

Destination Kerala

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SIDDEEK'S SAGA OF SUCCESSES





THE RISE & RISE OF ERAM GROUP

*Dr. Siddeek Ahmed, Chairman and Managing Director, Eram Group is a master of multi-tasking. His business empire covers all possible spheres of industrial activity. Yet, he finds time to take up social causes on a big scale with the same vigour. In a conversation with **Destination Kerala**, he speaks about Eram's business interests and his avowed commitment to philanthropy*

INTERVIEW BY ATHUL LAL A G
PHOTO COURTESY: ERAM GALLERIA



SIDDEEK AHMED, THE FOUNDER OF ERAM GROUP, LEADS ONE OF THE MOST DIVERSE CONGLOMERATES OF THE GCC REGION, WITH OVER 40-PLUS ENTITIES SPREAD ACROSS 15 COUNTRIES

"Our greatest weakness lies in giving up. The most certain way to succeed is always to try just one more time."
— Thomas A Edison

Like every Malayali, he also decided to fly to the Gulf dreaming a prosperous future. Armed with a Diploma in Electronics, he managed to find a marketing job in Saudi Arabia. But, at times fate is stranger than fiction. The Gulf War began. The deafening air-raid sirens at Al Khobar, located in the Eastern Province of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia on the coast of the Persian Gulf, shattered the dreams of Non-Residents. Hundreds of people, both natives and expatriates, fled the country.

But, Siddeek Ahmed, the youngest among nine children of Panamtharayil Ahmed Haji and Mariyumma, took a rather unconventional approach. Braving the odds, the young man in his early 20s

decided to stay back. He strongly believed that he should stand by the country during the time of adversity. When the dust settled, the native of Mankara village in Palakkad district seized the opportunity. The entrepreneur in him was born. With the support of friends and relatives, and the capital he raised by selling his shares in the previous companies,



SIDDEEK AHMED RECEIVING SAFAIGIRI AWARD FROM PRIME MINISTER NARENDRA MODI

Siddeek laid the foundation for the Eram Group.

Two decades later, 49-year-old Dr. Siddeek Ahmed leads one of the most diverse conglomerates of the region, with over 40-plus entities spread across 15 countries - Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Kingdom of Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman, China, United Kingdom, Italy, Korea, Thailand, Malaysia, Turkey and USA besides India. The Group has prominent presence in Industrial Contracting, Project Management Solutions, Automotive, Healthcare, Travel, IT, Hospitality, Manufacturing, Power Electronics, Trading, Floor Covering, Product Representation, Commercial Services, you name it. Headquartered in the KSA, Eram Group has become the largest diversified business group to be licenced by SAGIA (Saudi Arabian General Investment Authority). Eram holds seven foreign investment licenses, the largest by any company in KSA.

In 2015, Forbes Middle East magazine chose him as one among the Top Indian Leaders in the Arab World. Siddeek, a master's graduate today has also enrolled for the Owner/President Program at Harvard Business School.

Even as his business grew by leaps and bounds, Siddeek remained most compassionate and committed to society. He likes to be known more as a committed humanitarian than a super successful entrepreneur.

THOUGH HE LEADS A TRANSNATIONAL BUSINESS EMPIRE, HE LIKES TO BE KNOWN MORE AS A COMMITTED HUMANITARIAN THAN A SUPER SUCCESSFUL ENTREPRENEUR

For many, he is the synonym of philanthropy. Social and humanitarian activities are the hallmarks of the Group, be it in India or in the Middle East. Siddeek is associated with AH Foundation, a charitable trust established in Kerala to support the socially and financially backward. He is also the chief patron of We Care Association, a charitable organisation conceived to help the needy in the Middle East and India.

A football enthusiast, Siddeek has been in the forefront to promote the game at the grass roots and to encourage children to maintain healthy lifestyle by stepping outdoors to play

real football on the field instead of playing on mobile phones. He was instrumental in reviving the legendary Sait Nagjee Football Tournament in Kozhikode in Kerala after over two decades. He also conceptualised the UN@70 Cup, an All Kerala Inter-school Football Tournament celebrating 70th anniversary of the United Nations in 2015.

When in town, his home at sleepy Mankara attracts more people than a local self-government office as nobody returns empty handed. He is

their saviour, chief trouble-shooter, patron and big brother. He is passionately talkative and engages you in a wide range of topics spanning eco-sensitivity, politics, technology and engineering. He is acutely perceptive and sharp. But above all, he is a benevolent and able people's leader.

"I had a strong urge to do something for society from a very early age, thanks to my upbringing where values and strength of humanity were imbibed during my childhood," says Siddeek, when *Destination Kerala* caught up with him for a detailed chat at the suite room of Marriott Kochi where he was staying



SIDDEEK AHMED WITH PRANAB MUKHERJEE PRESIDENT OF INDIA

on a recent visit to the city with family. "I also approach challenges and risks as opportunities and have considerable resilience in times of crisis. I consider these as my strengths to be a businessman of today. I believe adopting globally accepted best practices and standards which make my businesses relevant and fit into a global business landscape," says Siddeek, the Chairman and Managing Director of Eram Group

Excerpts from the interview

With more than 40 entities, Eram is an incredibly diversified conglomerate. Please share the growth story?

Honestly speaking, the growth was organic. From the beginning itself, my business model has been independent profit centres. Now, the Group is going through transition. The entire business empire is being brought under a corporate structure in a phased manner. We are redesigning each sector as strategic business units. Initially, I launched an HR Consultancy firm. Now, Eram Group has business interests in many sectors. Some of these companies are completely owned by us while others are joint venture operations. Overall, we have around 100 offices across the globe. In Saudi, Eram's major activities are in the industrial sector. It also does substantial jobs for SEC (Saudi Electricity Company), the power giant of Saudi Arabia. Overall, I see enormous scope in the power sector across the globe. In India, I think there is ample scope for skill development projects.

In a major development, Eram has signed a JV agreement to represent Italian energy major ENEL across GCC States. ENEL will supply smart grids and smart meters for the Gulf's futuristic cities.

ITL World, the travel and tourism vertical, is one of the key and the most robust ventures of our Group. We first commenced its operations in the Middle East in Dubai in 2006.



RECEIVING INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN AWARD FROM PROF. ZALEHA KAMURUDIN, RECTOR IIUM AND PATRON OF INTERFAITH HARMONY CONFERENCE IN KUALA LUMPUR.



DR. SIDDEEK AHMED

AGE
49
BORN IN
MANKARA, PALAKKAD
FAMILY
WIFE: NUSHAIBA
CHILDREN: RIZWAN AHMED, RIZANA
MARIYAM AND RIZWI MARIYAM
BASED IN
SAUDI ARABIA AND UAE
FAVOURITE DESTINATION
SWITZERLAND AND LONDON
LOVES TO TRAVEL WITH FAMILY
FAVOURITE GADGET
IPHONE, IPAD
DRIVES
NOT VERY BRAND CONSCIOUS BUT
LIKES AUDI AND RANGE ROVER
FAVOURITE CUISINE
LOVES TRADITIONAL KERALA
CUISINE; MUTTON CURRY AND
SARDINE FRY ARE FAVOURITES
A LEADER YOU ADMIRE
DR. A P J ABDUL KALAM AND
RATAN TATA

It has rapidly expanded. Today, it has over 35 fully-owned and operating offices in markets encompassing Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, UAE, Oman, India, Malaysia and Thailand. ITL World is continuing to expand its presence into Europe by opening an office in London. Most probably, we will inaugurate the facility in September. Rated consecutively as the fifth most powerful travel management company in the Middle East by Arabian Travel News, ITL World has been catering to a wide portfolio of clientele across Asia and the Middle East. It has been the preferred partner of several global travel brands and tourism boards in the region. Recently, globally-renowned corporate travel giant – CTM (Corporate Travel Management) chose ITL World as their partner across the Middle East. With travel brands such as Miceminds, Arabian Experience, Tripmakers and EduVoyage under its portfolio, ITL World offers travel solutions to government entities, corporate business houses, MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, Events) segments, luxury travel, sports travel, wellness travel and student travel segments and much more.

We are the first to set up a manufacturing facility for power electronics in Saudi Arabia. Earlier, equipment required for the sector in the country were imported. Arabian Power Electronics Company (APEC) has become a leading player providing comprehensive

ERAM REPRESENTS ITALIAN ENERGY MAJOR ENEL ACROSS GCC STATES TO SUPPLY SMART GRIDS AND SMART METERS FOR THE GULF'S FUTURISTIC CITIES



SIDDEEK AHMED ADDRESSES THIRD ASIAN SANITATION DIALOGUE ORGANISED BY ADB AT MANILA

engineering solutions in the field of power electronics. Recently, we have acquired a leading Pune-based company in the power electronics sector. We are in the process of renaming it. We also forayed into education and training by taking over an aided educational institution in Palakkad district. It is not aimed at making profit but to provide quality education to underprivileged students. A few months ago, we have signed an MoU (Memorandum of Understanding) with KINFRA to set up a food processing unit at its upcoming Industrial Park at Ottappalam.

What made you think about launching eToilet project?

As part of the Group's humanitarian activities, I used to sponsor dialysis machines for various organisations. The cost of one machine would come around Rs. 6 lakh. Within a short period, I think, we have distributed close to 50 machines. When we looked into the reason behind such a huge demand for dialysis machines, we realised that the real villain was lack of public sanitation facilities. Women, including students, suffered the most. They used to skip the nature's call due to the absence of hygienic toilet facilities in public places which, in

turn, caused various health issues. This prompted us to think about setting up clean public toilets without burdening the coffers, clogging the drainage system and exploiting the water supply of a city. The answer we found was eToilet, India's first electronic public toilet.

Eram Scientific Solutions (ESS), the Group's R&D division which was launched in 2008, started working on the eToilet project in 2009 after spending a year studying various issues, like water and waste management which required technological innovation. We made the first prototype in 2010. By 2011, the product was ready for marketing. In August, Bruhat Bangalore Mahanagara Palike (BBMP) awarded a project for setting up 75 such toilet clusters in the city to ESS, after conducting a year-long trial that proved the cost-effectiveness and hardiness of the eToilets. The cost of one unit was Rs. 3 lakh then.

In 2012, I had a chance to meet Dr. A P J Abdul Kalam, former President of India, in Florida. He was there to unveil the statue of Mahatma Gandhi. In an informal chat, I briefed him about the eToilet project and the technology support that the DRDO (Defence Research and Development Organisation) has been providing. After giving me a patient hearing, Kalam suggested me to cut down the cost so that the project would benefit the common man. Inspired by his advice, we then set in motion an intense research to achieve it. As a result, we were able to launch a cost-effective version, a solar-powered toilet unit (eLite for schools) priced at Rs. 99,999. Till date, we have set up 1800-plus eToilet units and over 400 Sewage Treatment Plants across 19 states in India. eToilet has also won more than 40 awards nationally and internationally. Eram has also set up



SIDDEEK AHMED WITH PETER SHILTON, FORMER ENGLAND FOOTBALLER, AT UN@70 FOOTBALL TOURNAMENT



KIRAN MEHRA, DIRECTOR OF UNITED NATIONS INFORMATION CENTRE FOR INDIA AND BHUTAN AWARDED THE UN-INDIA CONNECT PIN TO SIDDEEK AHMED



RECEIVING BEST INNOVATION AWARD FOR DELIGHT (E-TOILET)

piles of faeces go up the conveyer belt and drop into a large bin. They made their way through the machine, getting boiled and treated. A few minutes later I took a long taste of the end result, a glass of delicious drinking water” – these words from Bill Gates say it all.

Philanthropy has been the hallmark of Eram Group. How did it happen?

My parents have always been sensitive and generous to people's sufferings and what I do today is

what I have seen growing up. It is an irreplaceable part of my life. What prompted me to extend humanitarian assistance is the belief that helping the people in distress is my obligation to the creator of the universe. Wealth is a trust (amanat) from Almighty Allah and our role is that of a custodian. Distributing money to alleviate the sufferings of people is of paramount importance. It was the driving spirit behind our Group's donation of Rs. 2 crore for the relief work in flood-affected Chennai.

We consistently make efforts to extend support to the poor and the needy, be it financial aid, medical and educational support or disaster relief. Recently, as you know, Kerala was reeling under extreme weather conditions. One such day, while I

We are now working with the California Institute of Technology, Duke University, and the University of South Florida (USF) to take eToilets to the next level. As a first step, we have installed NEWgenerator technology-enabled eToilet at Pulluvila in Thiruvananthapuram. The water that comes out as waste from the toilets is recycled and used for flushing, while the solid waste is converted into nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium which can be stored and used as fertilizers. The gas from urine is converted into methane and can be used for burning. The technology was developed by USF with NEW standing for nutrients, energy and water. The potential is enormous. The water can be fully recycled and made potable. “I watched

WE HAVE SET UP 1800-PLUS ETOILET UNITS AND OVER 400 SEWAGE TREATMENT PLANTS ACROSS 19 STATES IN INDIA. ETOILET HAS ALSO WON MORE THAN 40 AWARDS NATIONALLY AND INTERNATIONALLY

numerous 'she toilets' with sanitary napkin dispenser and incinerator.

In a major achievement, Eram was picked as one of the grant winners of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation's 'Reinvent the Toilet' Challenge aimed at finding next-generation toilets which are super cost-effective, and can provide sustainable sanitation to 2.5 billion people worldwide without access to toilets. The grant amount awarded to ESS is being used to pursue research on maintaining cleaner public toilets while conserving precious resources like water and energy.

It was a proud moment for all of us when at Safaigiri Summit and Awards 2015 our Prime Minister Narendra Modi conferred the title of 'Toilet Titan' on ESS.



SIDDEEK AHMED WITH SACHIN TENDULKAR



SIDDEEK AHMED RECEIVING RONALDINHO AT NAGJEE DECLARATION



RECEIVING SOCIAL EXCELLENCE AWARD AT 'HRIDAYA SANGAMAM' AT LISSIE HOSPITAL FROM KERALA PSC CHAIRMAN K S RADHAKRISHNAN

was talking to my relative at Mankara over phone he told me that people had to depend on drinking water supplied in tanker lorries. You know, Mankara is a village along the banks of Bharathapuzha and has a number of ponds and public wells. I was really shocked to hear it. In a bid to conserve water, we have launched a campaign – 'Save Open Wells – Save Water' in Palakkad district and the pilot projects have been kickstarted at Mankara and two adjacent villages with the support of local bodies. So far, we have been able to renovate more than 50 open wells benefiting around 2000 families in three panchayats. As many as 62 ponds left unusable in the region have also been resurrected. The project was officially launched by A K Balan, Minister for Social Welfare. And, the mission continues.

You have been called the Messiah by families of those languishing in Saudi jails. Why did you decide to intervene?

Millions of Indians have migrated to Saudi Arabia over decades to make a living. Generally, Indians are hardworking people and law abiding citizens. The Saudi Government also holds Indians in high regard. However, certain labourers have landed in jail due to various reasons. Lack of awareness about laws of the country is one reason. In majority of the cases, these people remain behind bars for reasons which are beyond their control. Many of the Indian expatriates here work in difficult conditions. They may be the sole breadwinner of the family back in India. Due to financial

constraints, they will not have the money to pay for their release. Being a person who considers Saudi as my second home and fortunate to have the resources, I believe it is my duty to help such citizens and bring relief to their families back home. It would have been impossible without the wholehearted support and cooperation of the Saudi officials.

What was the motivation behind ESPOiR? What will be its social impact?

Again, Dr. A P J Abdul Kalam is the inspiration for undertaking ESPOiR project. While interacting with him once, he spoke about the importance of skilling and stressed the need to set up skill development centres. It is a fact that there is gap between educational qualifications and employable skills. Hence, there is an acute shortage of skilled manpower in the industry particularly in the oil and rig sector. Lot of people come to my home at Mankara seeking job opportunities. Frankly speaking, even highly qualified professionals who show many years of experience on their resume lack basic practical skills



SIDDEEK AHMED WITH SHAHRUKH KHAN AT IAA SILVER JUBILEE SUMMIT

required for the job. While we recruit people for leading companies in the oil and refineries sector, most of them get disqualified in the client's interview. For instance, they even lack knowledge about health and safety aspects. It was based on these insights that we decided to establish ESPOiR in collaboration with Government of Kerala.

We have the official manpower licence and can issue number of visas. The convocation of the first batch of trainees of the ESPOiR Academy was held recently. We have given of letters to all the 85 students. The fact that all the students have been recruited by petroleum companies shows the very relevance of skills academies. Communication skills still remain a problem for some students. We are exploring options to plug that gap as well.

How many people does ERAM Group employ currently?

We have direct employees, contract employees and those who associate with outsourcing work. Currently, the Group has over 20,000 direct employees belonging to different nationalities. There are a significant number of Malayalis in the team. The lion's share of people working in my headquarters are from Palakkad. It is not deliberate. Majority of job seekers are from Palakkad district and I have never let them down. I always support my team members so as to give them the opportunity to develop to their fullest potential.

How do you spend time when not working?

I spend most of my time of the year in Saudi Arabia. I really enjoy being with family and friends especially during weekends. The feeling of togetherness creates a lot of energy and acts as a stress reliever. I also love travelling! During vacations, I make it a point to touch new destinations across the world with my family.