

## Why Indian-born tech talent is leading Silicon Valley

New Twitter boss Parag Agrawal joins the ranks of leaders at Google, Microsoft, Adobe and IBM who have come through India's education system

By [Lucy Burton](#) 6 December 2021 • 10:00am



Microsoft boss Satya Nadella was born in Hyderabad and studied electrical engineering at the Manipal Institute of Technology in Karnataka Credit: David Paul Morris /Bloomberg Finance LP

Activist investor Elliott Management will not have been the only one celebrating [Twitter's change of leadership last week](#).

The stepping down of founder Jack Dorsey, following a year of pressure from the hedge fund led by billionaire Paul Singer, also marked another victory for India and its increasingly lauded education system.

[Parag Agrawal](#), the social media network's 37-year-old outgoing technology chief, was picked to become the latest Silicon Valley leader who was born and educated in India, and the youngest boss on the S&P 500. He joins a growing power club.

“Google, Microsoft, Adobe, IBM, Palo Alto Networks, and now Twitter [are] run by [chief executives who grew up in India](#),” Patrick Collison, the Irish co-founder of online payments giant Stripe, pointed out on Twitter just after Agrawal's appointment.

In response, Elon Musk wrote to his 65m Twitter followers that the “USA benefits greatly from Indian talent”.

The Asian nation celebrated. Indian prime minister Narendra Modi urged more youngsters to take part in a start-up programme for financial technology businesses, while some of the country's wealthiest entrepreneurs applauded Agrawal's promotion.

Anand Mahindra, the tycoon behind Mahindra Group, the Mumbai-headquartered giant, joked that "it's the Indian CEO Virus. No vaccine against it".

Leadership experts say they are not surprised by the large and growing number of Indian-born executives who are now in charge of America's tech titans. The country's education system is heralded for producing smart technology talent.

Jeffrey Sonnenfeld, a professor at the Yale School of Management, says the Indian Institutes of Technology college system – public universities across the country – "typically translates into graduates that do very well in tech".

Before completing a PhD in computer science at Stanford University, Agrawal studied at the Indian Institute of Technology in Bombay, following in the footsteps of tech peers such as Google chief Sundar Pichai, a graduate of the Indian Institute of Technology in Kharagpur.

Competition for places at the colleges is fierce, with an acceptance rate known to be less than 2pc.

In picking Agrawal as its new leader, Twitter has prioritised an engineer and tech [whizz to lead the charge](#), instead of a candidate better known by the public. He also marks a far cry from Dorsey, widely regarded as a wacky entrepreneur.



*New Twitter chief executive Parag Agrawal and Jack Dorsey, who recently stepped down*  
Credit: JUSTIN TALLIS/AFP

Agrawal's parents have said that their son always liked maths, computers and cars, seeking out magazines and literature on the subject whenever they travelled.

Sources told The Washington Post that Dorsey convinced board members that Agrawal is the best choice because of his engineering background and the fact he had been rising through Twitter's ranks for a decade. One of the insiders also cited the success of other engineers who were relatively unknown before they took the helm at rival organisations, such as Microsoft's Satya Nadella and Adobe's Shantanu Narayen.

Dr Amanda Goodall, an associate professor at Bayes Business School, believes that Silicon Valley's desire to have bosses with specific technical abilities rather than generic management skills could be a reason the sector has so many Indian-educated engineers in charge.

"In India, expertise is still worth quite a lot – it hasn't gone over to the generic management approach," said Goodall, who has previously lived in the south-eastern coastal region of Andhra Pradesh. "Silicon Valley has managed to keep the technical quality of their CEOs."

She argues that technical ability rules the roost in Silicon Valley. India's education system, known for encouraging science and technology, huge population of 1.3bn and thriving technology hubs such as Bangalore – vital for many western firms – make it an obvious place for Silicon Valley firms to seek out talent.

Other potential internal candidates at Twitter may have included Vijaya Gadde, the site's Indian-born policy chief, but sources told The Washington Post that the company's top executives as well as investors wanted someone with "expertise in engineering or product development".



Google chief Sundar Pichai, who is a graduate of the Indian Institute of Technology in Kharapur Credit: JOSH EDELSON/dailymail.com

A wider move away from the cult of quirky tech founders has also opened up opportunities. Investors are growing frustrated.

A Tweet from Elon Musk, the world's richest man, wiped \$14bn off Tesla's market value last year when he casually remarked that the price Tesla shares was "too high".

Meanwhile, Dorsey has been criticised for making “tone deaf” comments. His attempt to juggle responsibilities at Twitter with other business and personal interests has also come under fire, including the 45-year-old clocking off early for hot yoga classes or fashion school, as well as taking 10-day silent meditation retreats and wanting to spend six months in Africa.

New York-based Elliott last year snapped up a \$1bn stake in Twitter and demanded that Dorsey be replaced. In his resignation letter to staff, Dorsey acknowledged the shift in tone: “There’s a lot of talk about the importance of a company being ‘founder-led’. Ultimately, I believe that’s severely limiting and a single point of failure,” he said.

Vivek Wadhwa, an Indian-born technology entrepreneur and academic, argues that boardrooms and shareholders now value the different life experiences that come from moving to another country and working up from the bottom of the career ladder.

“There is no doubt that technical abilities make a big difference, but many people have that. What makes a difference is the overall ability to bring a company together and not do crazy things. There’s lots of smart people in the world, but they’re not all able to show humility.”