

Dynasty

B.K. Birla and Aditya Birla. Faber and son. And also two of the more formidable giants in the Indian industry. In a twin interview, Gitanjali Prasad traces the inspirations and influences that have kept this lineage, now in its fourth generation, so spectacularly successful.

The Birla dynasty, as one already knows, is one of the leaders in the Indian conglomerate world. The B.K.B. - Aditya branch of the family has undertaken most of the Rs. 78-85 billion expansion planned for the Birla corporate conglomerate, which is already worth approximately Rs. 6,000 crore.

With companies in every corner of the world, the B.K.B. - Aditya group employs over 1,25,000 employees in their iron-ore, steel, paper, shipping, tyre cord, cement, chemicals and plywood factories. Some of their companies, included in the top 250 companies in the private sector, are Hindalco, Century Foka and Indian Rayon Corp., to name only a few.

But the Birlas have always been more than just industrialists. G.D. Birla was called a "Prince among Patriots" of the Indian freedom movement. A true nationalist, he was also an educationist and philanthropist of no mean proportions.

Basant Kumar Birla is G.D.'s youngest son. He joined the Birla combine as chairman of Resaram Industries and Cotton Mills Ltd., and in the years that followed, he started new industries in diverse fields. His Indo-Ethiopian Textiles share company was the first major joint venture to be set up by any Indian industrialist abroad. Recipient of the Menelik II award from Haile Selassie, the Emperor of Ethiopia, he has also been honoured by the Governments of Belgium and the Netherlands.

In this generation, it is B.K. Birla's son, Aditya, who is the driving force behind the overseas expansion. He too has been showered with accolades. Businessman of the year (1990) being only one of them.



■ Past, present and future: B.K. Birla flanked by son Aditya and grandson Kumar Mangalam

The blue-chip Birlas are, invariably, the first family of Indian business. In this, G.D. Birla's birth centenary year, grandson Aditya has been hailed as having touched the stratosphere. What is the secret of the phenomenal Birla success story?

Here are B.K. Birla and Aditya Birla with the answers.

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he will patiently go shopping for things like pencils, sharpeners and ribbons — and divide them equally amongst all the girls. He enjoys buying things for others, but he doesn't like to spend on himself." B.K. is comfortable with his reputation of being careful with money. Happily, he recounts how one day he told his grandson, Kumar Mangalam, that he thought it was time that he, B.K. Birla, refurbished his office, since it had last been redone by his father (G.D.) in the early '80s.

Kumar Mangalam immediately swung into action — and the next time his grandparents were in Bombay, he organised a meeting with a leading interior designer and architect. "I took a lot of time explaining to the architect and the designer that I am 75 years old, and for the last ten years I have been driving an Ambassador. I have just recently purchased myself and bought a Corolla. I don't want any fancy granite or imported marble. Give me the best Indian marble, but I want nothing foreign. I don't want to give my staff the impression that Mr. Birla has spent Rs. 50 lakh on re-decorating his office, because then their ideas will also change... You have to look after your shareholder's interest. In any case, I think I must be the most conservative member of my family." Wife Sarala concurs that son Aditya's taste for good living is a trait he shares with his grandfather, G.D. Birla. Also, like both grandfathers, Aditya is a good orator.

Aditya's son, Kumar Mangalam is, according to Manjushree, "very comfortable on the stage, and he's a fantastic singer, always coming up with new ideas. Recently, he held an auction in Bombay to raise funds for some charitable society. The prize was a date with Sushmita Sen — this was three days before she left for the Miss Universe competition!" Also, according to this very fond aunt, "Though Kumar Mangalam looks very mild and is soft-spoken, he's amazingly clear about what he wants to do and has a very firm resolve. He's always been topping in school, and is very good at acting. But now, you can't get him on stage!"

In many ways, it's easy to see that Aditya has inherited not only G.D. Birla's most profitable mills (Hindalco was the flagship compa-

ny as far as G.D. was concerned), but also his more lavish lifestyle. Then again, Aditya's purchase of the Cessna plane must surely have gladdened B.K. Birla's heart, for it was once his dearest desire to learn flying.

The inconsistencies of the Birla clan, seen in various spheres of their lives, make them

himself conservative, and one would imagine the MIT-educated Aditya to be more liberal, the elder Birla's dream for daughters Jayashree and Manjushree is that, "they should be occupied in some good work. So far, they have done excellent work," while Aditya wishes for daughter Vasuvadana, "a very nice husband".

The reason one discovers so many human foibles in the B.K. Birla clan is because they are so very accessible, so very open. Even when it comes to something as potentially dicey as Manjushree's divorce, there is none of the "this subject is taboo", that one could encounter. "I got married when I was 18, and I was married for ten years," Manjushree reveals. "In the beginning, things went okay. I tried very hard to learn to cook and so on, to please my mother-in-law, but I am really not cut out for all that. After a while, we decided to quit because we just weren't getting on." Though B.K. and Sarala tried to patch things up for two long years, when they saw that it was useless, they were very supportive.

Manjushree is fully conscious of how revolutionary their behaviour was for those times. "For any Marwari girl to come home then was quite something, for a Birla girl..." But today, she's grateful that she had the courage to do what she did. "I have come through a stronger person," she acknowledges.

This slender, soft-spoken, and yet incredibly energetic young woman has now thrown herself wholeheartedly into the educational and cultural fields. Manjushree is directly in-charge of the Kala Mandir, Sangeet Kala Mandir, Ashok Hall, the G.D. Birla School, Mahadevi Birla Shiksha Vihar. For the last two years, she has been increasingly involved with the new Ashok Hall schools set up in Ranikhet and Nainital.

Elder sister Jayashree looks after Nandaniketan, a creche for the children of working mothers, the Birla Academy of Art and Culture, and the Mahadevi Birla Girls Higher Secondary School.

For every member of the B.K. Birla family, the involvement in these activities is so total, that questions about the future are always interpreted as questions about their plan for these institutes.

Profiling a family that is as successful in the commercial arena as it is active in the cultural and philanthropic fields is exciting. Discovering that it is able to do this and yet retain its warmth, simplicity and naturalness, is stupendous. ■

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At Home with the Birlas

Over thandai and sandesh, Gitanjali Prasad tete-a-tetes with India's most powerful industrial family.

I have a 2.30 p.m. appointment, but as usual I am early. It's only 2.10, and I'm at the gate of Birla Park. I see ahead of me, a drive that stretches endlessly before the eye.

As I enter the house, a servant shows me

informed about the precise vehicle a visitor is going to come in, is one way of ensuring he/she is let in instantaneously.



■ Festive times: Aditya and sister Jayashree, while wife Rajeshwari looks on

in. I tell him that I am aware that I am early and, therefore, so please not disturb Mrs. Sarala Birla till later. However, he knows whom he takes orders from — and from me, he doesn't.

Hardly have time to take in the ambience, notice the twin Chinese ivory carvings, the masses of family photographs, when in walks a very gracious Sarala Birla. "Sorry I'm late," she says politely. It's still only 2.15, and again I admit I'm early. Also, that the photographer is due.

"Will he be coming in a car or a taxi?" I have no idea." So the instructions are passed down. "A photographer will come from Society; he may be in a car or a taxi or a two-wheeler."

I find this attention to detail interesting, because it's something daughter Jayashree told me about earlier: "My parents are the most hard-working people I know, and even today, they will involve themselves in every little detail. Nothing escapes them."

Thus checking out and keeping the clutter

For the moment, however, I am engulfed in the considerable warmth and charm of the Birla family.

A brewed water serves tea — sandesh, chura-natar, munsiki and rasogolla, along with a thandai and a tall glass of water. Even as I pepper Mrs. Birla and



■ Thandaals and waxes: B.K. and Sarala Birla

daughter Manjushree: Klutznik with questions, the former repeatedly urges me to finish eating first. This is so much like my mother's exhortations, that I find myself feeling very much at home!

It's obviously a close-knit family. Any conversation one has with one member, is known to everyone else within 24 hours. The morning after my interview with B.K. Birla, wife Sarala, daughters Jayashree Mohita (married to Prakash Mohita, and living on Belvedere Road) and Manjushree Klutznik (divorced,



■ Sarala Birla in the foreground and background. In a portrait by Birlas



■ Aditya and Rajeshwari

ad living with her parents and sprightly sister Vihara at Vasser Vihar) recognise my name as soon as I call for interviews. Again, at the office, both B.K. and Aditya veer away from home. "Check hai, ma," Aditya answers to various remarks made by an obviously concerned mother.

And when the family starts talking, anecdotes are told and re-told, while people whom you should really hear this story from (B.K., who is obviously the family raconteur,

I ask Mrs. Birla what first attracted her to B.K. Her prompt reply is, "Everything, but especially his simplicity. He doesn't allow anyone to spend money on him." "He's got these eight or ten wives, and he



■ Kumar Mangalam and Neeraj

just won't allow anyone to get him any more," daughter Manjushree claims. "It's not that he's miserly," she points out, "in fact, he's very generous. Every time he goes abroad, his grandchildren will give him a long list and



■ At home: Manjushree with daughter Vihara



■ Sarala Birla: Stepping out

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