



Nakul Anand

MD, ITC HOTELS & DIVISIONAL CHIEF EXECUTIVE - HOTELS

DATE OF BIRTH: 5 November 1956

EDUCATION: Bishop Cottons, Shimla; Eco Honours, Hansraj College, New Delhi

CAREER: Night manager, Chola Sheraton, 1979-1980; front office manager, Chola Sheraton, 1980-1984; executive assistant manager, rooms, ITC Windsor, 1984-1985; resident manager, ITC Windsor, 1985-1986; rooms division manager, ITC Maurya, 1986-1988; GM, ITC Windsor, 1988-1992; GM, ITC Maurya and vp, business hotels, 1992-1997; evp, hotel operations, 1997; executive director, hotel operations, 1998; COO, ITC Hotels Ltd, 1998-2001; MD, ITC Hotels and divisional chief executive - hotels, 2002 to date

A man of method

The grand vision was made public a while ago, but the impact is yet to be assimilated. From a restricted circle of operation, ITC Welcomgroup, which has 20 owned and 70 managed properties, is fast expanding. There's India's first LEED Platinum Green hotel in Bangalore, ITC Gardenia, that opened six months ago. Six months forward and the chain goes full circle, returning to Chennai (where the ITC Hotels division was born with the Chola in 1975) with a 600-room grand hotel. ITC Sonar in Kolkata is set to have a new neighbour in a 400-room ITC property. And very recently, the foundation stone was laid for the chain's first ever resort at The Classic Golf Resort beyond Gurgaon. "Five ITC brand hotels across Hyder-

abad, Ahmedabad, Amritsar and Bhubaneswar are on the drawing board, together with another 30 Fortunes," says Nakul Anand, divisional chief executive, who is bringing to life Y.C. Deveshwar's announcement of Rs10,000 crore being allocated for expansion. The man at the helm, Anand not only steers the group as it widens its canvas, but also ensures benchmark standards across the chain. A complex mandate, but for him a familiar pattern of 32 years, which he executes with much the same fervour he demonstrated when he started out in 1978.

As Chola Sheraton's night manager back then, he took it upon himself to improve the hotel's overall efficiency - mastering the front office,

effectively reducing electricity consumption, working to overcome room-service bottlenecks, tinkering to improve security... Fresh out of the WelcomGroup Management Institute, he deftly transformed a routine line job into what can best be described as an open university. "Chola was a phenomenal experience; I widened the pond by getting into various departments." While the self-starter downplays his initiative saying he made the most of his bachelorhood, he does admit that he has always chased his own targets.

Surprisingly, he attributes this strong point to a failing: fear of failure. With characteristic candour, Anand attributes his meteoric rise from night manager to chief executive of the Rs911 crore ITC

Hotels' division to his insecurity of underperformance. "Typically, when you do well you are driven by ambition. I did well as a product of my insecurity, that always pushed me to work doubly hard." The young night manager moved up to the Windsor Manor, from where, within a year, he was promoted to rooms division manager at the group's flagship, ITC Maurya. Then, when the joys of information technology were a while away, Anand laboured over print slips and manual updates. And was duly rewarded. At 31, he was designated GM of the Windsor; perhaps the youngest GM in the days when among the signature attributes of being a hotel chief was grey hair. "ITC has always been a forward-looking company and my age was not held against me!"

While it is true that Welcomgroup did not have many hotels making for a swift way up, the fact is that Anand had caught Deveshwar's fancy at the very beginning. As head of ITC's printing and packaging division, Deveshwar frequented Chennai and the zealous night manager made quite an impact. When he took over as chairman of the hotels' division, Anand, quite the performer, was hand-picked for the top job by the boss himself. Deveshwar personally announced most of his promotions, including what he considers symbolic: GM, ITC Maurya, the hotel that heads of state consider home, and where Anand had been a trainee. "Maurya was like a temple; I had mopped the floors here and started each day with the constant worry of not being on the right behaviour or in the right turn-out... And now I was to be its general manager." The exhilaration is writ large even today, not just

with regard to his success as a hotelier, but in the very fact of being a hotelier.

After three decades at ITC and in the hotel business, his passion has not given way to tedium, "for ours is a business of businesses". He knows no other and it constantly challenges him – till date. Back at Bishop Cottons, his alma mater where he spent not 11 but 12 glorious years, "having flunked the eleventh", he recalls that when asked of his ambitions, he would promptly declare hospitality. And he traces this early passion to his father. Anand lost his father, an ITC employee, very early. However, the company newsletter used to be delivered home years after his father's demise and browsing through one of them, "I read that ITC was venturing into hospitality

and that was it." He does confess though that his grandmother was appalled by his decision "since we came from a good family!" But to ITC's benefit, he had his way.

Today, as he travels the length of the country to action Deveshwar's expansion bid, he isn't concerned about the global onslaught, what with the Four Seasons, Ritz Carltons and Shangri-las checking in. For Indian hoteliering, he believes, is something to be proud of. "We've created a distinct niche." Also, that most debutant brands operate under management contracts and are shy of investing, is an answer in itself. The president of the Hotels Association of India similarly doesn't get ruffled when you talk about traditional rivals Taj and Oberoi. "It isn't competition," he says, "but co-operation. We

co-operate and we compete." It's a healthy rivalry and as the youngest of the three chains, he is amply clear that the Welcomgroup has different targets.

For starters, he wants to make a presence in essential Indian cities. Years into operation, the pioneer of business hotels did not have a presence in Mumbai, arriving finally with ITC Maratha in 2001. The group also opened its first operation in 'hometown' Kolkata only in 2003 with the ITC Sonar. "We are on a growth trajectory of our own. For us, it is essential to be in the first spread of business cities and consolidate our presence in India." Yes, the Oberoi and Taj have bypassed boundaries, but overseas expansion is still a distant objective. Which when pursued, "will be driven by

opportunity and will focus only on places that have a to and fro traffic to India".

The group, like its leader, is chasing its own targets. ITC Welcomgroup is among the pioneering hospitality companies to achieve Six Sigma status – global major Starwood Hotels and Resorts is the only other. The Motorola methodology of eliminating defects, the very basis of which is quantifiable targets (and so alien to hospitality) did not deter Anand – the force behind this feat and a strong propagator of "what can be measured can be managed". Hoteliering, he agrees, is an art form, but from being all flair and subjectivity at ITC, it has metamorphosed to embrace science. And thus emerge a unique Anand blend – of art and science in equal measure.