

NATION, IN OTHER NEWS

Remembering 'Nana' on his centenary

DECCAN CHRONICLE. | R. MOHAN

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The day marks the centenary of the suave, soft-spoken pioneering industrialist of Tamil Nadu.



David Cameron

Chennai: The former British Prime Minister, David Cameron, will be delivering the KS Narayanan oration on January 30. The day marks the centenary of the suave, soft-spoken pioneering industrialist of Tamil Nadu.

'Nana', who passed away on September 28, 2012 left an indelible impression on those he interacted with. From the fertile lands of the Tamiraparani in and around his ancestral village of Kallidaikuruchi in Tirunelveli district, 'Nana' rose to build an industrial empire through many decades of the vicissitudes of business in an ethical and upright manner that makes him an industrial legend of the state.

His autobiographical 'Friendships and Flashbacks' captures in a humorous and yet revealing manner while casting light on many incidents that were to dot his life and times. It is a remarkable story of

abundance of business sense in people who lived within a twenty mile radius of Kallidaikurichi and who were responsible for the establishment of many of the top industrial empires of the state, beginning with TVS, Amalgamations, India Cements, Easun and Chemplast.

Nana's story follows a

pattern of ingenuity shown by many of them from the area during the war when privations of the people in extreme war shortages also led to opportunity. For instance, Nana's genius in handling rubber to retread old tires was to make him an early fortune in World War II while also shaping him into the shrewd

industrialist he was to become. Of course, he had had a bit of a silver spoon of a start in the 'banking' business established by his father, SNN Sankaralinga Iyer.

The passage of time may have changed business ties over decades, but Nana always paid generous tributes to his friend and mentor - "Abboy" TS Narayanaswami, the father of N. Srinivasan and N. Ramachandran, who was one of the principal motive forces in starting up the cement industry in the state along with Nana's father. ("Soon to become my long-term business associate, my most discerning adviser and by a sort of natural progression, my closest friend", Nana wrote in his book.

How the two as young men ventured into the industry and built the foundation for the cement major India Cements was a grand story of the conquest of trials and tribulations of business people in the country in the days of the quota and licence raj. Nana's own success story in formal industry started with an ink factory that he turned around and then went on to conquer rubber with the typical ingenious ways of Indian entrepreneurs whose crisis management skills constitute a byword for innovation and thinking on one's feet.

His venturing into manufacturing PVC resin was the turning point in his life as well as that of the biggest industry he built in the Sanmar Group.

The aligning of latest technology in manufacturing was his biggest forte. To his credit, Nana would not work a day beyond the age of 60 when he handed over the reins to his sons N. Sankar and N. Kumar and hit the 'paplu' table with a vengeance as a pastime. His humorous stories of escapades and how he was forced to drink Scotch to mask the taste of caviar and numerous other escapades abroad marks him as a genial man of good humour.

Nana displayed a sporting spirit in everything he did in business as well as in sport itself, of which he became one of the first industrial patrons in sponsoring Jolly Rovers in Chennai's

senior division cricket league. If succeeding generations took cricket sponsorship to a professional level, it is to be taken as their tribute to Nana, the pioneering industrialist who simply loved sport.

Seen as an institution builder, he took keen interest in industry affairs as well as doing one stint as the Sherriff of Madras. It is six years since he passed away, but he went leaving an indelible mark on the life of Madras and Chennai as an entrepreneur with a golden heart and a genuine concern for his employees.

I remember him as an avuncular figure who genially signed a letter in his Dhun Building office in 1967 stating India Cements would sponsor my candidature for a seat in AC College of Technology. Seeing his grace in dealing with a gawky school student, it was not hard to imagine how easily he would have made friends forever in his life. They don't make industrialists like 'Nana'anymore.

KS Narayanan – an entrepreneur par excellence

G Balachandar Chennai | January 29, 2019



The year 2019 is significant for the Chennai-headquartered billion dollar plus Sanmar Group, as the calendar year marks the 100th birth anniversary of its founder KS Narayanan (KSN), who epitomised a culture of business that imbibed boldness, partnership, ethics and transparency.

KSN sowed the seeds for the success and rise of the Sanmar Group, now a diversified industrial conglomerate with presence across chemicals, engineering technologies and shipping with overseas operations in countries like Egypt.

Born in 1919 at Kallidaikurichi, a small town on the banks of river Tamiraparani in southern Tamil Nadu, to SNN Sankaralinga Iyer and Pichuammal, KSN rose to become one of the leading industrialists and a pioneer in industries such as cement and PVC in the country.

After his marriage at the age of 16 in 1935, KSN joined Indo-Commercial Bank, promoted by his father, and in the subsequent years, gained knowledge and hands-on experience across industries ranging from printing, rubber, and industrial chemicals to PVC resins.

“One problem that consistently plagues small-scale industries is that the coffers dry up at a critical stage in their growth. In my own career, I came across a dozen cases of excellent ventures running aground at the precise juncture at which an injection of precious capital would have made resounding success of them,” KSN wrote in his book *Friendships and Flashbacks – My Life and Times*.”

Overseas exposure

As a start-up entrepreneur, KSN faced similar challenges in his early ventures. But he pulled it off dramatically and made successful businesses out of them.

He was an entrepreneur by nature. KSN’s entrepreneurial journey began when he took over a struggling printing ink factory near Chennai in 1930s and turned it around.

The venture, which bagged orders from Tamil magazine *Kalki* and newspapers such as *The Hindu* and *The Indian Express* provided him numerous learnings.

As he moved from printing ink to the rubber business, KSN also turned the capital-starved South India Rubber Works in Coimbatore around after his family took over the business.

He also came up with innovative solutions in the tyre retreading business.

His exemplary skills were acknowledged when a tyre on a military plane burst beyond repair, leaving it stranded in Coimbatore. There was no spare tyre and KSN was asked to help though he didn't have any technology to handle aviation tyre. The old tyre was brought to KSN's factory and based on the old tyre, he made a solid rubber tyre instead of a hollow pressurised tyre to carry the plane safely to a place where a more suitable tyre could be found.

He repeated the success story in his next venture — industrial chemicals — too.

KSN joined the management of India Cements, which his father started in 1946, after his stints in a few countries where he acquired expertise in cement manufacturing and new technologies. He was associated with the company for more than three decades.

KSN, along with TS Narayanaswami, who the former called his closest friend and discerning advisor, expanded the group's activities starting from the 1960s. Chemicals and Plastics India Ltd (Chemplast) pioneered the production of PVC from molasses, a by-product of sugar mills.

KSN handed over the reins of administration to his sons Sankar and Kumar during the 1980s, even as he continued to guide them till his last breath.

KSN's leadership of the Sanmar Group was based on the highest standards of ethics, transparency and integrity.

“One notices that these days people don't mind cutting corners to make their lives easier, even if it does not result in any direct financial

gain to them. If a person has not adhered to any of our policies, we deem it a violation. Our ethics philosophy has been in practice for over five decades,” says N Sankar, Chairman, Sanmar Group.

Remembering KS Narayanan through his own words

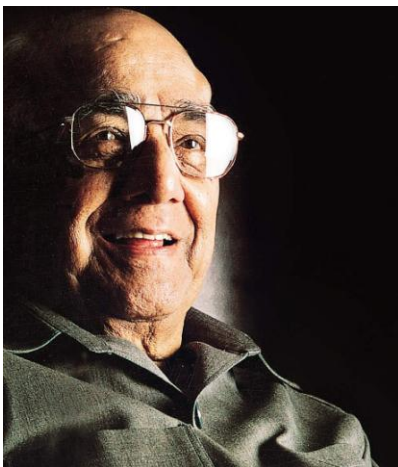
He, however, reserved, the most special place in the book, for his wife Madhuram.

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By Express News Service

CHENNAI: My friends would pile into it (the charcoal-driven car) cheerfully at the beginning of a trip. I carefully concealed from them the fact that at the first hint of a gradient the charcoal burner would cough, choke, and give up. Then — what are friends for? — they would get out, cursing, and push the stalled rattletrap uphill. That seems to be a good enough image of how we kept going through those difficult times: on ingenuity, adaptability, and the kindness of friends,” writes KS Narayanan in his autobiography.

While much has been written about Narayanan’s business acumen, in the 283-page autobiography ‘Friendships and Flashbacks’, friends, family and sometimes enemies, take centre stage. The rest — fame, success and power fell into place like clockwork actors in a child’s Christmas play. January 30 will mark his birth centenary.



KS Narayanan

With the ability to not harbour resentment towards people who may have even cost him a fortune, perhaps acquired with age, Narayanan speaks about people who had harmed him with the same fondness reserved for friends. Speaking about an Englishman that he remembers by the name ‘Peterson’, whom he had appointed the general manager of Nanco Printing Inks, he writes, “He really sealed the fate of Nanco Inks but I could never bring myself to blame or reproach him.” Peterson, who helped Nanco Printing Inks pioneer magnesium carbonate-based ink, had failed to revise the price of

the ink, resulting in the company's profits crashing. The sense of defeat, aided by alcoholism, had driven Peterson to the verge of insanity.

From his first stint at the Indo Commercial bank, Narayanan chronicles, for posterity's sake, his journey through various enterprises he took up along the way, recalling incidents that once a while, lifted the experience to beyond merely the ordinary. He recalls a certain Srinivasan, who mistook condoms, that a young duo was working on using the 'dipping method' at Nanco rubber, for balloons; the next day, workers opened the doors to see condoms, some filled with air, and others with water.

He, however, reserved, the most special place in the book, for his wife Madhuram. "All I know is that if having reached some conclusions on the subject, I had been asked to choose all over again, I would have chosen Madhuram," he wrote.

In other pages, he remembers the doctor Dr Achar, who saved his youngest son Kumar's life. And his own closeness to his roots. "Any device that malfunctioned — from my grandson's toy to the air conditioner would receive my own ministrations," he wrote. This was accompanied by the photo of the man, clad in white, who stood out even in a black and white photograph, inspecting the wings of a ceiling fan.

Stories from work

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A fighter & visionary collaborator

S Viswanathan | Jan 29, 2019, 23:58 IST

Chennai: The years following Independence threw up several enterprising, multifaceted entrepreneurs who charted new paths, helped build the economy and had a zest for life.

K S Narayanan, whose birth centenary falls on January 30, was one such colourful personality. He lived a full life, since entering business in his late teens, and remained active till he breathed his last at 93. India Cements and the Sanmar Group bear testimony to his invaluable contribution as a major industrial icon of TN.

Tirunelveli was home to several business leaders, including S N N Sankaralinga Iyer, who contributed to the state's industrialization from the 1940s. Iyer, who founded the Indo-Commercial Bank, developed a bond with his talented employee T S Narayanaswami and involved him in its development. Iyer's son Narayanan also cut his teeth at the bank. The three were so entrepreneurial they conceived a large cement plant at Thalaiyuthu. And India Cements was born.

In his early years, Narayanan, aided by his father, excelled in acquiring smaller businesses and turning them around. Narayanan and Narayanaswami became a formidable team. The former taking charge of internal administration, while the latter's charm was invaluable in managing the rigours of the licence-permit-quota raj. With R Venkataraman as TN industry minister, there was a constant search for new opportunities for industrial development and the dynamic duo rode the wave with PVC, in collaboration with BF Goodrich, USA. The availability of chlorine at Mettur Chemicals was a big advantage. After two years of painstaking efforts and tackling tough bureaucratic barriers at the Centre, Chemplast was set up. To manage the sophisticated business, Narayanan's son N Sankar and Narayanaswami's son N Srinivasan did postgraduation in chemical engineering at the Illinois Institute of Technology, Chicago.

Teething troubles at Chemplast, devaluation of the rupee in 1966 and competition in cement and PVC, made the going tough. The group also suffered with the sudden demise of Narayanaswami in 1968. Those were the days when new entrepreneurs heavily depended on institutional finance. Following internal dissent, Srinivasan was moved out; the losses incurred led to financial institutions taking control of the management of India Cements in the early 1980s. It was when a major company like ITC was ready to buy it that R Venkataraman intervened. A settlement was reached through handing the cement business to Srinivasan and the other family retaining control of Chemplast.

Despite the head start TN had with Mettur Chemicals, the thick concentration of leather chemical units, Chemplast and the large refineries and petrochemical units in Manali, the state's share in chemical production is less than 6% of the entire country. The expertise of the Sanmar group in PVC could be leveraged by thinking of a naphtha cracker unit that can support a large number of downstream units. It is time for such a big move. It would be a tribute to the enterprise of Narayanan.

(The author is the editor of Industrial Economist)