

Kheny to Philadelphia, an amazing corridor

By Prashanth Hebbar/TNN

Bangalore: Imagine. A fibre optic cable network between Washington D.C. and Jacksonville (Florida) spanning some 1,250 km laid in three months flat. Building the first and only people mover transit system using linear induction motors in Detroit. Building the first trans-Atlantic fibre network between New York City and Los Angeles (alongside the railway line).

Behind these projects and many more is a man now familiar to the people of Karnataka. The man behind Bangalore-Mysore Infrastructure Corridor (BMIC), Ashok Kheny, was happily retired until the governor of Massachusetts visited Bangalore in 1995 and the idea of an expressway between Bangalore and Mysore was mooted.

A masters degree holder in management science and engineering from Woster Polytechnic (Woster, Massachusetts), Kheny had the gall to tell his recruiting officer in Penn Central (later Conrail, a railway company in the US) that he would quit if he doesn't rise to the level of vice-president in five years. That was in 1974. In 1979, Kheny did quit Penn Central to float his own company SAB Engineering and Constructions Inc. and Railway Systems Design Inc. (RSD).

In the next seven years, SAB implemented some of the prestigious projects in California, New York, Florida, Detroit and Massachusetts. "They believed me. My credibility was good," says Kheny when asked how Americans came to trust a company run by an Indian. Though not everyone did.



For instance, Kheny's IT venture NSI Logic which was into CAD/CAM system had to be sold off as venture-capitalists refused to back an Indian entrepreneur. "The only other company into CAD/CAM at that time was IBM and (technical) magazines had rated our product to be better than their's," says Kheny.

The US administration recognised Kheny's contribution and in 1987, President Ronald Reagan honoured this little giant with the 'Outstanding Businessman of the Year of a Minority Community Award'. For Kheny, who hails from Kheny Ranjoli in Bidar district, this was the highest recognition he could hope for. By 1993, Kheny had made a fortune from SAB's success. He sold portions of his business and decided to retire.

"One day my sons came back home crying. Other children in their class had ragged them saying you are dirty because you are Indians. That's when I decided to come back to India and contribute to make this as great as America," says Kheny. The tryst with Karnataka started thus. His first project in the state was the bypass road near Dharwad city. But a project like BMIC was his original passion.

He is described as a workaholic, passionate and die-hard believer, by his colleagues. "Even if it takes another 10 years, I will pursue this project and complete it," he says. Having spent over 30 years in the US, Kheny has still not opted for a US citizenship. Though his family has, he prefers to be known as a citizen of India.