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Atul Punj, chairman, Punj Lloyd, lives in a very large house on Prithviraj Road in the centre of Lutyens' Delhi. That's par for the course but, hang on, its entrance is from the rear. You enter the front gate and drive around 150 metres to the back.

It's a great idea, except for one thing: next door is a state government 'House' — and it has employees' washing hanging all around. "I have tried to grow trees to block that view," says Punj, "but, you know..."

TABLE TALK

That's one of the few times we detect a note of despair. Otherwise, the 54-year-old seems to be made only of enthusiasm and energy. From the way he talks, you can make out the pace he must be setting in his \$2-billion-dollar company, which has recently made a foray into defence.

DEFENCE SECTOR

"Defence," we raise our eyebrows. "What would a nice guy like you be doing in a business like that?"

"We are not into that side of it," he clarifies quickly. "I am not getting into the agency game. We are making high-end engineering products. We have set up a plant in Malanpur near Gwalior, which will soon be making these very sophisticated things for the defence sector, like aerospace components. We could do some other things like gas turbine parts, steam turbine parts." The pride is palpable.

Good, we say, but even if you are on the side of the gods, isn't it difficult to succeed in the field of defence?

He explains that in the EPC (engineering, procurement and construction) business, which was Punj Lloyd's staple, you have to run very fast even to



► *We need five years of strong governance.*

ATUL PUNJ, CHAIRMAN, PUNJ LLOYD

maintain position. So, he began looking for sources of long-term stable growth, for 20 years and more.

Just then the defence business opened up, and he took the plunge. "The gap was in the big pieces, so we set up a manufacturing entity, capable of doing very large pieces of a single component," he says.

Things, he adds, are going well. Again, the pride is palpable.

Aren't you worried that the Chinese are cornering 98 per cent of the globe's rare earth supplies, we ask. "Not quite 98 per cent," he says, but admits that China controls enough now to make a nuisance of itself, as it did last year, when it suddenly withheld supplies.

"But it's unlikely they can go on cornering things. Now, a lot

of other people are investing in these areas," he says with his trademark cheerfulness.

ARAB SPRING

Prices sky-rocketed, yes, because of Chinese control, but, says Punj, that can happen in some other ways too.

"Look what happened to electronic components when there were floods in Thailand last year."

And the global recession, we ask? Isn't that singeing your toes a little?

"What have you been smoking today," he counters. "What recession? Europe is down, yes, but the US is soon going to be okay, and Asia, from Turkey to Korea is booming."

He then launches into a country-by-country analysis of West Asia. The facts roll off his

tongue like runs off Tendulkar's bat.

West Asia is going to spend hundreds of billions, he says. The result of the Arab Spring is that spending on social projects — schools, power projects, hospitals, etc — has escalated.

Particularly, he says, in countries like Saudi Arabia. "If you look at lower Gulf — Qatar (which has bid for 2020 Olympics), they are spending very aggressively, Abu Dhabi is reviewing programmes, but projects are on."

Punj is totally clued into the geopolitics of West Asia, and oil developments, especially in Kurdistan, Iran and Iraq. Kurdistan will become a prolific producer now, he forecasts. By the middle of this year, Libya will spring back, you see, he adds. "We have already been invited back," he says, proudly.

ORANGES TO SQUASH

During lunch — Punj has chosen to play host, turning down our offer to take him out, since he claims his chef can turn out as good fare — he confesses that he runs a mile in the opposite direction from Michelin 3-star joints. "I love Asian food. There is so much flavour in our food — *khao to lagta hai* something is dancing on your tongue." Currently, he is on a high-protein diet, which he proceeds to serve us too. So we eat *paneer, bhindi, rajma*, chicken legs and *bajra rotis*. Quite delicious.

Dessert is tiny home-grown oranges from his garden that taste like honey, but he, unfortunately, cannot join in. "I get high fever and break out in rashes when I eat oranges," he says. Into every life some rain must fall, we think.

Conversation never flags during the three hours we are with him, as Punj is well-read, clued into current affairs, enjoys music, takes a keen interest in a lot of things and keeps us entertained with a fund of anecdotes on places and people he has met. All off the record.

It's only when we come to the business and sporting climate in India, that his brows furrow. I only have 20 per cent of my business in India. I spend three weeks a month outside the country, he says, and proceeds to explain why.

"If you take a 20-year view, the India story will be a great story, but we need five years of strong governance. I am 54 — the residue of my business career is just ten more years. Last year, I spent three hours of every day in the air. I can't keep this pace forever," he says.

"In my lifetime, I don't see things improving here so I have to look for countries where things move faster. Fortunately, he says, we are in a mobile business — "I call it a nomadic business" — so one can pack one's bags and go — to Brazil, to West Asia, wherever the action is.

He is equally disillusioned regarding sports in the country, after his experience funding and promoting squash. He brought the prestigious PSA masters, one of six platinum events of the Professional Squash Association to India, and sponsored tournaments across various levels.

But the empty stands are now getting to him. "It's a shame. We get the top 20 squash players of the globe here. We aren't charging people a penny to come and see them play. And nobody comes," he says.

But what impresses us is how he takes all this in a stride. Perhaps, it's because everyday is a gamble for him, given the competitive scenarios, the way labour rates change, and the way policy decisions affect his business.

"People ask me why I don't bet on horses and so on, and I say, 'why should I? I am taking enough of a gamble in business,'" he says.

Nothing ventured, nothing gained. Punj is a living testimony to that old adage.