

CHAPTER 1

A PARADISE SAVED



Nanik with Balasaheb Thackeray
and Maharashtra Chief Minister Manohar Joshi,
at his Khandala bungalow.





Every June, the stage is set for one of nature's most amazing displays of power. For three long months from March to May, the Indian subcontinent appears helpless as the scorching summer sun beats down upon it. Close to a sixth of humanity must endure, or find some convenient way to beat the heat. In the wild recesses of the country, birds and beasts flock to the ever-diminishing bodies of water, somberly seeking shade; while the trees seem to extend their limbs in entreaty to the heavens, praying for a promise that never seems to come. As May draws to a close, however, powerful moisture-laden winds begin to blow east over the Arabian Sea into India, heralding the onset of the Monsoon.

The Western Ghats, also known as the *Sahyadri Range*, are a great chain of mountains that run 1600 kilometers down the western flanks of the Indian peninsula, with an average height of 900 meters. They are perfectly placed to challenge the monsoon winds coming in over the sea. When the

currents blow in high over India's shores, they soon run into these unyielding mountains. Their slopes cause the winds to gain altitude, cooling and condensing the currents as they relentlessly creep up the rock face. In an awe-inspiring show of thunder and lightning, clouds release copious showers over the entire western side of the Ghats. Having pacified the thirsty mountains by paying them the watery tribute, the armada of clouds sails on eastwards to water other parched regions of India.

It is thus that out of the Western Ghats, springs a lush rainforest that nurtures an incredible array of flora and fauna. Dozens of rivers emerge from the mountains and benevolently flow eastward into the Deccan Plateau. Summers in the Sahyadris are mild; winters, delightful; and there are several hill-stations to be found. *Khandala* is one such place, located at an altitude of 625 meters. Its beauty, serenity and proximity make it a popular weekend retreat that draws many visitors from the nearby cities of Mumbai and Pune.

Nanik Rupani is one of the residents of *Vikas Valley*, a paradisiacal part of Khandala. Like many of his neighbours, he travels there from Mumbai over weekends and delights in spending time at his bungalow. Each bungalow in Vikas Valley is aesthetically constructed and stands amidst beautiful lawns and gardens that its residents have lovingly and laboriously grown.

Each morning in Khandala arrives with the music of birds and the scent of dew over earth. Every afternoon, the sun smiles benignly out of the blue skies onto the sleepy valley. As the shadows lengthen in the evening, golden rays of the setting sun touch every tree, stone and knoll, imparting to each a dreamlike hue. As dusk melts into night,

a myriad of manmade lights come alive in the valley below and transform it into a sea of sparkling stars, the magic of which is rivaled only by the stars and the moon in the inky heavens.

Turbulence in the Valley

A day dawned when the air was filled with more than just the sound of birds. An unexpected bit of news leapt from house to house until it had all of Vikas Valley in its menacing grip. A team of government officials came knocking on the doors of many bungalows in the Valley, dispensing some information that brought about a depressing change on the countenance of every recipient.

Finally, the officials arrived at Nanik's bungalow bearing the news: Each resident in Vikas Valley was being informed that the whole area would soon be *acquired* by the government to accommodate the Mumbai-Pune Expressway project. All the houses in the residential complex would be demolished and the land handed over to the government. They also had orders to count, number, and mark every tree in the vicinity. This was seen as a clear and ominous sign that signaled the bitter certainty of the changes to come.

Agitated residents impulsively came together in a state of panic and despondency, their shocked minds refusing to believe or come to terms with what was happening — or what was soon about to happen. There was a great deal of confused discussion and aimless speculation between harried neighbours about *what* the officials said and *how* they said it. They wondered *what* could be done, *if* indeed anything could be done — because it was generally felt that the expressway's

route was now etched in stone.

Only one person remained calm and told the government officials to go ahead and perform their duties. There was no need to get worked up, is all that he said. To his confused neighbours, he confidently asserted that a way could and would be found. That night sleep eluded many of them, but it faithfully came to those who knew the power of Nanik's determination.

Finding a Solution

The next day, Nanik studied the matter and made his stand. Many of the residents had put their life's savings into these houses. Yes, the government had promised them compensation — it was a separate fact that the compensation itself would put a considerable strain on the State coffers — but that did little to satisfy the requisites of fairness. Obviously, at the time the land was made available to the residents, none of them were told, nor made aware of any possible plans of a future highway cutting through the Valley. This meant that all the residents of Vikas Valley had been misled into believing that they were making a permanent investment in sylvan settings.

Nanik got in touch with the internationally reputed architect, Mr. Hafeez Contractor, cousin of Dr. Shirin Wadia, one of the plot owners. Together, they came up with a perfectly feasible alternative route for the Expressway, one that would bypass Vikas Valley and leave its natural beauty unmarred. Then began innumerable trips to meet the Chief Engineer and bureaucrats associated with this mammoth project. His efforts were repeatedly stonewalled

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by officialdom; written requests and proposals that he presented were not even acknowledged.

Nanik finally got in touch with the Shiv Sena chief, Balasaheb Thackeray, who graciously gave Nanik a patient hearing. He carefully studied the alternative plans meticulously drawn up and found them viable. He understood the plight of the beleaguered residents of Vikas Valley. Before considering the next step, though, Balasaheb desired to see the situation first hand.

On the appointed day, Tuesday July 4, 1995, the usually quiet and peaceful Vikas Valley took on a totally new look. The area was bristling with cars, SUVs, wireless radios and security personnel. Balasaheb Thackeray arrived. He toured the area and saw how dearly the Valley would have to pay if the Expressway tore through its heart. Being a lover of nature, he looked at the bungalows, the lush greenery, and the colossal amount of love and resources that had gone into its making. The environment here would perhaps never recover from such a devastating blow. Considered from every angle, to marginally realign the route of the Expressway made complete sense.

Balasaheb's keen interest in saving this paradise was clear when he returned to Vikas Valley just 5 days later on Sunday, July 9. This time Maharashtra's Chief Minister Manohar Joshi accompanied him. They toured the area, talked to the residents (Nanik had arranged for them to be present in full strength), were satisfied that the residents' plea was one that deserved to be upheld, and returned to Mumbai.

Necessary action was subsequently taken so that the interests of the residents as well as the larger public good were served and protected. The Mumbai-Pune Expressway

Success is Our Birthright

has proved to be a boon for millions of travelers every day, including the residents of Vikas Valley who depend on it to reach their destinations.

A Birthright, Not a Monopoly

The purpose of recording this map-altering episode is not to glorify Nanik Rupani. As he himself says: “In all fairness, I cannot and do not wish to claim any credit for what was accomplished. I believe that even a leaf cannot stir without the will of God. I am just thankful that He granted me a small role in a united effort made by several sincere people who were successful in saving a bit of paradise for generations to come.”

The foregoing account seeks to highlight the calculated way in which Nanik confidently approaches many of life’s perplexing problems and eventually achieves success. “*Success is our birthright, not the monopoly of just a few.*” These words of Nanik are all the more intriguing when one learns that he is a college dropout; that even as one of the lowest paid employees in a company, he dared to dream that he would one day stand at the helm of his own organization. The story of his odyssey to claim his birthright is an absorbing one.