

N. Sankar, at 75

If S. Muthiah was our founder, N. Sankar was our saviour. As Muthiah never tired of saying, had not Sankar stepped in at a crucial point in the life of Madras Musings and placed it on a sound financial footing with support from multiple corporate houses, the magazine would have been short lived. On the occasion of his 75th birthday, we wish our saviour and patron-in-chief many more years of good health and all happiness – The Editor

A true icon of Indian industry will turn 75 on November 19th. At the forefront of the Indian PVC manufacturing segment for over four decades, N. Sankar, the chairman of The Sanmar Group, presiding over a US \$ one billion diversified multinational group, has been a role model for entrepreneurs and institution builders alike, characterised by an unusual combination of business acumen and ethical conviction – upright, farsighted, innovative. A pioneer in PVC manufacture, he was responsible for some of the most original choices made in the field including the highly integrated manufacturing processes at the numerous facilities of Chemplast, its flagship company, now over fifty years old.

Though the son and grandson of trailblazers in the history of south Indian industry and commerce – respectively K.S. Narayanan and S.N.N. Sankaralinga Iyer – Sankar was not born with a silver spoon, certainly not in a career sense. He obtained his B.Sc. (Tech) in Chemical Engineering from the AC College of Technology, Madras, graduating with distinction, and a Masters degree from the Illinois Institute of Technology, Chicago. He joined Chemplast in 1967 to help his father. In an interview years ago for Rediff News by Shobha Warriar, he recalled, “I was born in an entrepreneurial family of three generations, so automatically I also became an entrepreneur. I had no funds of my own to start an enterprise at that time. From 1967 to 1972, I worked with Chemplast, reporting to S. Ramaswamy, the chief executive of the company. I learnt a lot from him in those five years. He taught me simple things from how to draft a letter to how to manage people. Those were the most difficult times for Chemplast. But I learnt to cope with it.”

In 1972, Sankar started his entrepreneurial career, borrowing from friends and investors to acquire a majority stake in

a company called Industrial Chemicals and Monomers. Determined to bring in technology to India to manufacture products of excellence as a measure of import substitution, he, all of 26 years old, was writing letters to foreign companies seeking collaboration with them, something very nearly unheard of then.

In search of mechanical seals it needed, Chemplast zoomed in on Durametalllic of Michigan as its choice. Durametalllic India at Karapakkam, Madras, resulted, growing into what is now Sanmar Engineering Technologies Private Limited, an engineering group within the Sanmar Group, catering to a wide range of process industries – even India’s space missions – in need of components that principally ensure safety where the slightest risks must be ruled out. Several successful joint ventures have followed Durametalllic India (now Flowserve Sanmar).

Sankar has over the decades ensured that these joint ventures with global corporations are models for emulation. He has clearly enunciated a joint venture philosophy which can be summarised somewhat on these lines: Both partners should appreciate the need for the joint venture. They should clearly agree on the way the JV will be managed, they must work towards a system based on trust and transparency. There must be appropriate interaction at different functional levels for the ongoing operations of the JV, and clearly defined high level contacts at both ends for management decision-making on important issues calling for the involvement of both partners. Finally, both partners need to be equally able to serve the growing capital needs of the JV as it expands.

Always leading the way with its concern for the environment, the chemicals division of Sanmar under Sankar has made a fine art of ZLD or zero liquid discharge at its manufacturing facilities, amidst a whole slew of steps taken to ensure sustainable growth.

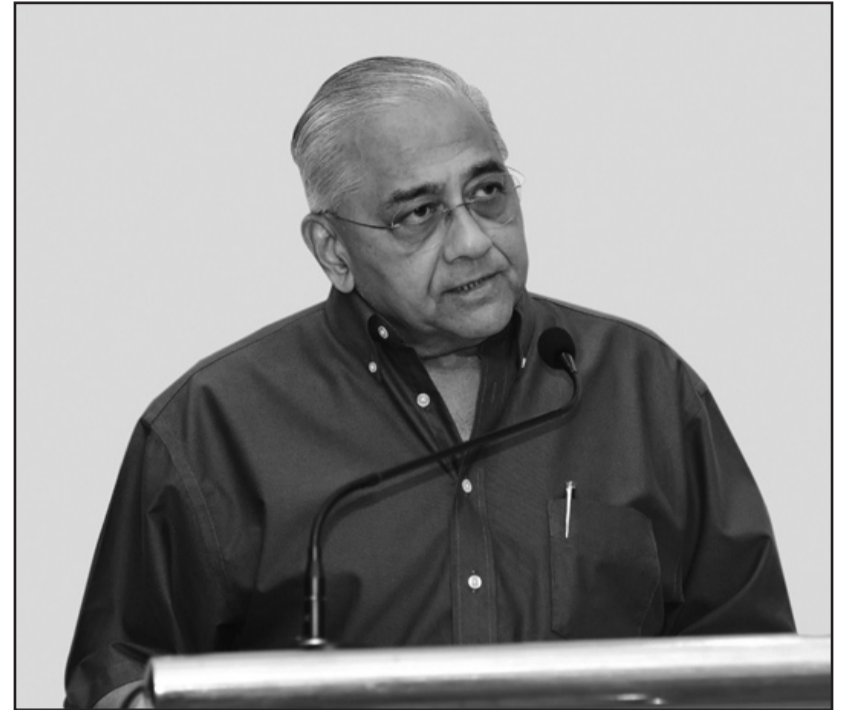
Corporate governance is an article of faith with Sankar, who must count among his contribution to best practices in business and industry the manner in which Sanmar has evolved a clear-cut management philosophy, its HR policy based on competence and a performance culture, and an elaborately spelt out ethics manual that guides employees on how they can implicitly follow the group’s code of conduct in a variety of circumstances that they may encounter.

Identifying the right person

for the right job and empowering his employees to function competently and ethically without fear seem to come naturally to Sankar.

“Strictly follow the law of the land, so that we can all sleep well at night” could well be defined as his paramount mantra to them.

Make no mistake, N. Sankar is a tough, demanding boss. Tasks must be completed in the proper timeframe, decisions should be based on irrefutable logic, information should be communicated clearly, honestly, and such communication has no hierarchy. It only takes him a couple of minutes to see through bluff and inadequate preparation for meetings. He is a master of follow-up, not for him dereliction in the guise of delegation. His attention to detail and meticulous planning do rub off on his managers who are empowered to discharge their responsibilities fearlessly, for so long as they do all that is required of them sincerely, fail-



during his tenure there but also posthumously by the establishment of the SR Seshadri Training Institute for its employees. Sankar also never hesitated to utilise the services of his most

patrons of cricket in India. The Sanmar family started supporting the iconic team Jolly Rovers Cricket Club in 1966, when India Cements adopted the team and hired cricketers from far and wide inviting players from other states like Mysore and Andhra, with the company’s director K.S. Narayanan enthusiastically leading the search party, as it were. Jolly Rovers dominated Madras cricket for many years, sweeping the league title repeatedly.

The golden jubilee of the Sanmar family-Jolly Rovers association was made memorable by an emotional gathering at Chennai of all living members of that first champion side in July 2015 and exactly a year later by the release by the great all rounder Kapil Dev of a book Cricket for the Love of it to commemorate this record association, accompanied by a presidential lecture by historian Ramachandra Guha.

The inaugural K.S. Narayanan Memorial Oration was delivered on January 30, 2016 by former England cricket captain David Gower. Every year since then, the Oration has maintained its high standards in both the quality of discourse as well as the unimpeachable credentials of the speakers. The crowning glory was the K.S. Narayanan Centenary Oration by former British Prime Minister David Cameron on January 30, 2019.

Sankar has never done anything by half measures and the way he has honoured his father’s memory is second only to the devotion with which he cared for him in his lifetime.

With son Vijay Sankar ready to take over from him whenever he is ready to hang up his boots, Sankar can look back with satisfaction at his journey as entrepreneur, institution builder and enabler of human potential in diverse fields.

● V. Ramnarayan

ure will not be punished.

Sankar is known for his steadfast friendships and loyalties. Just as he treated S. Ramaswami, his first, and only, boss with due respect until his retirement, he developed strong bonds with his mentors and senior colleagues. If he found in any of them qualities that could serve the group well, he took advantage of their expertise and wisdom for as long as possible. His professor Dr. G.S. Laddha was one such person of eminence who served on the Chemplast board of directors for more than three decades. For all that his decisions seemed based on cold logic, they could be, and often were, tempered by the human touch – without prejudice to business sense. A sterling example was the way Sankar and his father Narayanan rallied round senior employee S.R. Seshadri, devastated by the loss of his wife while he was at Mettur working for Chemplast. They assisted his relocation to Madras and psychological rehabilitation by approving his pet project to manufacture mechanical seals, vital components required by Chemplast and the process industry in general. The end result was the joint venture Durametalllic India. Firmly of the belief that public recognition and approbation are more important than monetary rewards, Sanmar not only honoured him properly

accomplished colleagues beyond their retirement age. Examples are S.B. Prabhakar Rao, M.N. Radhakrishnan and R. Kalidas. He also did not hesitate to reopen Sanmar’s doors to employees who left the group when they sought reentry if he felt they could serve Sanmar well all over again.

The recipient of honours and awards of every description including lifetime achievement awards from state level and national level apex bodies for the chemical industry, Sankar has been a highly respected figure while helming such bodies as Assocham, the Madras Chamber of Commerce and the Madras Management Association, besides sports bodies like the Tamil Nadu as well as the All India Tennis Association, the Madras Cricket Club and Tamil Nadu Cricket Association.

A keen sportsman, Sankar had to forego his ambition to become a top flight cricketer after polio struck him when he was 17, but a doubles champion at the university level partnering N. Srinivasan of India Cements, he continued his love affair with tennis well into his sixties, playing regularly at the Madras Cricket Club courts finding in it the perfect relaxation after a hard day’s work.

It is very well known that Sankar has been one of the finest