



Centre of Excellence for Innovation,
Entrepreneurship & Startups



Confederation of Indian Industry

A Publication on
**Inspirational
Entrepreneurs:**
The Legacies & Recipes





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the 1990s, the number of people with a disability in the United States has increased by 25% (U.S. Census Bureau 2000). The number of people with a disability in the United States is expected to increase to 35% of the population by the year 2020 (U.S. Census Bureau 2000).

As the number of people with a disability increases, the need for accessible information and communication technologies (ICT) also increases. The United States Department of Justice (DOJ) has issued a series of regulations to ensure that people with disabilities have equal access to information and communication technologies (DOJ 2001). The regulations require that information and communication technologies be accessible to people with disabilities. This means that people with disabilities must be able to use information and communication technologies to obtain information and services that are available to other people.

One of the most important areas of ICT that is affected by the regulations is web accessibility. Web accessibility is the ability of people with disabilities to use the World Wide Web (WWW) to obtain information and services. Web accessibility is a key component of digital inclusion, which is the process of ensuring that all people have access to digital technologies and services.

Web accessibility is a complex issue that involves many different factors. One of the most important factors is the design of the web site. Web sites that are designed to be accessible to people with disabilities are more likely to be used by people with disabilities. Web sites that are not designed to be accessible to people with disabilities are more likely to be ignored by people with disabilities.

Another important factor is the content of the web site. Web sites that contain information and services that are relevant to people with disabilities are more likely to be used by people with disabilities. Web sites that contain information and services that are not relevant to people with disabilities are more likely to be ignored by people with disabilities.

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Foreword

Inspiring the Next Generation of Entrepreneurs

India's remarkable economic journey is inextricably linked to the stories of countless entrepreneurs who dared to dream, innovate, and transform challenges into opportunities. Among them, first-generation entrepreneurs hold a special place as trailblazers who have shaped the nation's industrial landscape. Their indomitable dedication, calculated risk-taking, and innovative thinking have not only fueled the growth of their ventures but also laid the cornerstone for India's economic resurgence.

This compendium, "**Inspirational Entrepreneurs - The Legacy and Recipes**," is a heartfelt tribute to the extraordinary journeys of these visionary leaders. By chronicling their experiences, challenges, and triumphs, we aim to light the path for aspiring entrepreneurs and provide them with a reservoir of wisdom and inspiration.

Through this initiative, we seek to:

- Honor the Legacy of pioneering entrepreneurs who have redefined industries and enriched the nation's entrepreneurial fabric.
- Share Valuable Insights drawn from their personal and professional journeys to guide emerging entrepreneurs.
- Motivate Young Minds to pursue their dreams, armed with confidence and resilience.
- Foster a Culture of Innovation that drives sustainable growth and prosperity in India's business landscape.

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to Mr. Balaji, formerly of The Hindu Business Line, whose meticulous curation and narrative brilliance have brought these stories to life. We also thank Mr. Saai Saran and his team for their invaluable assistance in recording these inspiring interviews, ensuring that these legacies are preserved for generations to come.

It is our firm belief that by sharing these transformative stories, we can contribute meaningfully to nurturing a vibrant, dynamic, and inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystem in India. Together, let us celebrate the spirit of innovation and enterprise that defines our nation.



C K Ranganathan

Chairman & Managing Director
CavinKare Pvt Ltd

Foreword

Honoring India's Entrepreneurial Giants

India's economic landscape has been profoundly shaped by the relentless innovation and excellence of its entrepreneurs. These visionary individuals' stories are not just success tales but also sources of inspiration for aspiring entrepreneurs.

The collection, "Inspirational Entrepreneurs - The Legacy and Recipes," celebrates the extraordinary journeys of these pioneers. From modest beginnings to global triumphs, these entrepreneurs have navigated challenges, seized opportunities, and left a lasting legacy.

By sharing their experiences, we aim to:

- **Inspire the Next Generation:** Encourage young minds to embrace entrepreneurship and pursue their dreams.
- **Learn from the Best:** Provide valuable insights and lessons for aspiring entrepreneurs.
- **Foster a Culture of Innovation:** Promote a culture of innovation and risk-taking.

We are grateful to individuals like Mr. C.K. Ranganathan, Mr. M. Ponnuswami, Mr. Murugavel Janakiraman, Mr. Padmasingh Isaac, Mr. Mahdev Murali, Mr. Shree Kumar, Mr Abhay Kumar Meganathan and Mr Girish Mathrubootham, whose entrepreneurial spirit continues to inspire us. Their stories are a testament to human ingenuity and the limitless potential of the Indian entrepreneurial ecosystem.

We express our sincere gratitude to Mr. Balaji, formerly of The Hindu Business Line, for his invaluable contribution in curating and writing these inspiring journeys. We also thank Mr. Sai for his assistance in recording the interviews.

By sharing these stories, we hope to contribute to the growth of a vibrant and dynamic entrepreneurial ecosystem in India.



Dr. Thangam Meganathan

Chairperson
Rajalakshmi Institutions



Mr. A.D. PADMASINGH ISAAC
Founder and Chairman
Aachi Group of Companies

Always follow up fast after the initial success, keep the momentum going, says Padmasingh Isaac, Founder, Aachi Masala Foods, a first-generation entrepreneur. Aachi Masala is among the top players in manufacturing and marketing & selling spice mixes, diversifying into a range of ready to cook, ready-to-eat foods to convenient food therefore tapping new market segments.

Isaac points to his first major success in the segment with a spice mix, namely the Aachi Kuzhambu Masala in 2000, for making the ever-in-demand kuzhambu, a south Indian gravy. That success he attributes to his hard-earned understanding of the customer & the market need. He had immediately followed it up with a range of variants. Over the next two years he had over 20 different spice mixes in the market.

“I have not looked back since then,” he says.

But this breakthrough did not happen easily. Isaac has had to weather his share of setbacks and failures. His tutor was experience, he learned the business the hard way.

Humble Origins

Isaac recalls the trail he had trudged to create a space at the top in the market for himself and his brand. He was born in Nazareth, a small village in Tirunelveli District, in a family dependent on agriculture for its livelihood. He was one of six children.

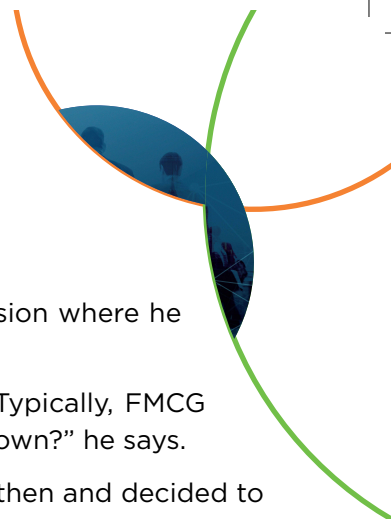
Isaac was just 12 when his father passed away survived by his mother and six siblings. He remembers, the entire responsibility of looking after the family fell overnight on his mother, a homemaker who had studied up to 5th class.

He recalls with admiration the way she had stepped up to look after the family.

“Just over a month after my father passed away, my mother brought home 4-5 milking cows and 40-50 chicken. The eggs she sold to meet day-to-day household expenses and milk she sold for monthly income. She literally took on the role of becoming the breadwinner without missing a beat,” he says.

“You have to remember, back then, cooking involved preparing everything from raw stock, including grinding spices on a stone mortar. It was a laborious task,” but she did it. She took care of us, we were six children, and she put all of us through college, she was clear all her children should be properly educated,” he says.

Little wonder that Isaac considers her his inspiration and role model. His mother had started from scratch due to an unexpected tragedy and had ensured her children had a secure home and education.



Stepping Out

Isaac graduated in business administration and joined a FMCG company's soap division where he worked for over 10 years.

"Since I was just a graduate, I realised there was not much scope for job-growth. Typically, FMCG companies expect a post graduate degree. So, I wondered why not strike out on my own?" he says.

Early in the mid-1990s, he stepped out on his own; He had done a lot of thinking by then and decided to start with making liquid blue, a whitener, for garments, the product was branded Twinkle Blue. "My family was concerned that I was giving up a lucrative job to start my own business, they could not understand why I would take such a risk then. But, my commitment and involvement with the project convinced them. That gave everyone confidence, my wife was a huge support," he says.

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"My initial investment was about Rs 50,000 and that was over 30 years back. I had gratuity funds, about Rs 80,000, and that was a huge sum then. But too small for business. The income was barely enough to support the family and I did not have enough to expand. Funds were scarce then, banks were tight-fisted and demanded collateral, and those were days before angel funds and venture capital," he points out.

"I had even hocked my wife's jewels, that was my bet. But the venture did not yield adequate income, and I realised it was not really a sustainable line," he says.

Liquid blue is a product that is only in seasonal demand, during summer. Also, Twinkle Blue, honestly, was a me-too product, he acknowledges.

Lessons Learnt

But the experience gave him an understanding of the market need and trends. He had to identify products of common and daily use, things that were a basic need.

So, he decided that spices fit the bill. People then had to grind their own spice mixes for various dishes. Isaac thought why not offer ground spices, create a brand. Those days generally multinational brands dominated the branded household products scene though there were a few national brands.

All in the Name

On the choice of brand name, he said since we were in spices and foods, we wanted a name that would draw women, and the term had to be kitchen-related. The name he picked was Aachi, a term used to refer to a respected elder in the family, it was a term children in the southern part of Tamil Nadu commonly used to call their grandmothers. It also resonated well with the target buyers, he says.

Also, Aachi is a variant of aatchi – to rule. Normally, you would expect an entrepreneur to identify a product and frame a brand name. But Isaac had registered the brand in 1995 first, in various segments and had launched a product four years later in 1999.

“Since I was from the FMCG segment, I understood the power of branding and focused on the brand and registered the names first. I also registered Twinkle, Sabash, Twin Birds, Go Strong, Ponni... and so on,” he explained.

Initially, shopkeepers were reluctant to stock the product, as they always are when it comes to stocking new products. Also, shop keepers also had in-house, unbranded products. So, Isaac changed tack and went to the consumers directly, went to market areas and crowded residential areas, approached the consumers. This went on for over 2-3 years. Buyers started asking for Aachi gravy mix and shop keepers had to stock the product, he said.

We literally sold our products street-by-street, offered incentives such as a free utensil for a buying a product. Quality, packaging, pricing, promotional, advertisement all these helps make a successful product.

“I had no other alternative. No other option but to forge ahead. I actually enjoyed the experience, reveled in the challenge,” Isaac says.

“The product was mine, a line I had chosen, and I had to come out ahead. The joy of succeeding is incomparable. If I had not faced such challenges, I may not have learned anything. But, it was a humbling experience and did me good. If it was an easy win, I may not have realised the value of the project. It is my failures, the stumbling blocks that carved me,” he says.

But those years helped me understand the dynamics of the market, and we continued that for over 10 years. Now there are 10 - 15 varieties of gravy possible using Aachi Kulambu Masala including vegetarian and non-vegetarian gravy and curry.

Team Building

An entrepreneur may have a vision for the product but it is equally important to inspire the staff to toe the line. They may be graduates but they need to understand the nuances, Isaac needed to educate them, train them. “Today, we have 5,000 direct employees and 5,000 distributors, 10 lakh consumers and over 10 crore consumers. We groomed the team. Initially, I employed three persons,” he says.


Forging Ahead

In 1999 after launching the gravy mix, Isaac was better able to understand the pulse of the market, and by 2002 he understood that he had a strong product on hand and got the confidence to explore a wider market. Within a year or two he launched a range of masalas for chicken dishes, over 20 products. That initial success-story opened the doorway to the market and gave him confidence. “We would launch two products every month. Always strike while the iron is hot, you should always follow up fast after the initial success,” he advises.

You need to observe your surroundings keenly, developments in the market, consumer needs and trends. People needed a range of spice mixes that were convenient to use and affordable. There were no big brands then. It was relatively easy to launch and establish the market after the initial entry, he says.

In 2002 with a range of mixes in place, he opted to go ahead with an advertisement campaign. “I wanted to expand the market range beyond Chennai and go statewide and countrywide. The company was on a firm footing, and I was aware of that stability. Those days there were only a few television channels, and we started advertisement in the popular channels and it made a huge impact,” he says.

The gravy mix ad with a popular actor helped product recall. We were among the biggest advertisers in the segment. This was a significant leap for the company that was doing business in lakhs and moved to crores, expanded capacities and covered the entire State. Aachi Masala crossed about Rs 100 crore within two years that campaign.



Once, the initial success was achieved we only needed to replicate the success in other States with products tailored to meet the local needs and taste. Today, Achi Masala is in 23 States. “We are very strong in Tamil Nadu, say number one, doing extremely well in Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Maharashtra. Achi Masala is a national brand and exporting sizeable quantities to 65 countries,” he says.

Tapping Opportunities

When you rise to a challenge, even obstacles become an opportunity. For instance, in 2020, during the Covid pandemic, while most industries were shutdown, the food sector continued to operate, and those who could, managed to thrive. We helped our staff stay in the factory, and provided the necessary convenience. They worked continuously. We produced huge quantities of masala and food products and the government supported us. Over 6 - 7 months our units ran for 24 hours. My employees provided full cooperation. Luckily, we were not affected by the contagion. As a company we grew at 25 per cent rate, expanded markets, and it was a thrilling experience.

We were able to grow because the demand was high, not many companies could run and those who tapped the opportunity managed to grow.

Market Trends

One reason he attributes to the success of the venture was the IT boom, with families going abroad, the Indian diaspora spread across the globe. That is a major market potential. Also, quick service restaurants have emerged overseas, foreigners also love a wide range of Indian cuisine. So, Achi Masala is sold internationally, the company is an Indian multinational.

Today, the HoReCa (Hotels, Restaurants and Catering) segment is emerging fast. Eating out habit is on the increase; driven by lifestyle changes and necessity people eat out. “We are developing products for institutional sales especially Quick Service Restaurants. So, they too need speedy cooking, convenient and handy products. We are developing products for the hotel segment including bulk packaging,” he says.

Quality to the Fore

Raw material sourcing is a challenging area, ensuring quality of the product has to start from the source. Isaac points out that procurement happens from January to April when fresh produce arrives from farms. Achi Masala needs to procure the best material then, in huge quantities and store them securely for use the rest of the year.

Isaac’s elder son Ashwin Pandian takes care of procurement of raw materials, over 70,000-tonnes annually. There is a big team that buys directly from farmers and moves the stocks to cold storage, we have a secure cold chain, he says. We prepare products in solar drying yards and move to storage.

His second son Abhishek Abraham, a food processing engineer is strong in R&D and he is passionate about the subject. We have a line of products under development. We have over 250 products and about 600 SKUs, thanks to our R&D department. Achi has progressively evolved from producing basic spices, blended spices, ready-to-cook products and today we are in ready-to-eat products.

Organic Farming

Quality is a key factor, especially in spice industry there are issues. There is overuse of chemicals as farmers chase yields. That is a challenge because of the chemical residues in the harvested produce. So, we have launched a new initiative for organic farming for various spices especially chili.

In Thiruvallur district, to the north of Chennai, we have launched a contract farming initiative spread over 1,000 acres. The Tamil Nadu government is expanding contract farming to six districts. We need to expand

organic farming and expand cash crops in the State. There is a huge potential if we put in efforts for the next four – five years, farmers too will benefit.

In a related move, waste management studies are also going on, he says. We collect the waste material during cleaning of spices. The organic waste is used in our farms and we find yields are increasing. Organised studies are on to expand the initiative. Convert waste to manure and that is positive results.

Diversification

While spices and food are Aachi Masala's core strength, Padmasingh Isaac says it is important to nurture diverse interests among the youngsters in the family. His first daughter-in-law, Shiny Ashwin, has started a showroom Diadem, a chain of garment stores. She is a designer and we wanted to nurture her interests. Youngsters have an entrepreneurial quality and taste and as elders we need to encourage that, he says.

My second daughter-in-law, Rebekah Abishek, is keen on the education sector. So, we launched Aachi Global School, based on Cambridge syllabus. It is doing extremely well, he says.

Isaac's wife Thelma has launched Aachi Kitchen, a restaurant that has ambitions of setting up a chain of hotels.

Aachi's Growth Plans

This year, in 2023-24 we have reached turnover of Rs 12,200 crore and among the top three companies in India. Particularly, the spice industry has drawn the attention of global players today. The Indian economy is growing, consumption of food increasing, and recently there is a lot of buzz around the spice industry. Frankly speaking this is a sunrise industry and is set to grow for 20-25 years. I believe the boom will be amazing.

"My sons are keen to take the Aachi brand globally," says Isaac. "We are doing a lot of planning targeting the international markets, our R&D is vibrant and new products are in the pipeline, especially ready-to-eat products in different verticals. People are increasingly looking at convenience foods, youngsters do not want to spend too much time in the kitchen, the market scenario is buoyant domestically. People are travelling and spreading the cuisine. Domestically industries doing well," he says confidently.

For those Starting Out...

I would like to say, today is the day. Anybody can enter the field, if you want to be an entrepreneur gain more knowledge, especially in service industry a lot of good things are happening, core industry is doing well but you need lot of capital.

In food service or other service sector, there is growth and if you are keen, please gain knowledge, work for some time, get trained. But it is important to get a good mentor. I am talking from personal experience. Learn the trade, own the job, consider yourself a partner in the company, patience and passion for the job is important, he says.

Actually, there are lots of opportunities in the domestic market and abroad. Mainly, there is all around development in industry, education levels have grown and qualified Indians are going abroad, ability to communicate in English is beneficial. This is the right time for an entrepreneur to enter the business. This is a golden opportunity. Whatever field you choose, learn everything about the field. Second, look for a good mentor, entrepreneur or leader. Do not prioritise salary, but focus on gaining knowledge, advises Isaac.



C K Ranganathan
Chairman & Managing Director
CavinKare Pvt Ltd

C.K. Ranganathan is quite the maverick. He walked away from the security of a thriving family-business, struck out on his own to create one of the well-known and diversified ventures in personal care and FMCG segment, CavinKare Pvt Ltd.

CKR as Ranganathan is popularly referred to, was inspired by his father R. Chinni Krishnan, a math teacher, who was also an innovator with a yearning to venture into business. His father, a first-generation entrepreneur, pioneered a packaging model in the early 1970s, single-use packs or mono-dose packs, for common items of day-to-day use. Krishnan also developed his own brand of shampoo and sold them in single-use sachets making the products available to the common man at an affordable price.

That was the birth of sachet pack in 1972.

Chinni Krishnan marketed the products in the vicinity of his home town, Cuddalore, and did not aggressively pursue expansion. That was left to his sons. The product range included pharmaceutical items, shampoo, honey and hair oil in sachets. The shampoo in sachets branded Velvette would go on to take the retail market by storm.

CKR, the third of Krishnan's four sons, would supply the sachets to shops on his way to college and collect the payments. But in 1978 the family received a jolt, Krishnan died of a heart attack, he was just 48. This happened just as the sachet concept was taking off, says CKR.

Chinni Krishnan was survived by his wife Hema Chinni Krishnan, and his four sons - CKR's siblings included the eldest C.K. Rajkumar, then an ophthalmologist; C.K. Ashok Kumar, an advocate; and C.K. Kumaravel, the youngest who too is an entrepreneur of note.

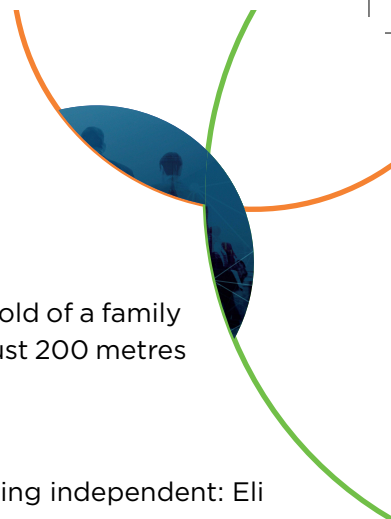
He remembers that the family had taken stock of its future after his father had died. They decided to continue the venture launched by Krishnan, and the two elder brothers got into the act. CKR who was in his second year of college, joined them after his college course.

Initial Steps

CKR recalls the initial days when he was bogged down by a "terrible inferiority complex", academically he had not shined and was yet to clear some subjects. He had arrears, too many of them, he says. His brothers had studied in English medium and were good students.

But in a few months, CKR found his footing in the business and gained confidence as he realised entrepreneurship was just about common sense. After that there was no looking back, he says.

He started asserting himself and participated more actively in business discussions. This was around 1982. "I had my own ideas, but these differed from my brothers' point of view. I felt there was no common ground and decided to strike out on my own. That was a defining career move," he says.



Venturing Out

It proved a major turning point in CKR's life as he came out from under the protective fold of a family business, and even moved out of the household, even if it was to a single room space just 200 metres away.

The family had agriculture land, a big house, and a thriving business.

But CKR has no regrets. He quotes a Tamil saying to emphasise the importance of being independent: *Eli valaiyanalum, thani vallaiya irukkanum* (Meaning: Even if it is a space as small as a rat's nest, it needs to be your own.).

It was now a question of finding his own way. He mulled various options. The pet and livestock lover that he was, CKR considered getting into poultry. But that requires lots of space and money. "I had just about Rs 15,000. So, poultry was out of question," he says.

He fell back on the one thing he knew well -- making shampoo. He was confident that he could make it work. The first objective was survival. "Having challenged my family, that I do not want their support or share in property and walking out, it was important that I prove myself. I had burnt my bridges and could not go back," he says.

After deciding on a course of action, he moved fast, got the formalities such as obtaining a licence, factory space, again a single-room, and so on.

"But at that time, I was only familiar with production and knew nothing about sales or marketing. Kicking off a business, the paperwork, and actual production were the easy part. I had even decided on the brand name, Chik, after the initial letters of my father's name, Chinni Krishnan," he says. That was the birth of Chik India, which in the late 1990s would become the well-known CavinKare Pvt Ltd.

CKR's immediate concern was the lack of funding. Vendors are generally reluctant to extend credit, and all the more so for a newbie, and a microscale player to boot. But some were kind enough to lend a helping hand, gave about Rs 3,000 worth of material and said he should roll over the credit fast. Plus, he had some money left over after the initial formalities including rent and licence fee.

"I started with small orders, about a couple of thousand rupees worth, each. It was crucial that I churn out the product fast, sell the stock to fund purchase raw material for the next batch," he says. He was on a tight budget and even tighter schedule. So, he had to travel to Chennai frequently for buying the raw material. It was a hectic life, he recalls.

Reality Hits

CKR remembers he started with sales of about Rs 50,000 a month, and was able pay the staff, vendors and manage his essential expenses. But soon sales started tapering by the month to Rs 40,000 and then Rs 35,000. At that time, he was employing about 8 - 10 staff when reality hit.

"Simply because I was familiar with shampoo-making, I had started with that product. But it was merely a duplication of my family's brand. One of my distributors pointed that out and advised me against it. I could not hope to go up against Velvette, a well-known brand by simply copying it, my product had to stand on its own strength," he said.

A retailer had even called him a copycat. But all this was a lesson. CKR realised he needed to act fast. "I was on skids, sliding down and I needed to differentiate," he says. Also, "I think it took a while to realise that I needed to market, advertise, get consumers to demand Chik shampoo," he says.



Gaining the Spotlight

CKR announced an incentive scheme for buyers and shopkeepers. Customers could bring in any five empty shampoo sachets and get one sachet of Chik shampoo free; for the retailers too he announced incentives for roping in buyers. That was a big break. From Rs 30,000 a month, sales started gaining momentum and in 10 months crossed Rs 10 lakh by about 1984-85. So that was a big threshold and there was no looking back, he says

Standing Apart

He also widened the variant base with more fragrances such as rose and jasmine. “I opted for a French fragrance and that was an important factor. When customers used Chik Shampoo, the aroma would pervade the wash room for hours, garments would retain the scent the whole day. Even the bed and pillow would smell pleasant. Normally, the price of the commonly used fragrances was about Rs 500 a kg but we used imported stock costing about Rs 3,000 a kg,” he says.

The product was recognised for its better conditioning, quality and variants and these were driven by advertisements, all these made a difference. So, customers started asking for Chik shampoo.

“It took me 10 years to understand the difference between sales and marketing I focussed initially on sales and called it marketing. Distinguishing between the two was all important,” he says.

Next, CKR started radio and television ads, roped in popular actors such as Amla, Kushboo and Arvindswamy in the ad campaigns. CKR also invested in strengthening the field teams and sales jumped from Rs 10 lakh to about Rs 2 crore a month.

Velvette was at that time the largest and Chik was the second on the advertisement channels. We did a decent job on not compromising on quality. It took some time but we were able to find our feet, he says.

Self-improvement

But the progress was not just about the product, CKR realised he needed to reinvent himself. “Maybe, I took things easy in school and college. But after getting into business, I slogged,” he says.

“I started reading. I read everything, about business, about self- improvement and so on. One transformative habit was reading self-improvement books very early. After work, I would think about business. After waking up, I thought about what needed to be done,” he says.

He also needed to brush up on English speaking, so he started reading the Hindu newspaper and also bought a dictionary. “I learnt five new words a day and I would write five sentences using each word,” he says.

He started grooming better, learned time management, got more efficient, familiarised himself with management and marketing concepts. “If I had been in the family business, these could not have happened and would probably have been stuck just in production. I was forced to change. But those habits have stuck with me,” he says.

Actually, earlier when Chik shampoo needed to be re-invented, it was a book, *Differentiate or Die* a book by Jack Trout that inspired him, he says.

Till 2000 CKR stuck to personal care segment and then he started diversifying into a range of businesses. The first move was a salon-chain, then diversified into food processing with pickles and that went on...



Diversification

With salons he experimented with a handful of formats – one was a typical barber shop for 300-400 sq ft for men and for women 500 sq ft; a unisex parlour Greentrends; for the high end, Limelite; and a barebones 100 sq ft shop offering haircuts at Rs 25. He piloted these over 6 – 8 months and finally settled on Limelite and Greentrends.

I hit upon this idea of a chain of salons, after the stark contrast between our local barbershops and the kind of facilities provided abroad. I felt things could be better. Also, in unisex salons, overall cost was lower, and economy was better, we could afford a receptionist, handle cash and customer management. All this is a good lesson. We also invested in training, got better space. We have over 400 salons and are the largest privately owned salon chain in the country and the most profitable consistently, he says.

The beauticians get social security benefits such as ESI, provident fund, and we are pioneers at that kind of employee support in this segment. We are that way happy and are one of the good GST payers.

Dairy Sector

The next major break was into dairy products. There was a sick unit available at Kanchipuram and we decided to take a look.

“I thought we could revive the unit given the market potential. Our focus was on milk-based beverages, which call for a separate distribution chain and were keen on that. We built a cold chain, and have grown our beverages and Cavin’s is one of the prestigious brands. Cavin’s holds one-third market share in milkshakes nationally,” says CKR.

R&D Led Growth

But the successes in any product line can be attributed to one thing important, we are heavily invested in R&D.

“When I started out my office was a 200 sq ft space but my R&D space was 500 sq ft. Even today my office is about 32,000 sq ft and my R&D facility is about 40,000 sq ft in Chennai with about 40 scientists. We always invested and focussed on R&D and innovation. It was not just about quality control and assurance. We have a dedicated R&D facility. That is the backbone of our growth apart from the great team of staff we have. We need that for international competition, to go global. For that every industry needs its strong R&D,” he says.

Lessons Learnt

But things have not always gone smoothly. We have had our own failures and these have shaped CavinKare, he says.

In 1987-88 CKR tried getting into the packaged drinking water segment, the product was branded Minerva. “It did well, we sourced stocks from a reputed producer. But unfortunately, the numbers were unsustainable. A 1.5-litre-bottle cost Rs 12. If we had to take 5 cases it was 100 kg load and the delivery staff using a tricycle for carrying the stock made about Rs 150 on 100 kg sales value. But one shampoo box of 6 kg and getting Rs 1000 and I can load 7-8 boxes and make a lot more. I realised that it would not work for me, it called for a separate distribution chain. I exited the business,” he says.

Similarly, he had launched Kanya anti-dandruff shampoo. It did okay. But involved big investment and perseverance to take on the competition of the existing established brands. Our’s was an herbal option but volumes were small. I realised we should not waste our time.



Nothing Ventured, Nothing Gained

We have one philosophy. Fail fast, fail cheap. Do not be afraid of failure. It is important that we learn from our failures. At the same time, we do not punish people who take risk and fail. But we look at the effort and affordability. As long as you can absorb the overall risk, we will give things a shot up to reasonable levels.

Two or three things that helped us to stay afloat and scale up is that – though I did not bring in great capital, I rotated money efficiently and made timely payments to creditors and vendors. So, it was a question of prudent credit and working capital management. If there was a strain in working capital we pause and ensure our debts are paid. Only after that will experiments start. I had a highly qualified finance person and we predict cashflows and plan in advance.

I do not want to be told you are not paying on time. That has helped me big time. Many companies may jump between vendors. But the world is small. Many do not understand this and get into trouble.

Packaging Security

In 1990, CKR found packaging material supply was restricted as only two players could supply sachets for liquid packaging. So, effectively, the suppliers constrained his output and turnover. That was frustrating. “I started our own factory – Packaging India at Pondicherry. It became the largest of its kind in the south and then I sold it after about 15 years of running when there were no longer bottlenecks in packaging availability,” he says.

And that sales helped with the funding. We got some good money and that helped our diversification.

We also put up our own factory at Haridwar for shampoo and personal care products and we got our dairy entry because of that and we bought Maa beverage, a small acquisition at that time. Later acquired Garden snacks at Mumbai. So, all this came off that packaging sales.

Growth Targets

Yes, we need to have a clear plan. We analyse our products, markets and potential for growth, to invest in production facilities and field force to add. We need to manage all this. I have not been too concerned on the growth rate, but clearly, we have gained, he says.

On the next step in the evolution, CavinKare II, he says a key factor is that the organisation has redefined itself after the Covid pandemic. Following the pandemic outbreak and working from home, we have now come back to office. We have outsourced routine work such as accounting, writing cheques, and non-core activities, and where possible, some production.

We are now a thinking organisation focussed on strategy, R&D, sales, marketing and production. We do our own exclusive formulations.

We are clearly focussed on product launches and innovation, says CKR.

Our online initiative, CavinKart could have been better. Though we are selling online through other platform, we had hoped to set up our own dedicated platform for online sales, but that needs to be honed. But it is costlier than selling through existing platforms such as Flipkart, Amazon, it is cheaper for us. However, we are keen on establishing an exclusive online presence to sell directly to every customer, and that calls for more time.



Leadership Transition

CKR has a son, Manuranjith Ranganathan; and two daughters, Amudhavalli Ranganathan; and Dharani Ranganathan. He has made it clear to his children that meritocracy is the key to leadership in CavinKare. Whoever is competent should lead the business and the others should accept the leadership. They are mentally tuned to the change, he says.

Also, I said they need to prove themselves before coming into CavinKare. Simply, they should have managed at least a 100 people in their own business and generate some profit. That would take 4-5 years and sufficient learning. I also gave them Rs 10 lakh each to let them get a feel of launching their own ventures.

My son succeeded initially and had his own challenges but recovered from that, my daughters also initially failed. The moment they came to some size I invited them to come into CavinKare. They need to learn the nuances of management and they passed the test. The third kid is midway, employing 35-40 people, and I am telling her to expand, get your hands dirty, face challenges, says CKR.

Manuranjith is handling retail, bakery chain, and the Sanchu Animal Hospital chain and he also participates in strategic discussion of CavinKare, including finance and marketing.

Amudhavalli handles the educational institutions in Cuddalore, over 6,000 students study in our schools and colleges; manages e-comm and our wellness clinic and is building it. She also participates in marketing discussions.

The youngest daughter Dharani is into home baking and is quite a leading player in Chennai and profitable. She needs to scale up and expand the units, he says.

For the Budding Entrepreneurs...

For the entrepreneurs in the making, CKR suggests that self-confidence is essential. "If you do not have confidence in yourself, you will not succeed. Do not be afraid to fail. If you are very good in managing yourself and others, I think you have a fair chance of succeeding. Applying common sense is important. I would very strongly advocate those who want to get into business, just build the foundation and prepare yourself," he says.

Neither the parents nor the environment or anything can prepare us for this. That comes through personal effort.

My guide is *Seven Habits of Highly Successful People* by Stephen Covey. It helped me learn time management, punctuality. When I started, I was not at all time conscious. Now I am judicious about my time. That is the most precious resource. Not money. That and right decisions are key. Imbibing such habits and making it a way of life is key to success. He says this is a book he has introduced in their schools for the students to practise.

Another book is *The Magic of Thinking Big*, by David J Schwartz, it is about how thinking expands our horizon, how impossibilities become a possibility. CKR practised those very early.

10 Natural Laws of Time and Life Management by Hyrum W. Smith, is a resource, CKR says, he found useful. I am used to taking a lot of decisions and do that within a minute. My governing values are clear, I know what I can do and what I cannot. On a few issues I may take a long time to decide, but these are rare, if everything is presented well, I can act fast, he says.

So, it is such foundation that determines a person's success. Otherwise, you will learn these the hard way, in bits and pieces. So, it is easier to learn in a book and practise.



Just do it

In these days of campus placement and lucrative jobs, how does one take the risk of launching a business? Risk and rewards are proportional. Going for salary may not be bad. I have studied so many biodatas and interviewed so many candidates. Typically, given a starting salary, after 25 years of service the salary would have grown six times, in some rare cases 15 times.

But as entrepreneurs, sky is the limit. Most have started from a humble beginning. But all that calls for how well you invest in yourself and prepare yourself. That homework, the discipline of learning, putting it into practise, will make a person great.

Do not take a risk that will push you back. Be aware of your capacity. Without risk I could not have diversified. If I was afraid to fail, I would not have grown.

There is never an ideal time to start a business. If you are confident, ready to take the plunge, if you are not afraid to fail, just jump in and learn on the go. But be prepared for hard work. As a senior executive, people can enjoy fixed working hours. But if you are an entrepreneur, you are involved 24 x 7, he cautions.



Murugavel Janakiraman
Founder & CEO
Matrimony.com

For a first-time entrepreneur who has nurtured a multimillion-dollar venture spanning the globe, virtually, Murugavel Janakiraman, Founder & CEO, Matrimony.com, is uncharacteristically humble, even candid, as he attributes his early success to serendipity.

Talking about the early days of the online match-making platform, his brainchild, he says, “My life has been shaped by unintended consequences. Any turnaround happened not because I thought things through and worked on a direction, but because I was able to accept whatever the outcome, and they proved to be turning points for the better. They were like God-sent directions. Unexpected consequences created better options than what was intended,” he says.

But the underlying fact is that the online platform he conceived was an avocation to which he devoted his time and recognised that it had the potential to grow. Matchmaking service was only one among the various online services he had built even while he had been employed in the US as a programmer.

Sharing his experience in starting up a successful venture, Murugavel opens up about the way it all began.

Humble Beginnings

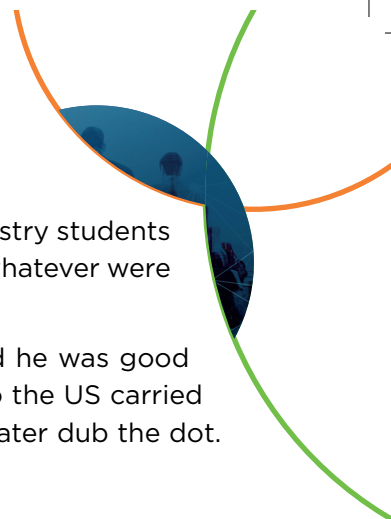
He grew up in Royapuram, a congested, coastal locality in north Chennai, known most for its fishing harbour and seafood market. He was also among the earliest in his family to complete schooling and go on to college.

As we sit in his swank 5th-floor-office in Foreshore Estate, overlooking the Marina about 10 km south along the coast from where he grew up, it is easy to see he has come a long way.

He was the first to complete high school in his immediate family. “I did not know what to study in college. My uncle the first graduate among my circle of relatives suggested I study BSc chemistry. That would enable me to get a lab technician’s job,” he had said. It was not that Murugavel was fond of chemistry, he had actually scored the least in that subject in school finals. But he applied to a number of colleges and hoped to do the course and get a lab-tech job.

But thankfully, when he met the principal of Presidency College for a seat in chemistry, the gentleman felt the student would do better in statistics. Till the 10th standard Murugavel had studied in a Tamil medium school, and was among the toppers. But when he shifted to an English medium school for the final two years, he had been handicapped by the language barrier. However, he had done well in math which did not need too much proficiency in English.

“I was initially disappointed with the college head’s advice. But thankfully heeded it and that was one of the best turning point for me and a major milestone. Equally by chance, for my post-graduation, a senior had advised, since I was good in math and logic, I should apply for a master’s degree in computer application,” he said.



Murugavel put in an application. Interestingly, he could not help but notice that chemistry students were not eligible to apply for the course! “A philosophy in my life has been to accept whatever were the consequence of my action. I believe, God has better plans for me,” he says.

So, he did Master of Computer Applications in the University of Madras. He realised he was good in programming, worked in India for a year, then moved on to Singapore and then to the US carried along by the tide of the growing internet-based businesses, which the world would later dub the dot.com bubble.

Entrepreneurial Bug Bites

Initially, he says his focus was on survival, making some money and improving his family’s quality of life. But with the US-job and a level of economic comfort achieved, he wanted to do something of his own.

“I was not sure where to begin. But being from Tamil Nadu, I wanted to do something for the Tamil community outside India,” he says.

Typically, his peers were focussing on online content.

But with his programming skills, he wanted to offer services that would help the Tamil community. He launched a Tamil calendar with festival dates, a discussion platform for Tamils and a match-making service, a matrimony facility. “It was a one man show, I started the website on Tamil New Years Day, April 14, 1997. It was a part time effort as I was employed as a consultant in the US,” he says.

Matchmaking Facility

The matrimony site started getting some traffic and the feedback was encouraging, people were finding it eased the process of identifying the right partner. That sparked an idea. There was bound to be similar requirement in other communities, even some specific niches. Why not create an exclusive matchmaking site? Initially, it would be for the Tamil diaspora, outside India, and subsequently the idea could be extended to cover various communities across the country, he felt.

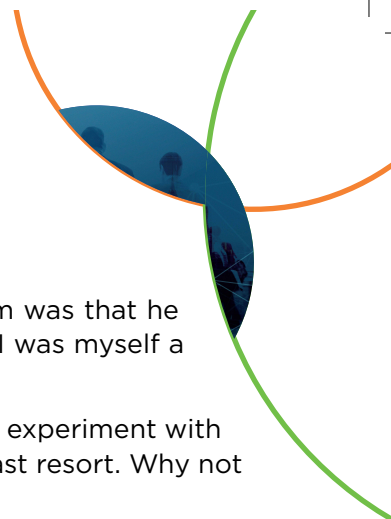
He had started with Tamil community because he was most familiar with the region as a Tamilian himself. That is how the whole thing began, he says. A natural extension was a similar offering for the Telugu-speaking community. With his roots in Royapuram where there was a significant number of Telugu-speaking members, it was a natural extension.

If you see the domain registration commencement date Tamil and Telugu registrations are on the same day, both the matrimony services were launched on April 14, 2000, he says. He also registered a number of domains under bharatmatrimony.com brand to cater to Marathi, Kannada and Malayalam speaking communities, he says.

Bubble Bursts

Around 2000 was the time he started promoting the services, he says. Again, fate took a hand. It was when the dotcom bubble burst and he lost his job. Effectively, he was now a fulltime entrepreneur. His confidence was also shored up by the efficacy of the matchmaking site – he had used the online platform to identify a life partner for himself.

“When I started the venture, it was more a community service, I had married recently, I was making some money but I lost my job. I told my wife that I wanted to get into the venture full time as I was not getting a good job after the dot com burst,” he says.



Tech Twist to Tradition

But, typically, in India, matchmaking is a pretty traditional area. What worked for him was that he saw those uploading their profiles were Indians abroad. He points out with a smile, “I was myself a brand ambassador because I had used the facility to find my life partner,” he says.

“Well, obviously people outside India need a life partner. These were people willing to experiment with the site, considered it an additional option in their search for a partner or even as a last resort. Why not give it a shot?” he says.

But, Murugavel saw the long-term potential in the online business, it was a good way to connect people. With the Internet growing, access to computers growing, a decade down the line it could prove to be a good model. “If technology was strong and the platform good, it would be great. I did have that vision of a great long-term opportunity,” he says.

Securing Client Base

But at the turn of the century, it was still a challenge initially. Potential clients were not sure if online option was ideal for matchmaking. It was still unfamiliar technology being used in a traditional and conservative area. Would people be comfortable putting their profiles online?

Murugavel says, right from the beginning he was clear that the profiles needed to be genuine and the subscriber was keen on marriage. “We vetted each and every profile, validated them, ensured it was only for marriage, a lifetime commitment, and not just for friends or relationships. Those we did not allow on the website. We also gave an option to the users to allow their photos to be public or keep it private,” he says.

To break into a traditional area like matchmaking it was important to give users a sense of security, allow them the choice to control who could view their information including photo and phone number.

Initially, the subscriber base was probably about 10 profiles a day, he says. Today, on a quarterly basis, Matrimony gets onboard over two million members.

The dotcom burst not only made him a fulltime entrepreneur, but also opened up an opportunity to tie up with bigger platforms such as Sify, Rediff for a relatively small cost. This boosted traffic, and put money into growth. Today what we have achieved over two decades is the creation of a brand called Matrimony, synonymous with online matrimony.

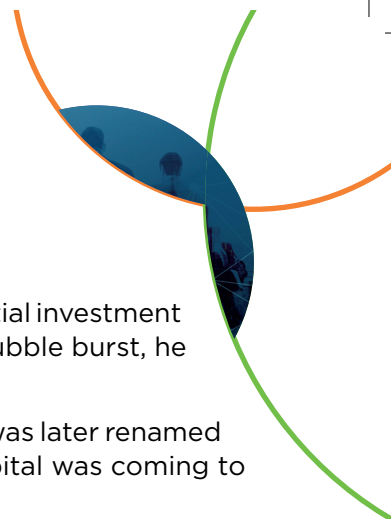
Protecting a Niche

Murugavel realised, obviously within India, more than 80 per cent of marriages happen within community. Here was an opportunity and a threat. “We foresaw more community matrimony sites coming in, and people will want a share of the success,” he says.

“The potential threat we saw and pre-empted. Initially, for SEO (Search Engine Optimisation) purpose we launched 200-plus matrimony sites based on community. By community, we do not mean just caste-based categorisation, but community in a very broad sense, a closed group with a common feature such as language, profession, like-minded people; so we have doctor matrimony, techy matrimony, defence matrimony, IIM and IIT matrimony, divorcee matrimony -- divorcees prefer to marry within the divorcee community,” he says.

“We have rich and affluent matrimony; it is a community by itself. Our strategy is based on segmentation – population that wants to marry within the segment. We recently launched a service called meraluv.com, an exclusive dating site for Indian Americans – again a community that prefers to marry among themselves,” he says

We own the domain names, today by and large within the matrimony sites across diverse segments we own the domain names and run it. So, we are protected from copycats, he says.



Investor interest

On funding itself, Murugavel says the venture was completely bootstrapped with the initial investment being a modest \$10 per month. Two years later when he lost his job to the dotcom bubble burst, he was investing \$1,000 per month when he became a fulltime entrepreneur.

By about 2006, he was running a \$4 million company, Bharat Matrimony Group which was later renamed Consim Info Pvt Ltd, when he decided to raise money. That was the time venture capital was coming to India.

“We contacted all the VCs but nobody was keen. I remember, on January 1, 2006, my investment banker said, Murugavel we have run out of options. But I said do not give up hope, keep trying, keep doing your best. Later the same year, we got investments from Yahoo, their first such investment in India, and from Canaan Partners totalling about \$8.65 million and we raised another round within two years, that was led by Mayfield Fund and the existing investors taking the total to \$11.65 million, and after that we did not raise any funds,” he says.

Over Extended

Here is where the entrepreneur in him made a mistake – over extending without consolidating the initial success, he says. Matrimony was a profitable company, but much of the initial funding went into other verticals he had launched hoping to duplicate the success of Matrimony.

A company press release of December 5, 2007, says BharatMatrimony Group, announced a name change of its holding company to Consim Info Private Limited. The new corporate name has been designed to represent the group’s various business verticals including BharatMatrimony.com, Clickjobs.com, Indiaproperty.com, Indialist.com, Loanwala.com and Indiaautomobile.com, under a common philosophy.

That rapid roll out of diverse sites proved a mistake. Without consolidating his success or focussing on growing it bigger, he over expanded without capital, bandwidth, management strength or for that matter any other resources to make a go of the other verticals. We went through a challenging phase in 2008 after the second round of funding – a most challenging and interesting phase, he says.

But that was the experience that helped him evolve from being an entrepreneur to becoming a business head. Till that time, he says, “I was an entrepreneur focussing on technology and product. That challenge made me a CEO,” he says.

Tough Decisions

“Post the second round of funding in 2009, and remember this was after the Lehmann crisis and the Global Financial Crisis of 2008, my investors told me categorically that there were simply too many verticals and not enough resources. They wanted me to hold on to Matrimony only. But I was not for it and wanted a diverse basket,” he says.

But my board too was clear on the need to cut our losses, get a hold on things. So, we shed some of the ventures, sold some at a throwaway price. Despite my initial reluctance for the course correction, I realised as CEO, I was responsible for the overall success. So, even the global financial crisis proved a turning point, he says.

Murugavel confesses, he initially did not have any understanding of the various aspects of business, his strength was programming. But the rest he pushed himself to learn – marketing, sales, HR, built a competency.

I was not even aware of profit and loss statement, cashflow, because I was from statistics and computer application, and an early entrant in this space. Even the global financial crisis was a significant turning point. I learnt from others, read up a lot on various subjects and all that contributed to the success and helping millions of people, he says.

While programming can create products, a business involved multifaceted expertise in finance, HR and management. It was a constant learning.



Brainstorming with Peers

One helpful resource was a peer group, the Bouncing Board, a group he was a member in. Every month 10 entrepreneurs would meet and help each other with a broad range of suggestions and ideas. I needed to improve myself.

“People say at the end of the day the bottleneck is always at the top,” says Murugavel. The speed of the train is the speed of the engine. So, I learned I needed to evolve, get better and learn. Things were changing rapidly. Today the changes are happening much more rapidly, than whatever was in the past. There was continuous improvement, he says.

Unique Facility

On the concept of the matrimony site itself, Murugavel points out, it is an interesting service model, we do not have lifelong customers, we are happy to lose a customer, that is our members find a good life partner, leave our data base and go on into the next phase of their life. We have lifelong gratitude from our subscribers, but not lifelong interaction. So, yearly we get a new set of customers. We are aware that over 60 million individuals are looking for life partners in India at any time, we have over 8 million on yearly basis. We have not reached the entire segment of potential customers. We only look at various ways to tap this resource, he says.

One recent launch was jodii.com which is a matchmaking service for non-degree holders. School educated. Online matrimony has been serving degree holders and English-speaking segments. So, we expanded the base with this simple product in 10 Indian languages,

We need to continuously figure how to reach out to new customers. We are a 24-year-old company with revenue close to Rs 500 crore.

Allied Service Offerings

The revenue right from the beginning has been subscription-based. The company is one of the few successful subscription-based online models. But of late we are diversifying and expanding we are getting into wedding services, mandap.com. By offering some service we can get a commission, we are exploring various other options.

Ideal funding is that from our customers. If you can do that, great.

But with the changing environment, capital available, if you are not able to raise money while your competitor does, it can be catastrophic. Typically, in the case of PEs the issue is of putting too much capital that affected performance of companies. When you raise money, you have to give exit. You can ask somebody to take over, but going public is a good option to give exit to all investors. There are pros and cons, but once you raise money, an Initial Public Offering is a good option.

But, when you are a private company, your information is private but a public listed company is subject to quarterly performance, continuous communication, and you need to manage that. You need to balance between short-term and long-term goals. As a private player you can afford to look at long term alone. But as a public company you need to balance and that is a challenge. There are lot more disclosures involved and all the information is out in the public domain. This can be a competitive disadvantage. But those are growth pangs, for a start-up, growing up, accessing funds, validation, and IPO is the next phase of the journey.

Today we are serving about 10 million customers and can in the next five years double that number and an interesting goal to chase. We want to create a long-lasting organisation that can serve millions of people find a life partner and lead a happy family life.



For Budding Entrepreneurs...

Now is the best time. India is at a phenomenal place to become among the top economies in the world. But it is important for entrepreneurs to acquire skills. Do not jump into the field just because it is interesting.

You need a strong desire to achieve success, but need to address what you are trying to offer, what product or service that will address the society's need. What segment you want to address. You cannot take on all issues. What solution or experience you want to give a segment.

So be clear about the target segment, or the problem to be addressed, solution or experience you want to give the segment. What value proposition you want come under. Once you are clear on this, if you have the desire, then you are bound to be a success, assures Murugavel.



M. Ponnuswami
Chairman & Managing Director
Pon Pure Chemicals Group

From a humble beginning to leading a chemical powerhouse, M. Ponnuswami 's journey is one of resilience, vision, and a relentless drive to build something extraordinary. What started as a small chemical trading company, born out of necessity, has transformed into Pon Pure Chemicals Group—an influential player in both the domestic and global chemical industry.

In the early 1980s, Ponnuswami worked as an employee in a scientific equipment shop, earning a modest salary. With a “simple business concept” and a commitment to supporting his growing family, he took a leap of faith, borrowing money from relatives and friends to start his own venture. This humble beginning laid the foundation for what would grow into Pon Pure Chemicals Group—a leader in the chemical industry. Today, over four decades later, the company serves numerous industries, embodying the power of perseverance, adaptability, and innovation.

A Rural Beginning Meets Big Ambitions

Ponnuswami 's story started far away from the hustle and bustle of Chennai, in a remote village. He began his education at a Panchayat-run school. After graduating with a degree in chemistry, he moved to Chennai in 1974 to look for a job. The city was difficult to navigate, and adjusting was hard for a boy from a quiet village. Simple social interactions felt overwhelming, so Ponnuswami returned home.

However, he couldn't ignore his ambitions. Relatives and friends, confused by his choice to leave the city, encouraged him to go back. He soon found work in his cousin's shop selling scientific equipment. This job helped him learn about business-to-business sales, which became an important step toward his future success as an entrepreneur.

The Birth of Pon Pure Chemicals

In the late 1970s, Ponnuswami faced increasing family responsibilities. He was married, and in December 1980, he welcomed his first son. At that time, his monthly salary of Rs. 650 barely covered basic living expenses. Confronted with rising financial pressures, he realized that the only way forward was to start his own business.

But starting a business was no easy task, especially when he was already Rs 5,000 in debt. However, with unwavering support from family and friends, he managed to raise Rs 36,500—a small sum that would set the

foundation for Pon Pure Chemicals. Encouraged by his family and driven by a belief that entrepreneurship was the path to a better life, Ponnuswami took the leap.



Building a Business on a Shoestring

With limited capital, Ponnuswami had to be resourceful. He recruited a team that included a sales representative, a typist, and a delivery person. Office equipment was purchased second-hand from a local auctioneer for under Rs 5,000, and a two-wheeler was acquired on a payment plan. Every rupee was spent wisely, with Ponnuswami focused on maintaining cash flow—a vital aspect for any entrepreneur.

His business model was simple but effective. He traded in chemicals, buying in bulk, repacking, and selling smaller quantities. With limited resources, this approach allowed him to cater to small buyers, including MSMEs, auto-component manufacturers, and even star hotels. In his early days, Ponnuswami's operations were extremely modest. He repacked chemicals into small polythene bags and glass bottles, targeting those who needed quantities as small as 1-5 kg.

Growth Through Commitment and Reputation

The early days of Pon Pure Chemicals were full of challenges. At one point, the business had only half a dozen customers, and each one was essential for its survival. Ponnuswami had to work hard to canvass for orders, often traveling up to 150 km a day on his two-wheeler. However, his hard work paid off as companies, impressed by his enthusiasm and commitment, began to support him.

Crucially, suppliers also played a significant role in his early success, offering credit to help keep the business afloat. Ponnuswami's practice of making prompt weekly payments and personally thanking suppliers helped build trust and strengthen relationships, allowing him to grow.

As the business expanded, Ponnuswami learned valuable lessons, especially about hiring employees with specialized knowledge. At first, he hired anyone who was willing to work, but in 1991, a consultant suggested he recruit chemistry graduates and chemical engineers. This change helped Pon Pure grow faster, as these employees could better explain the technical details of the business to clients.

The Expansion Era

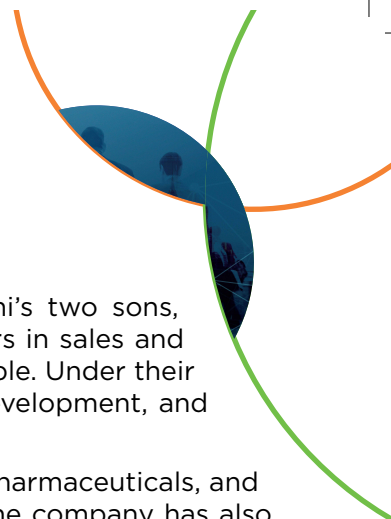
By the mid of 1990s, Pon Pure Chemicals had outgrown its Chennai base. The company's first major expansion came when Ponnuswami decided to open a branch in Erode, Tamil Nadu. A delivery issue with acetic acid to a textile mill prompted this move, which opened doors to new opportunities. Success in Erode led to further expansion in cities like Bangalore, Kochi, Delhi, and even internationally to Dubai, Singapore & Australia.

This strategic expansion helped Pon Pure solidify its position in the chemical industry. The company now handles thousands of tonnes of material every month, serving markets across India and abroad. The expansion into Kandla SEZ enabled Pon Pure to cater to international markets like Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, significantly boosting export volumes.

Entering the Big League

In the late 1990s, Pon Pure Chemicals secured a prestigious agency from Archroma, formerly known as Sandoz, to serve the Tiruppur textile market. This partnership, built on Pon Pure's reputation for reliable service, paved the way for further growth.

In another milestone moment, ExxonMobil approached Pon Pure in 1999, seeking a distributor for Southern India. The deal, which was based on Ponnuswami's stellar reputation in the industry, helped propel Pon Pure into a higher league, driving significant business growth.



Next-Generation Leadership

The early 2000s marked a turning point for Pon Pure Chemicals, as Ponnuswami's two sons, Suryaprakash and Lakshmipathy, joined the business. Both sons started their careers in sales and later took on leadership roles, bringing fresh ideas and modern approaches to the table. Under their influence, Pon Pure began to focus more on value-added services, research and development, and manufacturing.

Today, Pon Pure Chemicals operates across 11 verticals, including textiles, coatings, pharmaceuticals, and water treatment, with a vision to reach Rs 1,000 crore in manufacturing by 2027. The company has also entered the logistics sector, expanding into warehousing, vessel chartering, and express cargo services across southern India.

A Move into B2C

The COVID-19 pandemic marked another pivotal moment for Pon Pure Chemicals. The demand for hand sanitizers during the outbreak led the company to expand into the consumer market. Pon Pure launched its Vooki brand of home cleaning products, featuring sustainable, green chemistry solutions that are safe for consumers and the environment.

Current Business Highlights

Pon Pure Chemicals has continued to thrive, now employing over 1,000 people globally. The company serves more than 13,000 customers and exports to 65 countries. With a current turnover exceeding INR 4,500 crore, Pon Pure is a leader in the chemical trading and manufacturing space, expanding its footprint globally.

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)

Pon Pure is equally dedicated to making a positive social impact. Through its CSR initiatives, the company focuses on education, rural development, and environmental sustainability. Pon Pure partners with local schools to improve infrastructure & education for a brighter future, provide scholarships, transforming rural communities for sustainable growth, community hygiene projects, and has undertaken numerous initiatives aimed at reducing plastic waste and planting trees. These efforts demonstrate the company's commitment to giving back to society.

Logistics and Solar Business

To enhance its operations, Pon Pure has diversified into logistics, providing end-to-end supply chain solutions for the chemical industry. The company manages warehouses, offers vessel chartering for liquid chemicals, and operates an express cargo service within Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Karnataka. Additionally, Pon Pure is investing in renewable energy through its solar business, aligning with global sustainability goals while reducing operational costs.

The Road Ahead

With a strong foundation, a diversified portfolio, and the next generation steering the ship, Pon Pure Chemicals is well-positioned for future growth. The company is exploring new markets in the US, Europe, and South Africa, and is poised to continue its journey as a leading player in the chemical industry.

A Word for Aspiring Entrepreneurs

For those looking to follow in his footsteps, M. Ponnuswami offers some sage advice: "If you have talent, you can get a job. But to become a CEO, you need to create your own path. India is full of opportunities, particularly in manufacturing, where there is immense growth potential."

With an eye on the future and a commitment to excellence, Pon Pure Chemicals continues to evolve, staying true to the vision and values that built it from the ground up.

Rajalakshmi Group of Institutions

Focussed on the future



Abhay S. Meganathan
Vice Chairman, Rajalakshmi
Group of Institutions

Abhay S Meganathan, Vice Chairman, Rajalakshmi Group of Institutions, oversees a diverse range of businesses, apart from the flagship Rajalakshmi Engineering College and other institutions of higher education, renewable energy, electrical components making for public sector utility, auto dealerships and more. What makes him tick?

Diversity is a strength, as India's economy is poised to grow over the coming decade, a presence in a clutch of industries will stand the group in good stead, he feels. Also, with climate change issues gaining centre stage, his own heart lies in renewable energy-adjacent sectors, and the group is positioning itself strongly in this area, he feels.

He shares his experience of over 15 years for the Confederation of Indian Industry's start up initiative, for the benefit of young and emerging entrepreneurs and students.

I am a second-generation entrepreneur overseeing a diverse range of ventures started by my parents, says Abhay Meganathan. They ventured into business over 40 years ago in Chennai, in the manufacturing sector. "We are among the older suppliers of conductors to the Tamil Nadu Electricity Board, which we continue doing," he says.

Both my parents are very focussed on education. My father, S Meganathan, is a mechanical engineer and my mother, Thangam Meganathan, is a doctorate in technical education. My father worked for 10 years in various prominent manufacturing units. My mother is an accounts professional and a PhD in technical education. They started on their entrepreneurial journey in 1986 His parents had partnered in a range of ventures. Both had taken the first step as entrepreneurs with a unit making HDPE woven sacks, went on to manufacture electricity conductors for utilities and set up a mattress factory in the early 1990s.

They got into academics when in the mid-1980s the then Tamil Nadu government led by the actor-turned politician MG Ramachandran privatised higher education.

In 2010, Abhay joined them.

"I did electronics engineering from the College of Engineering Guindy, followed that up with a post graduate degree in the US and an MBA from Norton Business School. For the last 15 years I have been in the family business," he says introducing himself.

His younger brother is a radiologist, a medical doctor and has done post-graduation in Chennai. He oversees a medical college and a 600-bed hospital - a 600-bed hospital.

The Start

Was Abhay's decision to join the business automatic, or how did that come about? When asked, he says, "As far as joining the family business was concerned, for me, there was no well-defined transition between study, home life and business. From my school days, I was involved in, and aware of the business, and what was happening."

“You see, for the first generation, the line between work and home life is blurred. The venture takes up the waking hours of their lives. Everyone including my parents and most visitors to the house, all only talked about business. It was second nature. I felt I was involved even from my higher secondary school days. So, I was familiar with what was happening,” he says.

“It was inevitable, I join them. Though, I had always wanted to be an engineer—I had an analytical bent of mind-- but I was born into business. Certainly, there was no compulsion. After my studies, the next stage of the journey started, and I have thoroughly enjoyed it.” Abhay says.

Learning the Ropes

But after actually getting into business, the first 3 – 5 years was a learning phase, a lot of it. Personally, I found it easier to comprehend numbers. But managing people, that was a challenge, I had to work on it, it is an art, he says.

In the initial years I worked with professionals, never under either of my parents, and never reported to them.

But, the morning coffee with my parents was more often like a board meeting, he says.

In the second five years there was lot more freedom with Abhay wanting to take up projects of his own interest such as renewable energy. In the last five years, all that changed and evolved into him having to shoulder overall responsibility. The buck stops here, he says.

Second Generation Role

But as a second-generation member, what does he bring to the table? If there is something that he has contributed, what would it be?

Abhay answers candidly, “To be honest, the second generation is very close to the first generation in the business. I remember, a course on family businesses had explained that the second generation is a confused lot as 50 per cent of their role is a first-generation role and 50 per cent is to act as custodians, nurturing the business for the generations to follow. Custodians, that was a word often used. You are a pass-through for the business. From third generation on you become a full-fledged custodian, so there are rules in the second generation,” he says.

The first generation has little going for them, but, conversely, there is also very little stopping them. They have a whiteboard to paint on, no boundaries, Abhay says.

That is the benefit of a startup player. He refers to No Rules Rules, the book by Netflix founder, Reed Hastings and author Erin Meyer. A startup can be unconventional in its approach.

But, once the first generation creates a good, solid platform. What the subsequent generations build on it is the key to sustaining a venture, he says. “We cannot afford to continue with that same attitude, we have something at stake and need to be considerate of that fact,” Abhay says. Also, the next generation is competing against other startups.

Value Add

Abhay says modestly, “However, if I sit and think how I add value. I would say I have made our ventures more modern, tech-enabled, and far reaching in terms of targets, that we take up. Initially, we were a little bit more conservative. I shed the extreme conservative tag and got out of the mould. We need to evolve with the times, be closer to the environment. In the 1990s and 2000s businesses were conservative. But post-Covid the younger generation, is more like our north Indian counterparts – a lot more outgoing, aggressive. There was a little bit of modernisation that was needed and that is what I got to the table, I feel,” says Abhay.

For example, even talking about a business problem. The previous generation, handled issues in a conservative manner – safety first. We too are safety conscious but more aggressive with the problems. I have seen people do a great job in Tamil Nadu and outpace their counterparts elsewhere. My generation has to run faster, and that is what I am trying to do, he says.

Multigeneration Sustainability

But is it easy to change the style of operations?

That is a considerable challenge both in internal family dynamics, legacy of businesses, he acknowledges. Also, there are the external factors – a family has a name and reputation to uphold, he says referring to factors that weigh on the second generation. Younger generations have their own set of problems. But businesses have to evolve with time.

It is fact that, few companies go past the third generation, and often the sixth generation is the outermost, I remember reading in a book on family business, he says.

“I remember while doing my MBA, I met a member of the 9th generation of the Faber Castell group. I used to interact with her a lot on how that happened. It is tough even for India where a few have sustained past fourth or fifth generation,” he points out.

But, remember, he points out, India is still a young capitalist environment. The next 50 – 100 years will see the growth of family businesses in India. As a result, the challenge is that we have a lot more structured way of doing things in the second generation onwards, he says.

Diverse Businesses

Talking about the diverse set of businesses in the group, and the way he copes with the varying needs, he says, “I think the ethos is similar across the organisation. We are a family driven group and clear on how we run the business, whatever the vertical whether education, renewable energy, automobile... there are professionals who manage the core areas, we are prudent in financial management and we are not aggressive on capex plan and investments.”

And it is how we created a family-like feeling within the organisation. We are not a corporate set up. We consider employees as our associates, a part of the ownership team and are decision makers. There is a very clear agenda that no one is going to be troubled for routine, or trivial things. We have created that atmosphere here and as a result we are agnostic to industries. Diversity is a strength.

“In the last 15 years, we have seen India grow, and the next 20-30 years look extremely promising and we cannot restrict ourselves to a narrow mindset or business. That is how you see a diverse set of operations,” he says.

Pet Projects

On his individual interests, Abhay says, “I have been passionate about renewable energy. I believe, the next set of companies—much like the IT revolution in the last three decades—are going to be about climate issues. I certainly think that is going to be the problem occupying our minds, that will be the theme of the future for at least two-three decades. I am looking to spend a lot more of time in sustainability and related efforts,” he asserts.

“While we do have some wind energy operations on, I have to clarify I am not talking about just renewable energy per se, solar and wind power...that is one aspect of addressing climate change problem. I got into renewable energy because of climate change issues, over the last decade, but I have started pivoting towards other areas where there is a role for entrepreneurs.”

In the core energy sector, such as wind, solar power generation, going forward, entrepreneurs may have a smaller role to play. Renewable power generation is well established, possibly even a more viable opportunity than conventional coal-fuelled power, says Abhay.

So, there is a relatively little role for an entrepreneur. Over a decade or more back renewable power was a novel factor.

What I am referring to in renewable sector are a diverse set of issues, the kind of goods that we use, such as electric vehicles, household appliances such as fans, air conditioners and so on. They can be a big problem in climate issues. I have entered into other sectors in this area, Abhay says.

These are concerns we need to take up. For instance, papers, packaging material... India has not spoken enough. People even consider these issues a nuisance, more than a serious challenge, so far. However, the current generation onwards takes it more seriously. My efforts are towards on that.

Sustainability

Even in education, I feel that topics around climate change, sustainability, will be next driver of change.

Recently, we have tied up with Arizona State University, and we are setting up a campus for them in Chennai. The School of Sustainability will focus on all these allied issues. Not just renewable energy. Maybe 30 years back that would have been enough. But now we need to escalate our response, take serious cognisance of the threat the world is facing.

The amount of research, the developed countries, especially the US, have done is stupendous. There are billions of dollars being poured into research. India cannot spend that amount on research. We need to piggy back on leading players. The point is we are one of the biggest players in the world where sustainability has to be sorted out. Not just climate, but also health sustainability, is something we are not looking into.

Learning environment

As a private education sector, 30 – 40 years is a small period in educational institutions term. It is very new field, but there is a lot of metamorphosis happening.

In the first 5 – 10 year we were a glorified, teaching centre. But over the years we have become research focussed.

As student and administrator, I have seen that teaching is a one-way communication, that is a typical classroom only in India, a lecturer addresses 50 students who are expected to just listen. But not in the west. In the west it is 50 equals in the room. That is what we have been trying to achieve. But, the 14 years of school education creates a mould that is hard to break. Education today is not about one to many. That is the culture we are trying to create in our institutions.

Post the Covid outbreak, we are seeing another change happening, we are seeing colleges are more communities. Not just a traditional institution that led students to get a job. That is a byproduct. Today we are seeing learning happening. Like-minded people are trying to get ahead in life by seeking knowledge. That is the environment we are creating – both for faculty and students. Not just focusing on curriculum, pure teaching. For those keen on seeking knowledge, huge resources are available and the best of the best are accessible to everybody.

“For instance, you can learn valuation online from the legendary Aswath Damodaran, Professor at the Stern School of Business, New York University. Now, what we need to do is create the push for individuals keen on startup to understand they have to know about valuation,” says Abhay.

Industry – academia synergy

There is so much corporate India has to do. Research as a profession has not been taken seriously. We are pushing hard. Here only a small fraction is poured into R&D as compared with our peers abroad. We have been working on that, and there I see some change. When even a few lakh rupees were tough to come by, now millions of dollars is coming into research. We spend as much as possible in our institutions; we have 15 centres of excellence that we have been developing.

On the prevailing sentiment in industry that fresh graduates are not industry-ready, Abhay says, I totally agree, and will not refute, but largely we are sitting in two different islands – the corporate sector and the academia.

We need to emulate the kind of collaboration with industry we see in the west especially, Germany. Institutions and industry are one and the same over there. There is a lot of synergy.

The same people mentioning that fresh graduates are not industry-ready, should also put in some effort to bring the islands together. Many years back we started, we moved our calendar from Monday to Friday to Tuesday to Saturday, industry personnel take lectures on Saturdays. These are not one-off talks, but they are part of the course, he says.

Post-Covid industry people are increasingly coming to academia. That is happening. We are seeing a lot traditional industry seeking fresh qualified talent. Industry requirement is changing. Education in India is not tuned for rapid change. We need to change fast. Industry needs are diverse and dynamic. But the gap has narrowed. Still some ways to go, but definitely narrowed.

For instance, a lot of IT companies are replacing higher cost manpower with lower cost freshers. That will not be possible if the gap still exists. Freshers are able to replace workers with 5-10 years' experience at their job, I would say that institutions are moving towards creating industry-ready graduates.

Entrepreneurial Mindset

Increasing interaction with real-world industry and entrepreneurs will help create an entrepreneurial mindset. Look at the US especially, we have seen billionaires come out of campuses. Take for instance, University of Pennsylvania, it has one of the largest number of startups; Stanford, MIT and few other campuses that have over the last decades have created a whole ecosystem.

Even within India there are some pockets, where as a culture risk-taking ability is higher. But, in Tamil Nadu that is a little on the lower side, but we are also changing. In Bengaluru, that culture is much more, technology institutions are more successful in creating start up entrepreneurs, he feels.

We are trying to emulate that in our fold. In last two three years Rajalakshmi Institutions have taken up many initiatives in ensuring there are startups. We have started seven startups, I understand it is still a small number compared with what is possible. We churn out 3,000 engineers and of that seven is not a big number. But that culture like you said, we are more tuned to becoming professionals. Need a mental attitude change. It is a work in progress.

For the younger generations, Abhay has a few thoughts he would like to share. One is the support group of peers, nurture that, he says.

For the Aspiring Entrepreneurs

For him, the Young Presidents Organisation, a peer group in Chennai has offered invaluable support, he says. There are smaller groups within the organisation, where they can bounce ideas of each other. This is a nonjudgemental, no advice, kind of interaction. And the group members are not necessarily friends. It is a professional but informal set.

Otherwise, without a peer level interaction if you are totally wrapped up in your business, there is no clear benchmarks. So, as a support system, networking with other entrepreneurs or family businesses is an opportunity to share a world of experience and learn, he says.

On the startup side, I have two points I would like to make, he says. Entrepreneurs should always, look for value addition in a venture, not float a me-too project. We see a lot of that, and these are not a good idea. We need a key differentiator.

Next, do not just look for valuations and fancy numbers alone. Business has to be profitable and viable in its own self. We are a matured startup economy. Over 15 years back everything was about burn rate and all that. All that is passe. We need to look for viable businesses, value add and make a change.

Once such a concept is in place, then go all out and not look back, he advises those keen on starting their own venture.

SKM Egg Products Export India Ltd:

Capitalizing on value addition



SKM Shree Shivkumar
Managing Director
SKM EGG Products

Transitioning from a traditional business operating fertilizer and animal feed dealerships, trading eggs and manufacturing animal feed to establishing a Rs 650-crore business making value added egg products for exports, that is SKM Egg Products Export India Ltd.

Over the last nearly three decades, SKM Egg Products has grown to account for more than half the processed egg products exported from India and is among the top as a preferred supplier to developed markets globally. It manufactures egg powders including whole egg powder, egg white powder, egg yolk powder and liquid eggs in cartons. It exports to Japan, Russia, Europe, West Asia and the Far East and South-east Asia.

SKM Shree Shivkumar, a second-generation entrepreneur, and elder son of the SKM group founder, who spear headed the investment and the growth of SKM Egg Products and handled the challenges in the process of emerging a market leader in the segment.

Shivkumar says: My father S.K.M. Maeilanandhan is a first-generation entrepreneur who started a fertilizer distribution business in the mid-1960s handling Parry & Co products. SKM as he is popularly known, started in Modakurichi village, about 12 km from Erode. When Parry & Co also started an animal feed division, SKM got the chance to handle its distribution too. That is how he started working with poultry farmers in the layer-bird sector, says Shivkumar, Managing Director, SKM Egg Products.

Shivkumar says, his grandfather, SKM's father-in-law, was also a poultry farmer and the family was familiar with the segment. His father did not settle for just one distributorship. He also started dealing in products from major feed manufacturers such as Hindustan Unilever and others. He grew to be among the top distributors in south India. Shivkumar says his father was keen on farmers getting a choice of products; that was the reason for him taking up distributorship of multiple brands of animal feed. But while dealing with farmers there were some supply & quality issues. His customers encouraged him to start his own feed unit during his interactions with them, says Shivkumar.


Customer Support

SKM had built a close rapport with farmers. He would meet with them regularly and also organized meetings annually, for feedback and to discuss market issues. It was at these meetings they encouraged him to start his own feed mill.

So, he established a poultry feed unit, transitioning from distributor to manufacturer. The first feed mill started production in 1983. But that was the easy part. As a feed manufacturer, he was now in competition with big players for some of whom he had been a distributor.

Though a new entrant and playing in the big league, SKM was someone trusted by the local farmers, with their support, he was able to weather the competition, says Shivkumar.

Over 7-8 years and a price war with well-entrenched players, SKM broke even and was firmly set on the growth path. A key factor in his ability to take on the competition was a barter system he entered into with the poultry farmers. He would sell feed to the farmers and collect eggs from them. This was a necessity



for the farmers for whom market access and physical movement of stocks was a challenge – losses due to breakage were a concern. So, SKM would deliver feed and collect the eggs and move them to the market. This benefitted farmers who bought feed from him.

Second Generation Enters

SKM was handling about 1.5 million eggs, and it was around that time I entered the business, says Shivkumar. “We were losing money on egg trading but recouping with margins from feed sales. But that was not sustainable. My first task was to reduce the losses on eggs,” he says.

However, Shivkumar also shouldered other responsibilities. “I was inducted as an executive director and my responsibilities included setting up infrastructure such as additional production plant and warehouses . I was closely involved in the operations and was a part of various review meetings and grew familiar with the entire gamut of operations.

Egg trading losses were mostly due to some inefficiencies and pilferage. So, we addressed that on a priority basis, he says. Shivkumar managed to solve the leakage in egg trading with logistics management, this was around 1992. Also, he expanded the feed mill and managed the units for about two years.

Morale Booster

Parallely, he says, there was a challenge with the workers in the factory. There was some labour unrest.

My father was involved in social activity and left the day-to-day management to professionals. The workers felt that the management needed to create more facilities. There was dissatisfaction brewing among them. So, Shivkumar took up the issue. Actually, the demands were quite simple – the workers were asking for more water coolers, better quality canteen food... But that can happen when you lose touch with workers, he says.

Shivkumar conducted a series of meetings with small groups of workers. There were over 6 – 7 meetings as handling all the workers, about 300 totally, would be an issue. The discussions helped to crystallize the demands that they felt the management needed to address. Shivkumar did that. So, workers’ morale improved with changes. And within a month, about three weeks, things were back to normal. “For me as a 24-year-old, this was a big achievement and a confidence booster,” he says.

Value Addition

But there was an inherent weakness in the egg trade. SKM had to declare a price for procurement at the start of the week, and when they sell there was a risk of prices dropping when the eggs hit the market. A long-term solution was needed.

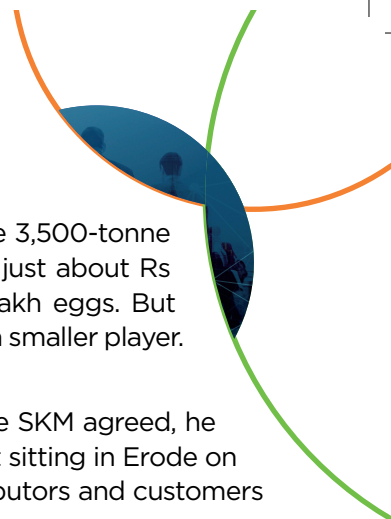
It was at that time, early in the 1990s that the Tamil Nadu Industrial Development Corporation (TIDCO), a State-run agency for promoting industrial investments, sought a co-promoter for setting up an egg processing unit. The SKM group applied and was selected as it was the largest egg-procurer in the south. It was a project conceived by Tidco and my father felt that this was a great opportunity. If we could process a portion of the eggs and diversify our markets and product base, we could cut our losses and create more demand for eggs, he explained.

And so, in 1995, we floated SKM Egg Products Exports, and the board included a TIDCO nominee director, and we went looking for partners to establish the plant and in July 1997 the export-oriented unit started production, he says.

For the SKM group this marked the shift from egg trading to value-added processing. Shivkumar had been involved with the project right from the early days.

He says, it was TIDCO’s concept. Plus, other leading poultry companies such as Venkateshwara Hatcheries had already started similar facilities elsewhere. In Tamil Nadu, SKM was the pioneer.

Feed mill and food processing plants are different games altogether, he points out. A feed mill is a traditional business and low tech. Food processing is subject to more stringent norms and are high-value products. We visited units in Europe and the US, and I was confident we could do much better. Technically it was not a hard task, he says.



The project eventually would have a capacity to handle about 10 lakh eggs a day to make 3,500-tonne egg powder. It would involve investments of about Rs 35 crore. We did not have much, just about Rs 7 - 8 crore, he says. My father even advised that we could scale down capacity to 5 lakh eggs. But Venkateshwara Hatcheries had already done 10 lakh and I could not compromise on being a smaller player. So, I stood my ground, he says.

However, Shivkumar was just 25 at that time. The final decision was up to his father. While SKM agreed, he decided they would go for a public issue to raise funds. Shivkumar recalls they managed it sitting in Erode on the strength of the SKM reputation in the poultry sector, and the support of its feed distributors and customers in Tamil Nadu and Kerala. The public issue was oversubscribed by 1.8 times, he says.

The SKM group held a 51 per cent stake. TIDCO 11 per cent. But, with the cost overrun the State-government agency's holding came down to 8 per cent. So, the project got off the ground with equity and loan funding, he says. But remember, at that time interest on the loan was 21 per cent. IFCI supported the loan front and TIDCO's presence eased the process.

Initial Challenges

Shivkumar remembers that in the first three years they could not meet their commitment. Market access for the new entrant proved harder than they had anticipated. The operations did not go well because of quality issues including pesticide and antibiotics residues that Indian products faced in Europe. So, the initial impression took a hit.

In the 1990s India's reputation abroad in the export market was not ideal. That did not help. In 1996, SKM Egg Products started production. It was difficult to sell. What we did was, we organized a seminar in 1997, and over three days, brought in about 50 potential customers from 27 countries. We showcased our unit and systems and that was a big breakthrough. Buyers started considering our product, that helped to break the ice. Of course we had to sustain that momentum.

Initially, we collaborated with a Belgium company for technology and marketing. We would supply the products to them, and they invoiced the products to other customers. But the first direct customer was from Japan, he came to our plant, and we finalized a three-month contract, not just a one-time order for a couple of tons, but supplies for a specified length of time.

That was a big win as the Japanese have stringent conditions. For us, that was really a confidence-building measure. Once you start supplying to the Japanese market the other developed markets are easier at least on the quality front. Our credibility is enhanced. It is very convincing that this Indian supplier is catering to Japan. That certainly helped open market access to the West also, he says.

Securing Quality

The biggest challenge for a product is achieving standardized functionality and quality. That includes physicochemical parameters, microbiological quality and residues of agrochemicals including pesticides in the case of edible products. Here was a weak link for India.

So, we set up the entire value chain, looked at feed ingredients, feed, eggs and had every intermediate product checked. We were the first to do it in India. Most would tell the suppliers to follow some guidelines buy eggs from the market.

But we followed up with testing. The biggest threat was transformed to the biggest strength. Even Europeans may not get test certificates for every stage of production. We gave authorized test lab certificates, and these were reputed labs. We even set up our own labs ISO 17025 certified lab instead of depending on third party testing, says Shivkumar.

We also paid 5 paise more per egg as incentive payment. But now, in the last four years, we have integrated our facility with our own eggs from captive production and feed mill also.

We started captive production of eggs in the last few years to ensure quality. Now, about 90 per cent of

our eggs are from our own production, earlier it was 20 per cent. We will soon be 100 per cent. This ensures raw material security and consistency in terms of quality and cost.

As of now we would have invested over Rs 275 crore and our business is in the vicinity of about Rs 650 crore.

Tapping the Domestic Market

From exports, we also launched our products in the domestic market – we have branded whole eggs, we do liquid eggs in package for the institutional segment, the local bakeries and fast food chains and that is also growing steadily.

But the B2C products in the retail segment such as liquid eggs in cartons and egg white cubes similar to paneer, that did not take off well. The products are great, but while our capability as a B2B player is strong, in the B2C segment we are not very strong – the cold chain had to be managed by us even in retail.

Because egg products are considered non-vegetarian they cannot be on the same shelves in the retail outlets or even the cooler along with dairy products. So, we needed dedicated coolers at the retail outlets. We pushed for three years but have subsequently scaled down. But that is to be addressed in the future. Maybe my son will have the insight and energy to get into B2C, he says with a smile.

My son, SK Sharath Ram, is now the Executive Director of SKM Egg Products, and is in charge of feed and farm division. I guide him when needed. Youngsters mature only with experience – authority and accountability. He is doing quite well, says Shivkumar.

Teething Troubles

To take a step back, when asked, for a second-generation entrepreneur how easy or difficult was it to enter the family business, find your space in the enterprise.

It was not an issue at all, says Shivkumar. His father had created a conducive environment.

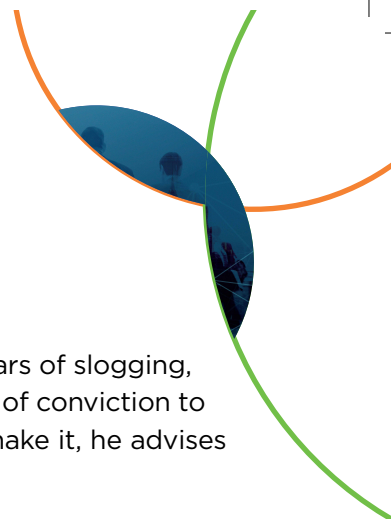
He would discuss various aspects of the business, and always backed me 100 per cent, he says. So, it was smooth sailing initially. “Of course, with respect to performance, it was a challenge. Like I had mentioned earlier I had my task cut out for me to set the egg trade issues, labour problems and the routine of infrastructure establishment,” he points out.

But he did face flak from an unexpected quarter. Shivkumar clarifies, “I would underline here that I am mentioning this only as a lesson for new entrants within family businesses. One can not expect all family members to have same view as you especially when we are in a rough patch, you need to overcome this with lot of determination and self belief to push for materializing your vision

The operations had to be re-designed to overcome the challenges, many decisions had been made by me to address various issues. That may be something a young entrepreneur may need to tackle as a part of a family business unit. It is ok if things work out, but hard if there are protracted issues, says Shivkumar.

Due to the above challenges, the family business and the new investment had to be separated.

But now there are new structures like family business counsel, people can define their roles clearly; spell out what each brings in and the compensation. There are tools and systems that can be deployed to ensure the family business is not affected, he says.



A Word of Advice

However, Shivkumar cautioned that a start-up cannot afford such distraction.

In the case of a first-time entrepreneur, stabilizing a new business may involve 3 – 5 years of slogging, he says. You are going to be under scrutiny. You need to have emotional stability, force of conviction to stick to your vision and goal. So, you need sheer tenacity. If you give up you will not make it, he advises entrepreneurs.

For the new entrepreneur Shivkumar says: If you are not from a business background, your best option is to choose your field where your interests are and get some work experience. Or get into the value chain such as a distributorship. Get exposed to that business. When you know more about the nuances of trade, you know where things can go wrong and be able to anticipate potential mistakes. Sometimes mistakes can be costly. So, exposure to the domain, about 3 – 5 years, is important before you risk your own money, he says.

“I know some friends who within one year or two will draw up an excel sheet calculation and say if you do not make it in 2 – 3 years it is not worth it. That does not always work. A start-up needs sustained effort of 5 years bare minimum,” he feels.

For the SKM group, egg processing was not at all easy. “We had our own set of challenges, especially considering our traditional background and we were stepping into exports and international trade,” he says.

Tackling Problems

Any challenge at the first step, here I am speaking in general, will look insurmountable, like a big wall, he says, that can be shocking and depressing. But as you keep analyzing the situation, exploring various options, a solution will emerge. There is never any insolvable problem. That is my belief, says Shivkumar.

Sometimes, you need to share your problems with others. But often entrepreneurs are worried about their reputation and others’ views. But I would say be transparent, at least with a select few, the well-wishers. Then somebody with experience can help or sometimes someone can come up with an unconventional solution. You must value your own goals and persevere rather than worry about what others will think.

Once you overcome the first problem, you will gain more confidence, he says.

Changing mindset

The current generation, I am saying this not only in the context of my son but in general, I also see my peers’ sons getting inducted into businesses. In our generation, whatever the father said was accepted, the sons would not say anything contrary, let alone oppose their parent.

But our sons challenge whatever we say to get more clarity and to get convinced. After the clarification, they act very efficiently. That is good because we followed blindly, they act based on reasoning.

Conversely, elders must have the patience to explain why and so on.

My father had set systems in place. He had the experience of dealing with corporate entities such as Parry & Co and others. So professional structure was in place since quite early. It was quite easy. Also, we were a public company from the start, and we needed to be professional. But you can have too many professionals. Decision-making has a cost. So, you need to be tight knit as an organization.

On a Strong Wicket

Since inception we took over 8 – 9 years, till we attained about Rs 150-crore turnover, to be considered a serious player. We were breaking even at 40 per cent capacity at about Rs 60 crore. We turned the corner with sales growth of about Rs 100 crore. The last five years have been really good. Apart from sales, forex movement and the rupee – US dollar movement also helped. Earlier it was Rs 65 to the US dollar. Now it is around Rs 85.

We are now the biggest in our segment and account for more than half of India's export in this line. In Indian context we are referred. In each country there will be 2 -3 players who are top in this segment, and we are the most referred company in India. From the time when we had to fight to be recognized, even considered as a supplier, we have come a long way.

We were the first to introduce animal - origin products into Russia from India. That was due to our image in Japan and the West. Image among the customers can be built up. Initially, growth can be slow. But once established in the market growth scales up.

Corporate Social Responsibility

It's always good to contribute for social development as a responsible corporate citizen. The company and me are engaged in various CSR activities helping the poor and supporting in solving various challenges faced by the society.

I hope sharing of our company's growth and my views will benefit budding entrepreneurs to realize their dream.

Wishing them good luck !!!

Sri Krishna Sweets:

Innovation Rooted in Traditional Values

Sri Krishna® Sweets



M. Murali
Managing Director
Sri Krishna Sweets

From a single eatery with a sweetmeat counter in Coimbatore over 75 years ago, to a national presence with one of the largest chains of retail outlets and aggressively scaling up, Sri Krishna Sweets has come a long way.

M. Murali, Managing Director Sri Krishna Sweets, a second-generation entrepreneur, says the sweetmeat-maker is what it is today, because of his father, the founder's initiative, values and commitment to this business. These traits that have been nurtured over the last seven decades and more and is embedded in its genes as the third generation steps in, he says.

In 1948, Murali's father, N.K. Mahadeva Iyer started a small restaurant, a one-room unit in Coimbatore, but the venture did not pick up, it was not successful, says Murali recounting the early days of the Sri Krishan Sweets saga.

Today Murali heads the business with over 50 plus retail outlets across Chennai among the largest in the segment. Such a network is uncommon in what is a fragmented industry with sweetmeat shops mostly having a local presence.

Also, the sweetmeat maker is diversifying into quick service restaurants, exclusive outlets for food products and building a significant presence online. Sri Krishna Sweets is now seeing the third generation stepping in. Murali's two daughters are carrying forward the brand. It has major plans to scale up and expand the chain of sweet shops and expand its presence in restaurants in various formats.

But to go back to the days when it was still a fledgling business led by Mahadeva Iyer, who undaunted by the early troubles, shifted the eatery to a different place, on the Coimbatore - Perur Road. The restaurant, Krishna Bhavan, did better and that encouraged him to again move to a bigger premises on to Big Bazaar Street, in the heart of Coimbatore.

He rented a small place and later bought that space. At that time, sweetmeat shops were usually attached to restaurants, it was one aspect, a division of the business, as was the restaurant, says Mr Murali. The outlet was in a busy market area, and activity started as early as 5.30 am as traders start preparing for the day ahead, he says.

A Committed Founder

My father was a good manager, a people-person with the ability to identify the right individual for the right job. Also, he was capable of working tirelessly, he would not rest until he got the expected results. He was a natural at that, he says.

If there was one factor that contributed to the success of Sri Krishna Sweets, it was Mahadeva Iyer's conviction that his shop and its products have to stand out and fully meet customers' expectations.

He was intent on doing something different, not just grow sales alone. If he had concentrated on just sales, he would have been one among the many, the growth would have been slow. But Mahadeva Iyer was focussed on standing out, being different and that brought in a new perspective to the business. He took a lot of pains for that, Murali says.

He points out, in the 1960s and early 70s there was not much development in Coimbatore. But even at that time, his father had established an air-conditioned restaurant, it was a big thing then. The hotel was about 2,000 sq ft with the ground floor earmarked for serving tiffin items, and the first floor for catering traditional meal on banana leaves. He provided one table and chair for each patron coming for a meal. This gave the customer an element of privacy and exclusivity at a time when eating out was still uncommon. On the second floor was the airconditioned space, a novelty then. He also set up a roof garden in the 1970s, even if it was a small space of about 15 X 15 ft it was uncommon for its time. He was clear that he needed to bring in differentiation.

Even the menu stood out. He brought out new products, concepts, and beyond a certain stage, he even set up an exclusive sweet shop.

The first restaurant Mahadeva Iyer started, along with his father Krishna Iyer. His was a supporting role but it was this learning that enabled him to evolve as an entrepreneur. He was from a remote village, and along with his family had moved to Coimbatore for a living. In those days, there were not many options for people with less than modest means to start a venture.

Food business offers a relatively easy entry point. Family members adept at cooking would make a few popular items, the others would sell the dishes. But they were committed to giving good products and were sincere. Over the days Mahadeva Iyer evolved as an entrepreneur, took small measured steps and grew.

Murali says, "My grandfather was a big mentor for his son. I have heard my father say he was an inspiration. Just as my father was for me. My father got into the business when he was 15 or 16, though he helped out at the eatery from even earlier. He had studied up to 2nd or 3rd class, the business was everything to him."

So, that is why when Mahadeva Iyer helmed the venture it was a restaurant with a difference, it included a sweets counter, an airconditioned space, an exclusive meal section and a roof garden. From the restaurant to an exclusive sweet shop later, his motive was clear -- give what the market expected. Mahadeva Iyer put customers' need first. He once said, Murali recalls, "I placed faith in customers and they looked after me."

Those days it was mandatory for sweet shops to disclose if their product was not made from pure ghee. So, sellers would put this detail in fine print "the product was not made from pure-ghee", the disclaimer would say.

But his father had started putting up a board prominently, an assurance, that the stocks in his shop were made from pure ghee.

Murali says, "You cannot separate the venture from the individual, my father was fully immersed in running the business. He probably did not know what his sons were doing or studying. His energy was totally devoted to the business and growth. That was what was needed at that time," he says.

He points out that even up to the 1970s eating out was not in vogue even in cities, leave alone a small town like Coimbatore of those days. People would only eat at home. But Mahadeva Iyer gave home-style food and novel items which were then available only in Chennai such as adai-butter and aviyal, pongal which were not commonly available in smaller cities. They were "Madras items", as Chennai was then known. That, and the assurance of quality and purity resonated with the people, drew in the customers.

Also, the menu was not huge like now, just a few common or popular items. So, each dish was prepared diligently and reflected what an elder in the family would prepare. Preparation "like mom-makes at home". Mahadeva Iyer had caught the pulse of the market.

That was a threshold in the business.

A Unique innovation

Of course, when you say Sri Krishna Sweets, the flagship product is Mysurpa, the silky, melt-in-the-mouth variant of the traditional brittle and crumbly Mysorepak.

Murali says his father had conceived of the idea, and was totally involved in making it a reality. In any successful venture, there is always that one person fully dedicated to an idea or a concept, an obsessed even. For my father creating the Mysurpa was his goal. Like a musician totally immersed in the music, my father was totally committed to that creation. He conducted innumerable trials, and his faith in the concept made that miracle happen, says Murali

So, when did Murali himself join the family business?

“Much like my father, I was a part of the business ever since I can remember, since my early school days. I did not know anything else. I studied in a local corporation school. So, even when I was in mid-teens, before going to school, I would be at the coffee stall by 5.30 am, assist my father with the sales or with some other chore. A couple of hours later I would attend school, and after school, go back to the shop. It was a part of my life. It was a well-trodden trail – home-shop-school-shop-home,” he says.

Growing Wings

When did the transition happen from a single restaurant in Coimbatore to growth for Murali? It was a natural progression, he says. You could say I grew with the business. The venture prospered as we catered to customers’ expectations, provided quality products and a welcome ambience. In 1996 when I planned to set up shop in Chennai, we started very simply. It was just my second or third visit to the city. My father encouraged me and gave me the confidence.

Taking risk is a key part of entrepreneurship. But it has to be a calculated risk. Our success in Coimbatore gave us confidence. My father’s blessings, support and encouragement, and my own initiative all came together. It is important that you are committed to your vision and look beyond just money-making; money should be a sub-product. The primary aim should be to meet market- and customer-need, then it is inevitable the money comes in, he says.

After my college study – Murali is a math graduate -- I needed to create a space for myself. My brother was handling the Coimbatore part of the business. So, like the ingredients of a sweet coming together in the making – when tradition, elders’ blessings, hard work, planning all come together naturally, growth happens, he says.

The Chennai move was Father’s will. You simply had to be in the big city if you have growth plans. While Murali knew he had to move to Chennai, he acknowledges, he had no idea of what to expect.

In 1996, we only had a bare outline of the kind of enterprise and outlet we had to set up. But no idea of what it would grow into. We had only about six stoves to start with, and then it increased to 120, and a 50,000 sq ft kitchen. But what we started with was a 200 sq ft shop in Pondy Bazaar, and expanded the facility. Then put a unit in Adyar, Anna Nagar and steadily expanded – we are also in airports there was good response.

Chennai’s reception for Sri Krishna Sweets was all that we could have hoped for and more, says Murali. Anticipation had been building up, after all the makers of Mysurpa were coming to town. Plus, we did our might, we gave freebies of 1kg free for 1kg of sweets bought.

People supported us. I remember the enthusiastic response on the first day in Pondy Bazaar. There was a continuous stream of buyers, some were even waiting for us to open and customers continued to pour in till 10.00 pm.

But we also realised that with growth in expectations, our responsibility grows.

Market Trends

Sri Krishna Sweets continued its commitment to standing out from the crowd. Its offerings continued to expand and it evolved with the times. As lifestyle changes happened and increasingly the concept of gifting during various occasions caught on, the need for aesthetic and efficient packaging increased.

Innovation in packaging came to the fore, it was as important as the product itself. Guests would take a small gift when they visit relatives and friends. Such a package cannot be a purely utilitarian cardboard or plastic box, he says.

You can see for yourself the pleasant ambience in our shops. But when the buyer takes a product to present it to somebody else, that lavishness and luxury feel should extend to the final consumer, they should feel that some thought has gone into the gift, he says.

Efficient, tasteful and convenient packaging makes a gift stand out. "When you reverse engineer, understand the buyers' expectations when they enter the shop, we were able to fulfil the need," says Murali.

Also, Sri Krishna Sweets exploited every occasion to celebrate with sweets. We celebrated various events including some we created, for instance, Mysurpa Day to mark the founder's birthday.

Typically, Diwali was traditionally the big event, but we focussed on other poojas also including Vinayaka Chaturthi, Pongal, Krishna Jayanthi and other non-religious but significant ones such as Independence Day. Also, every pooja has its own special varieties of sweets. We used every occasion to hype and build the brand. We created a Krishna Jayanthi box with a variety of sweets, seedais, a pack of butter and savouries. Nowadays, small families, especially youngsters, find it hard to make such items.

For Vinayaka Chaturthi we offered an appropriate box with a small statuette of Lord Ganapathy, and sweets made on the occasion such as the kozhukattai; for Diwali we offered bakshanams. All this fostered connectivity with the people.

Thinking Different

Yes, traditionally the sweetmeat business is a fragmented industry, with a shop on almost every busy street and some of them very popular ones. But we envisioned something different because of our long-term plans; me, I followed my customers, says Murali. With one shop in one part of such a large city, you tend to draw customers from all over. So, we set up more outlets and expanded from one locality to the next, and from one city to another. It is easy to duplicate success and scale up but there are some underlying requirements, he cautions.

Creating a retail chain is like stringing flowers to make a garland, says Murali. The bigger the garland, the stronger the fibre that holds the flowers needs to be. The entrepreneur should have the capability to cope with growth, establish systems to ensure orderliness and connectivity.

He adds, that for him, when talking about system it is not just business system, but also the entrepreneur's own discipline. "I am a deeply spiritual person and believe in spiritual guides. I am a devotee of the Mahaperiya of Kanchipuram and also follow Mahatria. When you have a spiritual guide, it helps gain equanimity," he says.

Also, the team needs to understand the entrepreneur's vision. Communication is important to gain their commitment and for getting standardised and uniform products at various locations. Whether Mysurpa or Karas we have to teach the skill. Need the team to understand the concept. We need to be system driven, he says

Similarly, you bond with the customers, so they relate to you and to the product, and that instils confidence in them that we will meet their expectations.

Bring in Experts

There is only so much an entrepreneur can do. Beyond a certain stage it is time for experts to take a hand, whether in marketing, finance or management. All this is a mix. Today with growth, you need to acknowledge that entrepreneurs sometimes over reach, or over think. But that is an experience and they need to move on, consider it a lesson, understand and should not wilt, says Murali.

We did not have a big financial backup or even technical knowledge. We focussed on sales and marketing, just getting the product from x to y. But we learned all that is needed and we roped in consultants.

Imagine going to Delhi without knowing Hindi. But that should not stop us from entering new markets. There is technology, we use translators, we use experts in specific skills and trust them. We listen to them and adapt their suggestions to our needs. Whether for finance, product or market, we use the appropriate people to address the issue.

Funding can be a challenge. So far, Sri Krishna Sweets has not done on a largescale. But we hope to, and are seriously looking at scaling up to a higher level. In Chennai we started with the support of Dhanalakshmi Bank. But we were nobody then. Today we are exploring various options.

Another great support system can be peers, entrepreneurs in other businesses. They can be a great source of inspiration and support. CII's bouncing board was a huge support, he says. Veteran entrepreneurs such as C.K. Ranganathan of CavinKare; Murugavel Janakiraman of Bharat Matrimony; and M. Ponnuswami of PonPure Chemicals were there with valuable suggestions. Plus, my school mates who have been friends for over 50 years were always there. Similarly, family support is important. How we utilise the support system is up to us.

Yes, entrepreneurs face multiple challenges. It is important to understand challenges are meant to be solved, that is how opportunities open up. Anticipating and meeting demand, cycles in businesses, and weathering these challenges and expanding are all important.

Evolving Business

Now we are looking at restaurants, food products - convenience foods. Brand Murali's is coming out with a new concept, Murali's Market, a dedicated food products shop with over 500-600 SKUs. We stock not only traditional items such as sweets and savouries but also chocolates developed in-house, novel variants, spice mixes and so on. There is also a restaurant linked to the outlet. We are looking at expanding the restaurant chain and designing it to market trends. We have over 50 years' experience, and we are tailoring the design.

Krishna Sweets will increasingly be an experience space. Now with an online presence we have all-India reach. Online is doing well and we are looking at options to expand our presence. For example, how to popularise Mysurpa in Odisha or West Bengal. We are expanding our reach with outlets in airports, looking at a presence on highways and major roads and railway stations. We are also planning restaurants-cum-sweet shops and looking at differentiation within shops in various locations.

The Tradition Continues

Powering the evolution of Sri Krishna Sweets is the third generation - Shruthi and Sneha, my two daughters. They are keen on the business and have involved themselves from their school days. The daughters learned the nuances of the enterprise hands-on. Just as I learned from my father, they learned from me.

Shruthi is good at back-office operations, and has a deep knowledge of the products. Sneha handles the front office and marketing and packaging; she can do wonders. They are bringing in a lot of energy to the business. Each understands their strength and what they are good at and their roles. We only need to channel their energy, be role models, he says.

Muralis Market, was my daughters' idea. It is based on experience. They offer novel products, for example noodles made from carrot, healthy variants, new varieties of sweets and savouries.

Giving back to society

Not just in business approach, but also in giving back to society, Murali has a unique concept rooted in tradition.

“My father often said you need to give back to society, share wealth. Do something for society, your customers,” he says. For the old and young we are creating a concept “Do good every day.” For example, we are organising classes in schools on traditional concepts such as what is dharma? what is money? what is beauty beyond the physical aspect? And on appropriate social interaction, relationships...

Similarly, on spiritual thought, we teach youngsters on how to pray; teach respect for elders through programmes such as “salute mothers”, “father is mentor” and so on. We need to inculcate values, love and discipline in youngsters. Sri Krishna Sweets got its recognition and honors by various notable social, cultural organizations and received more than 60 plus awards for its CSR activities including Kalaimamani Virudu from Tamil Nadu State Government and 20 plus Awards for Business. I owe this to my father Sri N K Mahadeve Iyer who inspired me to do says Murali.

For Young Entrepreneurs

Youngsters must understand everything is possible. Whatever the business, anyone with commitment can make a success of it. Even for someone with modest means, all they need to do is to make a start and take things step-by-step, set goals and work towards it. Entrepreneurs need to fully understand the nature of their chosen area of business and its requirements and be focussed.

Once a line of work is chosen, he says, repose complete faith in the business. Learn everything there is to know about it. Just a couple of decades back it was hard to access knowledge. Today everything is at our fingertip online. If anything, we have a problem of plenty where information is concerned, he says.

Also, understand that a business cannot be purely money-minded. Profit is the primary goal of a business, of course, but the way it is done should be sustainable and ethical. If conglomerates such as the Tatas have sustained over multiple generations it is due to the underlying principles and ethics guiding them since their founding.

While it important to be self-confident, it is easy to believe that we alone can handle everything- that is ego. “You need to seek support when needed, delegating responsibilities is a key aspect of evolving from a pure entrepreneur to a business leader. Entrepreneurs should understand when to control and when to give their team a free hand,” says Murali.

Acknowledgement



Dr Thangam Meganathan

**Chairperson
Rajalakshmi Engineering College**





Centre of Excellence for Innovation, Entrepreneurship & Startups

CII Centre of Excellence for Innovation, Entrepreneurship, and Startups (CIES) serves as a catalyst for fostering innovation, driving entrepreneurship, and bridging the gap between corporates and the dynamic startup ecosystem in India. Through a comprehensive suite of services, CIES aims to elevate organizations in innovation, technology adoption, and investment potential, thereby contributing significantly to the growth of the startup ecosystem. CII is a force multiplier, uniquely positioned to catapult growth in the country by leveraging its 300,000 members connect, 500+ sectoral councils, 65+ offices in the nation, 8 international offices, and 300+ MoU's with international partners from over 100 countries.

Mission: Empower corporates to thrive by embracing innovation through startup connect simultaneously guiding startups to grow into renowned corporate leaders.

Vision: To be a world-class, state-of-the-art, corporate-driven, startup resource platform that enables growth of successful startups in India.

Key Services:

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ICONN Alpha is a dedicated mobile app for connecting with CII CIES startup and innovation community.

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International Delegations | Institutionalized Framework | Inbound and Outbound

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Confederation of Indian Industry

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Confederation of Indian Industry

The Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) works to create and sustain an environment conducive to the development of India, partnering Industry, Government and civil society, through advisory and consultative processes.

CII is a non-government, not-for-profit, industry-led and industry-managed organization, with around 9,000 members from the private as well as public sectors, including SMEs and MNCs, and an indirect membership of over 365,000 enterprises from 294 national and regional sectoral industry bodies.

For more than 125 years, CII has been engaged in shaping India's development journey and works proactively on transforming Indian Industry's engagement in national development. CII charts change by working closely with Government on policy issues, interfacing with thought leaders, and enhancing efficiency, competitiveness, and business opportunities for industry through a range of specialized services and strategic global linkages. It also provides a platform for consensus-building and networking on key issues.

Through its dedicated Centres of Excellence and Industry competitiveness initiatives, promotion of innovation and technology adoption, and partnerships for sustainability, CII plays a transformative part in shaping the future of the nation. Extending its agenda beyond business, CII assists industry to identify and execute corporate citizenship programmes across diverse domains including affirmative action, livelihoods, diversity management, skill development, empowerment of women, and sustainable development, to name a few.

For 2024-25, CII has identified "Globally Competitive India: Partnerships for Sustainable and Inclusive Growth" as its Theme, prioritizing 5 key pillars. During the year, it would align its initiatives and activities to facilitate strategic actions for driving India's global competitiveness and growth through a robust and resilient Indian industry.

With 70 offices, including 12 Centres of Excellence, in India, and 8 overseas offices in Australia, Egypt, Germany, Indonesia, Singapore, UAE, UK, and USA, as well as institutional partnerships with about 300 counterpart organizations in almost 100 countries, CII serves as a reference point for Indian industry and the international business community.

Confederation of Indian Industry

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