

News monitored for: Lemon Tree Hotels

THE PRESIDENT VIKRAMJIT SINGH



# HUGE APPETITE FOR GROWTH

THE PRESIDENT OF LEMON TREE HOTELS ON HOW IT ALL STARTED FOR HIM AND THE PUSH TO GET BIGGER

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BY: **BIKRAMJIT RAY**

VIKRAMJIT SINGH, may have grown up in a hotel--his family owned and ran their own concern in Jorhat Assam--but his own plans did not feature hospitality. "I was a B.Com Honours student at SRCC and while I was passing out, Taj came for campus placement for an Management trainee program. I sat for the interview since my father was in hotels and our family was in the business of hotels," he said, remembering that had found the hotel business very glamorous and Taj gave a very impressive presentation. The plan at that time was to get trained and go back to the family business back in Assam.

While doing his two-year program, he met Patu Keswani who was then the resident manager of Taj Mahal Hotel, at Mansingh Road, New Delhi. After spending four-and-a-half-year, Singh returned to Assam to run the family business after the demise of his father.

"I didn't see spending the rest of my life in Assam, so

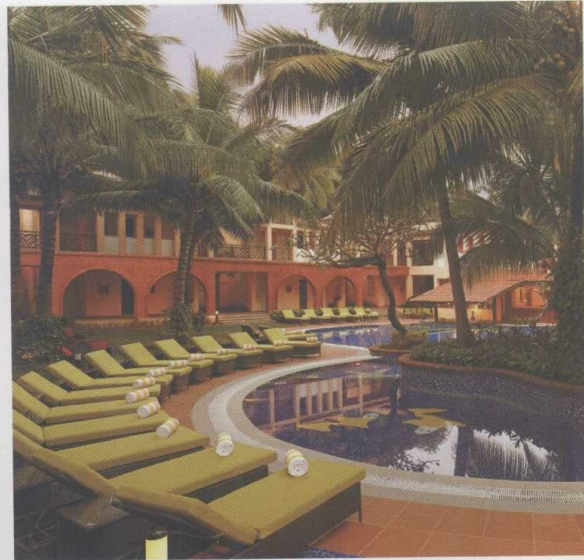
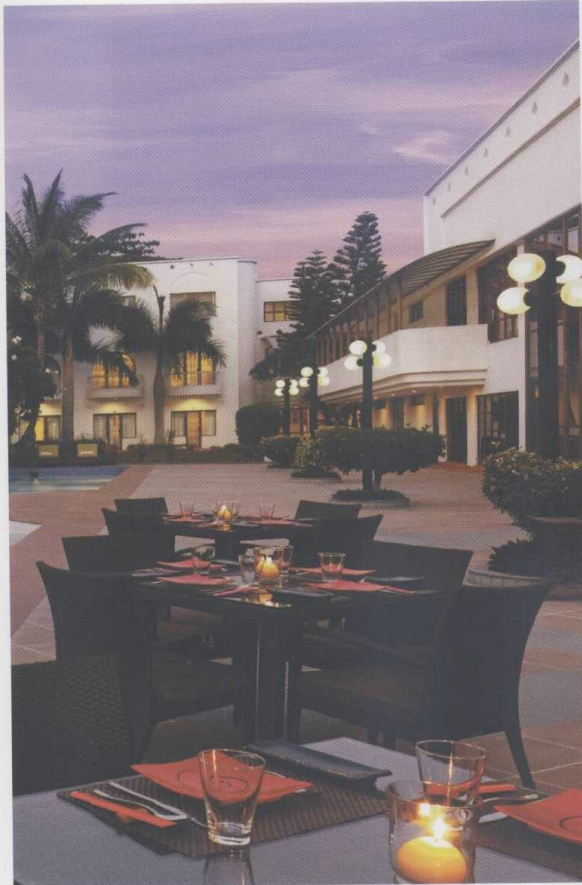
I found a buyer for my hotel, sold up lock stock and barrel and moved back to Delhi," he reminisced. This was also when Lemon Tree's first hotel was opening and Singh went and met up with Keswani and a couple of other colleagues and asked for a job.

"When I joined, I was told the company needed someone to take care of sales in Gurgaon," he adds, and even though he had never done sales, Singh took up the challenge. This was back in 2005.

The reason why Singh managed to stick on all these years, making him a veteran of the company was because, "The spirit of Lemon Tree was very entrepreneurial. I think you are not defined by the role, or function or what your business card says. A lot of it is the fact that you do a little bit of everything. Whatever the need of the hour is, you land up doing, which I think is very exciting and keeps you going." He also mentioned that here is a lot of learning from

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the job that kept him engaged though his 11 years on the job.

"I was lucky enough to be part of the team which opened 31 hotels in the last 10 years. I got exposure to different cities, to different markets, different clients and customers. Something I think I cannot find a parallel to. No hotel company has grown the way we have. No hotel company can give you the exposure which we can," he added.

"If it wasn't Lemon Tree, I don't think I would have lasted for this long. I think its true for a lot of my colleagues. In Lemon Tree it's never like you are an employee with a set role. You are empowered to take decisions which is a huge thing when it comes to a hotel company in this day and age. You are not limited by your role. Whatever is the need

of the hour and the company. If that's not entrepreneurial, I don't know what is!" he said when asked why he didn't go the independent way since he was from a family with experience in independent hotels.

One of the passions that drives Singh is the push to be India's largest hotel company. "Right now we are already India's fastest growing (hotel company). In the next three to four years or five years. We will be the second largest by way of asset ownership," Singh said.

As of August 2017, the chain had 33 hotels in 21 cities with over 3500 rooms. The first target is by 2020 to have 8,000 rooms, something he was very confident about - spread over 60 hotels in 30 cities, according to the plan.

The big ticket inventories include 1000 rooms in Mumbai, properties in Kolkata, Udaipur a second hotel in Pune and two more properties in Gurgaon, which gives the chain 500 rooms in the area.

The company is also acquiring a couple of hotels in Goa and by the end of October they would have five hotels in Gurgaon looking for more, he added.

It is the leisure market which Lemon Tree Hotels wants to foray into now, "It is something we are seriously and aggressively pursuing," began Singh. The themes which the company wants to follow are broadly: wildlife, pilgrimage, golf and hills.

"We are building our own resort in Udaipur, we are building Shimla, while in Katra, a pilgrimage venture, we took the management route. Tarudhan in Manesar, also a

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managed property, is our foray into golf tourism," he told us, explaining that this was the model a mix of owned and managed, which was the way forward.

Why leisure, we asked? "We've got the business portfolio growing. Except Mumbai, where we are building a thousand rooms, we are practically in every big corporate hub of India. The aim now is to capture the entire share of our customer, by venturing into leisure. The average Indian takes three to four holidays a year. Short trips have become the in thing. It's a big market space, which is why, we have a big focus on leisure and the resort portfolio," Singh told us.

And though there are places where the management contract route is being taken, "Lemon Tree is also aggressively looking at investing in this portfolio. There are places we are looking at buying land and building, there are places we are looking at acquiring resort as well," he told us, besides looking at managing existing resorts, of course. The aim is to add at least 10 resorts to the leisure portfolio.

"From the point of sales and marketing, we are now expanding two things. The predominant customer is the Indian domestic customer. In bound is a dying segment, if you ask me. We have now strengthened our domestic team. I have an offline domestic team which is majorly covering big domestic hubs," Singh said.

"We may get into the upper upscale five star space. The Mumbai or Udaipur property would be the first for us in that segment for us. It's still a work in progress and we are

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THE TARGET IS TO INCREASE ROOM STRENGTH FROM 3,500 TO 8,000 BY THE YEAR 2020

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still discussing that brand, but no concrete thoughts yet," Singh shared.

"If I wasn't in Lemon Tree, I don't think I would have survived in any other company. The whole entrepreneurial streak that I have would have taken the fore. With Lemon Tree, there is something to do all the time. There is no change of getting bored. There is never a dull moment," he concluded.

**AUTHOR BIO:** Bikramjit Ray is Executive Editor of BW Hotelier.