



He came. He saw. He conquered.

From selling paan to owning his own Port, Kolkata-born Nikhil Gandhi's journey resembles a fairytale, all thanks to his mental toughness, grit and of course his hard work

By Hiren Mehta

“Chacha, main agar aap ko aise paan lakar du to aap lenge kya?”(Uncle, if I get you this variety of paan, would you buy it from me?)

A 16-17 year old lad's sudden poser took the owner of Ghatkopar-based popular Panwala by surprise. The reason for the Bhaiyaji's bewilderment was the fact that the boy who was enquiring was the nephew of one of his reputed customers. How could he be asked to make supply of something like paan?

Gingerly, the Bhaiyaji mumbled something like ‘thik hai...’ (It is ok) much against his wishes and also later got the boy bulk orders from 8-10 members of his fraternity so that his own requisition did not look much too inadequate. With a smile of satisfaction radiating from his face, the boy departed only to once again show up a few days later with a consignment of 4000 betel leaves ordered by Bhaiyaji.

It did not take long for this maiden transaction to become a regular routine for the boy. He would get Paan orders from the shopkeeper, return to Kolkata to

buy paan, hoist himself up, with his wares, into a crowded unreserved compartment of a Mumbai-bound train, perch himself precariously near the door and arrive in Mumbai. On the way he would not forget to keep sprinkling water on the green leaves lest they withered away. While returning, he would buy toys that he would sell in Kolkata.

One day one of his relatives spotted him supplying paan in Mumbai. Armed with this exclusive and explosive information, the gentleman called up the boy's mother: Nirmalabahen, do you know what kind of work your son is doing in Mumbai?

Though miles away from her son, the mother evidently knew everything her son was doing. She had full faith that her son earned money by honestly working hard and not by stealing.

At the shipyard of Pipavav, though it is well past midnight, the usual bustle of activities is punctuated by the muffled sounds of hundreds of labourers slogging away on the shops. In the lengthening glare of massive floodlights two huge ships are being readied in the dockyard that stretches as far as one could see. This is what is called the Dry Dock of Pipavav shipyard. Dry Dock means a place where surplus water is drained off a newly built or repaired ship to allow its load to come to rest on a dry platform. During ebbs, water recedes into the sea and the gigantic doors of the dock get shut so that work may be initiated on the dockyard. This is the second largest Dry Dock in the world, its length being 662 meters. Adjacent to it, a new and bigger Dry Dock is now coming up. Pipavav is associated with everything that is larger than life. In fact, the man who put Pipavav on the international map is habituated to dreaming big and doing it big. Not only did he dream big, he knew how to realize those big dreams. At the age of 25-26, when he saw the Mumbai port the first time, he had vowed to own a port, all by himself.

And he kept the promise made to self by building the first ever private port and subsequently a huge shipyard.

His name is Nikhil Prataprai Gandhi.

Today Nikhil Gandhi's name has become synonymous with Pipavav Port. Till about 20-22 years ago, Pipavav did not have much of identity. Years ago, the village which is situated at the remote end of Amareli district was named after a holy saint named Pipa Bhagat. It was a sheer coincidence that while Nikhil Gandhi was on his first ever visit to his forefathers' native place happened to have made a stopover at Pipavav for a cup of tea. He instantly loved the sea, as the waters were relatively calm and tranquil. Like Mumbai, this place too could be developed into a natural port, a thought began to germinate in his mind.

Nikhil Gandhi made the Pipavav Port on this spot. Later though he gave this Port to Danish company called Merck and built his own shipyard in the vicinity. Having made Bulk Cargo Career Ship for several overseas companies, the Pipavav shipyard is currently engaged in making 12 Support Offshore Vessels for ONGC. The Shipyard which has export orders worth Rs 4000 crores, has also grabbed an order, worth Rs 3000 crore, from Navy for making five gunboats. Nobody could have imagined that the man who had abandoned studies because he had problems learning English, who was at one point of time beleaguered by financial troubles and once faced a near death situation, would grow so big. But he did dare to dream and added to this dream was his mother's counsel. Her advice was that learning is an ongoing process and it is never too late to learn anything, so keep imbibing new every day. And also, do not get disheartened by failures.

Sharing his life story with Chitralakha Nikhilbhai admits: my mother's words filled me with huge confidence. In fact, I was adding to the canvas of my life, hitherto left blank owing to lack of education, fresh colours of my dreams.. Nikhilbhai was born in Kolkata. His mother was a teacher and father had a tarpaulin and raincoat business. His parents put Nikhil in prestigious Walton School but when Naxalites burnt down a school bus, they got him admitted in a Gujarati school, which was close by.

When Nikhil went to college, he began to face problems in comprehending as it was all in English. Frustrated, he started bunking his classes. However, instead of wasting his time, he focused on doing something worthwhile, like doing the job of a salesman in a company making milk bottles or doing supply of sweet Kolkata paan in Mumbai. By the time his contemporaries stepped out of college with degrees, Nikhil had already accumulated a capital of Rs 45,000/- Nikhil Gandhi's close childhood friend and director of Kolkata-based Rajda Group Dipak Gathani says that Nikhil never ever had any hang ups or felt inferior while doing hard work. He had always aimed high even when he did not have enough money in his pocket.

And this passion to do something big brought Nikhil Gandhi to the city of dreams. For the first two years he worked with his maternal uncle and earned as much as Rs 50,000/- He added his old saving and thus started his own business with a capital of one lac. But the first order was to change the course of Nikhil Gandhi's life. The order was for supply of brooms to Bombay Port Trust (BPT) and dusters for Bombay's Naval Dock Yard.

It was while executing these contracts that Nikhil Gandhi happened to have set his gaze on the Mumbai Port for the first time and instantly fell in love with what he saw.

"According to a Greek saying owning a port is like owning the whole country. When I saw the Mumbai port I decided that I would build a similar port and

become the king of the sea.”

Later Nikhil named his business Sea King.

With rise in number of orders for supply to Mumbai Port, Nikhilbhai's business kept growing. In a span of four years, he became the youngest trustee on Mumbai Port Trust. During this period he got an opportunity for collaboration with a German shipyard. Having visited this shipyard and other world ports, Nikhil Gandhi put up a proposal to the government of India, in the capacity of a member of the Board of Mumbai Port Trust, that we too should have such modern ports and shipyards. The government apparently lacked the money or the will, so Nikhil Gandhi followed it up with another proposal:

‘If government cannot do this job, please allow me to do it...’

What..? Private port in India?

Most of them laughed off what they thought was an audacious suggestion.

The former chief minister of Gujarat, Chimanbhai Patel, however gave a green signal to the project. Nikhil Gandhi remembers Chimanbhai's words even today: When a boy from Gujarat has come forward to do something for the state of Gujarat, we should help him.

And this is when Nikhil Gandhi visited his native place Amareli and chanced upon Pipavav, where country's first private-non government port was to take shape.

Nikhil Gandhi had made sizeable profit from his partnership with German shipyard, out of which he bought in Hyderabad five Bulk Pharma companies. These companies' products were to be exported to more than 20 countries. Nikhilbhai says that most people think of spending as soon as they earn whereas I think in terms of investing it. This was the reason he had purchased Hyderabad-based companies and when it came to investing in Pipavav, he sold off these companies and raised his funds.

Nikhilbhai was flayed for his Pipavav decision, but he remained unmoved and took it on the chin. He said if I don't do it, somebody else will. After all, there is no monopoly on ambition.

He invested all he had in his Pipavav project but the phase that followed his initial decision proved quite testing for him. When he set out to purchase a plot of land for Port, he had to confront local level goons. Two officials associated with this project lost their lives and even Nikhilbhai and his brother were grievously assaulted.

Nikhilbhai's mother was so traumatized by this incident that she could not take it any more and eventually passed away.

Nikhilbhai says, 'I always regarded my mother as my greatest Guru, my ultimate source of my inspiration. With her death I lost my greatest asset. That very moment I resolved that I might be baniya by birth I would now fight like a Rajput and complete the Pipavav project. That will be a real tribute to my mother.

Strongly determined as he was, even fate was perhaps putting him to tests. Nikhilbhai says that all his funds were exhausted. The project had got so enmeshed in problems that nobody was coming forward to help. There were hurdles all around and no ray of hope was visible...

And it was another twist of destiny that somebody introduced him to Dhirubhai Ambani. This encounter and subsequent reassurance from Chimanbhai Patel were to rescue Nikhil Gandhi. In no time a bank offered him the loan and later in 1995 work on Pipavav project started. In less than 14 months the first terminus of the port became operational. Nikhilbhai rightly dedicated it to the memory of his mother.

Nikhilbhai's next project was shipyard and for this purpose he visited a number of shipyards in the world. In order that his shipyard turns out to be the best one, he invited experts from various countries including Germany, Japan, Norway, Holand and Korea. As a cumulative result of their efforts, the Pipavav shipyard came up. In terms of planning, designing and modern engineering, Pipavav shipyard is considered to be among the best in the world. Orders have started pouring in as soon as the shipyard became operational. The Pipavav shipyard is the only private shipyard to have obtained licence to manufacture frontline warship.

The wheel had taken a full circle and now success was chasing Nikhilbhai. First private port, first private shipyard, country's first private railway line (publicprivate partnership), private highway, first concept of SEZ (Special Economic Zone)...having got so many 'firsts' to his credit, what does Nikhil Gandhi intend to achieve further?

He says that since Independence India made achievements in various fields, but there are two fields where we need to do a lot. One, for exploration of crude oil and gas, we have to depend on foreign technology. Similarly, the same situation prevails in case of certain ammo in defence. If we can make satellites and rockets, why not warships and other necessary war utilities and materials? Pipavav shipyard now intends to focus on making various types of warships, notably submarine.

Nikhilbhai says from engineering perspective, submarine is considered as the

most complex machinery. We want to prove by making it that we too are equally superior.

He started with supply of pan. Will his journey end with making submarine or go beyond..?

God only knows..!!

NIKHIL GANDHI: UNPLUGGED

Born in Kolkata, Nikhil originally hails from Gujarat...This combination suggests that the man must be essentially a foodie. Like every Kolkatan, the city's masala muri-Bhel, Misti Doi and Rasgulla are Nikhilbhai's favourites. Despite living in Mumbai for long, Nikhilbhai often gets drawn to the city mainly for his warmth for Kolkata and his Kolkata-based childhood friends. He candidly admits that I look for some or other pretext to visit this city.

Having visited a number of cities in the world, Nikhilbhai is essentially a lover of Nature. Wife Neha Gandhi vouches that Nikhil loves living in midst of greeneries or near the sea. His other hobbies include watching light films, plays and of course gazals.

Nikhilbhai rues not studying much and this is what drives him to always keep learning something. Having studied in a Gujarati medium school and not pursued studies in college, Nikhilbhai kept reading a lot and watching news channels to improve his pronunciations. This relentless perseverance made him at home in English and despite not being a graduate he was invited to give a lecture at America's Wharton University.

Neha Gandhi often repeats Nikhilbhai's favourite quote: if you take on challenges upfront, crises will not last long, but one who defies the crises, for sure, lasts longer.