

100 YEARS OF SUGAR CORPORATION OF

THE BOY WHO DARED TO DREAM



THE
MEHTA
GROUP

Partners in Progress



The late Mr Nanji Kalidas Mehta, the founder of the Mehta Group



Sugar Corporation of Uganda Limited celebrates 100 years in 2024



PART I

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(Granddaughter of N.K.Mehta)

This is the story of Uganda's first sugar factory, "Uganda Sugar Factory," now known as Sugar Corporation of Uganda Ltd (SCOUL), which celebrates its 100th birthday in October 2024.

This is a story of what is possible when we allow ourselves to dream the impossible, when our actions are driven by courage and unwavering determination, and when our hearts are filled with a deep love of humanity and an unshakeable faith in God.

Our story begins in 1887, with the birth of Nanji Kalidas Mehta, in the small town of Gorana in the state of Saurashtra, India. Nanji, as he was affectionately called, was one of five children. He had a carefree childhood, spent playing by the sea, which held a place of awe and mystery for him. At the tender age of 11, he started working in his

father's shop, as there were no facilities for further education in the area.

Nanji was enchanted by tales he heard of Indian merchants sailing in ships to establish trade between India and Africa. His yearning to set sail to far-off lands intensified as his elder brother and other men in the community started to leave one by one to forge their own paths and seek their fortunes.

Seeing his desolation and restlessness, his loving parents reluctantly agreed to let him go to Madagascar to help his elder brother in business.

Aged 13, Nanji set sail from Bombay in the first available vessel, a small, primitive wooden dhow driven by heavy sails.

The captain used a mariner's compass to navigate during the day, and at night he would rely on the stars. The boat was at the mercy of the winds and was often buffeted by huge waves, causing violent seasickness among the passengers who threw themselves on deck, clinging desperately to their mats. But young Nanji stood as firm as a rock, revelling in the sense of adventure and freedom which he sought.

After 26 days, on January 17th 1901, they finally moored in the crystal blue waters of Kilindi harbour, Mombasa, and Nanji set foot on African soil for the first

time.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Mombasa was the main sea port for all trade for East Africa. To Nanji it resembled a bustling Indian city. The Indian rupee and postage stamps were in use. Indian labourers were brought in for major construction work, including

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the 600-mile Kenya-Uganda railway. Tragically, many of these men lost their lives working in uninhabited lands filled with deadly wildlife, pests and insects.

In his autobiography, "Dream Half Expressed" Nanji observes:
"Such enormous human sacrifice bears testimony to the truth that no nation can stay alone and flourish in isolation... humanity gets richer by mutual give and take."

From Mombasa, they continued to Zanzibar from where they set sail to

Madagascar. A day into the journey, they were hit by a storm that raged for a week. The cyclonic wind howled incessantly bringing along with it torrential showers. Water flooded onto the decks and trickled in through the crevices into the bottom of the ship. Everyone on board worked day and night scooping out water with cooking utensils, pots and pans.

To make the ship lighter most of the cargo had to be thrown overboard and the mast had to be cut.

In Nanji's words:
"The tiny vessel was at the mercy of the tempestuous ocean which heaved and howled like a mad and intoxicated giant. We shook with the terror of obvious death and even the captain had to declare that the ship was in danger

and the fury of the elements could only be overcome if God helped us in the impending doom."

After a few days the sea became calmer but food was restricted to a handful of chickpeas boiled in seawater. They drifted on for 46 days before they finally landed in Ile de Mayotte. They rested here and made necessary repairs to the ship before setting sail once more for Majunga.

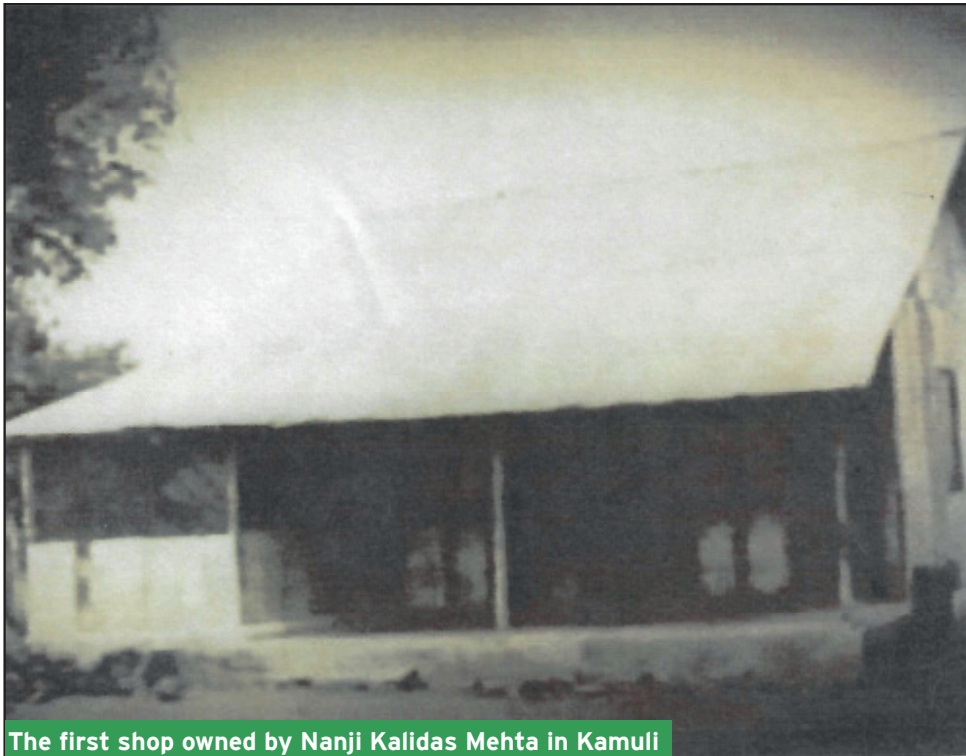
After 5 months of travel and aged just 14, Nanji was reunited with his family in Majunga. He quickly took to the trade, shouldering strenuous activities with ease and enthusiasm.

His first stint in Africa however, was short lived when in 1902 plague broke out claiming 140 lives in 2 weeks. He was sent back to India by his brother, a voyage which took just 26 days.

In India, Nanji felt restless and longed to return, hoping to follow in the footsteps of his idol Mahatma Gandhi to South Africa. However, while he waited for his permit, destiny changed his path and led him in search of his uncle in Uganda.

From Mombasa he travelled through the rift valley by railway till Kisumu, and then by steamship across Lake Victoria to Jinja, Uganda, a country he called "the land of nature's bounty and eternal fertility."

UGANDA LIMITED - LUGAZI



The first shop owned by Nanji Kalidas Mehta in Kamuli



The first office set up in Jinja

From Jinja, Nanji was sent by his uncle to Kamuli to work in the shop of a Muslim merchant. A few years later, in 1906, with the Rs 200 which his employer had given him as a token, he decided to set up his own shop. This marked the beginning of his career as an independent business man in Uganda.

No amenities of convenience or means of modern communications existed then. In his autobiography, he recounts surviving terrible fevers, fearsome storms on the Nile, narrow escapes from angry lions and even a tribe of cannibals. Nanji travelled fearlessly by foot for miles on end, through jungles teeming with wild animals, crossing dangerous streams

and lakes infested with crocodiles, to the remotest corners of the Teso and Lango districts carrying pearls, cloth and wire which he would exchange for sesame and ivory. The indigenous tribes, who had never seen foreigners before, were wary at first but soon thronged to the camps in excitement. Though he understood little of their dialects, he felt that they expressed love and goodwill towards him, which he reciprocated in full measure.

By 1913 a new era was dawning in Africa with the introduction of machinery, investment in infrastructure and improved methods of communication. Bridges and culverts were being built, roads had improved,

bicycles and motorcycles were replacing bullock carts. Jinja had become a flourishing trading centre and the cotton industry had begun to grow in East Africa.

Over the next decade Nanji's business started to flourish and he opened shop after shop, which he handed over to his family members to run as he turned his hand towards growing cotton and building ginneries. In his life time he built 29 ginneries and an oil mill making edible oil out of cotton seeds, sesame and ground nuts. In 1921, he signed a contract with a prominent Japanese company, Toyo Menka Kaisha Cotton Company to export Uganda's cotton to Japan. They established their first

Ugandan headquarters in Nanji's office in Jinja.

Nanji travelled back and forth from India to Africa tirelessly and sometimes in dangerous circumstances, especially during World War I when Germany and British East Africa were fighting. While travelling he took every opportunity to visit as many factories as possible and learn about different industries and trades. In his words: "During these tours I have learnt a lot which I could not have learnt by acquiring degrees from universities." One such visit in India, sparked in him the desire to start a sugar factory in Uganda.

**TO BE CONTINUED
NEXT WEEK**

CELEBRATING 100-YEARS OF CREATING SWEETNESS IN UGANDA



A QUALITY PRODUCT FROM THE MEHTA GROUP