

## A Tryst With Destiny



Born in Mumbai, he owns 8 Book Showrooms in Bangalore and surrounding areas. Having got a pride of place in the Limca Book of World Records, Sureshbhai Shah's life is an inspiring tale of struggle and hard work

- By Ketan Mistry

He has made all Gujaratis proud. He is **Suresh Shah**.

Born on Wednesday 3 March 1938 in Ghatkopar, a suburb in Mumbai, Sureshbhai's father Chhaganlal Shah battled against physical and economic crises. With five children, mother Rambhabahen stood by him on all fronts. Chhaganlal was doing a job in Cotton Exchange near Kalbadevi, but it was tough to meet the two ends meet.

Suresh Shah studied in a renowned education institution called Gurukul High School, founded by a strict Gandhian Vadilal Chatrabhuj Gandhi. Manubhai Vidya who was one of the teachers in the school, recognized Suresh's potential and got him the scholarship. Sureshbhai did not let him down as he stood first from class one to matriculation and earned his free books, uniform on merit. Sureshbhai says, 'there was no way out. I was 10-year old, eldest in the family. Whenever I could spare time I would go and help my father'

Having done matriculation with first class, Sureshbhai got admission in Khalsa College. 'Those days total annual college fees worked out to Rs 300 and the Railway Pass cost Rs 5, but even managing that amount was difficult. Someone took me to a trader in Iron market who sponsored my fees and my college life started but...

'But poverty refused to leave us. My father wished that I take up a job and shoulder the responsibility of running home any my sisters' marriage'. Finally he left his college and started looking for sundry jobs. He would do odd jobs like delivering to the affluent houses in Mumbai things ranging from pearls to soaps, paste etc. After deducting expenses he would manage to save Rs, 5-10, but poverty stubbornly stayed with him.

One day however destiny took a turn. Sureshbhai happened to know the station master of Ghatkopar railway station, who knew that this young boy was slogging hard to sustain his family. He suggested that instead of working at several places, it is better to work at Ghatkpoar station. Sureshbhai agreed and started getting Rs Rs 8-10, at the age of 15, he became the president of the Ghatkopar division of The Mumbai Coolie Association. Because of this post, he got an opportunity to meet the then prime minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru. Recalling that day, Sureshbhai says, 'Jawaharlal Nehru was to travel on that day from Dadar to

Ghatkopar station. I was to welcome him as the president of Coolie association.

'When I put the garland around his neck, he looked at my face and asked, 'what are you doing here?' I said I am a coolie here. Surprised, he asked, 'coolie? But why? I do see the glimpse of goddess Saraswati on your face. Having said this he patted on my back and walked away...'

Sureshbhai was bewildered by Nehru's words. Little did he realize that day that the author of The Discovery of India, the erudite Nehru had seen in him a disciple of Saraswati.

Later at the behest of his father, he left his job and joined Tulsi Shah's Pocket Book Distributing Company. Describing Tulsibhai shah, Sureshbhai says, 'he was a stickler for discipline like a military officer. He would brook no indiscipline in work. For six out of twelve months he would go to the USA.

Sureshbhai would get monthly Rs 75 and a Railway pass and office timings were from 7 to 10 at night. His office was located in Dalal Street near Mumbai Stock Exchange and the Showroom was close by. Judging Sureshbhai's dedication and honesty, Tulsibhai soon promoted him to the post of the Showroom manager.

Meanwhile he married Bhanumati, daughter of Uttamchand Hemani, originally from Karachi but who later settled in village Bantwa near Junagarh. In 1962, Sureshbhai was transferred to Madras as assistant manager. Dhanjibhai Damani was the manager of the showroom. When Sureshbhai joined the Madras branch, the turnover was Rs 16000, which shot up to Rs 3 lac annually, thanks to Sureshbhai taking over.

After this phenomenal success in Madras, he came to Karnatak in 1963 with wife and two year old Nitin. Recollecting those days at the Asia's biggest book store in Gujarat, Nitin Shah, says, 'My mother Bhanubahen always prompted my father to do his own business. She would say, job is a job after all, what if you put equal labour in your business?'

Given the way the book store was expanding Dhanjibhai Shah decided to open book store in Banagalore. He sent Sureshbhai by flight to Mumbai head office for discussion. That was his first journey by flight. Dhanjibhai

was to be partner in the project, but he backed out at the last moment as he was apparently instigated by others. This was shocking for Sureshbhai, but thanks to the support given by his wife, he pulled himself together. He resigned from the job. With the determination to keep working 24X7, he started a new book house near Janata Hotel in V V Puram area.

Every Saturday his showroom would be overflowing with customers and Sureshbhai would go to his shop with a pan tucked in the inside of his mouth. This way he befriended the panwala, who had his shop near Kapali Theater. One day he suggested, 'you are coming all the way from Gandhinagar, why not start a shop there?'

He liked the suggestion and started a book store and a lottery center in a rented place. The state lottery was increasingly becoming popular those days. Meantime, Sureshbhai had two sons, Dipak in 1963 and Paresh in 1970. The eldest son Nitin would observe his father's struggle and support him as much as he could.

Suddenly there is one more turning point in Sureshbhai's life. In 1971, the lottery that was sold from his shop gets a bumper prize of Rs 10 lacs. Sureshbhai gets the commission of Rs 1 lac. During this period, he fulfills the dream he had shared with his life partner. His first book store Sapna was inaugurated by the vice chancellor of Bangalore University, Dr. H Narsinghmaiya. Later, one after another golden chapter was added to the entrepreneur Sureshbhai's life.

His three sons have given a new high to his business. His eldest son Nitin is dynamic and workaholic like his father

'When I got my degree we were facing a lot of challenges. We were selling text books. It was our ambition to make Sapna a synonym for books, to go for a massive expansion of the store.

Later they took up supply of books to state's various libraries. When Dipak, his younger brother joined, they diversified in various directions. Then enters Paresh, the younger brother who has played cricket in Australia for Karnataka, in 1991. They started business in areas other than books, which included cd, music cassettes, gifts, stationery, toys etc.

In the year 1995, a new chapter is added to the Sapna saga. Recalling the year, Nitin says, 'I get an opportunity to meet the Jhanpith Award winner Dr. Shivram Karanth. I was so impressed with him that I volunteered to publish all his works, which he accepted. As publisher, the first work that we published was Mukajia Kanasaglu.

Those days they used to publish 30-40 titles and today they publish two books a day. Till date, The Sapna has published 3600 Kannada and 500 English titles. The English section includes PUC, text books for engineering diploma-degree course, whereas in Kannada their published works ranging from short stories, novels, poetry collection to current affairs, encyclopedia, dictionary and text books for children. Many of these works have been selected for various awards including Jhanpith. Besides, they have published books of Narayan Murthy, Nandan Nilakeni, L K Advani, Atal Behari Vajpayee and so on.

Recently the third generation too has joined the Sapna business. Nijesh, Nitin's son too has joined and strengthened their hands. He has taken over the Internet business of Sapna: the Sapna online and many venture capitalists and private equity institutions have evinced interest in this business.

**One feels like asking a question: in this era of the Net and mobile, how difficult is it to publish books?**

Responding to this query, Sureshbhai says, 'five years ago, we had three showrooms; in 2007 we started two more. Today we have eight in Bangalore, Mysore and Mangalore the total area of which would measure 2 lac square feet. Now we are contemplating to open more in towns in neighborhood of Bangalore.

I think you must have got the idea by now. It is a myth that today generation is not in the habit of reading. In fact, they understand the value of reading.'

Even at the age of 75, Sureshbhai takes interest in the Sapna business. He goes for walk in Freedom Park and inspires younger generation. Moreover, he has not forgotten to return where he has earned from. His Daksha Trust takes the educational responsibilities of more than 200 children.

Every year, they distribute more than 50,000 free notebooks and help the needy. Apart from the educational help they also provide medical help.

### **What next?**

Responding, Nitinbhai says, 'recently we have started two new businesses. One relates to things useful only for the newborn babies, Babies Only, and a new department for sports products.

Later on way to airport, a thought crosses the mind: a man's love for books and his sincerity and hard work not only changed his family's life but also contributed to changing many a life.

### **Suresh Shah Unplugged**

- All the three brothers are passionate about cricket-badminton. The youngest Paresh has played cricket in Australia for Karnatak
- The whole family would go for dining out together. They also prefer to see light comedy films
- They are Sthanakvasi Jains and deeply religious. They follow Shrimad Rajchandra's philosophy. On the top floor of their residence is a temple that can house 200 devotees. They often go to Paradi-based Shri Prem Acharya's (Pappaji) Ashram
- Fond of traveling abroad