



Nirupa Shankar, Vice-President, Business Development & Strategy, Brigade Hospitality, joined the family business in 2009. A leader by nature, she is instrumental in leading a number of organisation-wide activities to improve existing department processes and create a work culture that makes Brigade Group one of the best real estate companies to work for in India. In conversation with **Anuradha Ramkumar**, she talks about her journey till now, and the new focus and energy that she brought into the company.

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Elaborate on the path that you took leading to your joining your family business.

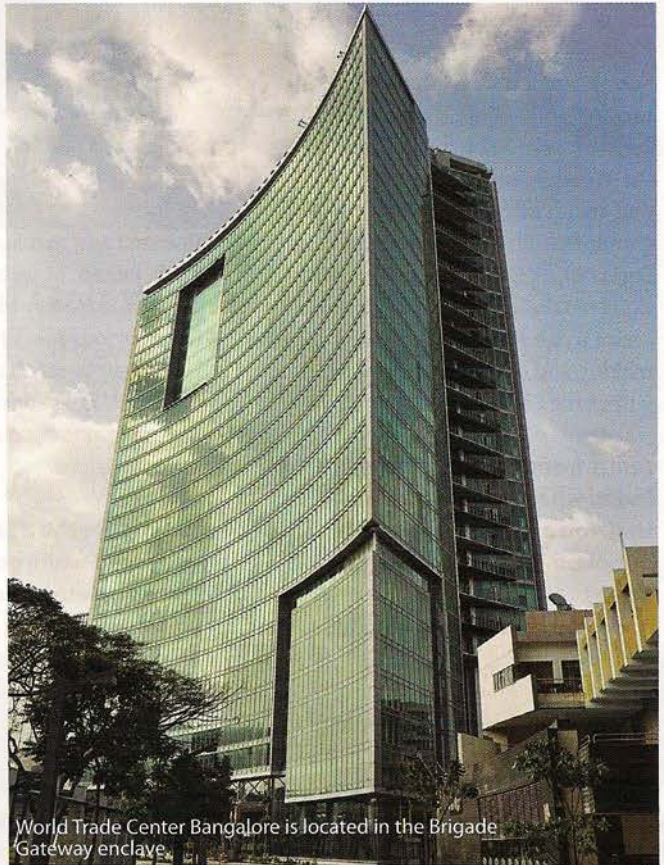
I did my Undergraduate degree from the University of Virginia in the United States. I majored in Economics while taking up many leadership roles in student government and a co-ed business fraternity called Alpha Kappa Psi (AKPsi).

Every summer, we would get 3 months off and I used this time to explore various industries as I had not decided which path my career would take. My internships were in advertising, consulting and hospitality and of the three, enjoyed hospitality the most because I found that it was a good balance between working with people

Hospitality with a Charm



Brigade Exotica boasts a spacious atrium, and living spaces converge into the patio.



World Trade Center Bangalore is located in the Brigade Gateway enclave.

d working with systems.

nce I graduated, I took up a consulting job with Ernst & Young (EY) because the role had a steep learning curve and I wanted to hone my analytical skills. While working with EY, I took evening classes in Hotel Operations at New York University. I thoroughly enjoyed it and after three years of consulting, I resigned and applied for Masters of Management in Hospitality (MMH) from Cornell University in New York. While at Cornell, I majored in Hospitality, Real Estate and Finance and graduated on the Dean's List.

I decided to join the family business just post my Masters in June 2009, as the hospitality industry in India was booming at that time and we were at the cusp of launching many more new ventures.

How has your journey been so far – from joining the business to starting new ventures and setting up

successful teams?

I am very happy with the progress made thus far. I have grown a lot over the past four years and working with Brigade has been a fulfilling and great learning experience. At the same time, I also have been able to contribute a significant amount back to the company.

I really enjoy working with my father (MR Jaishankar, CMD, Brigade Group). He is a great leader and has accomplished a lot within a very short period of time. I constantly draw inspiration from both him and my mother who heads Brigade Foundation.

Brigade Group is in transitory phase and we are moving from a medium size to a large scale organisation. We are going through a growth spurt making it a very exciting time for all Brigadiers.

Throw some light on the different verticals of the Brigade Group and your contribution in them.

Brigade Group is currently into

Residential, Commercial, Retail and Hospitality property development. We also have a sister company that handles property management services. Our not-for-profit arm is called Brigade Foundation which focuses on providing quality education manages three schools within Bangalore.

While I am a Director in many of the subsidiary entities of Brigade, my primary role lies within the company called Brigade Hospitality Services Ltd. (BHSL). My focus is on developing and growing the hospitality business while also overseeing the operations and strategy of the existing units. We currently have four lifestyle membership clubs, two convention centers, two hotels and one serviced apartment. We recently launched another initiative called Celebrations Catering and Events that handles event management, large scale catering and corporate cafeterias. I am also a part of many organisation-wide committees within the Group. For instance, I chair the group's Under 35

Think Tank, the Complaint Redressal Committee, and the Suggestions Scheme Committee. I have a strong inclination towards Human Resource (HR) Development hence co-authored the Work Culture Code for the company and am an active member of the HR committee. Since I am a certified Six Sigma Black Belt, I use my analytical skills to take on cost reduction measures, create a culture of data oriented decision making and drive Business Excellence within the Group.

Apart from a major presence in South India, what are the other locations that you are planning to enter? What opportunities do you envisage in them?

Each state even within South India has different laws and procedures to follow, making operations a bit complicated and expansion that much harder. Hence, as of now, our focus remains just on South India and there is still tremendous potential to capture here.

Elaborate on the vision you had envisaged and the qualities that helped you achieve this status today?

On a professional front, there is still a lot more for me to achieve. On a personal front, I have always wanted to make my parents proud and I definitely want to help take Brigade to a new height; and put us in a league above the rest. I hope to do this with the help of my sister, family and of course our Brigadiers.

I have been lucky that people within the company have been very accepting of me, making it easy to do my job. But I also know that they recognise that everything I work towards is for the betterment of Brigade Group – the company and its

people.

At my end, I make it a point to treat everyone with respect and ensure that I behave in a fair and professional manner with everyone. I also worked my way up by spending a lot of time with the line staff as a management trainee when I first joined. More responsibility was given to me every time I proved myself in a previous role. I think it is very important to stay humble and to ask the 'basic' questions in order to better understand the business and make the right decisions.

What were the challenges that you faced while going about your entrepreneurial project and how did you cope with the same?

The biggest challenge I deal with is project delays. There are a hundred different reasons why a project can be delayed and sometimes it can get hard to pin point the root cause because there is so much inter-dependency with departments. The way I tackle this is through incessant follow-up in order to put pressure on completing the job. It is also important to have constant communication and regular meetings between all parties to ensure everyone is on the same page. You'll be surprised how many issues can be resolved through in-person communication.

How has the entry of younger developers impacted infrastructural projects that are being constructed today?

I think younger developers are trying to move from people dependent organisations to system dependent organisations. They are also finding innovative ways to fund projects and

diversify their geography and products quicker. Return on effort is a key focus element.

Second generation developers have BIG shoes to fill. We have been blessed with inspiring fathers who have created tough acts to follow. The skills required to start a company and sustain a company are quite different.

How have the architecture, design and décor in the hospitality industry evolved from what it was in India a decade back and are they at par with International standards?

I would say that the designs have gotten more standardised. 10 years ago there were fewer players in the hospitality market and each hotel was looked at as a prized asset. There was a lot more focus on elaborate and luxury design elements. Of late, the mid market and budget segment hotels are booming. In order to keep costs under control, designs are getting more modular and facades less intricate in order to keep operating costs low. Hotels are no longer being looked upon just as ego assets but more as a long term cash cow.

I would say there is a big difference between the hotels in the West and in the East. The quality of the hotels in the East (Asia, India etc) is far better. The specifications are much higher and there is greater emphasis on the design elements. The hotels in the West (United States, Europe etc) are by and large much standardised and quality of customer experience is not as good. However, they are definitely more efficient. Staff to Room ratio is lower and payback period is quicker.

Outline the projects that you are currently working on.

Apart from working on six hotels that are under various stages of development, the Brigade group is also creating a spectacular Sky Lounge Bar and Restaurant atop the World Trade Centre in Bangalore. It will be the highest point in South India and a 'must do' attraction for anyone visiting Bangalore. ■

Upcoming projects

Brigade Group currently has six hotels under various stages of development:

- Holiday Inn, Chennai
- Grand Mercure, Mysore
- Mid Market Hotel, Mysore
- Holiday Inn Express, near Bangalore International Airport
- A mid-market hotel, Bangalore
- Luxury Island Resort near Kochi