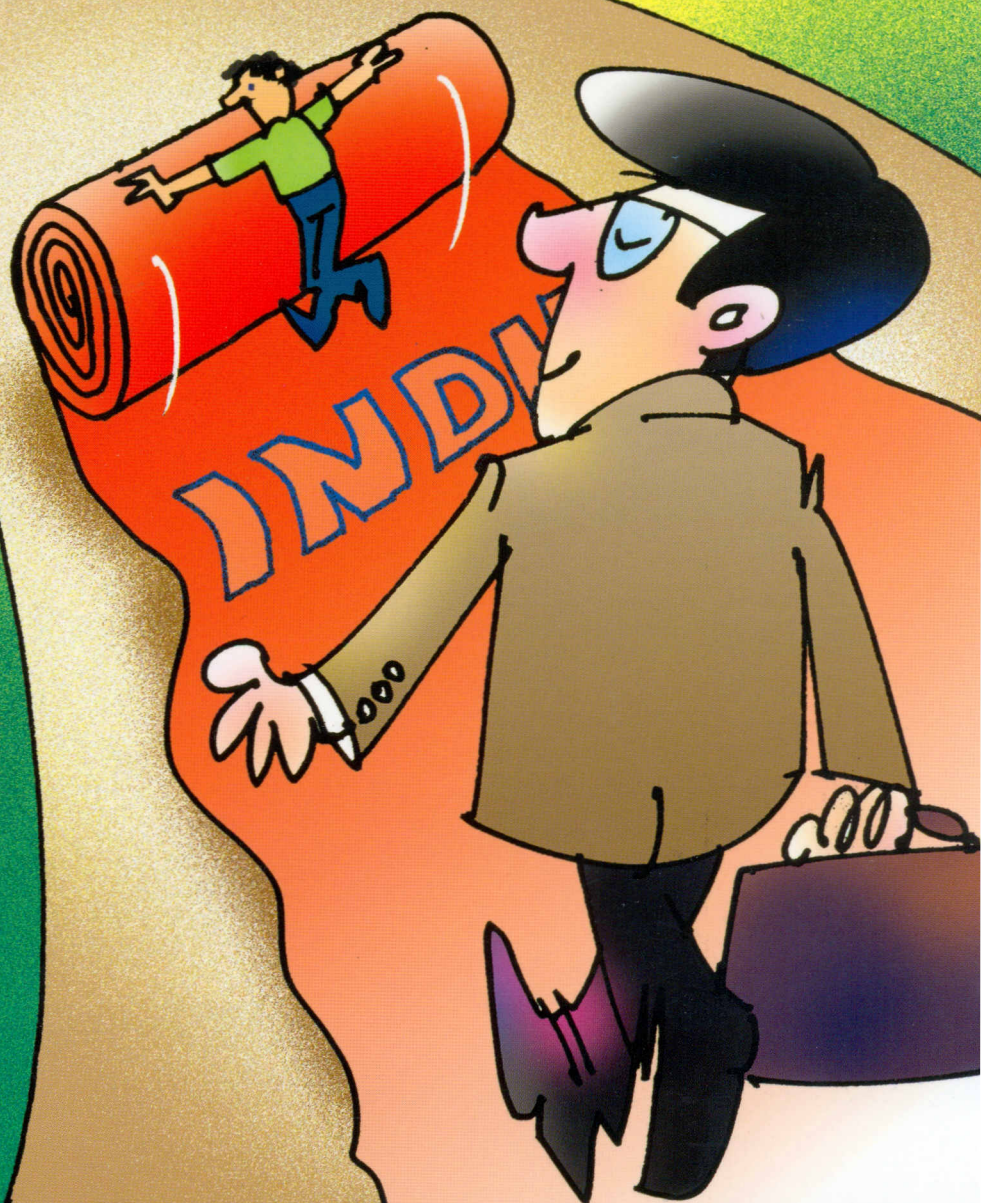


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Nikai group chairman Paras Shahdadpuri's is not your conventional success story, with neither a business legacy nor a virgin market featuring in it. His mantra for success? Strong fundamentals, he says



Paras Shahdadpuri greets Sheikh Nahayan Mubarak Al Nahayan, UAE minister for education, and Salim Iqbal Sherwani, former Indian minister for external affairs

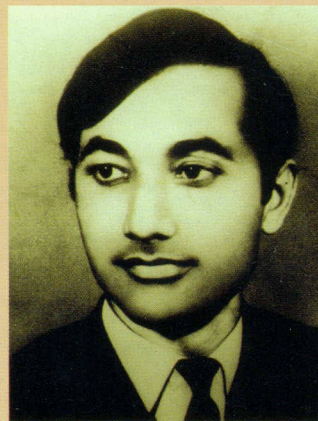
A sense of purpose

By Deepa Gauri

AN average entrepreneurial success story, bred in the Gulf, starts with a young man forced by parental legacy or driven by fate to reach the shores of the Arabian Gulf. The essential frills would include reminiscences about “no electricity, no water and no telephones”, before wordy takes on fate, vision and luck. Paras Shahdadpuri, chairman, Nikai group of companies, will have none of all this. He doesn't even fit into the conventional ‘Gulf entrepreneur’ mould. He is suave — a throwback to his Indian Foreign Service breeding. He is sharp — a result of his diplomatic assignments. And he is focussed — the true mark of his success.

The global business empire that Shahdadpuri has painstakingly built in less than 15 years rests on strong fundamentals, which start off with a clear understanding of what he wants from life. Don't go to Shahdadpuri to learn about the Gulf's living conditions 50 years ago; go to him instead to understand how the Gulf market will shape up in the next 50 years. In today's climate of forward looking business philosophy, he “makes real sense”. That — “makes real sense” — incidentally is the tag-line for the Nikai group.

Nikai is a Japanese word often accorded two meanings: “good omen” and “second story”. Either way, it applies to Shahdadpuri. The Nikai group has indeed been a good omen for the entrepreneur, and it also is a “second story” for him. For, he was earlier a diplomat with the Indian Foreign Service.



The young Shahdadpuri

The shift was not an abrupt one. And it wasn't prompted by transient externalities. Shahdadpuri recalls that he had three definite objectives in taking the risky decision to start out on his own, leaving behind the cushy comforts of a diplomat's life. “I wanted to be gainfully busy while I enjoyed good health and it was not to be after retirement. I wanted to improve my financial lot. I wanted to provide a financial foundation for the generations to come.”

Today, having achieved what he had set out to do, Shahdadpuri has broadened his vision for the future. That encompasses society as a whole, approached from the perspective of the world as a seamless entity. He sees the world with the eyes of a “global Indian and a global citizen”, and his goal is to benefit the middle and lower segments of society by providing them the technology advantage, which the Nikai group, a retail electronic major in the Gulf, is well poised to deliver. However, the group's business interests, extend far and wide. Specialists in home entertainment, electronic appliances and white goods, the group has reached out to food products, information technology and restaurants — and has blazed a trail in all segments.

It hasn't been an easy task. Shahdadpuri did not have an untapped market before him. Unlike many successful entrepreneurs who had the privilege of an emerging market, Shahdadpuri had to slog it out in a well-established business hemisphere. That Nikai succeeded is indeed a mark of the man's clear vision. Shahdadpuri attributes his success to four reasons: "Clear and strong fundamentals, honesty in my thought processes, dealings and conduct, never overshooting *on our capabilities, and hard work.*"

Shahdadpuri was aware of the uncertainties he would face as he ventured first into commodity trading and then establishing the Nikai group in the UAE. "But I have always been confident of myself. If you put me in the middle of the Sahara Desert, I will still survive and succeed," he says. That streak of confidence is inborn, he feels. "It is a gift of God. You can educate a person at any institution of high repute, but character has to come from within."



Shahdadpuri (extreme right) with Dr Khalid Mohammed Al Khazraji, under secretary, Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, and Asoke Mukerji, former consul general of India in Dubai

Shahdadpuri landed in Dubai, where his businesses are currently headquartered, by sheer chance. A missed flight to the UK, and he found himself in transit in the city, with 22 hours to while away. What he saw made him decide that the city offered endless possibilities. Though he does feel that he would have achieved the same level of success whatever his destination – China, Hong Kong, the US, or Europe. The beauty of Dubai, he says, is that it offers the best of both worlds — East and West.

The Nikai group hasn't restricted itself to the Gulf. Its FMCG division, Crescent General Trading, represents renowned brands such as Bru, Kissan and Shri Lal Mahal Basmati Rice in over 30 countries. Its IT arm, Ad Astrum Technologies, serves the global market from its office in Bangalore. And the restaurant division, Boston Foods, is a franchisee of American fast food chain Subway.

Shahdadpuri's son, Mahesh, an engineering graduate and MBA from the US, is at the forefront, leading the Nikai group, while his daughter, Jean, is a US board certified paediatrician. "She has con-



Shahdadpuri greets Sheikh Ahmed Bin Saeed Al Maktoum, chairman of Emirates Airline

sented to join the Nikai group," says Shahdadpuri. He adds that the Nikai group is all set to embark on "a different line of business" in 2006. He won't reveal whether this will be in health or education — an issue close to his heart.

Redefining his priorities for the future, Shahdadpuri is now utilising his business prowess to "percolate the benefits of my business to reach the lower strata of society". He already has a track record of effective societal leadership, serving as chairman of the Indian Overseas Economic Forum, an organisation that represents the Indian diaspora in the Gulf. "I have worked to bring Indian businessmen and professionals who are based here closer to our UAE hosts, and we have succeeded in better understanding on both sides. I have tried to play an active part in fostering relations between India and the UAE by engaging investments in both countries. I am glad that many of my recommendations have been accepted positively by the UAE."

Shahdadpuri believes that man shapes his own destiny and creates his own space. "Luck is an excuse — it is left to us, as individuals, how we play the cards of talents and opportunities we are given. I believe that people who attribute everything to luck and fate are those who lack confidence in their own ability and are not willing to work hard with self-confidence." Shahdadpuri is a hard taskmaster — "open-hearted and understanding, but firm. I believe in getting the job done. Unless you adopt a go-getter attitude, you can never accomplish anything. I do not tolerate excuses."

Shahdadpuri missed out on all the "booms" that have driven the UAE economy. Yet, he has succeeded. That, he says, is not because he has been an innovator or extraordinary in his approach. "I have always tried to be a shade better than the others. I believe that there is a piece of the market pie for everyone. Only, you must find your way to it and bite into it. Since our inception, our company has never seen zero growth. We have always grown, and that is because we always try to be a shade better than the others."

(For comments or further information, write to spotlightonpersonality@globalindianme.com)

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