

## The Spice of Life



He was so poor he couldn't afford a bicycle and dream of nothing more than a square meal, but today Dhananjay Datar is Managing Director of the Al Adil Group and drives a bespoke Rolls-Royce. He tells Suchitra Bajpai Chaudhary his inspiring tale of struggle, survival and success.

In the almost 30 years since opening its first store in the UAE, the Al Adil Group of grocery shops has acquired a cult like status among Indian expatriates. That's because with 8000 varieties of authentic Indian foods, including spices, pickles and poppadoms, it's a store that literally bottles the taste of home. It was created in 1984 by Mahadeo Datar, and his son Dhananjay has made the tastes, smell and sights of Indian delicacies so irresistible that there are now 32 branches across the country, with 17 in Dubai.

Today Dhananjay, 48 is ranked 19th in the top 50 list of richest Indians in the Gulf with a total net worth of \$650 million (Dhs. 2.4 billion). But he hasn't forgotten his humble beginnings in a small village in Maharashtra, India.

"I never dreamt that I would be a successful businessman one day." he says. "All I dreamt of then was a stomach full of a food." But from those days when he couldn't afford a bicycle or breakfast to now, driving a made to order Rolls Royce in Dubai, Dhananjay remains unchanged. "To me my work place is sacred." he insists.

"My customers are revered and my employees are my true assets."

I had a tough time as a child growing up away from parents and with no comforts. My father Mahadeo, was employed in the Indian Air Force as a flight sergeant and my mother, Shashikala, was a housewife. This was the late 1960s when government salaries were very low and transfers were frequent. My father was posted in northern India and we never lived in one place for more than two years.

When I was five, we were posted to a town in Punjab and I was put into grade 1 but, before I could complete the academic year, my father was transferred to another town in the same state and I had to repeat grade 1. The following year before I finished the school year he was due for another transfer and that's when Dad decided he couldn't keep disrupting my studies and sent me to live with my grandparents in Maharashtra. So, in 1970, at five and a half years old, I arrived in the sleepy village of Shirkhed in Akola district.

While my father led a very frugal life, my grandparents were even poorer. I do not remember ever having a breakfast as a child; just a glass of steaming hot tea. Lunch was a flat coarse millet bread with thin lentil gruel, and dinner was one lentil flatbread with plain yoghurt. Often I would argue with my granny to add sugar to the yoghurt and she would reason with me gently, saying they needed the sugar for the tea next morning.

I walked barefoot to school and during the monsoons I would cover my head with a jute sack as an umbrella was a luxury we couldn't afford. I never had a sweater and would shiver in my thin clothes.

I had just one uniform for school that I washed every evening and hung out to dry the next morning. I couldn't afford ink, which came in a sachet in granular form that you had to dissolve in water to be able to use it. I'd borrowed ink every time I wrote.

My brother Sanjay, who was far younger than I, got to stay with my parents as he didn't have to go to school.

In 1973, my father retired from the air force and took up a government job that brought him to Mumbai and I moved back in with my family. We had a modest two bed roomed house in Kalina, Santa Cruz.

I wasn't very bright at school and was particularly weak in math. That has now taught me to check and double-check numbers. But eventually I managed to do a doctorate in Business Administration from the American Liberty University. I found the written test easy as it was based on practical business knowledge, something I have practiced for so many years.

In Mumbai people always talked about how fortunes change in Dubai. My father already had plans for moving to Dubai and within two years he applied and got accepted for a job as a store manager in Jebel Ali. He moved to Dubai in 1976 and our fortunes changed. Suddenly there was enough food on table and we could afford a television. I was determined to join my father in business.

In 1984, my father resigned from his job at Jebel Ali and with Dhs. 4500 to invest he opened the first store in Bur Dubai. He hired two helpers and by the time I joined at the age of 22 there was enough work to keep all four of us busy.

Initially it was just to be a grocery store but we soon realized that Indian expats were pinning for the flavours and tastes of things they had enjoyed as kids - poppadoms, liquorice, herbal shampoos, sundried mango candy, hair oils and spice mixes. The Sikh men would come and ask us to get their fixo get to fix their beards and their particular shampoo, Kesh Nikhar. When we acquired these goods and supplied them to our customers, they were so happy. We had a one on one relationship with each customer and in those days many would just walk in to chat and greet us when they were missing home. Gradually we established our name as being grocery store that stocked authentic Indian foodstuff.

I had to sweep the floor, clean the windows and carry the goods. I weighed 50 kgs and had to lug 50 kilograms sack on my back from the store to the shop floor. I'd have to ask one of the others to help me to lug a 90 kilogram bag of rice. But that is how my father trained me. He

wanted me to be tough, without the airs of an owner. I learnt how to run the shop from the bottom up.

When I was ready, my father handed me the entire operation and retired at the age of 55, returning to Mumbai.

By 1986, all the major five star hotels and airlines began placing their food orders with us and we opened a special spice mill in Al Quoz where we acquired whole spices and cleaned, powdered, packed and delivered them. We opened a branch in Abu Dhabi in 1993 and one in Sharjah in 1996.

I wanted to expand even further, but health issues prevented me. I was ill by the time I was 42 because I was so busy that I didn't eat properly and my weight crept up to 105 kilograms. I began having acidity issues and I had such a bad back that I was on very strong pain killers. Eventually I discovered I had a duodenitis, an inflammation of the duodenum caused by poor eating habits, so I completely changed my lifestyle. I began having eight smaller meals and cut out oil and when I was better I joined a weight loss programme and shed 25 kilograms. After that I made up for lost time.

Today we have 32 stores across the UAE and we have two flour and two spice mills. We also have plans to open in Oman and Qatar.

I have been greatly influenced by my father. He was extremely disciplined and valued hard work and punctuality. When I was 40 he was here on holiday and had gone into the office. I was a little late getting to work, arriving at 9 am instead of 8:45 am. He was so incensed at my tardiness that he actually slapped me. I didn't mind and I respected him. He passed away at the age of 61 3 years ago.