

CHAPTER 8

A PASSION CALLED  
PRIYADARSHNI



Nanik, Chairman, Priyadarshni Academy,  
addressing the Indian Parliament.





By mid 80s, Nanik's business ventures had taken to the air, where they were gaining both speed and altitude. He knew it was time to realize a vision that had been calling him right from his formative years — to establish a unique institution to render service to humanity. Nanik realized this dream in *Priyadarshni Academy*. The story of his life is closely entwined with that of Priyadarshni Academy. The Academy has been his passion, his obsession, for more than two decades. Priyadarshni is his legacy of love to the world, which he firmly believes shall endure for generations to come.

It was an institution simply waiting to happen. A tiny spark was all that was needed to get it going. One day in 1984, Nanik and some of his friends — Murli Adnani, Popati Hiranandani, Jamnadas Lalwani, Kaushi Mirpuri, Ramkrishin Advani, Chander Manghnani and Madhav Balwani — came together to discuss how best to promote the talent of the deserving, upcoming *Kathak* danseuse,

Anila Sunder, who was in search of the right platform.

That meeting was a turning point for Nanik. “We have such a gold mine of talent and potential in India. Regrettably, due to lack of opportunity, much of such talent remains unnoticed. We envisioned an organization that would unearth and polish such treasures for the world to see. Besides, service to humanity is the best work of life. Since we have taken so much from society, we must pay back.”

The friends brainstormed over how to continue and sustain work along these lines. Nanik continues: “There was no lack of issues to be addressed in India. Whether it was the subject of helping our youth with education opportunities, reinforcing Indian values and culture in society, combating social evils like drug addiction, or reaching out to help people affected by natural calamities — we wanted to form and pilot an organization to serve people.”

The world has seen untold number of such organizations that are set up with much enthusiasm, only to wither with time. So how and why was Priyadarshni Academy to be different? From what source would the Academy finance its various activities? Would it remain a local entity, or would it mature into an institution with a national, or even an international reach? Time would tell.

Nanik knew that if any such organization were to survive and thrive, it had to be unique as well as effective. Looking around him, he saw plenty of organizations and clubs like the Jaycees, Rotarians and Lions that did their bit in honouring Indians who had contributed something worthwhile to their country. “Their work was commendable, but what did not exist was an organization truly Indian in

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origin, which recognized and applauded the efforts of individuals and institutions from across the world. Why was there a lacuna in this area? This is the thought that inspired Priyadarshni Academy which upholds, primarily, the values of humanity and service,” he states.

### A Star is Born

Priyadarshni Academy was born on September 19, 1984 in Mumbai. On March 18, 1985, it was formally inaugurated by late Dr. V Subramaniam, then the State Minister for Housing, Maharashtra Government, and by Vilasrao Deshmukh, then Minister of State for Home. On the same evening, the *Kathak* danseuse, Anila Sunder, whose cause made Nanik and his friends come together in the first place, displayed her artistic talents.

In May 1985 — barely two months after its inauguration — Nanik introduced Priyadarshni to the then President of India, Giani Zail Singh, at the Raj Bhavan in Mumbai. “I led a delegation from the Academy to meet the President. We introduced the vision of Priyadarshni to him. A few months later in October, I took another delegation to meet the Chief Minister of Gujarat, Mr. Amarsingh Chaudhary, to request him to be on the Advisory Board of the Academy. He agreed immediately. This acceptance from all quarters came mainly because of one of the core values of the Academy — that of promoting national integration by strengthening socio-cultural bonds. It’s a thought inspired by the philosophies of our great leaders,” Nanik points out.

On September 19, 1985, Priyadarshni Academy celebrated its first anniversary by holding an Awards

Ceremony at Mumbai's glittering Taj Mahal Hotel. The function was marked by the presence of the entire cabinet of Maharashtra's ruling government. Priyadarshni Academy was Nanik's baby, and he had the knack of drawing the best and the brightest to support his endeavours.

In fact, it was a diplomatic feat of sorts on his part. He had managed to get both, then Chief Minister of Maharashtra, Dr. Shivajirao Patil Nilangekar and MPCC (I) President, Ms. Prabha Rau to attend the ceremony in spite of the political differences that had surfaced between them. Nanik had a long-standing relationship with Ms. Rau, and she readily accepted his invitation. However, Nanik knew Mr. Nilangekar only slightly, but after just one meeting, he was able to persuade him with the help of Mr. Govindrao Adik, then the General Secretary of the Maharashtra Pradesh Congress Committee.

The re-establishment of communication between these two dignitaries on this occasion was hailed by many as one of Nanik's many ways of bringing people together by using *Rupani Cement* — as it came to be called!

## Hands Folded in Service

At the first anniversary function, Nanik announced the institution of an *Award for National Integration* of Rs. 1 lakh, to be given every three years. Today, when the Academy has entered its third decade, this Award has become one of the most prestigious in the country.

It is at this point that another facet of Nanik's strong conviction and faith deserves a mention. When the Award and the sum of money were announced, several eyebrows

were raised and doubts expressed. *How would a fledgling organization be able to set aside such a huge amount?* The value of one lakh rupees twenty years ago was almost 10 times it is today. Apart from the media and the critics, even Nanik's well-wishers were a little apprehensive about whether he had bitten off more than he could chew.

“To that, I would say, we have many a time surpassed our own standards,” Nanik declares. For the first thirteen years, the Academy did not need to hold any fundraising events. The noble cause was supported by the patronage of close associates, friends and Nanik's accumulated goodwill.

The National Integration Award was not the only thing on the agenda. The Academy stood ready to be of assistance during times of crisis or even otherwise. “Steadily and surely, the Academy became a part of the socio-cultural and economic fabric of the country, concerned with all-round progress in various fields,” Nanik says.

As an example of how widespread its activities soon became, the month of December 1986 serves as a pointer. The Academy organized an All-India slogan competition to create awareness about the harmful effects of drug addiction, and to highlight the urgent need for afforestation, family planning and national integration. Nanik relates: “The competition received an overwhelming response from across the country. The winning slogan was composed by Mr. Alexander from Coimbatore: *We are one, if not, we are none.*”

The same month, a drive was launched to motivate slum dwellers towards maintaining cleanliness and hygiene. Other landmark events of 1986 were the institution of two important awards, which have always attracted huge publicity and are much awaited: the *Best Sportsperson of the Year Award*

and the *Smita Patil Memorial Award for Best Actress*.

Nanik has always felt strongly about women's empowerment. He says: "I was appalled by reports of young educated men burning their wives or killing them for the sake of dowry." In 1987, Nanik decided to institute a special *Anti-Dowry Committee* in the Academy. Like-minded people helped Nanik in this endeavour. Noted film actress and social activist Shabana Azmi, lawyer Indira Jaisingh, prominent journalist Vimla Patil and famous media personality Dolly Thakore readily volunteered all possible help to the Anti-Dowry Committee. The committee held its first meeting in February 1987, at the residence of Maharashtra's Minister for State Education, Ms. Chandrika Kenia. By March, the first batch of victims of dowry-related harassment was invited to a problem-solving session at Manjhanand Durbar, a community hall in Khar.

Nanik recalls: "It was not easy to encourage oppressed women to come forward and present their cases. The Academy realized that it needed the sound backup of the Judiciary and the police force to inspire confidence and bring justice to the victims. Merely creating awareness was not enough. We thus started the Academy's *Legal Cell*, which was then headed by late Marzban Patrawala. The Cell offered counseling and legal assistance to those women who faced the wrath of their in-laws for failing to bring enough dowry."

The Legal Cell also ensured police protection wherever required by coordinating with the social security cell of the police department. The Anti-Dowry Committee began to organize orientation camps for social workers that trained them to assist dowry victims in various situations. It also via oratory programs, tried to create mass opinion against this



evil practice, which physically and mentally tortured young brides.

With his eye on the larger picture, Nanik saw to it that the Academy did not espouse just a single cause. “It can never be enough to commit yourself to one particular project and ignore everything else. We needed to look at the country and its concerns and issues as a whole,” he says. “We may not be able to provide solutions to all problems, but every bit helps in the longer run because initiative taken by an individual or organization motivates others to join the movement. It is this collective force and momentum that finally leads to a solution.”

Keeping this in mind, the Academy has risen to different occasions — providing cash assistance for the drought-affected, undertaking animal welfare measures, organizing medical camps for those who cannot afford high costs of treatment, promoting literary activities in regional languages, reaching out to the tribals through development projects, tackling the menace of drug addiction head-on — they have all come within the realm of the Academy’s activities.

Drug addiction and the spread of this scourge among younger sections of society is something that Nanik has always felt extremely concerned about. “The misuse of drugs for so-called pleasure is a curse, an ever-present menace to our youth, their loved ones, and the society at large. We need to protect and rescue them from this bottomless abyss,” Nanik says. “Given the heavy emphasis the Academy places on our country’s youth, it was inconceivable for Priyadarshni not to enter the fray to combat this evil.”

In this context, Nanik sought the guidance of Russel

Pinto, a reformed drug addict who started *Sevadban*, a drug rehabilitation center, and later became a member of the Academy's committee on *Drug Prevention and Rehabilitation*.

Nanik emphatically says: "It is the primary duty of every citizen to educate and prevent students from falling prey to drug addiction. Young boys and girls consume drugs to start with, but ultimately they are the ones consumed by the drugs."

Priyadarshni also initiated efforts towards the creation of a cleaner and greener environment. Being a lover of nature, environmental conservation and preservation have always been subjects of vital importance to Nanik. In 1987, an *Afforestation Award* was instituted to boost the efforts of those working in this area. In 1992, the Academy for the first time participated in tree plantations, starting with the *Priyadarshni Park* in Mumbai.

Priyadarshni as an organization has staunchly believed that youth are the backbone of the nation. "Supporting talented youngsters in the fields of education, arts and sports is one of our primary functions and this is to ensure that natural gifts do not go waste," Nanik explains. "I feel a sense of satisfaction for having contributed to the education of those who would have otherwise had to curtail their academic pursuits. I remember, in particular, a student named Shrikant Sharma whose parents were vegetable vendors. Priyadarshni provided him with a scholarship and Shrikant stood first in all the semesters at the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT). There was another bright boy whom the Academy assisted — he was from a backward class — he subsequently excelled in his studies and made it to Italy."

Another area the Academy addressed was the keen urge of the overseas Indian community to do something for their country of origin. It was a feeling Nanik was quite familiar with, having spent his initial years in Ghana. “Indians living abroad are our country’s gold mines. They love their country of birth and are eager to give back to their motherland.”

The year 1990 proved to be a booster in cementing relations between the Academy and overseas Indians. In May 1990, Nanik, accompanied by some committee members held a series of meetings with Indians based in Dubai. Prominent among the diaspora were Vashu Shroff, Ram Buxani, Murij Manghnani, Lakho Lulla and others. Nanik declared his plan to set up an *Overseas Indian Co-Ordination Committee* with a computerized data bank of overseas Indians. As a centralized nodal agency, it would serve as an effective facilitator for the overseas Indian community.

Over the years, Nanik has been working silently for the betterment of the Sindhi community. “After all, my roots lie in this community. How can I ignore that fact?” he asks. In October 1992, Nanik participated actively in the Sindhi Adhikar Yatra that culminated in a meeting of a delegation of prominent Sindhi personalities with the Prime Minister, P. V. Narsimha Rao. Nanik accompanied late Nari Gursahani, President of the International Sindhi Panchayat, Kundandas Rohra, Chairman of the World Sindhi Congress, and others to the meeting.

The meeting turned out to be positive in many ways. It resulted in an assurance from Mr. Rao of immediate action for establishing a cultural center called Sindhu Bhawan. The proposal for securing a budgetary allocation in the Eighth Five Year Plan for a proposed Sindhi University and Sindhi Vikas Board also met with a favourable response.

## Making History in Parliament

In 1993, Nanik was given the singular honour to speak from the dais of the Central Hall of India's Parliament House. The book *The Making of an Institution — Priyadarshni Academy* best describes the events of that momentous day.

On August 20, 1993, the charismatic Nanik Rupani addressed a distinguished gathering of Members of Parliament and other dignitaries in the Central Hall of Parliament House, New Delhi. The unique privilege of presenting a magnificently rendered portrait of late Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, served to highlight the Academy's achievements as an NGO. Present on the occasion were the President of India, Mr. Shankar Dayal Sharma, Prime Minister Mr. P. V. Narasimha Rao, Vice President, Mr. K. R. Narayanan, and the Speaker of the *Lok Sabha*, Mr. Shivraj Patil. Among the other dignitaries present were Mrs. Sonia Gandhi, Mr. Sushil Kumar Shinde, MP, Mr. C. K. Jain, Secretary-General of the *Lok Sabha*, a host of Governors, Chief Ministers, Central Ministers and Members of Parliament.

Addressing the gathering on behalf of the Academy, Nanik expressed his deep gratitude for the unprecedented honour accorded to him. The Academy had always held Mr. Gandhi in great esteem and it was in recognition of his invaluable contribution to national integration that the Academy decided to rename its triennial National Integration Award of Rs. 1 lakh, as the *Rajiv Gandhi Memorial Award for National Integration*. It was, therefore, a fitting gesture that the Academy was offered the privilege of presenting Mr. Gandhi's portrait to the nation.

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It is a matter of continuing pride for Priyadarshni Academy that this portrait has now become part of India's Parliament House.

### Reaching Out to the World

Nanik has always appreciated yoga and meditation. In 1995, a group of people affiliated with the Academy brought the ancient *Hasyayoga* – laughter therapy – into contemporary use by establishing a *Laughter Club*. There is the proven theory that *when you cry, you cry alone but when you laugh, the world laughs with you*. Initially, people ridiculed the idea, but when health benefits became apparent, the attendance at the club began to increase. Nanik and other committee members had set their mind on giving momentum to this unique activity, and efforts were whole-heartedly directed at supporting all such clubs.

On June 26, 1996, the Academy formally opened its *Laughter Club Division*. At present, it is affiliated with more than 100 laughter clubs in India – 40 in Mumbai itself, several in the UK, and a few in the USA. Many distinguished personalities, educationists, top civil servants, leading medical practitioners and industrialists have joined the movement.

As activities of the Academy multiplied and kept pace with world affairs, another area that came into focus was spiritualism. “Success in the material world is a wonderful thing. It provides a person with all the comforts life has to offer, all the goodies money can buy. But how content you are on the inside, rather than the outside, is the true measure of a meaningful existence,” Nanik has always believed.

The Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University, an organization with a global presence, invited Nanik as its guest of honour. This was to felicitate Rajyogini Brahma-kumari Dadi Prakashmani, chief of the University. She had returned to India after having been bestowed with the Peace Messenger Award by the United Nations. The bond that was established between Priyadarshni Academy and the University became stronger over the years, with the sharing of ideas, thoughts, philosophies and events.

1998 was the year that saw one of Nanik's long awaited dreams come true. He had always wanted the Academy to acquire a global identity. The Awards function held on September 19, 1998, proved to be a step in that direction. With Mr. L. K. Advani in the chief guest's chair, the curtain went up on the first International Awards function. To choose people whose work had impacted the world at large had been a challenging task. A high-powered committee under the chairmanship of Dr. Ram Tarneja, former Managing Director, Bennett Coleman Group, had been formed and the members went through hundreds of documents and records to select a few individuals whose contributions to society led to either definitive commercial progress or the creation of a better social environment.

The Global Awards that were bestowed on the momentous day included:

- The Global Award for Outstanding Contribution to Humanitarian Services.
- The Global Award for Promotion of Benefits of Space Technology to Humanity.
- The Global Award for Outstanding Contribution to Corporate Social Responsibility.

- The Global Award for Promotion of International Understanding.

In 2001, the Academy joined hands with *India International Multiversity*, an institution of which Dr. Vijay Bhatkar is Founder and Chancellor, to start the *Vedic Research Center*. Elaborating on this new initiative, Nanik states: “*Vedanta* is a science of living. Science tells us that we use only ten per cent of our mental capacity. Vedanta helps cultivate the balance 90 per cent and access the powerhouse of infinite energy lying dormant within us. It prescribes the technique of right action that ensures success. In any field, be it academia, business, music, art or sport — the winning edge comes from the mind. Master the basics of mind management and the outer manifestation of success follows. This is what *Vedanta* teaches us.”

There has not been a single year since its inception that Priyadarshni Academy has failed to make a significant contribution to society and to lessening its many human struggles. There is no doubt that the Academy is powered by Nanik’s convictions, faith and determination. However, Nanik simply refuses to let the spotlight rest on himself. “The Academy has been a success only because of the collective will and efforts of the team involved. People from different walks of life have come forward to support this institution. They have invested their ideas, time, effort and money in the Academy. I had only the determination to keep it going, but I needed their support to make it happen,” he says.

Elaborating on this team spirit, Nanik states: “Our Sindhi community is very coherent. We believe that  $1+1=11$ . This unity is very important to get big projects off the ground. We believe that while a single thread can easily be

broken, 100 such threads held together shall have the strength of a rope.

“Priyadarshni has brought me in touch with many new friends and has strengthened my bonds with existing ones. A special bond of friendship that comes to mind is with the Harilela family based in Hong Kong. Nearly thirty years ago, I was introduced to Bob Harilela by our mutual friend, late Prof. Ram Panjwani, who was a highly respected and accomplished figure with a magnetic personality. He told me that he would like me to meet a very well-known but down-to-earth person. He introduced me to Bob over a lunch meeting, and Bob and I clicked almost instantly. It has been three decades, and our friendship has only deepened; I have been to Hong Kong to visit Bob and his family several times, and Bob too has visited my family and me whenever he has come to India.

“The entire Harilela family lives jointly in a palatial bungalow in Hong Kong. It was through Bob that I got to know and respect Hari, his elder brother. Hari has distinguished himself in business; he heads a leading chain of hotels worldwide. The Harilelas are known for their philanthropy and are always in the forefront of helping and supporting worthy causes. What I find remarkable is their love and unity that I have been privileged to observe over the years. My heart always warms up whenever I think of them.

“Another long time family friend who comes to mind is Haru Mahtani, Chairman of Wearwel International and an influential resident of Jakarta, Indonesia. He recommended Ms. Megawati Soekarnoputri, the past President of Indonesia for a Priyadarshni Award. The committee studied the recommendation and bestowed upon her the Global



Award for Outstanding Contribution to the Promotion of International Understanding in 1998.

“In Thailand, I have close friends like Vashi Purswani; in Japan, Bhojraj Rupani, who is affectionately referred to as Jiju; in Dubai, Dr. Ram Buxani, Murij Manghanani and Vasu Rupani; in the US, Nari Pohani. In fact, time will fail me if I recount the names of all the friends I dearly love, who have done so much for the Academy. That would require another book, I suppose!” he smiles.

The Academy runs on highly democratic and well-structured lines. The various committees formed for the purpose of identifying people who have contributed immensely to their chosen fields, have the full liberty of nominating anyone they want. Nanik has not given himself the power to influence any selection. The usual procedure is to go through a person’s achievements and then test them against the norms set by the Academy. There is a strong code of conduct that disallows anyone to use the powers vested in him or her to do anything that may be considered unethical.

“Admittedly, there is always external pressure from people who want those close to them to be honoured with the awards, but I tell them upfront that I have no clout as far as the committee’s decisions are concerned,” Nanik says. This firm stand does result in a few disgruntled elements being unhappy with the Academy, as Nanik himself admits: “Yes, there are times when someone feels disappointed because the award has gone to someone else who has achieved equally; but then that’s life and he or she comes around to understanding that.”

Having brought the Academy so far, Nanik feels that he

has to pass the baton to someone else. “A successor is yet to be found to take this institution forward. This is a very special position and holding the chair for more than 20 years has been a source of personal pride and joy for me. Niranjan Hiranandani is a good candidate for the Chairman’s position, but it depends on his other commitments. Niranjan is a special person who has done a lot for the Academy and has its interests close to his heart. Above all, his and my families are very close-knit; I consider Niranjan as a younger brother and he completely understands and values the vision I have for Priyadarshni Academy.

“Nayan Patel is another wonderful choice. I admire him for his capacity to organize and his penchant for perfection in all that he does, and I am sure the Academy will flourish under his leadership.”

The position is one that calls for a wide range of networking skills. It involves a lot of interaction with politicians, academicians, social activists, film personalities, overseas Indian businessmen and so on. The Academy is always in the media spotlight. Given Nanik’s larger-than-life contribution, it is a challenging act for any successor to follow.