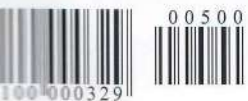


# Friday

DECEMBER 29, 2006-JANUARY 4, 2007

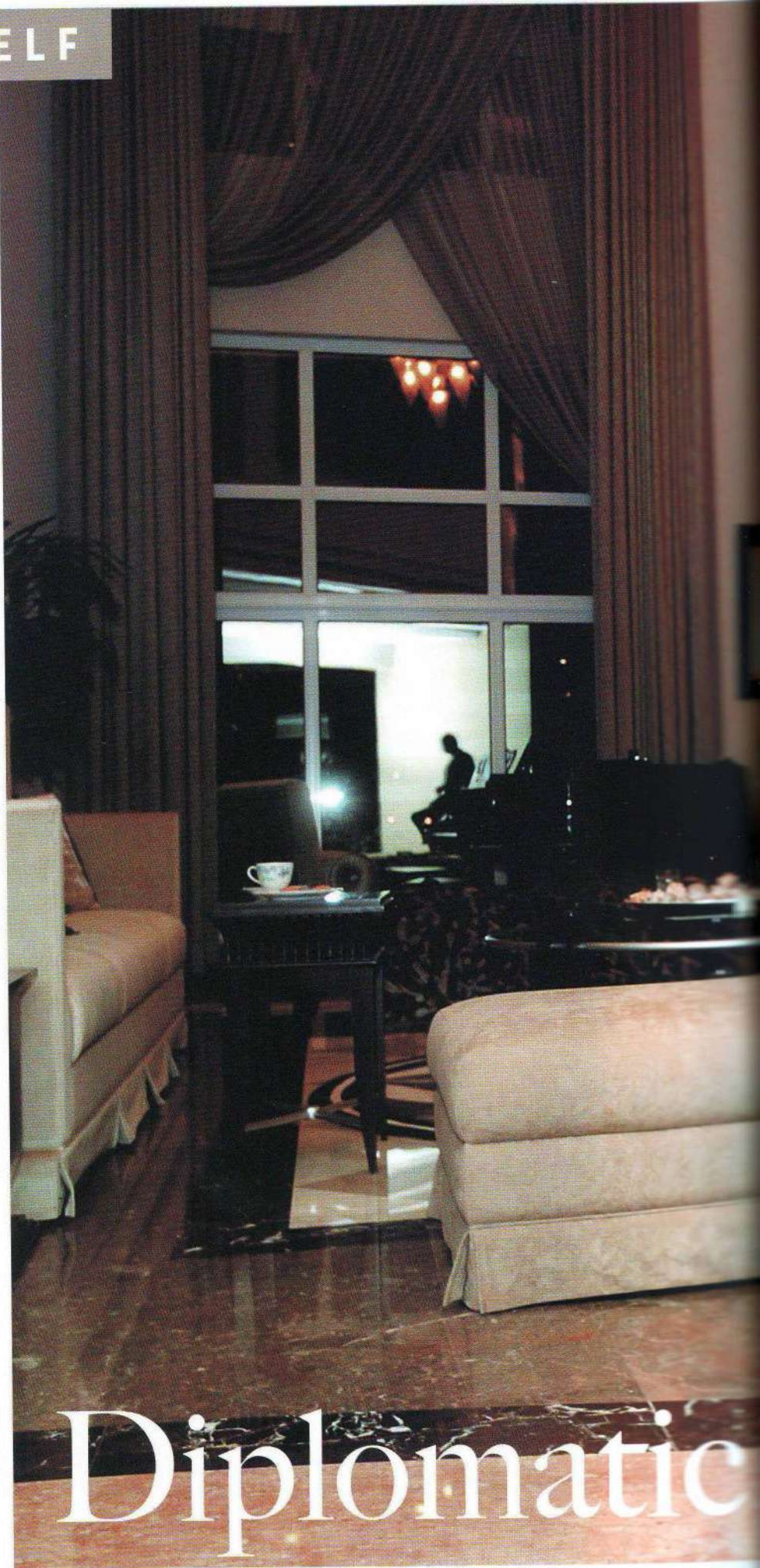
Once  
the  
party's  
over ...

... consider changes that can lead to a happier you 36





**H**ARD-NOSED DIPLOMACY AND THE HIGHLY COMPETITIVE FIELD OF BUSINESS. Both very different arenas but which share plenty of similarities, Paras Shahdadpuri might say. Aryeman Raj meets the chairman of the Nikai Group of Companies, who gave up a career in diplomacy to enter the highly competitive business of consumer durables. Photos by Arshad Ali



# Diplomatic





# moves

Parag Mehta ...  
'... conducting  
your life in an  
honest manner  
leaves you with  
peace of mind.'



## A STICKLER FOR PERFECTION

**Paras was a year-and-a-half old** when his family moved to India after the partition of the country. Life wasn't a bed of roses for his six siblings (four brothers and two sisters) since his father (Dharamdas) had to start life afresh in a small town called Nagpur in northern India. Situation improved when Dharamdas (a bureaucrat and a health specialist) got a job as a health officer with the Delhi government.

Early in life, Paras realised

that he lacked the conventional 'cramming' qualities expected of every student. However, his sharp eye for observing things around him and his skill in justifying issues put him in the good books of his school-teachers.

"I was a stickler for perfection. My clothes were always wrinkle-free, my bicycle was sparkingly polished. Yes, I do embarrassingly remember not mastering the stanzas of the morning school prayers, even though I was the monitor of the morning prayer assembly session," recalls Shahdadpuri.

Over the years, he picked up traits of being conscientious, dedicated and an eloquent speaker and graduated in economics, topping the Delhi University merit list in the subject (although he lacked the ability to quote by rote statements made by noted economists).

"My theme-based justifications helped me score high marks, although I wasn't able to provide the quotations of famous economists in their entirety," he says. After graduation he took the civil services examinations and made it to the Indian Foreign Service.

Paras Shahdadpuri was a respected diplomat in the Indian Foreign Service, having served in several key positions in China, the US, Saudi Arabia ... He was doing pretty well for himself – he had a coveted job, the pay was not too bad, he rubbed shoulders with decision-makers and diplomats ...

Then, in his forties, he was offered a posting in Helsinki. Shahdadpuri turned it down and opted instead for Tripoli, Libya. (He won't say why.) It was a posting that was to change his life.

"It was during my tenure in Libya as a diplomat that I realised that I was cut out for something different in life," he says. Shahdadpuri wanted to do something on his own ... do or build something from scratch that would have a huge impact on people, something that, years later, he could look back on with a sense of pride and satisfaction.

"I was 40 and I felt it was an opportune moment to redirect the course of my life path," he says.

Of course, the fear of quitting a glamorous job and starting life afresh did make him baulk a bit, initially. But deep down, he knew his mind was made up. He would enter the world of business and carve a distinctive place for himself.

"Business was an alien field for me," he recalls. "None of my immediate family had dared to foray into this field. There were no siblings I could seek guidance from." But the pull of an uncharted world was too powerful to resist. So, he packed his bags, returned to Delhi and began to put his future plan of action into place.

In 1985, he resigned from diplomatic service and set up an export business.

One of the initial hiccups he experienced was the economic system in India, which at the time was not yet so accommodating. Also, the communication systems were not the way they are today. So he set up office in England, since it was the "only English-speaking country in Europe I could relate to in terms of professionalism and business opportunities".

Little did he know that his decision

to move to London would, in a sense, have a bearing on his life forever.

Embarking on his new life, he booked himself on a flight to the UK from India. However, he missed the connecting flight and was stranded at Dubai airport.

Since he had some time on his hands, he decided to look around Dubai. And what he saw amazed him. The business potential the 'city of gold' held was mind-boggling. It did not take long for Shahdadpuri to make up his mind – he decided to set up a business in Dubai.

A couple of months later, he returned to Dubai and with the help of a few friends started a business. "Initially, I traded in commodities – soaps, detergents, urea and fertilisers – and later branched out to importing and distributing home appliances.

"Over a period of time I diversified and decided to create my own brand [of consumer durables]. Thus, in 1995, the concept of Nikai was born. I saw there was a niche for a private brand that could stand its own against major international European and Japanese brands.

"And today, Nikai is a brand to reckon with," he says.

Paras Shahdadpuri, chairman of the Nikai Group of Companies, is proud of his company and its products.

But it's not just the pride he takes in his hard work and commitment that make him a great person to be seated next to on a long-haul flight. Shahdadpuri displays other qualities that would make you want to listen to him. For starters, he is very eloquent. Second, his own experiences in life have taught him the secret to keeping one's morale turned to 'High'. Always. At 60,

he has packed in the kind of wisdom and wit that only comes from observing life in close grain.

*Friday zooms in to get a glimpse of the mind behind the man.*

\*\*\*

### I strongly believe that your ...

... personal beliefs can take you to heights of success – in any field. Honesty and sincerity are essential elements for success. I have not resorted to any dishonest means throughout my life.

### I feel ...

... conducting your life in an honest manner and having a strong faith in yourself can get you closer to the path of success. I consider success as incidental. Sincerity, dedication, commitment and hard work are crucial qualities to possess and practise. You can cheat and deceive the whole world but you cannot deceive yourself.

Every morning, I stand before the mirror for a minute and 'look' into my eyes. I retrospect and look for any traces or moments that I should be ashamed of or feel bad about. I've learnt that conducting your life in an honest manner leaves you with peace of mind. If you cannot face your own reflection with conviction, then you need to mend your ways and not repeat your wrongdoings.

### I am constantly experimenting

All the innovative ideas that I get are like new chapters in learning, which add





**With his wife Poonam ...** '(She) has been a huge support.'

to my [collective] life experiences. I might not have tasted success in some of them but I definitely learn a lot from every experience [I have undergone].

**I am not a quitter ...**

... because I always stand by my conviction. During my chairmanship of the Overseas Indian Economic Forum from 1999 to 2001 [and later as Chairman-Emeritus from 2001 to 2003], we tackled some sticky and sensitive issues which most people would [have] shied away from. Among various issues, we managed to [get] the Indian government to rescind some of the unreasonable income tax clauses applicable to NRIs and to grant a 20-year immigration card to PIOs [Persons of Indian Origin].

**I think ...**

... the destinies of all people have much in common. It is up to us, individuals, how we mould [our individual destiny] and shape it to our expectations and desires. If, for instance, it is in a person's destiny to experience an accident, he should not take it as being the end of the road for him.

I know of a US doctor who has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize several times. He was diagnosed with cancer when he was 40 years old. Today, he is 75 and confined to a wheelchair but he still conducts 40 surgeries a day. He is unable to speak because the cancer has affected his throat [but that has not stopped him from doing his work]. It is this quality of determination which is required to reach your goal. I firmly believe every handicap can be overcome. Destiny has not been unkind or partisan to anybody. It is we who fail to reach our destiny for whatever reasons. We are responsible for it. We miss out on golden opportunities ... we do not spot the pot of gold [at the end of a rainbow].

My advice? Wake up and optimise your true potential in life. Only losers blame their failures on destiny.

**I am happiest when ...**

... I am accomplishing something worthwhile. If I have made an effort [towards realising a project] and if it has

been completed according to plan [it need not necessarily be successful], I feel I have done my job. However, it would trouble me a lot if I have not put in the effort.

**I am passionate about ...**

... everything I do. Passion is at the core of every activity of mine. I consider a relationship without passion hollow and lacking substance. Even a monotonous activity can be interesting if done with passion.

The same holds true for food – do you just gulp it down or do you actually relish every morsel of it? The same goes for life. Enjoy and relish every moment with passion and you will notice the difference it can make to your life.

**ME**

**Me and my passionate streak:**

Your life is sure to be bland if you are non-reactive ... quite like a log of wood. Passion makes the world a better place to live in. Success and passion are two sides of the same coin. You cannot win [in life] if you don't have a passionate streak in you.

**Me and my philosophy for success:**

There is no alternative to success. [Success] is an individual's birthright. We have got to work towards making every effort a success.

Whenever I am confronted with a difficult task, I review my strengths and limitations and try to optimise on my capacities and capabilities.

I am 60 now but I believe there are more heights to conquer.

**What I learnt as a diplomat:**

I learnt that at the end of the day, every issue has to be sorted out in an amicable manner.

Sincere communication is important. My heart bleeds when I see people fighting and killing their own kind while pursuing wrong objectives. Diplomacy taught me ... how to express, explain and communicate with respect while holding my ground.

**Me and the Nikai magic:**

God is great and has been extremely kind to me. Looking back on the 11-year-old success story of Nikai, I neither had the confidence nor the vision (of an experienced businessman) when we launched the brand. Today, it has surpassed all expectations. All I had was the conviction that once I set my heart and mind on it, the result would have to be outstanding.

Creating brand awareness for Nikai in this highly competitive electronics market was no simple feat.

Our catchline, 'Mr Reliable', is synonymous with my personal ideology and this seems to have impressed our client base. Today, Nikai is responding to the requirements of [every] stratum of society, be it the middle-income or high-end income groups.

**Me and my family:**

Mine is a close-knit family. My wife Poonam has been a huge support to me. She has believed in me and in my efforts and has stood by me through the highs and lows of life. She showers unconditional love on the family and even in person is a very simple and pure individual.

I believe that parental guidance is necessary for children even after they are married and settled in their careers.

Education has always been a top priority for my children. My son, Mahesh, has completed his MBA from the University of Boston after having completed his bachelor's in engineering. My daughter, Dr Jean, is a postgraduate in paediatrics. I ensured that they both worked first in other private organisations before they joined the family business. They have imbibed the intricacies of people management



and have experienced what it is to be an employee before being entrusted with senior positions within the family business.

Although my daughter was running a successful medical practice of her own in the US, I managed to convince her to join the family business and settle down in Dubai.

I am fortunate that my children have strong family values, and they cherish the family bonding. I am a strong believer in the idiom, 'You reap what you sow.' I feel that the respect and love that our children shower on my wife and me is the result of the respectful relationship I shared with my parents. Love and respect are handed down the generations and good upbringing provides a solid foundation for every child's future.

I feel today's parents do not spend enough time with their children. The easiest way to reason with an agitated child is with a smile and plenty of love. Raising your hand or shouting at a kid will only aggravate him. If you can master the art of handling such situations with 'kid gloves', so to speak, you can handle any problem, be it at work or at home.

### Me and the Bharat Shiromani award:

I was conferred the Bharat Shiromani last year. This award is conferred on NRIs for their outstanding contribution to society, and their efforts at becoming exemplary self-made entrepreneurs. Former Prime Minister of India I. K. Gujral presented this award to me in the presence of leading Indian political leaders like L. K. Advani, Najma Heptullah, Tirlochan Singh and a host of other luminaries in New Delhi.

I believe that if society has given you success, you should repay it in some form. Personally, education of needy children and uplift of women are causes very close to my heart.

## MYSELF

**To be a successful businessman, you need to be prudent and practical. Does this make you immune to sentiments on the way to reaching your goal?**

Being prudent and practical does not mean that you should be unethical and devoid of sentiment. I believe any businessman needs to think with his head first. But at the same time, he must strike a fine balance between his thoughts and sentiment.

It is practical to make use of both [the logical and emotional aspects] in the right proportion, depending on the situation. A businessman who uses only his head [logic] and has no compassion for the feelings of the people around him will end up being ruthless. And this may not fetch him the support [of others] in the future.

### What has been the most valuable lesson in life?

To never give up. I learnt that you will always find a solution [to a problem]. If you have exhausted all alternatives and cannot [find a solution to an issue], then you better endure the pain with a smile on your face.

In whatever you do, there may be

**'I believe any businessman needs to think with his head first. But at the same time, he must strike a fine balance between his thoughts and sentiment.'**



obstructions and obstacles, but obstacles only make the adrenalin in me course faster and I end up chasing my dreams with greater conviction.

### You must have long-term goals to allay the frustrations of short-term failures.

If you are a statesman-like person, you don't get slowed down by short-term failures. It is like fighting a big war, which has many small battles to be fought first in order to win the big one. The greater objective is to win the war. Battles are tactical fights, and here, it is natural to win some and lose a few. Jumping to quick conclusions, developing a bias and nurturing [the bias] for a lifetime will not take an entrepreneur places. If you have long-term goals for the group, short-term frustrations shouldn't pull you down. Don't lose sight of the macro picture. If you adopt a statesmanlike behaviour, you will never get involved in partisan or egotistical matters.

So, don't let small concerns ruin your larger goal. Gloss over the short-term failures and you'll taste sweet success.

### Any true-life incidents which reiterated the fact that instead of fighting problems, one should try to look for a solution?

During my tenure as a diplomat in Libya, an unnerved father once sought my assistance. His teenaged son, who was mentally challenged, was attempting to throw himself off their seventh-floor apartment. Any attempt to coax or dissuade the teenager was resulting in more aggression from him.

I reasoned with the teenager using logic ... that he wasn't gaining anything by taking such drastic measures. As he

began to open up to a conversation, I slowly inched myself forward towards him. Engaging the boy in some [kind of] logical conversation was my only way of pulling his attention away from his mission. And I managed to pull him back from the brink.

Problems such as this need to be handled with a cool mind. Reacting in an [appropriate] manner helps you tackle the most delicate situations in life with success. [The situation could involve] a sharp weapon, a verbal backlash or physical fury ... face it bravely, with intelligence and deflect it.

### Are some difficulties in life really surmountable?

Difficulties are resolved with conviction, logic and pragmatism. Those difficulties which cannot be handled must be endured - with calm.

No problems or business losses in my life have tied me down. But, if the problem persists and is unsolvable, I have to learn to live with that. If we realise that, life becomes easier. **E**