

Jewels of India: Anil Bakeri



A Reputation Built on Trust

At the foundation of his formidable reputation are his sincerity, honesty and farsightedness. Anilbhai Bakeri's Bakeri Group has ensured that as many as 1 lac people have homes of their dreams.

- By Ketan Trivedy

When a father from Ahmedabad went to see his son who was then studying in Vidhyadham Vallabh Vidhyalaya, the son had gone to see 'a Bollywood blockbuster 'Awaara'.

At the time the father kept his counsel, but when the son failed in the first year, the father gave him a piece of his mind: you can't study in a prestigious institute and afford to fail in the very first year.

This was way back in the fifties.

Today however one feels when one looks back that that failure was a stepping stone to what was to be a phenomenal success. For the boy, that failure paved the way to the summit of success.

He is none other than Anil Ratilal Bakeri, the managing director and chairman of renowned Bakeri Group. The name of Bakeri Group is not new in the field of real estate. Be it Ahmedabad, Delhi or Mumbai, real estate builders may have earned money but sadly, not all have earned reputation. Because of shady land deals and scams in property transactions, builders are not looked upon with respect. Anil Bakery is however a happy exception.

Usually the common perception is that you would succeed in this field only if you do fishy land deals and suspect construction business. But Anilbhai has always swum against the tide and never done business at the cost of the reputation of the group. Bakeri Group has so far done construction on plots measuring 15 million square ft. and developed plots on another 20 million sq ft. As many as 1 lac people live in the buildings constructed by Bakeri Group. The group has such a strong image that aspiring buyers would not bother to crosscheck legal documents or other matters concerning his property and would close the deals, blindfolded.

It is obvious that this image could not have been built overnight. Anilbhai has worked very hard towards creating such formidable reputation. His empire has gone beyond Ahmedabad and entered Vadodara, Pune and even Bangalore.

What is the saga of his success?

When we met him in his office at his Ashram Road on a sultry noon, Anilbhai talked at length, without being fazed by the humidity, about his childhood, his struggles, his passion, about cement and sand and so on...

Sand and cement were part of Anilbhai's childhood. When he was born in 1932 in Bharooch on the bank of Narmada, his father Ratilalbhai was an engineer in government's construction Deptt. Since the father's job was transferable, Anilbhai was brought up at different places like Ratnagiri, Kolhapur, Mumbai, Surat, Godhra and so on. He completed his education from school to college at Surat, Ahmedabad and Mumbai. During vacation, Anilbhai would accompany his father to construction site. He never realized how he bonded with sand and cement during those tender years.

It was strange that Anilbhai who stood first or second till S Sc never scored as brilliantly while doing engineering.

He candidly admits, 'I was never interested in theory. It was practical that always appealed to me' In 1955, when he completed civil engineering, he joined the canal project at Vanakbori Dam, but somehow he could not continue and came to Mumbai to join Mumbai Municipal Corporation as junior engineer.

Then how come he thought of leaving the government job and starting his own business?

Anilbhai says, 'father inspired me to be an engineer, but it was my mother who motivated me to be businessman. In fact, she was fed of father's transferable job and used to tell me: you do your own business'

It was 1959 when the air was thick with talks of Gujarat becoming an independent state and Ahmedabad becoming its capital. Sensing that there would be business opportunities galore in Ahmedabad if the latter becomes the capital, Anilbhai left his job and laid the foundation of Bakeri Group in Ahmedabad. He borrowed money from his father and bought a plot of land. Since at one end of the land was St Xavier's college and at the other end was M G Science, he named the plot Ghyankunj.

At this juncture, Anilbhai admits frankly, 'I have not created anything out of nothing, nor did I make a beginning in abject penury. During the initial phase of my business, my father did help me financially' Also, his mama Rasikbhai Shah who lived in Kolkata also stood by him. In fact he was more of a friend.

Not many people would be honest enough to make such candid confession, but this does not mean that his success story is less interesting. When he took a plunge in construction business, most of his contemporaries at the time are nowhere today. But Anil Bakeri is still there.

Behind this success was his Saakar Series. In 1990, he constructed his first Saakar I Complex. The idea of building a complex with offices and no shops was a new one at the time. Anilbhai calls it Corporate Commune. The phenomenal success of Saakar I got the group unprecedented success. It was followed by Saakar II, Saakar III and so on. Today Saakar of Bakeri Group has its own identity in Ahmdebad.

Another feat that strengthened his image is Shrinandnagar Township. Anilbhai is one such builder who thinks first of financially challenged clients rather than rich ones. When he looked at his peons or drivers, he always thought when these people would have their own homes. And this sensitivity towards the poor made him present his first Shrinandnagar Scheme at Vejalpur area. He sold 1-2 bedroom kitchen flats to them on almost no-profit basis. He constructed small buildings and sold. However, the facilities like ventilation and water were on par with those of his other constructions. No compromise on quality. Gruh Finance offered this group loans and consequently this underprivileged group could buy their own homes with dignity. Anilbhai may not have made enough profit from this project, but he earned blessings of these people.

In any case, Anilbhai has his ideas about profit and loss. It was around 1971 when during the constructions of 3-4 schemes, the Bangladesh war precipitated a back-breaking inflation. Because of resultant increase in raw materials costs, all real estate people were in a financial squeeze. They all escalated their costs, but not Anilbhai. He stuck to his original committed price. He sold his flats at the same price. Consequently he

lost as much as 20 lacs. Says Anilbhai, 'in business it is not that you always make profit, you have to be prepared for loss as well' His mantra is to stick to ideals and commitment even if it means loss.

Anilbhai asserts, 'in fact we have been helped by negative forces. If you insist on doing right even if everything wrong is happening around you, people would tend to trust you.' Anilbhai strongly believes that whatever we do has to be in accordance with the norms of Nature and society. Whatever should be the proportion of sand and cement in construction, it has to be followed. Whatever commitment we make to our clients with regard to facilities and area to be allotted, it has to be honoured, come what may. Transaction has to be done by cheques and whatever tax dues have to be cleared.

A simple man, Anilbhai's success formula is too equally simple. It is another thing that in order to implement it you need to give up on a lot of things. Anilbhai in his entire career never ever accepted government contracts. In order to get these contracts, not only you have to give low bid, you have to grease the palms of officials concerned and it would in turn affect the quality. Anilbhai cannot tolerate and accept this. He says, 'our asset is our social reputation. If people believe that we cannot do wrong, this means we should not do wrong.'

Environment concerns are as important for him as adherence to commitment and quality. Government is now talking about water harvesting, but when Anilbhai built Saakar I twenty years ago, he had adopted the underground water conservation facility even then. We find trees at most of his sites. He gifts Tulsi to all inmates of his buildings. Even today, when he buys plots of land, plantation of trees occupies greater priority than what is to be constructed there.

Anilbhai is still engaged as managing director and chairman, but now it is his son Paavan who has taken the responsibility of growth of the company. The elder son Achal Bakeri has his own company Symphony that makes Air coolers. Having inherited the business genes from his father, Achal has ensured that his company Symphony grows to be the biggest Air cooler making company in the world. Anilbhai's daughter Pawani too is well-settled.

To those aspiring to be entrepreneurs, Anilbhai has a piece of advice, 'do not do business with a view to earning only lots of money. Since trust is the foundation of any business relation, it is important that you honour the commitment you make. Only then, people will trust you. To illustrate this point, he cites a touching example, 'while crossing the river overflowing with tide, the son asks his father that rather than he holding his father's hand, his father should hold his hand. For, the son is convinced that he might leave his father's hand, but his father would never let his hand go'

Those families who have been living in buildings built by Anilbhai have similar trust in Anilbhai that he won't leave their hands.

And this trust is perhaps Anilbhai's secret of success..!!

Anilbhai Bakeri Deconstructed

Among the three brothers, Anilbhai is the eldest. Prafulbhai, one of his brothers is with him in his business and Pankajbhai is doing textile business. Anilbhai goes on vacation with family every year. He desires to visit the places in Himachal where there is no electricity and mobile.

Anilbhai gives credit for his success to his wife, Hansabahen. Hansabahen is a law graduate and both had a love marriage. When Anilbhai was busy with his business, Hansabahen played the dual roles of father and mother to their children. Hansabahen has always been the source of his strength.

It is Anilbhai's ardent desire to build high profile and high-end homes for high income retired group, not like home for the aged though. He rues that he could not make it.

He has no clue as to how his family came to have Bakeri as surname. He has heard from his forefathers that once upon a time his ancestors used to tend goats and this is how they got this surname.