

# Master Commander

The compelling success story of how a man rose from Salesman to Channel Head ... in 12 years flat!

With the launch of Satellite Television in 1991 a name that hit into instant fame was Gautam Adhikari, he kept the viewers on edge week after week with a thriller *Commander* under the banner of Shri Adhikari Brothers.

A Commercial Art graduate from JJ School of Arts he was forever thirsting to create something of his own. From humble beginnings as a counter-sales person to a freelancer to an owner of a Channel (SAB TV) Gautam Adhikari has come a long way.

In March 2005 he sold SAB TV to Sony. The first to create a market for

sponsored Marathi serial he has two new channels to his credit – recently launched *Janmat* and yet to be launched *Mee Marathi*. Taking a break from his pet passion thrillers Gautam is busy taking command of his new family drama *Rishton Ki Dor* to be aired on Sony.

From *Kuchh nahin* to *SAB kuchh* his life story reads like a gripping thriller...

After months of chasing he finally relents and invites **GR8!** to his office. Over piping hot *kaanda pohe* which his *Maharaj* has specially cooked for him, he talks *kuchh dil se*...



# EPISODE 1

**I repeated a class in 8th standard I was very mischievous... and I hated Maths**

I repeated a class in 8th standard I was very mischievous... and I hated Maths My surname is actually misleading. Contrary to what people think, I'm actually a Gujarati and not a Maharashtrian. Generally Adhikaris are supposed to be either Maharashtrians or Nepalese or Bengalis. I remember when I had gone to Nepal in 1986 it's because of my surname that they didn't let me into the casino. 'Gautam' and 'Adhikari' both are common names there and locals there were not allowed to gamble. Only after I proved to them that I was from India that they let me in.

My father Navneet Adhikari was a cinematographer and used to work as a freelancer. But he didn't want me to join this industry. However I always imagined myself to be a director ever since the age of 12. Back then this line wasn't so rewarding and secure. It's much better today.

As a child I was very fond of drawing and so I went to J. J. School of Arts. I was very mischievous, an average student and I hated Maths. At that time there was an option to leave Maths in the 10th standard. So I left it. And I took up drawing.

My mother was very strict with us. She would take up our studies. She would be bothered about our exam papers and marks. So whenever any of my exam papers would go bad, I would go home after 3 hours only after asking my friends for the right answers. Anyways she would come to know the results later but atleast I could avoid tensions for a month!

I repeated a class in 8<sup>th</sup> standard. I failed in Maths so I had to repeat a year. At that time, in my school, Gokhlibai, the name of highest scorer in each subject would be announced. The year that I failed I had scored the highest in arts!

In the ninth standard, my sir knew that my weak point was Maths. At that time you required 15 marks to pass the subject. So he let me copy from another student and that's how I passed my Maths paper.

I was very fond of cricket as a kid and most of the time after school I would be playing outside.

I started smoking when I was in the 9<sup>th</sup> standard. We used to go for the NCC camps. So the Majors there used to tell us that if we didn't want to shiver in the cold we should start

smoking. So that's how I started smoking. Today I smoke 100 cigarettes a day. I used to read thriller stories as a kid. I used to buy or borrow these thin books and when everyone would go to sleep I would read them in the night lamp. Even today when and if I read a book, I just read the dialogues. Once I read the dialogues and understand the theme I just read the climax. I'm the read-the-last-page-first kind of person.

When I was very young once I had gone to see how my father worked. At that time I only understood that the director was the creator. When I would watch a film, I would try to understand what the director had done in that movie. I would study it on my own. I knew then that I wanted to be a director. I think there are only 2 directors that have been ahead of their times - V Shantaram and Raj Kapoor.

# EPISODE 2

**I wasn't a sincere student**

After I completed school my father encouraged me to go to JJ School of Arts. I used to watch movies everyday while I was in JJ. There we had to submit projects from Monday to Monday. So I would finish my project in 2 days and then watch Matinee movies on the remaining days. I would also bunk college a lot. Once I didn't go to college for 3 months just for the heck of it. I would go for movies or just do nothing. I had pataoed the postman in my area and told him that if there was any letter from JJ, he should give it to me, not at home.

**I have a major attitude problem. I can't take orders from anyone. My favourite role amongst being a director, channel head and producer is that of a director. I would gladly give up being a channel head or a producer. When I'm on the sets I'm a director and when I'm in office I'm a channel head and a producer.**

As expected they sent a letter to my place which he gave me. So I caught hold of my friend who worked in Fort area [which is close to the college] and took him to the college making him pose as my elder brother. My professors lectured him to take care of me and to pay attention to me. I wasn't a sincere student.

During my vacations in college I used to work as a sales person at the counter in Happy Home Store that sold readymade shirts in Century Bazaar. I used to earn Rs 500. Once the owner thought of having a sale and asked us to change the price tags and hike the price. So we sold it accordingly. But for my friends I changed the price tags again and sold it at a much lesser price.

# EPISODE 3

**With 150 Rupees we started a business...**

After I finished with JJ I worked in various ad agencies as a freelancer. My skill lay in language art work (English Ad copy translated into regional languages). Being a visualiser has helped me a lot in life. When we would make ads, there the director would come into the picture and that would be close to what I wanted to do. If I had continued with advertising I would've owned a company by now.

During my freelancing days there were times when I didn't have money for food. So I would go hungry. Or just survive on channas.

After I graduated from JJ and Markand graduated from Mithibai College respectively we wanted to do something on our own. I remember close to where we were staying there was a coaching class and the owner had asked us to design a logo for him. I asked him for an advance and he gave me Rs 150 and I designed the logo. With that money I opened a bank account. It was with that money that we started our business.

This was in 1981. My brother and I started our own ad agency called Surya Communication. In any case my brother wanted to do business of his own so we got together. We took loans from the market from private financiers to run the agency. We did this for 8 years. Even during that period I freelanced with ad agencies like Everest and Lintas etc.

We used to make print ads and ad films as well. Swad ad film and Gadre cupboards ad were made by me.

First we started doing business from home. Then we took up a place in partnership with someone in Fort. After this place we took up a rental place in Nariman Point.

The place that we took here could accommodate one table. It was so small that only one of us could sit there at one time and the other would have to stand. So when he would come I would leave because if both of us managed to sit then no third person could've sat there.

After some time we shifted to Bandra and then to Juhu. And then finally we made SAB TV building in 1999. It all happened in a span of 12 years. In fact the office was decorated in four months flat.

While we were working, we would have to give kickbacks to the people we worked with. So that's when we realized that a small sized ad agency wouldn't work. That's when we decided to get into serial making.



# EPISODE 4

I'm a self-made director...

**W**e began our career with Marathi serials. We presented a script for a serial to Door Darshan [DD] in 1982, but since there was an over submission of projects our project got delayed. At that time Adhikari Brothers wasn't a name... so the Marathi serial *Bandini* went on air in 1987. At that time when my father saw the serial he didn't like it. He said it wasn't well made. And I never worked with my father. I didn't think that we would've gotten along on the sets. There would have been many creative differences.

When we were doing Marathi serials, everyday I would go to the DD office in Worli. I used to just sit around and get to know people and keep inquiring about what was happening to the projects that we had submitted. There people had started joking that all that was left for me to do was sign the muster. I used to sit there from morning till evening.

Till 1991, we did only Marathi and Gujarati serials. Then in 1991, ZEE TV started and we did our first Hindi serial called *Commander* that ran for three years. By 1991, we had become a popular name so Zee called us to do a serial with them.

*Commander* was the first serial on ZEE TV. Ramesh Bhatkar was finalised for the role because he was a good actor. In the beginning people didn't like the way he spoke Hindi with a Marathi accent. After 104 episodes we replaced him with Sudhir Mithoo but because of popular demand we had to bring Ramesh back.

I remember that the first day of shooting for *Commander* it was a 2 p.m. shift. For that we went shopping for clothes in the morning.



We did regional serials at that time because that was the only option for us. At that time the market was new for the regional programs. The market for Marathi serials was developed by Adhikari brothers. We also got sponsors for them and encouraged people to take spots for ads. Later as the serials became popular more people started buying ad spots.

I started my career with emotional women oriented drama but then went on to thrillers. One can say that now I have been slotted as a thriller maker. My first thriller was *Paramveer* with Kuldeep Pawar. Then we did 'Hello Inspector' with Ramesh Bhatkar. These serials had more TRPs than *Chhayageet* on DD. Also there was no competition. Even today I enjoy making thrillers more as it's got more camera angles to shoot from. There is lots of room to play around with.

My father died in 1994. He didn't see my success. There was no one to guide me either in the family or in the industry. So after directing I would go and sit on the editing table to observe. I have never assisted anybody. I'm a self made director.

*Bandini, Akrosh, Dhananjay, Paramveer...* all these were Marathi serials that we did.

Earlier it was only Shri Adhikari Brothers. Then we corporatized the firm in 1995 and called Shri Adhikari Brothers Television Network Ltd.

# EPISODE 5

You need funds to keep a channel alive

**W**e did these serials for sometime. Then we felt the need for diversifying and decided to have a channel of our own. We hired people for doing the research and Markand did most of the stuff for setting up the channel.

We started out with general entertainment. But then we thought that there was no point in offering the same thing that everyone else was doing. So we switched over to being a complete comedy channel. Comedy you can watch everyday and not get bored of it.

Before we launched the channel we had test runs. We launched the channel on 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2000. For a new channel you need to have a bank. So we decided to run initially with old programs and then start new ones. We merged the old and the new.

We had hired people to do the groundwork for us. The process was smooth and people liked what we showed. But when we turned to comedy they liked it more.

One of our biggest hits was *Office Office*. The name was so attractive and unique in itself that we decided to go with it right away. Also the character represented the common man by R K Laxman. So we went ahead with it. We had confidence in the script right from the start. The major credit for the success should go to Pankaj Kapur for doing that role so well and the writer Ashwini Dheer. If it wasn't for him the serial wouldn't have happened.

But a channel needs as much money as you can put into it. There was so much competition. We had created a brand and we had to keep it alive, and for that we needed funds. That's how Sony SAB happened. We sold the channel to Sony. We didn't want our brand to shut down. And it's still alive. I do follow the channel now and then.

Kunal Dasgupta CEO, Sony TV and I would meet socially somewhere so we would talk about the channel. And the deal was a mutual thing. They didn't change the name because it's an established brand. It was the best option for us and I didn't feel emotional when the channel was sold. It was like seeing your daughter off at her wedding. We started discussing the deal to sell the channel in April 2004 and finally signed the contract in March 2005. We have no stakes or equity in the channel.

# EPISODE 6

I missed seeing my kids grow up

**I** got married to Anjana in 1982. It was an arranged marriage. That time I was earning hardly 1000 rupees a month. Though my wife understood my profession she used to nag me about my work timings and I would ignore it. After all I was not a bank clerk with fixed working timings.

I have two children - a son Ravi and a daughter Urvee. My wife has raised both the kids. I had no contribution in that. When I would occasionally go to their school for some function I had to ask my wife what standard the kids were in. My kids understood that I had to be working for long hours.

I didn't know when and how my kids grew up...! I used to work round the clock...It's now when they are working I realise that they have grown up. I missed their childhood.

Today my daughter is taking care of the Production in my new channels. And my son is currently assisting Satish Kaushik in his new movie *Shaadi Se Pehle*. He wants to get into direction.

I told my son that we can hire creative minds but he needs to learn to handle the administration and the company. But he's interested on the creative side. But my kids are free to do what they want. I don't force them in any way.

# EPISODE 7

Markand is more disciplined than I am...

**M**arkand is 7 years younger to me. He was more studious and better in studies than I. There is another brother between us called Hiren. I used to be very protective of him. The first time he saw me smoke he was shocked and said 'I'll tell at home'. I told him that I had been smoking for the past 4 years. Today he smokes in the evening time. He is more disciplined than I am. He is more particular. We have never fought with each other even as a child and don't fight today.

He has always handled the administration and I have concentrated on the creative side.

He overreacts to everything most of the time. If he likes something then he'll like it excessively. If he doesn't then he won't like it at all. I'm more controlled. We have always been very close. As kids most of his friends would also be my friends. There wasn't a problem of an age gap or anything.

The one thing that I like most about him is his confidence and he's a good orator. The one thing I'd like to change about him is his overreactions to everything.

Markand Adhikari



# EPISODE 8

## On The Sets People call me Hitler on the sets

I have a major attitude problem. I can't take orders from anyone. My favourite role amongst being a director, channel head and producer is that of a director. I would gladly give up being a channel head or a producer. When I'm on the sets I'm a director and when I'm in office I'm a channel head and a producer.

I'm involved in the scripting just about 50%. My scriptwriters know what I want. The writers get their stuff to me and I edit the scenes in my mind. As a director one should know how to write and edit at the same time. Otherwise you remain only a technician.

I don't like to read scripts. I prefer the story to be narrated to me. Even while I'm directing I sometimes start with the last scene first. I'm a strict director. I like discipline on my sets. People call me Hitler on the sets. I hit people when I get very angry.

I don't like artistes who tell me that they have done so much and then they can't even emote when the camera rolls. Also I'm very punctual when it comes to shooting timings. I don't care which artiste has to leave at what time. I adhere to the lunch breaks. It's always at 1:30pm for lunch and 6.30 evening break, no matter what. Why should my entire unit wait for food, because one artiste has to leave early?

Besides doing television I want to do films soon. Today the films are getting made within a few months and after doing television I don't have the patience to make a movie which will go on for a long time. I'll make a thriller this time around.

When I make a movie, my USP would be the camera angle. Most of the time, my actors don't know where I have put the camera. My camera angles are always different from normal. It takes a while to spot my camera.

Besides direction my interest lies in editing and background music. After I finish shooting, I come to the office at 2 a.m. to listen to it and only once I approve it goes for mixing. When I do the shot division, I keep space for the background music. The fellow who gives the music also enjoys it because I let him experiment. We make new music everyday.

## As a Channel Head and Producer I haven't taken an off for 3 years... I hardly socialise

Mentally I'm always occupied. Every day I'm here from 11am to 11pm. I don't take off from work. I don't like holidays. I haven't taken an off for three years now. I'm a workaholic. I hardly socialise. I don't like going for parties.

I don't know how the afternoon looks like in and around my home. I can't sit at home. I had a fracture in 2004 and yet I shot with that cast. Even when I was advised rest I would come and sit in the office.

As a producer or channel head I never interfere with the other directors that are working with me. I give them complete freedom. Even though I'm a producer I don't go on the sets so often. Also during shooting if there is something that requires us to go over the budget then I do that.

The other thing that I have been following for the past few years is that I provide food to my entire staff. No one has to get his or her *dabba* from home. The same rule applies to all the people working on the sets including the junior artistes.

For Markand and me we have a *maharaj* in the office who cooks for us. I have breakfast but don't have lunch. Sometimes I even skip dinner.

## My Fads "I'm deeply interested in numerology"

I like to watch movies but on the big screen not at home on DVD. If the movie keeps me interested in the first 15 minutes then I watch the whole movie. If not then I get up and go. I study every movie I see. The movie I have liked in recent times is *Veer Zaara*. I don't watch TV much. I like watching news channels more.

I'm a firm believer in destiny. I'm not so religious but yes I do believe in God. I know palmistry and I'm deeply interested in numerology and practise it.

I change my serial title according to numerology. There is no lucky letter for me as such. My name adds up to good numbers so I haven't changed anything in that.

I even went to meet Sanjay B. Jumaani celebrity numerologist and before he could start saying anything I started telling him and we started arguing. After a while he told my brother, *tumhara bhai bahut chalu hai*.

With *Office Office* the numbers just worked out fine. There was no need to add anything to it.

When I'm sitting alone I like to listen to Hemant Kumar and Mohammad Rafi. I have a whole collection of them.

I don't know how to drive. I had learnt and I got a license which I never renewed. I prefer my driver driving me around. He

knows that he is not supposed to speed up when he is with me. When there are no drivers at home I just hop into a rickshaw or taxi. If that is also not there then I come walking at times.

I'm not superstitious but yes I do things like open my car door with my right hand only.

I don't know how to operate the computer. I know how to receive and make calls and to send sms. I don't know any other function of the cell.

I continue to stay at Parle [W]. Even as a child I had friends but not so many. I'm a loner by nature. But if I hit it off with someone then I really hit it off. Earlier I was an introvert now that has converted to an attitude problem. I'm a loner by nature.

# EPISODE 9

## I'm willing to experiment with young directors

Since there were so many news channels we thought of starting a Views Channel – so *Janmat* is a views channel where the common man can address his views. The news is every half hour. It's like a magazine on television. I guess I'm very inclined towards the common man theme which was also reflected in *Office Office*. The response so far has been excellent.

We'll soon launch a Marathi channel *Mee Marathi*. It's like going back to where we started out from. We will ask other directors to work with us but most of the programs will be done in-house.

I'm also thinking of doing something on the younger generation and if I get a good script I'll probably hire a teenager to direct it as well. But he should be creative; should have some sense of editing and should know what he wants to shoot. A good director need not shoot one scene from 4 different angles - he should know how to economise.

My new show on Sony TV afternoon slot *Rishton Ki Dor* is based on a format show called *My Sisters*. I haven't seen the original and I don't want to see it. I want to do it on my own.

Anuj is playing the role of the brother and Urvashi is playing his wife. It's a half hour daily. I've done the initial episodes then I'll get another director to direct. The story of one day will be spread over a period of four episodes.

As told to Mona Vaidya

