

FAST LANE TO MYSORE

By Allen Mendonca

The walls of Ashok Kheny's office are covered with photographs and cartoons of HD Deve Gowda. The photographs are quintessential Gowda Son of the Soil, in various postures of sleep. The cartoons, some of which also feature Dharam Singh, have been gleaned from various newspapers. The former prime minister had been a thorn in Kheny's side.

Gowda almost scuttled Kheny's dream of creating the Bangalore-Mysore Infrastructure Corridor (BMIC). But Kheny fought back through the courts and his numerous supporters in Karnataka to put the project back on track. "I made my fortune in the USA. This is a labour of love. When you love a girl you don't run away when her father assaults you. You stand up to him and win."

Kheny's track-record for creating speaks volumes: a 1250km fibre optic cable network between Washington D.C. and Jacksonville, laid in three months flat; the world's first and only transit system using linear induction monitors in Detroit; the first trans-Atlantic fibre network between

New York City and Los Angeles.

Kheny grew up in Kheny Ranjol in Bidar district, completed his engineering in Suratkal, moved to the US, obtained a master's in management science and engineering from Woster Polytechnic, Massachusetts, and worked for Penn Central. At the job interview he told the recruiting officer he would quit if he didn't become vice-president in five years.

He quit much before that to float SAB Engineering and Constructions Inc. Kheny also founded Railway Systems Design Inc. and NSI Logic. President Ronald Reagan honoured him with the Outstanding Businessman of the Year Award in 1987. In 1995 he accompanied the then Governor of Massachusetts, William Weld, to Bangalore, "Before I realised what I had got myself into, I began putting together a consortium to build the BMIC." One of the members of the consortia is the Kalyani Group of Companies promoted by his brother-in-law, Baba Kalyani, CMD of Bharat Forge and winner of numerous international awards for business excellence.



Now that most of your troubles are behind you, when do you foresee the completion of the peripheral road and the expressway?

The Tumkur Road-Hosur Road stretch is ready. The Outer Ring Road- Bidadi stretch will be ready by June. The 111km expressway will be ready, end-2007. The H D Kumaraswamy government has indicated it is all for development and progress. I think he is serious. The State will benefit.

All the unforeseen delay must have resulted in an escalation in the projected cost of Rs 2000 crore. How will that affect the project?

Costs have gone up by around Rs 500 crore, but that doesn't worry us. We can build faster here than in the USA where manpower averages at \$50 an hour. I envisage higher revenues given the projected increase in traffic volumes on the expressway, and the guaranteed economic boom in the five self-sustainable townships we are building along the highway. Revenues will also come from toll.

What are you doing for the rehabilitation of villagers along the expressway?

We have adopted 149 villages and in consultation with the residents will provide them alternative accommodation very close to their former villages. We will also be constructing schools and hospitals, and setting up training centres so that the villagers



ASHOK KHENY, Managing Director, Nandi Infrastructure Corridor Enterprise

can acquire professional skills. We are building temples too, because many want one near their new dwellings. In one village we have even constructed a tunnel linking two mosques making it easy for the faithful to move from one to another.

How will the expressway benefit Bangalore?

The new townships and industrial areas will help decongest the city and the expressway will create thousands of new jobs in the existing and new townships, from here to Mysore. There is already a real estate boom in Mysore and many IT companies are setting up development centres there. The expressway will reduce considerably commuting time between Bangalore and Mysore, which will attract more tourists. The upgradation of the Mysore airport will increase passenger traffic to the city of palaces and yoga. No matter what economic angle you look at it from, it's a win-win situation for everybody.