Maidan. A large measure of thanks for this must go to Business India Exhibitions, which along with

Pranab Mukherjee. Just as well because the computer industry got the opportunity to publicly highlight how the grey market operators were making capital out of the situation and how unless some of these were remedied, the real manufacturers would find themselves going out of business.

But of course, it is an entirely different issue that the computer hardware and most of the software displayed at the exhibition was mostly foreign. Though instances of real 'Indian' innovation in software were not visible, there was one small Hyderabad-based company that had packages out of the ordinary. Kernex Microsystems displayed two of its packages: Mimex, a tool for developing



IT Asia '94 had twice as many stalls as last year

MAIT hosted this event.

It is this seriousness that caused K.R. Palta, president of MAIT, speaking of the nagging problems faced by the computer industry on account of the high import duty on critical components in his inaugural speech. Unlike last year, where prime minister Narasimha Rao was invited to do the honours and which led to severe protocol problems and much unhappiness among the participants, this year it was minister for commerce,

graphical user interface, and MathX, a mathematical computation package that can solve all mathematical problems and generate graphs. The company is simultaneously launching the products in India and the US.

L&T is the other company that had a software package with global scope. Its package CA-Unicentre, a systems management software, makes distributed processing and heterogeneous computing (much talked-about trends in the US)

reliable and secure. Not as dramatic, perhaps but nevertheless relevant was the launch of the network version of the aXcess e-mail software from Business India Information Technology. It is the first Indian e-mail service provider to launch a network version. Otherwise, by and large the software packages that were being demonstrated were mostly e-mail software, anti-viral software, business accounting and share accounting software.

Once the notion of seeing Indian products was abandoned, IT Asia '94 had much to offer to visitors, though much more to general visitors. Amongst other things, there were prizes to be won. If Hewlett-Packard offered a laser printer, CALS offered a five-day trip for two to Santa Barbara. As far as business visitors were concerned they just had no clue what was coming their way. A good example is Wipro's Apple stall. Wipro had booked nothing less than 36 stalls spanning 8,500 sq ft to showcase Apple Computers' products. Among other things, Apple was trying to show seamless networking by linking four servers operating under four different operating environment — Solaris, Novell Netware, Windows NT and OS/2 to its Apple systems. But it was also displaying its page-making software, educational CD-ROMs and the Apple notebook PowerBook 540C. Not to mention the various products around the Mac from its 12 business partners who shared the space with Apple. Just how much of what a serious visitor really got to see and understand is debatable. Whether Wipro succeeds in convincing the business fraternity in India to look at Mac as a platform worth evaluating alongside other Intel-based systems, which was its only agenda, remains to be seen.

Equally confusing was the Pertech Computers stall which had Virtual Corporation written boldly across it. Very few people who went in and came out had any clue of what it was all about. In simple language, what PCL was trying to say was that it can offer not just networking but internetworking solutions too. It was offering heterogeneous connectivity between systems running different operating environment like Novell Netware and SCO Unix. As systems integrators both Digital Equipment India Limited (DEIL) and Wipro have been doing a

similar job without confusing or confounding the users. Another company, though much smaller in size, offering a similar expertise is CALS Limited. The other side is that though there was no theme to this exposition, networking and internetworking was more than visible everywhere. So were networking and internetworking products.

Among the product launches that made any kind of impact were the ones by Hewlett-Packard, DEIL and Alphabetics Limited. HP's new range of Deskjet laser printers are expected to knock the air out

HDFC, A.G. Prabhu, senior vice-president of ICICI and Utpal Sengupta, vice-president, Brooke Bond-Lipton India Limited sharing experiences definitely augurs well for the computer industry.

Perhaps, it is all coming together. The Indian computer industry and the user industry. And since they are so closely entwined and because the Indian computer industry is still to take deep roots, an exhibition of this nature where there is a lot of everything and which appears pretty much diffused, is natural. Even in the US, which is streets ahead in terms of



Thadani, Chopra, Dasgupta and Palta of MAIT saw that all went smoothly

of the dot matrix printer (DMP) manufacturers as these printers are likely to be as reasonably priced as the DMPs. Late in the day perhaps, but DEIL's notebook computers are definitely a cut above the rest. In price too. Its HiNote Ultra, weighing 1.5 kg, cost Rs3.25 lakh. Alphabetics launched Optra R, the 1,200 dots per inch (DPI), high resolution laser printer, from Lexmark International of the US, at an unbelievable price of Rs99,000.

Happening simultaneously at the IT Asia '94 was the vision seminars. The focus this year was on strategy, solutions, technology and policy. And it was inaugurated by the CII president Subodh Bhargava. The attempt, according to Vijay Thadani, chairman for Vision Seminars, was to involve the user industry. That this year there were the likes of Deepak Satwalekar, managing director of

computerisation and expertise, there is a Comdex. Whether India will start hosting a Mac World or a Compaq Intech kind of expositions, where entirely different lines of technology are the key factors, is still a speculative affair. But one thing is for sure. The organisers, expecting to gross a revenue of Rs2 crore, are looking at making IT Asia the number one business event in Asia-Pacific. In the words of Bikram Dasgupta, chairman, IT Asia '94, "We have achieved the inter-meshing of Indian and global IT companies that we desired. In fact, for the first time we had a truly international exhibition. Now, having announced the dates for the next IT Asia, we are hoping that all companies will be able to plan their launches for this part of the world to coincide with and take-off from the IT Asia."

■ LATHA KUTTAPPAN