

Master of discretion

Over grilled chicken and greens, **Anand** talks to **Pavan Lall** about the changes taking place in the world of hospitality due to Covid-19, and the career lessons he took away from his days as a DJ

This may well be how interviews and lunches in the future be conducted, I surmise, as I adjust the height of my iPad on the dining table at home so I can see the video clearly for a Zoom **Lunch With BS**. It's 1.30 pm and I've been dialled in for a meeting with career hotelier Nakul Anand, executive director at ITC, the multinational conglomerate best known for hotels, cigarettes and assorted FMCG products. The screen comes to life and I'm greeted effusively by Anand who is already seated at his dining table, large garden windows behind him offering a farmhouse view of the greenery and sunlight.

"Is that the lockdown beard you've cultivated or is it something you always had?" Anand fires away. "Lockdown, I'm afraid," I say hoping his next question won't be why I couldn't find the time.

He doesn't, and Anand's streak of empathy, thanks to four decades in hoteliering, and sadly absent in many corporate honchos, comes to the fore. "It's irritating in the beginning but once you get used to it, you'll be fine." Anand himself retains only a silvered-moustache that matches the colour of his slicked back hair and lends a patrician air, I note.

A house-waiter materialises in the screen carrying a salver and brings Anand his lunch, which I'm shown. The menu of the day is grilled chicken, a greens salad, some vegetables and mashed potato. We proceed to start, but there's curiosity and I'm asked to show my plate which bears aloo parantha, *anda bhurji*, and *bhindi* masala. "Can we swap?" asks Anand who sounds serious, as he proceeds to describe how he's actually conducted research on the different varieties of *parathas* by cities in north India.

The 62-year old Anand leads a chain that owns and manages more than 100 hotels in over 70 destinations across brands that

range from the ITC-prefixed super deluxe and premium hotels to the five-star Welcomhotel brand, the mid-scale Fortune brand and the WelcomHeritage brand that comprises palaces, forts, *havelis* and resorts, and is chairman of the apex tourism body in India, FAITH (Federation of Associations in Indian Tourism & Hospitality). Anand, who comes across as unpretentious, is also director on the board of ITC, and in addition to overseeing the hospitality, travel and tourism businesses, he also runs the group's lifestyle retailing business. He's been feted globally, winning the Corporate Hotelier of the World award.

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Interestingly, he had told his teachers at his school — Bishop Cotton School, Simla — that he wanted to become an hotelier way back in 1974. However, at one point in time, the Economics graduate from Delhi University was spinning Bee Gees records, moonlighting as a DJ at The Cellar, in the Regal building in Connaught Place, Delhi. "The list also included The Rolling Stones, (Jimi) Hendrix, classic rock and roll, you know," Anand says, as he shares he also sported a ponytail in keeping with the vibe. "It was an era when there were no digital mixers which meant spinning was exhausting."

There were learnings that he would later apply to hotels. "It's easy to get many people on the floor with one good tune that keeps them dancing, but how do you keep them there number after number and prevent them from the leaving the floor?" He adds, "Spinning is one thing but sensing the mood of the audience and playing to that is equally important because just one wrong number can spoil the entire mood."

The father of three, whose wife Timsy Anand runs event management firm Jalsa, tells me that when he joined Chola Sheraton

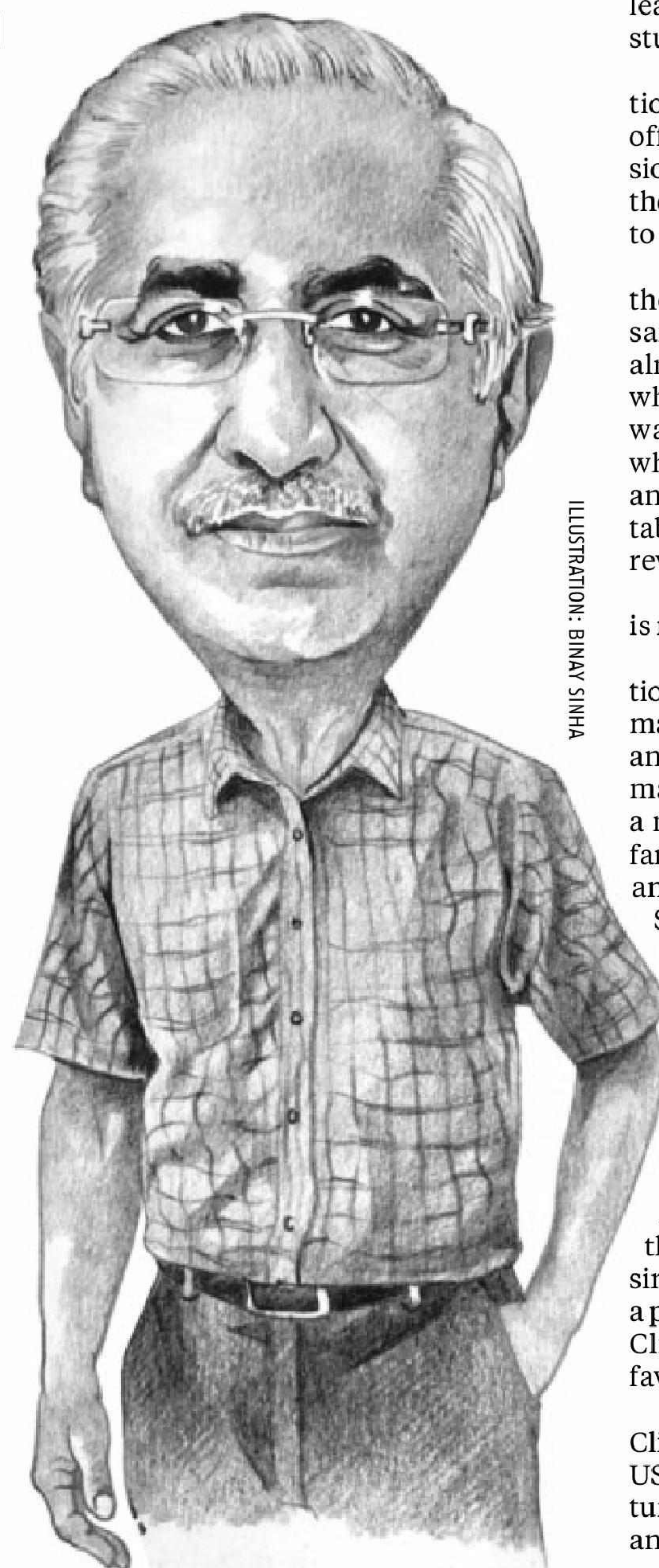


ILLUSTRATION: BINAY SINHA

(Chennai) as a night manager it wasn't his charge to walk around and see where he could turn off the lights to save power or get

a janitor the next day to clean a corner that was neglected but he did. In the bargain, he made friends across levels at the hotel and learned more than he would have if he had stuck to what he was supposed to do.

Thereafter, Anand worked in every position imaginable across properties — front office manager, resident manager to divisional chief and finally securing a place on the board of directors at ITC. It would be hard to bluff Anand about how a hotel is run.

How does Anand see Covid-19 changing the game? "Different levels of hygiene and sanitation will kick in, and they will be almost like certifications. Why need a key when you can check in with your phone, why wait in a buffet line with 10 other guests when a gloved waiter can come to your table and get you what you want from the buffet table," he says. "The motto will be survive, revive and thrive, going forward."

He hasn't eaten very much but his plate is removed.

What about growth plans for ITC in a location like Thailand, a popular destination for many Indians? "Those markets are saturated and we would like to focus on where we can make an impact," Anand says, talking about a new hotel, which is going to open not too far from the Taj Samudra Mahal in Sri Lanka, and uses a mixed model with Philippe Starck-designed residences. Does Anand have a favourite non-ITC restaurant? Or hotel? He pauses and says it would be the Waldorf Astoria in New York City and Gaggan Anand's eponymous restaurant in Bangkok.

Food is a hallowed trademark of ITC's hotels, thanks to best-in-class restaurants that include Peshawri, *Dum Pukht* and the award-winning *Bukhara* at the ITC Maurya in New Delhi where every single US President in recent times makes it a point to dine, especially after President Bill Clinton told Oprah Winfrey it was his favourite indulgence.

In fact, Anand has met presidents Clinton, Bush, Obama and Trump. Few meet US Presidents, much less four, and so I venture to ask what each was like. Anand smiles and says each one was unique.

He doesn't say it but the other thing the DJs learn well is discretion, something that applies just as well to the world of hospitality.