

The Master of Spices

"Success is not what others think you are," says 'Masala King' Dhananjay Datar who was nominated for the Entrepreneur of the Year at the Masala! Awards 2012 & named amongst the '100 Most Powerful Indians in the Gulf' by *Arabian Business Magazine*, on making the Al Adil stores such a success story

Dhananjay Datar's success story isn't too different from that of the spice traders of the past who travelled great distances, started small ventures and then became hugely successful in foreign lands. Having begun as a small grocery store in Bur Dubai way back in 1984 with three employees, today Al Adil has grown into a spice empire serving the entire GCC and beyond, employing 375 people directly and about 500 in the UAE and India indirectly. For the large Indian community in this region, Al Adil has become the go-to store for spices, cereals, pulses, pickles and every other product that brings them closer to home.

Dhananjay, who counts his father, the late Mahadeo Datar as his biggest inspiration, has taken the group to great heights through sheer hard work and determination, resulting in a string of awards and recognition. However, the enterprising businessman does not believe in all work and no play. A few years ago he organised the thread ceremony of his son Rohit mid-air in a Jet Airways aircraft – a feat that landed him in the Limca Book of records! On another occasion, he celebrated 25 years of Al Adil 40,000 ft above sea level along with his wife and close associates onboard a Royal Jet Airways Boeing 737. Clearly, Dhananjay loves to live life king size! *Masala!* chatted with the spice king on his journey and his awe-inducing lifestyle.

What were the challenges you faced when you started Al Adil Trading Co LLC?

The market conditions were hugely different during those days as compared to the scene today. There were quite a few challenges. The market was not as developed as it is now and business activities were limited. The import-export policies were also very different as compared to the scene currently. However, the liberal and co-operative business culture of Dubai helped us rise above the challenges.

Dubai is now teeming with big chains of supermarkets and hypermarkets targeting the Indian community. What makes Al Adil different?

Al Adil always provides customers with what

they want. Our customers have always been loyal to us and they patronise us for what we offer them. With all due respect to the big chains present here, customers feel at home at Al Adil since we have a huge variety of spices, *masalas*, *atta* and other Indian products.

What were the strategies you employed to make Al Adil such a huge success?

My strategy has always been very simple: provide the best to the customer at the best possible price with no compromise on quality. We believe in value addition and giving people more than what they would get at other shops.

What does it take for an entrepreneur to succeed in a competitive market like Dubai?

Honesty, integrity, customer focus, the willingness to work hard and above all, high quality products are among the most important factors to make a mark.

Work and business aside, what excites you the most? How do you manage to spend time with your family given your hectic schedules?

Family plays a very important role in my life. My wife, Vandana, is my biggest support system. She is my friend, philosopher and guide. I always consult her and discuss all major business aspects with her. What I appreciate about Vandana is that she always points out new angles which I may have overlooked. Her perspectives help me a lot in business. Therefore, I make it a point to spend quality time with my wife and two sons, Rohit and Rishikesh. I strongly believe that parents should be an integral part of a child's formative years.

We hear that you gifted your wife Vandana, a customised Rolls Royce some time back (it was apparently the first Rolls Royce Phantom in Dubai). What was her reaction?

I share everything with my wife but I kept this a secret till the last minute. She was really surprised by the gift, and for several minutes, was absolutely speechless! Needless to say, she was thrilled though it took a while for the shock to wear off.

The mid-air thread ceremony you conducted for your son made headlines a few years ago. What made you come up with such an idea?

I always wanted to do something different and after lot of brainstorming I came up with this idea to have a unique and memorable ceremony for my son. It worked really well. Even now people are talking about it.

Your lifestyle and unique celebrations have landed you in the record books. How do you feel about it?

I want all the special moments in my life to be really memorable. It's only incidental that they have found a mention in the record books. My only desire is to be unique in my lifestyle and celebrations as I want to establish a different identity for myself.

What's the next big celebration you are going to surprise us with?

It is a secret. If I reveal it now, it won't be a surprise any more.

Apart from your father, who are you most inspired by in the field of business?

My father is my biggest inspiration. There are many other people who have inspired me so I do not want to mention any name in particular.

What are your favourite cars?

My favourite car is my Rolls Royce bespoke edition. I also have a Mercedes Benz.

What are the possessions you are most proud of?

I am proud of all that I have.

How often do you go on a holiday?

I travel at least three to four times in a year.

How would you describe your success?

Success is not what others think you are. Success, I feel, is what you think you have achieved with your life. Many people make the mistake of looking at success purely in monetary terms. I do not dispute that wealth is an indicator of success but the way you are seen as a human being is equally important. For me being a good human being is more essential than anything else. ☐

Dhananjay Datar was nominated for Best Entrepreneur in the Masala! Awards 2012.

