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# hotelier india

THE DEFINITIVE GUIDE TO SUCCESSFUL HOTEL MANAGEMENT

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11<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

# THE POWER LIST 2019

INDIA'S MOST INFLUENTIAL  
HOSPITALITY LEADERS

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# THE POWER LIST 2019

THE STALWARTS WHO  
SCORED BIG THIS YEAR

**E**xcellence is a journey; it is a constant striving for perfection, for achieving the best results. There is no dearth of amazing hoteliers or good leaders in the hospitality industry. But just a few attempt to take risks and achieve results beyond the ordinary, sometimes by innovating and at the other times by the sheer force of their ambition.

For *Hotelier India's* annual Power List 2019, we drew up a list that encompasses several levels of the hospitality industry — from owners to senior management, who have made immense contribution to not just their brands, but to the industry at large. Whether it is making forays into difficult markets across India or opening hotels with a difference, or even bringing in new systems and processes, or offering sage advice and analysis to the industry, each is an achiever in her or his own right.

We also have a few new entrants to the list this year. Just by the force of their gumption, forward-thinking and innovative strategizing, they inspire a whole new generation of hoteliers.

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THE  
LIVING  
LEGEND

# P.R.S. OBEROI

Executive Chairman, EIH Limited



OBEROI'S EXACTING STANDARDS AND PROCESSES HAVE BEEN DOCUMENTED IN A STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURE (SOP) DOCUMENT, MORE THAN 2000 PAGES IN LENGTH.

THE  
POWER  
LIST  
2019

**P**rithviraj Singh Oberoi, or Biki Oberoi as he is known, is an inspirational figure not just in the Indian hospitality industry but even in the entrepreneurial space. He has taken The Oberoi Group of Hotels to great heights, redefining luxury as 'understated and discreet' for an entire generation of hoteliers, without losing sight of the roots from which the group draws its sustenance.

Unlike other hotel groups, the Oberoi properties are steeped in the culture of India — from their dedication to the dearly-held philosophy of Atithi Devo Bhava to the design of the resorts, which can be best defined as 'India Modern'. Old hands will tell you that Mr Oberoi is the chief architect, designer and planner for every one of his hotels. While building The Oberoi Gurgaon, the octogenarian hotelier visited the hotel more than 50 times. His exacting standards and processes have been documented in a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) document, more than 2000 pages in length.

Mr Oberoi inherited this legacy of hospitality from his father, MS Oberoi. Mr Oberoi extended the brand by establishing luxury hotels in some key tourism markets, and also expanding The Oberoi Group beyond India's shores.

At 87, he is still the force that drives the business though he has passed on the running of the group to son Vikram and nephew Arjun. Mr Oberoi has also contributed to the hospitality industry by setting up the Oberoi Centre of Learning and Development, from which has emerged several leaders of the industry as well as other achievers.

A winner of several awards including the Padma Vibhushan and the Lifetime Achievement Award at the CNBC TV 18 India Business Leader Awards 2007, Mr Oberoi offers some advice to budding hoteliers: the people you work with you are the biggest assets, so invest in them. Don't cut costs; instead, try to cut waste. And possess a passion for what you do if you want to succeed.

Recently, under Mr Oberoi's guidance, the Oberoi Group launched a new brand identity focusing on its guest experience. It has now been renamed to 'Oberoi Sun', which according to the Oberoi Group means the warmth, energy and sense of well-being of its guest experience. Mr Oberoi insists that the focus right from the first hotel in the 1930s has remained on the guest experience.

Mr Oberoi has mentored several hoteliers, many of whom have gone on to establish their own groups. ■

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## THE POWER LIST 2019

# AJAY BAKAYA

Managing Director,  
Sarovar Hotels & Resorts



BAKAYA IS DRIVING THE  
EXPANSION IN GLOBAL  
MARKETS SUCH AS THE  
MIDDLE EAST AND THE  
AFRICAN CONTINENT.

**T**he seasoned hotelier has often said that long-distance cycling taught him a thing or two about the importance of positive energy and self-control, attributes that go a long distance as a hotelier.

The managing director of Sarovar Hotels & Resorts is responsible for overseeing the operations and development of the group. He has set his sight on expanding the group's portfolio to 100 hotels by 2020. Founded in 1994, right now the group portfolio includes 75 properties across 50 destinations, under three brands — Sarovar Premiere, Sarovar Portico and Hometel, besides some properties under other brands.

Bakaya has revealed that the group has signed up new hotels in Ajmer, Jhansi, Dibrugarh (Assam), Guhagarh, Junagadh, Gorakhpur, and Dalhousie. Today, Sarovar's footprint expands across most of India and five countries in the African continent, including Tanzania, Kenya, South Sudan, Zambia and Ethiopia. They are now looking at expanding to the Middle East. In 2017, European hospitality brand Louvre Hotels bought a majority stake in the chain, infusing it with much-required cash for expansion.

And to think that Bakaya stumbled upon the hospitality career quite by accident. The youngest of the four siblings, Bakaya studied in Shimla before moving to Mumbai to study at Hansraj College. He worked as a medical representative for a while after college, before opting for management training at The Oberoi Group. He went on to study hospitality management at Cornell-Essec, France.

Bakaya, who has worked with a very exclusive French kitchen headed by chef Jacky Freon, says he wanted a job in the F&B section when he joined The Oberoi Group. But his first job was actually as banqueting manager at The Oberoi, Mumbai. He went on to work across the globe in senior management positions, from the African continent to countries such as Australia, France and the UK.

He began his Sarovar journey in a shared office with a single hotel. Today, Sarovar Hotels is recognised as a *tour de force* in the mid-market segment. Sarovar operates largely under a managed property model. While 65 per cent of the group's revenue is generated from the business clientele, the rest 35 per cent is from the leisure segment.

As the next phase of growth, Bakaya is looking at underexplored pilgrim spots such as Katra in Jammu, Ajmer in Rajasthan and Bodh Gaya in Bihar, which has a captive market of international Buddhist pilgrims. In India, where 12 new Sarovar hotels will open by the end of this year, many of them would be in temple towns. ■

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# AMIT BHOSALE

Managing Director, ABIL Group



BHOSALE'S FOCUS  
REMAINS ON TIER-I  
CITIES OR TRAVEL  
DESTINATIONS SUCH AS  
GOA, AND NOW LONDON,  
AND HE STEERS CLEAR OF  
B-TOWNS, UNLIKE OTHER  
HOTELIERS.

**T**he dapper managing director of the realty major ABIL Group is known for his tenacity and for making things happen despite all odds. While the ABIL Group was founded by his father, Avinash, Amit Bhosale is most passionate about the hospitality segment.

Among the big moves ABIL has made this year is the acquisition of an eight-storey commercial building at Trafalgar Square, a prime location in London, for nearly £100 million, or INR 900 crore. The investment marks ABIL's foray into the international markets for the group's hospitality business.

In a statement after the sale, Bhosale said. "We have always developed hotels at landmark locations. London ranks in the top three choices when one is considering global expansion. This is an exciting opportunity for us as Trafalgar Square is a globally recognised location." The freehold property, 5 Strand Trafalgar Square, will be redeveloped into a five-star hotel with 210 to 230 keys inventory at an additional investment of over £80 million.

This brings ABIL's portfolio of luxury hotels to five. While it was his father who embarked on the hospitality journey by bidding for a Holiday Inn property in November 2002, Amit gained formal education in the hospitality industry through a rigorous course at Switzerland's Les Roches. His first experience at running the hotel was with The Westin Pune, where he was involved with every decision — from procuring the land to conducting a market survey, meeting architects and consultants, working with structural engineers, negotiating with hospitality brands, acquiring sanctions and commissions, and liaising with the contractors and vendors during the construction phase. The other three luxury hotels in Pune were doing great business in the early 90s, with ADRs touching INR 8,000-9,000 and it was a fortuitous time to make his debut as a hotelier. Bhosale went on to open Shangri-La in Mumbai's Palladium Mall (which is now St Regis Mumbai) and then W Goa. Interestingly all three global brands made their debut in the Indian market with ABIL.

After the planning stage, Bhosale prefers to step back and leave the job to architects and contractors, moving on to strategise on how to market and position a hospitality project. His focus remains on Tier-I cities or travel destinations such as Goa, and now London, and he steers clear of B-towns. Unlike other hoteliers he believes that while the land cost is cheaper in these regions, the development cost continues to be high, the spending power much lower than cities, and infrastructure issues such as lack of good air connectivity is an issue. ■

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# DR ANKUR BHATIA

Executive Director, Bird Group



DR BHATIA DEFINES  
ROSEATE'S BRAND OF  
LUXURY AS A YOUNGER  
APPROACH WITH A TILT  
TOWARDS DESIGN AND  
PERSONALISATION.

**T**he Bird Group, under Dr Ankur Bhatia, has emerged as a significant player in both hospitality and travel technology. Bhatia is not expanding his hospitality portfolio across India but is also eyeing the global market, particularly the Middle East.

His hospitality portfolio is a blend of urban and leisure properties. The Roseate Ganges in Rishikesh is the newest of the Bird Group properties that have hit all the high notes. The resort was bought 15 years ago, but has just been refurbished and opened with 16 cottages, a spa and F&B offerings. "We will add 34 keys by 2020. This hotel redefines design, architecture and services in the luxury space of the Himalayan region," he has said in an interview.

Right now, the Bird Group offers a collection of six luxury hotels across India and the UK, with more under development in Goa and Jaipur. Bhatia is a strategic thinker and provides direction to the group consortium. Globally, his vision is to opt for acquisitions to expand the group's portfolio, while in India, all the properties owned and operated by Roseate Hotels & Resorts are Greenfield projects.

Dr Bhatia is backed up an insightful understanding of the travel market in India and his experience in the service industry. The Roseate Hotels & Resorts, which is the Bird Group brand, offer differentiated experience and has design, art, hospitality and personalised service at its core. He defines Roseate's brand of luxury as a "younger approach with a tilt towards design and personalisation. The detailing is on art, decor and on how it's interactive with the design."

A proponent of 'individualism' in hospitality, where one hotel of the same brand doesn't always resemble the other, Dr Bhatia has said in earlier interviews, "Within India, if I were to position Roseate House, New Delhi Aerocity, I don't think there's a comparison. I want to offer a global experience with a little bit of Indianess. We don't want to be intricate. You won't see the kind of opulence that some luxury properties in India present to their guests. While Roseate House, New Delhi Aerocity is set up like a city hotel, it offers everything that any luxury hotel across the globe has to offer. Rishikesh has a similar feel to the Roseate fabric, but it is rather unique."

Dr Bhatia refuses to play the number game due to his belief that large room inventories are not affordable at the price standards and service standards that Roseate is known for. ■

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# ANSHU SARIN

CEO, Keys Hotels



SARIN HAS REINVENTED  
HERSELF AND HER  
BUSINESS SEVERAL TIMES  
OVER TO ENSURE THAT  
THE HOTEL GROUP STAYS  
RELEVANT.

**A**s CEO of Keys Hotel, Anshu Sarin has reinvented herself and her business several times over to ensure that the hotel group stays relevant to an emerging generation of travellers. Every good hotelier is aware of the need to realign themselves to the current market realities and the evolving expectations of guests.

Keys is a significant player in the mid-market category, which holds immense potential. The group combines superlative revenue management capabilities, which enables a disproportionately higher yield as ADRs improve. The group follows a capital-efficient business model to drive the development of their hotels, said Sarin, opting for optimum cost-effectiveness as a strategy.

Over the years, the Keys team has restructured the portfolio by creating three distinguished brand offerings. The group, under Sarin, has ensured that the workforce is diverse, with equal opportunities with remuneration for all. Keys Hotels ensure gender parity across the board. Sarin says the group utilises revenue management levers such as booking window, day of the week, channel mix, time of booking, price elasticity, etc. and refers to digital trends to offer hospitality experiences with a difference. The group is aiming to add another 1,000 rooms in the coming three years to their existing network of 21 hotels.

Sarin is a self-confessed workaholic, claiming that those who are passionate about their work are able to strike the right balance between work and life. ■



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# ARJUN OBEROI

MD, Development, EIH Limited




HE HAS HIS FINGER  
ON THE PULSE AND  
IS RESPONSIBLE FOR  
SEVERAL SUCCESSES,  
PARTICULARLY ON THE  
F&B FRONT AND NOW,  
ON THE DEVELOPMENT  
FRONT.

**A**rjun Oberoi is the man on the ground, responsible for the quality and timely delivery of the various The Oberoi Group properties as head of the Development team of EIH Limited. Son of Mr PRS Oberoi's late brother, Tilak Raj Oberoi, he runs the show with Vikram Oberoi.

Arjun gained experience working the ropes as part of The Oberoi Group and the McKinsey & Company teams, which were responsible for re-engineering systems and processes within the food and beverage departments of The Oberoi's city hotels. He has his finger on the pulse and is responsible for several successes, particularly on the F&B front and now, on the development front.

Now that he heads the project development team, his wide-ranging job includes assessing prospective opportunities for developing new luxury Oberoi and five-star Trident hotels and resorts and planning them to the minutest of detail. Over the years, he has worked on luxury projects, among them The Oberoi Amarvilas, Agra; The Oberoi Udaivilas, Udaipur; The Oberoi, Mauritius; Wildflower Hall, Shimla in the Himalayas; Trident, Gurgaon and Trident, Bandra Kurla, Mumbai, The Oberoi Dubai and The Oberoi Al Zorah Resort in Ajman, each of which is a unique property.

"We've never aimed to be in the mass market. It's really about providing very special hotels and experiences. It takes time; it's not cookie-cutter," Arjun has said in an earlier interview. "And of course in India, there are many opportunities, but we will continue to pursue those as we go along. Many of our hotels have established themselves in new destinations. They've created a market for themselves."

With the reopening of The Oberoi Delhi after a massive refurbishment and restoration, these are clearly exciting times for the group. The Oberoi Beach Resort, Lombok will soon open after a restoration. At least two new properties are being built — in Marrakech and Bandhavgarh. 

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# ARUN SARAF

MD, Juniper Hotels Pvt Ltd.



THERE IS NO DOUBT  
THAT SARAF IS NOT JUST  
A MAN WHO MEANS  
BUSINESS, BUT ALSO  
ONE WHO KNOWS HOW  
TO RUN A PROFITABLE  
BUSINESS.

**H**e heads Juniper Hotels Pvt Ltd (JHPL), a hotel development and ownership company that largely works with the Hyatt Group and its several brands, such as Andaz.

Saraf, an unassuming owner-hotelier, is a man of few words, opting to stay in the background and let his work do all the talking. And yet, there is no doubt that he is not just a man who means business, but also one who knows how to run a profitable business.

He is the son of Radhe Shyam Saraf, a hospitality pioneer who bought the Hyatt Group to India in the early 80s when global hospitality groups did not yet have India on their radar. The company traces its origins to 1975 when it began construction of its first property, Yak and Yeti in Nepal (which ultimately opened in 1978).

Much like his father, Saraf takes several calculated risks. The Hyatt properties owned by Juniper are also known as repositories of art — for instance, the massive art project he commissioned for Grand Hyatt Mumbai years ago, or the contemporary art that forms the core of the design of the 401-rooms Andaz Delhi, a joint venture between a subsidiary of Hyatt Hotels and JHPL. Andaz was the third hospitality business venture between JHPL and Hyatt.

In the next five years, JHPL is looking at investing INR 2,400 crore in the business. Saraf has tied up with the Bihar Government and Magadh University to develop a resort at Bodh Gaya through the public-private partnership model, in a bid to help develop India's spiritual and religious tourism segment.

Footsteps of Buddha Pvt Ltd, a company floated by Saraf, will invest Rs 140 crore in a 160-key resort. He is also building nine upscale and mid-market hotels in cities such as Raipur, Hampi, Lucknow, Sarnath, Guwahati, Ahmedabad, New Delhi, Jaipur, and Thiruvananthapuram, through two companies — JHPL and Chartered Hotels Pvt. Ltd, which will be managed by various Hyatt brands. For the astute owner, hospitality is an ever-evolving business that involves scouting for new markets and new formats, which will work in those markets. ■

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# ASHISH JAKHANWALA

MD & CEO, SAMHI Hotels Pvt. Ltd.



A CONSUMMATE DATA  
MAN, JAKHANWALA  
RELIES ON ACQUIRING  
AND ANALYSING MARKET  
DATA TO HIS ADVANTAGE.

Under Ashish Jakhanwala, SAMHI Hotels has grown exponentially, even exploring an IPO to raise funds for its fast-growing business.

Nine years after Jakhanwala co-founded the business, it has 29 hotels in 14 cities, with a total of 4,315 keys, with brands such as Marriott International, Sheraton Hotels & Resorts and Hyatt Hotels Corporation. Much like several new-age hotelier-owners, Jakhanwala believes that the ownership of the hotel and its management should be in two different hands. This way, while one is focussed on augmenting the asset value of the hotels, the other can work on increasing its operational value.

In an earlier interview to a financial newspaper, Jakhanwala had spoken about how SAMHI came into being, "In 2011, I saw that there was no large institutional owner of branded hotels. That's when the Eureka moment happened. If we can attract global institutional investors, we can create the first large institutional owner of hotels in India. The idea is to invest capital in a brand-agnostic fashion where returns are the highest."

The strategy has paid off, and Jakhanwala, known for his keen market sense, is now set to drive the IPO that hopes to raise INR 1,800 to 2,000 crore from the market by the end of this year. The hospitality acquisition, development and ownership company, which is backed by marquee investors such as Goldman Sachs and Piramal Capital & Housing Finance Ltd., has raised a considerable amount of funding over the years. The strategy is simple: acquire hotels that aren't in their healthiest state and require extensive intervention in terms of improving capital structure, product re-configuration and rebranding, and drive the performance in partnership with the operator.

A consummate data man, Jakhanwala relies on acquiring and analysing market data to his advantage. Over the years, SAMHI has launched several international brands in India, among them Fairfield by Marriott, a brand that existed only in North America and the rebranded Holiday Inn Express Hotels in key Indian markets. Jakhanwala has announced an investment of INR 100 crores to renovate 10 hotels as world-class products. ■

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# DILIP PURI

Founder, Indian School of Hospitality



ISH, PURI HOPES,  
WILL TRANSFORM  
HOSPITALITY  
EDUCATION IN THE  
COUNTRY THROUGH  
A UNIQUE APPROACH  
TO ITS PEDAGOGY AND  
EDUCATION PHILOSOPHY.

After decades of working in the mainstream hotel industry, in 2018 Dilip Puri quit his high-profile position as the managing director — India and regional vice president of Starwood Hotels & Resorts after the group's global merger with Marriott International. Instead of joining another group, he chose an offbeat path to become part of academia and set up the Indian School of Hospitality (ISH).

In some ways, Puri will be considered a pioneer. What the Indian hospitality sector lacks is access to well-trained manpower at all levels. Speaking about the motivation to set up ISH, he has been quoted to have said, "The hospitality industry environment is changing at an incredible pace and if the talent is to be future-ready, curriculums need to have the newest trends and patterns incorporated into them. The skill sets of hospitality and tourism graduates fail to match up to industry expectations, creating additional complications and failing to bridge the gap between supply and demand."

ISH's mission is to adopt a unique approach to higher education that balances the current needs of the global hospitality industry with those of today's millennial students. The faculty comprises of several hospitality industry experts and culinary veterans; the curriculum is tailor-made to prepare students to anticipate disruption within the global landscape and even to train them as potential disruptors.

There can be no one better than Puri to launch this significant venture, given his long innings in the industry and his several successes, including at his last position as the head of Starwoods. One of the world's leading hospitality school, Ecole hôtelière de Lausanne (EHL), recognised the effort and tied-up with ISH. They will work with the latter's faculty to provide Swiss learning methodologies and certify student diplomas. The tie-up has proven to be quite a success story for ISH this early in its lifespan.

ISH, Puri hopes, will transform hospitality education in the country through a unique approach to its pedagogy and education philosophy. He has said, "The competitive edge and battle for market share in the future will be fought as much over customers as over talent. It is a vibrant, exciting and ever-changing world and we endeavour to prepare professionals to be future proof, and foster a spirit of entrepreneurship and innovation through a uniquely designed academic curriculum." ■

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THE  
POWER  
LIST  
2019

# DIPAK HAKSAR

CEO, ITC Hotels & WelcomHotels



HAKSAR, WITH HIS  
'EMPOWER OTHERS'  
LEADERSHIP IN KEEPING  
WITH ITC HOTEL'S  
PHILOSOPHY, STRIKES A  
DEEP CHORD WITHIN THE  
ORGANISATION.

Under Dipak Haksar, ITC has expanded its portfolio across its four brands — ITC Hotels, WelcomHotel, Fortune and WelcomHeritage — to about 10,000 keys. In the last year, ITC Luxury Collection launched two new grand properties — ITC Grand Goa and ITC Royal Bengal, Kolkata, establishing its presence in the luxury end of the business.

ITC, right now, has a portfolio of 10,000 keys and over 100 properties in almost 71 destinations. Haksar, with his 'empower others' leadership in keeping with ITC Hotel's philosophy, strikes a deep chord within the organisation. "All divisions of ITC have deep synergy and interplay between manpower and resources. This allows us to leverage some of the institutional strength," he said in an interview.

Haksar is known to spend time mentoring his younger colleagues in the company, along with the new management entrants into the industry, in an attempt to create a managerial talent pool for the future.

ITC continues on the growth path; on the anvil is ITC Narmada in Ahmedabad, a part of its Luxury Collection. In the upper-upscale Welcomhotel brand, the company is actively pursuing an asset-right strategy. Under Haksar's leadership, ITC will launch 3,000 rooms in WelcomHotel brand in the next five years through management contracts. The new WelcomHotel properties will come up in destinations such as Corbett, Chennai, Chail, Ahmedabad and Puri.

Haksar is also pursuing ITC's 'Responsible Luxury' and sustainability initiatives with gusto. "We offer an exceptional luxury experience to our guests but we also take care of the environment. We have tried to create the lowest possible carbon energy footprint and we benchmark our hotels to achieve this. We are already carbon positive, water positive and solid waste recycling positive. For example, we have invested heavily in wind turbines at some of our properties, which meet a lot of the energy needs. Wherever we can, we are going for these turbines because it's the cleanest form of energy," he is quoted to have said.

ITC is revamping the experiences offered at the properties for the millennials by modernising the spaces and focusing on responsible luxury, besides incorporating technology and enhancing this package through personalisation and customisation. Haksar attributes the success of ITC Hotels to a combination of factors — among them, an innate vision and commitment to offer experiences that capture the beauty and magic of India. A student of Vedanta, he brings the wisdom encapsulated on the pages of these ancient scriptures, to his work. ■

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# JEAN-MICHEL CASSÉ

COO – India and South Asia,  
AccorHotels



CASSÉ HAS HELPED  
SHIFT THE GROUP'S  
BRAND STRATEGY FROM  
PRODUCT-CENTRIC TO  
CLIENT-CENTRIC, TO  
MEET THE DEMANDS  
OF CONTEMPORARY  
CUSTOMERS.

In his last two years as COO – India and South Asia, Jean-Michel Cassé has announced several big-ticket projects in the country. But the biggest has to be the announcement that AccorHotel's uber-luxury brand, Raffles, will be in India soon. The legendary luxury brand is synonymous with glamour and extraordinary experiences across the world. The Indian editions will come up at Jaipur and Udaipur, the two Rajasthani cities known for their vibrancy, luxury and royalty-inspired lifestyle.

Cassé told *Hotelier India* at the launch of the brand, "We are seeing increasing demand for luxury travel in India and are looking forward to expanding Accor's globally renowned portfolio of luxury brands in this incredible country. The addition of the iconic Raffles brand signals a new era for our group in the country." Right now, Accor's luxury portfolio is represented in the country by two Fairmont properties in Mumbai and Jaipur.

Accor is witnessing interesting times under the tutelage of the well-travelled and well-spoken hotelier, who brings his extensive global experience to the Indian market. He has helped shift the group's brand strategy from product-centric to client-centric, to meet the demands of the contemporary customers. Cassé is also driving the group's mid-scale and economy portfolio aggressively, through the expansion of brands such as Novotel and ibis.

He sees a huge potential in India for premium and luxury Accor brands such as Banyan Tree, Delano, Mondrian, Hyde and Tribe. "We are also interested in the development of branded, private and serviced residences in the country," he told *Hotelier India* earlier this year. For now, Accor's pipeline includes 5,000 rooms.

Cassé, who has handled the Indian market since 2008, is credited with the expansion and spread of AccorHotels across the country. He has said, "Some of the key milestones we have achieved include building a strong network of close to 50 hotels represented by nine of our international and regional brands, nearing 9,000 keys and over 8,500 employees. Moreover, we consolidated our position in the mid-scale and economy segment with Novotel and ibis hotels respectively, and expanded our luxury offerings by bringing Fairmont, Sofitel, Pullman, Swissotel and Grand Mercure brands to India."

He terms himself a "self-motivated" man, who draws inspiration from people he meets and destinations he travels to. Cassé dreams of bringing the experiential, design-led Accor brand, 25Hours, to India one day. "Even if we were to have only one, and it should be in Mumbai, because of its differential F&B offerings." ■

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# JITU VIRWANI

Chairman & MD, Embassy group



THOUGH NOT AVERSE TO  
TAKING RISKS, VIRWANI  
APPROACHES THE  
HOSPITALITY BUSINESS  
WITH CAUTION.

**T**he real estate baron is a new entrant on *Hotelier India's* power list for the opening of the second Four Seasons property in India earlier this year. Four Seasons Bengaluru is a sprawling and extravagant hotel and branded residences, which combines the best of luxury and global hospitality. Virwani said at the opening of the hotel, "The many synergies in our culture, service offerings, and vision between Four Seasons and the Embassy Group have brought us together to create this iconic asset."

The hotel comes two years after Embassy bought a stake in MAC Charles, which owned Le Meridien Bengaluru. In 2018, Hilton announced two new properties in Bengaluru with Embassy Group. The 500 room dual-branded hotel that features a Hilton Hotels & Resorts and a Hilton Garden Inn hotel in the same complex will be located within the 100-acre Embassy TechVillage Business Park near Marathalli.

By aligning his group with global hospitality brands such as Four Seasons and Hilton, and positioning the hotels within their vibrant business parks, the Bengaluru-based realtor is aiming high. Embassy has planned for 1,400 keys over a four-year timeframe, across luxury, upscale and midscale segments. Embassy, under Virwani, is focussed on hotels as a relevant component of their integrated developments offering synergies between offices, hotels, conferencing, retail and F&B.

Virwani is known as a visionary. He began his real estate career in his father, Mohan Virwani's construction business as a teenager and went on to set up a development dynasty in 1993 with a borrowed capital of \$50,000. The company was renamed Embassy Property Developments. And now, he has acquired another distinction, that of a passionate hotelier.

In an interview with *Hotelier India* Virwani had said, "Our selection of brands is based on what fits best with our hotel strategy and resonates with our target audience. We aim to provide our corporate occupiers world-class services and recognisable international brands that offer products at two price points - good quality F&B offerings, and a capacity to manage MICE/convention space operations.

Though not averse to taking risks, Virwani, much like all good investors-owners, approaches the hospitality business with caution. "We recognise that this segment of real estate is not standardised and the returns are based on human expectations on both sides. Alignment is critical to securing the right deal. We are taking an opportunistic approach and willing to wait to get the right deal at the right price." ■

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# DR JYOTSNA SURI

Chairperson & MD, Bharat Hotels



LALIT BELIEVES  
IN DEVELOPING  
DESTINATIONS AND NOT  
JUST SETTING UP HOTELS.

**T**he hotel heiress, who had the gumption to break ties with global hospitality brands and rebrand her properties as LaLiT Hotels, in the memory of her late husband, hotelier Lalit Suri, has travelled a long distance to where she is today.

LaLiT Hotels have a presence across the country, annual revenue of \$90 million according to *Forbes India*, and 13 luxurious hotels. The brand's USP in a market like India, says Dr Suri, is the belief in limitless hospitality. "We define ourselves as traditionally modern, subtly luxurious and distinctly LaLiT. But we are also modern in our approach." LaLiT believes in developing destinations and not just setting up hotels.

Dr Suri, who has worked across several different departments, says that her approach to hospitality is different from her colleagues. "I did not believe that international brands could teach us hospitality; it is ingrained in our DNA."

She believes that hoteliers have to evolve to keep up with the pace of change in customer behaviour and demands. "Technology has changed the way people travel. Digitization has allowed instant access to information and through social media; every experience and opinion is in the public domain. At the same time, the definition of service and luxury has changed."

The future of hospitality lies in the mid-segment, she says. "LaLiT has two hotels in this category under the brand—The Lalit Traveller, and will further develop in this segment." Looking back at her career, Dr Suri believes she has, by and large, achieved success in what she had set out to do. "My disappointments have been in tackling a complicated system, facing multi-levels of bureaucracy during the development and operations of my hotels."

Dr Suri was named among the '25 Most Powerful Women in Business 2011' by *Business Today*. She has featured in several of *Hotelier India's* annual Power Lists. As Chairperson of FICCI and then as head of the federation's tourism committee, she is pushing for change in India's tourism policies to attract more travellers, besides making cheaper finance available to the hotel industry. ■

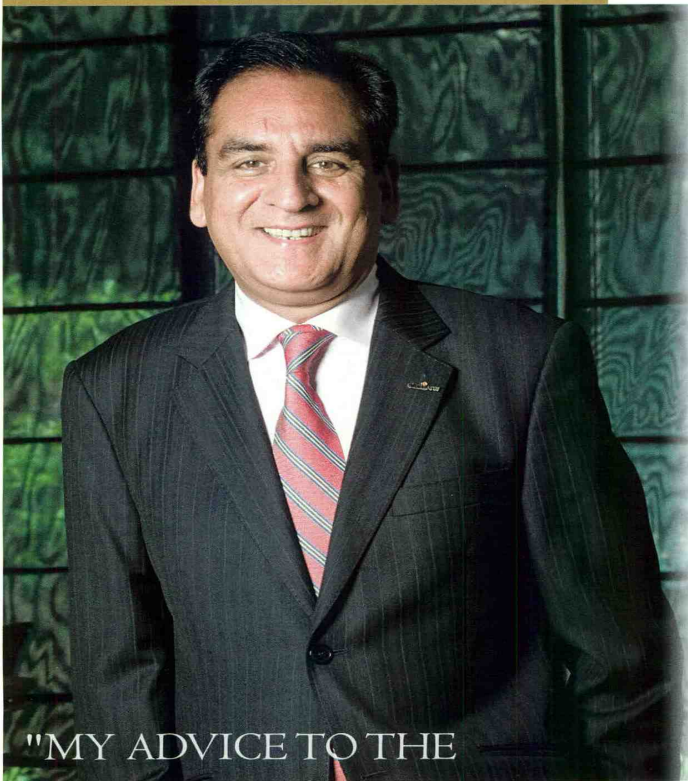


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# KB KACHRU

Chairman Emeritus, Carlson  
Rezidor Hotel Group



"MY ADVICE TO THE  
YOUNGER HOTELIERS  
IS TO ALWAYS STAY  
GROUNDED AND ACCEPT  
THAT CHANGE IS THE  
ONLY CONSTANT."

**K**B Kachru, the winner of *Hotelier India's* Lifetime Achievement Award in 2017, has spent almost four decades in the hospitality industry. He has been instrumental in building Carlson Rezidor Hotel Group's business in India since 1998. Before being appointed as the company's chairman emeritus and principal advisor in South Asia in July 2016, he served as its executive VP and was responsible for its overall strategy, hotel development, management and functional support in key markets.

His career includes an initial stint in the government-run Ashok Group of Hotels. He has considerable experience in the fields of travel and tourism as a proactive member of various committees, including the National Tourism Advisory Committee, and is on the board of directors for the tourism corporation of Jammu & Kashmir, Pondicherry and Madhya Pradesh. He introduced duty-free shopping on arrival at all the international airports in India.

Kachru's vast and varied experience also includes academia — he helped set up the Institute for International Management & Technology in collaboration with Oxford Brookes University, London. But it was at Carlson that Kachru came into his own. The group is betting big on India; it plans to operate 200 hotels by 2020. Right now, it has 100 hotels in operation or under construction. Last year, the group signed a strategic partnership with Gurgaon-based real estate firm Bestech Group to build 49 new Park Inn, Radisson's mid-market hotels, by 2024. Kachru, who heads a team of 21,000 employees in India, has said that they are scouting for similar partnerships.

Born and brought up in Kashmir, Kachru studied hotel management before moving to Germany on a scholarship. He worked with several hotels in the European country, before moving back to India to work with ITDC. In the early 90s, he quit ITDC and along with his senior, Rajan Jetley, formed a company that worked with Radisson Hotels Asia. He relocated to Singapore and gained experience of several Asian markets such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Bangladesh and India, understanding their subtle nuances and the differences between them.

In the mid-90s, he headed back to India and helped expand the group's footprint into not just the metro cities, but several tertiary markets too. Recalling his long career, Kachru has said, "I have been fortunate to have had great mentors and support teams both in ITDC and Radisson. Some of them today are very successful CEOs and head Indian and international hotel groups. My advice to the younger hoteliers is to always stay grounded and accept that change is the only constant." **HI**

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# MANAV THADANI

Founder Chairman, Hotelivate



THE BEST ADVICE  
THADANI OFFERS IS TO  
SURROUND YOURSELF  
WITH GOOD AND SMART  
PEOPLE TO ACHIEVE  
SUCCESS.

**S**erial entrepreneur, trusted advisor and a passionate hotelier — that is how the LinkedIn profile of Manav Thadani reads. Thadani set up Hotelivate two years ago; he is also the co-founder of SAMHI. He terms his entrepreneurial journey, particularly in the field of consultancy, as an exciting one. Hotelivate was conceptualised as a full-service hospitality consulting service provider that would go beyond just feasibility studies and valuations. “We wanted to explore new markets, new services and customise our offering for our new-age customer. Our goal was to be the ‘go-to’ advisors of our clients at every step of the way during their hospitality lifecycle.”

Over the past two decades, he has led, managed/performed numerous feasibility studies, economic valuations and market studies for diverse hospitality assets and conducted several operator search and management contract negotiations, representing the owners. As co-founder of SAMHI, Thadani forayed into the world of hotel ownership on behalf of foreign institutional capital a few years ago.

But the venture he is most excited about is Hotelivate. “We have become much more social-media-savvy. We also tweaked and, hopefully, improved HICSA and HOSI as our platforms. We have launched our Hotelivate Revenue Management Services and believe this will be a large part of our business going forward. Another area of focus has been our investment advisory services. The strategic advisory business has been focussing on operator search and brand contract negotiations as well as brand valuations with far more zeal.” Hotelivate is expanding its footprint internationally with its office in Jakarta, after Delhi, Mumbai and Singapore.

To be a great manager you also need to be a great leader, believes Thadani. Though no stranger to success, he considers himself to be a life-long learner. “I read and keep an open mind when it comes to the changes happening around me. The best advice I can offer is to surround yourself with good and smart people.” ■

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# NAKUL ANAND

Executive Director, ITC



ANAND DRIVES THE  
'RESPONSIBLE LUXURY'  
MAXIM OF ITC AND  
BELIEVES, "IF WE DON'T  
SEE GREEN, WE SEE RED."

In the competitive world of Indian hospitality, Nakul Anand is known as a visionary who can see beyond ARRs and RevPAR numbers.

He has a firm grip on the systems and processes and is known to be a keen observer of world hospitality trends. Anand has helped ITC transit from a traditional hospitality company to one that incorporates technology for guest experiences, even as it stays true to its roots with great F&B offerings and the understanding of India's cultural nuances. "The more we become dependent on technology, the more we yearn for the human touch," Anand has said, explaining why he continues to believe in the human touch to ensure that hotels "go beyond serving the wants" of their guests.

Anand often stands up for the industry as its spokesperson, or rather a thought leader, bringing up issues that it struggles with on various forums, including with the government.

He drives the 'Responsible Luxury' maxim of ITC and believes, "If we don't see green, we see red." A sustainable planet, Anand feels, is an absolute necessity today. "It also fits in beautifully with our ethos of Atithi Devo Bhava," he says. At ITC Grand Chola, responsible luxury has translated to mean the use of wind power drawn from its own wind-mills. Across the group, the 'Food Sherpa' programme is viewed as a sustainable initiative; ITC chefs scour their destinations for street food (or popular local food) and serve them in the sanitised environment of luxury hotels as part of their Local Love menu. Anand says, "We were at an inflection point, pressed to make a choice between sustainability and luxury as the way forward. Deliberations led us to the conclusion that choosing either/or wasn't an option. Sustainable practices must be embedded in our business philosophy." In some ways, ITC is a pioneer in the sphere of sustainable luxury.

Anand is known to be a team player and gives complete credit to his team, batting for the right attitude towards the business of hospitality to achieve the best results. He has led ITC through several transformations, including the restructuring of the WelcomHotel brand to make it more contemporary and focused on getting management contracts. ■

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# NAVJIT AHLUWALIA

Country head and Sr. VP, Hilton (India)



AHLUWALIA ASSERTS  
THAT A WORKING  
ENVIRONMENT NEEDS  
TO HAVE A DNA  
BASED ON OPENNESS,  
TRANSPARENCY AND  
HONEST FEEDBACK.

Last year, under Navjit Ahluwalia's leadership, Hilton opened two important hotels in India — DoubleTree hotels in Ahmedabad and Goa. Before that, just towards the end of the year, the group opened its doors to the country's second Conrad in Bengaluru. "We are looking forward to a big-box Hilton. We are also looking to expand our entire portfolio of brands across different markets." But Ahluwalia's biggest win would be to bring in the marquee brand, Waldorf to India, which he often speaks about.

Ahluwalia compares his journey with Hilton to climbing a mountain — it is exciting and challenging, but there is a long way to go. "It keeps me on my toes. It is important to build good quality assets at the right location and then create a cycle of constant growth. I think we are laying the foundation of something that will last for the next 30, 40 or 50 years." The focus, Ahluwalia insists, is not just on increasing Hilton's presence. "We believe expansion has to be based on market need, business returns."

A proponent of transparent workplaces, Ahluwalia asserts that a working environment needs to have a DNA based on openness, transparency and honest feedback. Ahluwalia's 30-years in the hospitality industry has seen him work for global majors including, most recently, an over decade-long stint at Marriott International where he was senior vice president, hotel development.

"Being in a business of serving people, we have so many opportunities each day to touch lives in more ways than we can imagine. With that privilege comes great responsibility. Our duty to uphold the highest standards of hospitality is not just for guests who walk through our hotel doors but also to the communities where we live, work and travel in." Right now, Ahluwalia is headlining an initiative to make Hilton more sustainable by eliminating the use of single-use plastic from all hotels.

Over the next three years, Hilton, under Ahluwalia's leadership, aims to double the number of hotels. "We want this number to be a hundred. We want to expand at a much faster pace than we have been doing," said Ahluwalia. ■

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# NEEL RAHEJA

Group President, K. Raheja Corp.  
Pvt. Ltd.



FOR RAHEJA, A CRITICAL  
PART OF THE GROWTH  
STRATEGY IS TO FOCUS  
ON MAXIMISING COST-  
EFFICIENCY AND FOLLOW  
A DISCIPLINED APPROACH  
TO ASSET MANAGEMENT.

**N**eel Raheja was in news earlier this year for the initial public offering (IPO) of Chalet Hotels Ltd., the hospitality business of K. Raheja Corp., the first of the many hospitality businesses to launch an IPO. The issue was aimed at raising INR 1,641 crore for the expansion of the hospitality arm of K. Raheja, which needed some urgent fund infusion.

Chalet Hotels, which has several five star and deluxe hotels in its portfolio, has emerged as a leading hospitality player in India due to the efficient management of properties and the buying of land at much cheaper rates.

Like most scions of business houses, Raheja learnt the ropes of the business from his father, property tycoon Chandru Raheja. But he did opt for a formal business degree from the Harvard Business School, after completing a degree in law from the Mumbai University.

Over the years, he has worked with his father to steer the diversification of the group's businesses from real estate to retail brands and world-class hospitality projects, such as Renaissance Mumbai Hotel and Convention Centre, JW Marriott, Juhu (co-owned); JW Marriott Sahar, Mumbai; Westin Hyderabad; Marriott Whitefield, Bengaluru; The Resort - Madh Marve, and Lakeside Chalet - Marriott Executive Apartments.

Raheja is leading conversations with leading global hospitality brands to invest in his hotels, among them Marriott International, who is said to have an interest in picking up some stake in his business.

The company intends to invest INR 3,000 crore over the next four to five years to expand rooms in existing hotels and spread to new geographies. He emphasizes that a critical part of the growth strategy is to focus on maximising cost-efficiency of the hospitality portfolio and follow a disciplined approach to asset management, to drive profitability. ■

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# NEERAJ GOVIL

Senior VP – South Asia,  
Marriott International




BESIDES POSSESSING  
LEGENDARY STRATEGY  
SKILLS, GOVIL IS KNOWN  
AS A FINANCE WIZARD.

**N**eeraj Govil, a consummate strategist and an outspoken hotelier, is executing a vibrant roadmap for Marriott International in India, which will take the hospitality group to the top of the line. There are very few in who understand the Marriott brands as well as he does, including their distinct personalities and DNA.

The group doubled its portfolio in India after the acquisition of Starwood Hotels two years ago. Govil says the group is now seeing growth in the resort segment. "We have also begun seeing the emergence of micro-markets within the cities. The infrastructure is stressed, the travel time from one area to another is too much, and people tend to hang out in one part of the city."

Today the brand has over 118 operational hotels in India. "For us, it is not just about the number of hotels; it is about the number of keys, it is about ensuring the best F&B experiences, and it is about ascertaining that we are available to Indians as a big outbound market, which is a very large segment," he says.

Besides possessing legendary strategy skills, Govil is known as a finance wizard in the hospitality circles and brings a wealth of international experience and expertise to the table spanning several disciplines. In a bid to add gravitas to the team, Marriott International is investing in specialists for several positions, including for backend domains such as engineering and IT. The company is poised to further grow its leadership presence in India, with more than 50 signed projects in its pipeline. It recently launched the Tribute Portfolio in India, with the opening of Port Muziris, a property with 54 artistically designed rooms. Govil adds, "The addition of the Tribute Portfolio in Marriott International's brand footprint for South Asia reinforces our continued focus on providing a diverse collection of prime, distinctive properties across high potential markets in the region."

This is just the beginning of what Marriott International plans for India as Govil and his team push through aggressive expansion plans that will see fruition in the coming years. 

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# NIRUPA SHANKAR

Director, Brigade Hospitality Group



SHANKAR BELIEVES THAT THE PROBLEMS WITHIN ONE'S CONTROL ARE EASY TO RESOLVE WITH HARD WORK AND THE WILL TO GET IT DONE.

**N**irupa Shankar asset manages the group's hospitality ventures. She is also known to have conceptualised the unique lounge bar atop the World Trade Centre-Bangalore, called HIGH Ultra Lounge, the highest point for food and beverage in South India.

She began her career as a senior business analyst with Ernst & Young LLP in the US after a bachelor's degree in economics from The University of Virginia. Shankar went on to take evening classes in hotel operations at New York University and then study at the Cornell University's Hotel Management School, before interning at Four Seasons, Singapore. Shankar came back to India to work with her family business, which had started the first Mercure hotel in India (eventually rebranded as the Grand Mercure).

Never the one to take an easy route, she says, "The problems within one's control are easy to resolve with hard work and the will to get it done. External issues are the "challenging" ones like macroeconomic policies, changes in customer sentiments, the approval time for various licenses, etc. We need to keep a positive mindset and take things in our stride."

Among the changes Shankar has witnessed in the hospitality industry, she lists the entry of brands in India and the onset of the digital age. "We want to focus on the development of mid-market business hotels of around 120 to 170 keys as the breakeven is faster. We do not want to do luxury hotels as a strategy," she claimed. Brigade Enterprises wants to develop hotels as mixed-used projects primarily.

Her last much-talked-about project was Bengaluru's Art Café, positioned in a fourth-floor corridor connecting the World Trade Centre and Sheraton Grand Bangalore Hotel at Brigade Gateway. The sky bridge venue overlooks the scenic waterfront and shopfronts of Orion Mall and features the works of emerging as well as established artists. She has described the bridge as symbolic at several levels. "Apart from literally bridging two very different buildings, an office and a hotel, it bridges the way different people spend their time - work vs. leisure." ■

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THE  
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2019

# PATANJALI KESWANI

Chairman & MD, Lemon Tree Hotels



KESWANI, WHO HAS OFTEN BEEN CALLED A DISRUPTOR BY HIS COMPETITORS, SAYS WITH LEMON TREE, THEY CREATED A CATEGORY.

Lemon Tree Hotels is considered a pioneer in the midscale hospitality market in India. And the man behind its success is Patanjali Keswani, popularly known as Patu Keswani.

Keswani quit as the senior vice president and chief operating officer of the Taj Group of Hotels to create an asset for his sunset years. Seventeen years later, Lemon Tree Hotels is one of the biggest players in the hospitality industry and is soon entering the upscale market. The Mumbai property is scheduled to launch in 2021 and it is slated to be the biggest upscale hotel in India under the Aurika Hotels & Resorts. The hotelier obviously does not believe in half measures. Lemon Tree is also building a state-of-art resort in Udaipur, its first resort property, on the banks of the picturesque Lake Pichola.

Keswani, who has often been called a disruptor by his competitors, says with Lemon Tree, they created a category. "The bottom of the cycle, I have always believed, had more equity and less debt." When Keswani opened a mid-market or a budget hotel, the customer expected all the services of a five star, though he was paying a very low price. "The customer was expecting the earth and the moon and maybe one or two stars. We had to educate them."

As a vision for the future, Keswani is looking at investing in stand-alone hotels and standardizing them to bring them into the branded space. "I would like Lemon Tree to be the default choice for mid-market hotels in India. People use the word 'xeroxes' as a generic term. When a brand becomes a generic name for a product, you have achieved success. I would love for people to say, 'Book me a Lemon Tree'."

Among the turning points he mentions, was Warburg Pincus's investment with the group in 2006. "Then APG invested a thousand crores. I think one big turning point was when I felt I had the responsibility to meet the career aspirations of so many people who are joining Lemon Tree and I *could not* let it not grow." ■



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# PRIYA PAUL

Director, Apeejay Surrendra Group




AN IDEAS WOMAN,  
PAUL'S MOST AMBITIOUS  
PROJECT HAS BEEN THE  
'ZONE BY THE PARK',  
WHICH FIRST LAUNCHED  
IN JAIPUR.

**P**riya Paul cut her teeth as a hotelier under the guidance of her father, the late Surrendra Paul while working as the marketing manager of The Park in New Delhi. This was not the best of times for the hospitality industry, with the sector reeling from a supply glut.

Over the years, she worked to build a differential hospitality brand, with design at its core. The Park Hotels are stylish, edgy and fun properties that represent the contemporary face of Indian hospitality. Paul was ranked by *Forbes* magazine as one of Asia's 50 most powerful businesswomen.

Her interest lies in the field of literature and arts too; she is a trustee of Indira Gandhi National Center for the Arts (IGNCA) and board member of the National Council of Science Museum. She was also awarded India's fourth highest civilian honour, the Padma Shri in 2012, and was conferred the prestigious Insignia of *Chevalier de l'Ordre National du Mérite* (National Order of Merit), an Order of State granted by the president of the French Republic.

Last year, The Park Hotels celebrated 50 years. Over the years, Paul has succeeded in creating a unique collection of luxury boutique hotels. When she took over, the group had three hotels under one brand; now it has 17 hotels under three brands: The Park, The Park Collection and Zone by The Park. By 2022, she aims to take the number up by 20 new properties.

She believes in delivering results by offering leadership with a difference. An ideas woman, her most ambitious project has been the 'Zone by The Park', which first launched in Jaipur. The hotel is designed to meet the requirements of the price-conscious, design-conscious urban traveller. "Witnessing the success of Zone Jaipur, we are confident that this hotel will play a key role in strengthening the brand. We are certain that the hotel will appeal to customers with its design and format," she has said. 

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# PUNEET CHHATWAL

MD & CEO, Indian Hotels Company  
Limited



SINCE HE TOOK OVER THE  
REINS, CHHATWAL HAS  
BEEN ON A RELENTLESS  
JOURNEY OF HIGHER  
REVENUE AND PROFIT  
GROWTH.

Puneet Chhatwal is known as the alchemist in the hospitality industry. Since he took over the reins at the storied hotel company of the Tata group, Chhatwal has been on a relentless journey of higher revenue and profit growth. The graduate of IHM in Delhi, with an MBA from ESSEC Business School, Paris, has worked around the globe and brings his experience into the restructuring process.

The multi-lingual hotelier has mapped out separate pathways for all group brands — Taj, Vivanta, Gateway and Ginger. He has also introduced a new brand, SeleQtions, under which IHCL will be working with old but iconic properties such as the Connaught Hotel in Delhi and Cidade De Goa. "Getting into management contracts will help us to not just expand our footprint, but also leverage and monetise IHCL's strengths such as branding, distribution, sales and marketing networks. The hotels under SeleQtions are well-established in the marketplace and allow us a quick six-month turnaround."

Chhatwal is also attempting to rebrand Ginger from its image as a 'cheap' option to a mid-scale one. Besides, IHCL is looking at harnessing the potential of its F&B offerings by tying up with channels such as Eazydiner and Zomato. With Ama Trails and Stays, it has forayed into the homestays segment. Clearly, Chhatwal has several grounds covered — from ownership to managed properties.

Tata Group's Indian Hotels Company Ltd (IHCL) is planning to sell assets worth INR 200 crore this fiscal to fund its expansion plan in core areas. Under Chhatwal, IHCL is also planning to enter the North East market, with hotels in Assam, Meghalaya, Sikkim and Tripura.

The efforts to consolidate and expand is part of the master strategist's five-year plan, Aspiration 2022. "Aspiration 2022 looks at reimagining our portfolio of brands and today we have very distinct brands with its value proposition suiting different customer needs," he claimed. ■

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# RAHUL CHAUDHARY

Executive Director, CG Corp Global  
and CG Hotels & Resorts



CHAUDHARY'S FORTE  
LIES IN FORGING  
STRATEGIC ALLIANCES IN  
ESTABLISHED AS WELL AS  
EMERGING MARKETS.

Besides other businesses of CG Corp Global, Delhi-based Rahul Chaudhary runs CG Hotels & Resorts, its hospitality arm. CG has several investments in hospitality groups such as The Taj Group and The Fern, a mid-to-upscale brand in India, the Zinc Hotels, besides joint venture agreements with Alila. CG Hotels & Resorts portfolio comprises of over 100 hotels and resorts in 20 countries and 65 destinations with over 6,000 keys. Chaudhary, in an earlier interview, had said, "We were a group with just about 10 hotels. By 2020, we will be 200 hotels in 97 destinations, 15 countries and 10,000+ keys (based on current signed and active deals). We have spread ourselves across all segments in the hospitality space and various regions of the globe, and that has given us the bandwidth to be able to tap assets from New York City to China." Among their newest venture is The Farm, a wellness retreat in Nepal. He attributes the success to his father's sagacity and grit.

CG's foray into the hospitality space began almost two decades ago through their partnership with the Tata Group/IHCL in Colombo (Taj Samudra) and Maldives (Taj Exotica Resort & Spa and Vivanta Coral Reef).

Chaudhary's forte lies in forging strategic alliances in established as well as emerging markets and he has worked on several successful joint ventures. He said, "You have to consider the area of expertise, the experience and the strategic fit before you decide to go ahead with a partner. I expect my local partner to be someone with developmental expertise, strong local presence, an ability to deal with the local authority, have local knowledge and most importantly, someone who is well-intentioned. If all these qualities are in place, the rest is all about execution." ■

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# RAJIV KAUL

President, The Leela Palaces,  
Hotels & Resorts



A MENTOR TO HIS  
COLLEAGUES, KAUL HAS  
ALWAYS STRESSED ON THE  
IMPORTANCE OF GOOD  
TALENT.

In a long and distinguished career, Rajiv Kaul has achieved many milestones. The Leela hotels are considered some of the best in the world and the group has been voted among the 'Top 10 Hotel Brands in the World' several times.

Always focused on delivering a luxurious experience to guests, the Leela difference is visible in the way each hotel showcases Indian craftsmanship and natural materials and the way every guest is treated. "Based on our heritage, culture and traditions, we have a unique story to tell. Excellence is not an act but a habit. It is not just about personalised service, but the warmth and grace with which it is delivered, every time. As part of our DNA, we also have an innate ability to make guests from around the world feel at home and connect them to the inner richness of India."

In his four decades-long career, Kaul has helmed some iconic hotels, including working with some of The Oberoi Group properties. A mentor to his colleagues, Kaul has always stressed on the importance of good talent. "The war for talent continues to intensify as attrition rates of employees exceed 30%. The ability to attract, develop and retain talent is a pre-requisite for success." Kaul has trained an army of hoteliers, imparting his passion for creating immaculately memorable experiences to industry leaders of the future.

He is now spearheading The Leela Group's next cycle of growth through an asset-light strategy with management contracts. Among the group's upcoming projects are a palace hotel in Agra, where every room will have a sweeping view of the Taj Mahal; a palace resort in Jaipur; and business hotels in Hyderabad and at Bhartiya City, Bengaluru. Internationally, the company is to go to Maldives, Dubai and Vietnam. ■

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# RANJIT BATRA

President – Hospitality,  
Panchshil Realty



BATRA BELIEVES THAT  
SUCCESS IS A RESULT  
OF BEING A HANDS-ON  
PARTNER AND AN ACTIVE  
OWNER.

**T**he developer as a hotelier is a very rare concept in India. Ranjit Batra is a rare man in the industry.

He began his career at The Oberoi Group of Hotels in India and then trained in Monteux and Zurich, Switzerland. He went on to graduate from the Institute Hotelier, Cesar Ritz, Switzerland, and then the Oberoi Centre of Learning and Development (OCLD) in New Delhi.

Batra is involved in almost every aspect of the hospitality business — from F&B to engineering to rooms division. Among his other responsibilities are asset management, strategic planning, risk management, acquisitions, hotel design and fit-outs, financial planning and control processes.

Panchshil Realty has helped change the hospitality market in Pune and laid the ground for the entrance of luxury hotels in the city. The group has developed some of the most luxurious properties in Pune — JW Marriott, Courtyard by Marriott, Marriott Suites, Oakwood Residences, DoubleTree by Hilton, and the swankiest of them all, Ritz Carlton, which is under construction. With 198 well-appointed rooms, The Ritz-Carlton, Pune will be easily accessible from the airport. The hotel will house an Indian and Japanese restaurant and an all-day diner, as well as a lounge.

Nearly 85% of the business in the Pune market comprises of the corporate segment, while the remaining 15% is contributed by MICE and other smaller segments, which have remained constant year over year.

“With some of the biggest global names under our belt we are striving for the acquisition of more assets and turning them into successes,” Batra said. He believes that success is a result of being a hands-on partner and an active owner. He takes a bottom-up approach to hospitality. ■

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# RATTAN KESWANI

Director, Carnation Hotels and  
Deputy MD, Lemon Tree Hotels



KESWANI IS KNOWN AS A  
STRATEGIC THINKER AND  
A THOUGHT LEADER.

Leadership expert and guru Robin Sharma once said, "Leadership is not about a title or a designation. It's about impact, influence and inspiration." These words ring true for Rattan Keswani, known as a strategic thinker and a thought leader. The hotelier, inspired by the likes of Mr P.R.S Oberoi, brings his sharp insights and years of experience to his job.

Carnation Hotels Pvt. Ltd is a company he jointly promoted with Lemon Tree Hotels. The focus has been on strengthening their position in the midscale market, and emphasize differential hiring policies that ensure low attrition rates. Keswani believes in creating value for his employees, guests and stakeholders.

Last year, Lemon Tree signed a hotel in Dubai, thus entering the lucrative Middle East market. "For Dubai specifically, we felt the need for a mid-scale hotel of this calibre in this location, taking into account that India has been the largest source market into Dubai, as well as the UAE as a whole, for over three years now, and it is constantly growing," he said.

Much like other hotel groups, Lemon Tree is also entering into management contracts to manage properties. Keswani is a hands-on operator, receiving daily reports. "We run a transparent operation. I tell owners we are running 41 hotels as a company, which hotels financial results do you want to see?" he said. He hopes to see more hotels under Carnation. "The ramp-up took a little while. In the first year-and-a-half, it was introducing the relationship and management capability pan-India. Now, we are on a bit of a roll." ■

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# RITESH AGARWAL

Founder, OYO Hotels & Homes



OYO CLAIMS TO HAVE A STRONG BALANCE SHEET WITH OVER \$1.5 BN AND HAS SEEN A 4.4X YOY GROWTH IN REVENUE IN JUNE 2019.

Sheer innovation and edgy thinking by OYO founder Ritesh Agarwal has ensured that the hospitality company has blazed a trail not just through India, but several international markets too.

Agarwal is living the Steve Jobs maxim, "Innovation distinguishes between a leader and a follower." After his \$2-billion share buyback, the young entrepreneur has taken up a non-executive director role from an executive director position in the India entity, Oravel Stays; he plans to take up a larger role in the company's Singapore office as the brand establishes itself as a global player.

OYO claims to have a strong balance sheet with over \$1.5 Bn and has seen a 4.4x YOY growth in revenue in June 2019. It has raised \$1.7 Bn of funding from investors such as Airbnb, SoftBank Vision Fund and several more.

What an amazing growth story for a hotelier who decided on the business model when he was just 17 while travelling across India. "I realised there was a serious lack of good value/good quality hotels in the unbranded budget accommodation category," he says. Today, OYO works with independent hotel owners or accommodation providers to improve their financial returns whilst ensuring guests have a positive experience during their stay. OYO's transformation team helps improve the appearance, facilities and comfort of the hotels.

It is a 100% 'Made-in-India' business model and the first-of-its-kind worldwide. The numbers are breathtaking: recognised as the world's fastest-growing hotel group, OYO is South Asia's largest and China's largest single hotel brand and second-largest hotel group, and the world's 3rd largest hotel chain by room count. It has footprints in more than 800 cities across 80 countries.

"We started out on the belief that everyone deserves a beautifully designed, chic and comfortable living space. We did that by upgrading bland, generic spaces and places and designing them with next-gen chic and design moxie and offering them at hard-to-ignore prices. OYO has revolutionized the fragmented and legacy-driven budget hospitality space by empowering small and independent asset owners with the operational capabilities and technology that enables them to compete with big hotel chains and achieve high occupancies and therefore yields." ■

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# SANJAY SETHI

CEO & MD, Chalet Hotels



MUCH LIKE A GOOD  
LEADER, SETHI IS A  
GOOD MANAGER,  
INSPIRING TRUST AND  
LOYALTY IN HIS TEAM.

Sanjay Sethi is the man credited with successfully leading Chalet Hotel's IPO earlier this year. Flush with funds, the company is currently in talks with multiple hotel owners to buy out existing properties in Pune, NCR and Chennai, and is also looking to acquire large-size operating hotels or brownfield hotels where construction has reached a certain stage.

"Acquiring ready operating assets is one of our strategies for expansion. Our balance sheet is a lot healthier to buy more assets," Sethi said. At present, the group has five hotels and one service apartment property totalling around 2,300 rooms in Mumbai, Bengaluru and Hyderabad that are managed by Marriott International. Another three hotels with around 580 rooms in Mumbai and Hyderabad are in the pipeline.

The company is also expanding its branded hotel partners by signing on global hospitality firm Hyatt Hotel Corporation and is gearing up to launch its 260-room Hyatt Regency hotel in Mumbai by April 2021.

A hotel management graduate from IHM Pusa, with additional qualifications from Cornell, XLRI-Jamshedpur and IIM-Bangalore, Sethi has spent 28 years in the industry and is counted among the brightest professionals. His last big project was the 585-keys JW Marriott at Sahar, Mumbai, but he first came to the industry's notice during his tenure with the Tatas, where he qualified and served as an assessor of group companies.

Sethi quit the Taj Group in 2006 to set up Berggruen Hotels in partnership with Berggruen Holdings, New York. Through its proprietary brand Keys Hotels, Resorts and Apartments, the company went about setting up a chain of mid-market hotels and upscale resorts in India. By the time Sethi left this assignment in 2014, he had guided the company to a sound beginning.

From Keys, according to Sethi's official biography, he moved on to Chalet Hotels in January 2015 with the mandate of doubling the company's portfolio in the next five years. Much like a good leader, Sethi is a good manager, inspiring trust and loyalty in his team. If leadership is defined by results and attributes, he more than excels in his role. ■



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# SATYEN JAIN

Director, The Pride Group of Hotels



JAIN IS A HANDS-ON  
LEADER BUT BELIEVES IN  
EMPOWERING HIS TEAM.

None but the brave venture into unchartered territories, and Satyen Jain has proved his mettle time and again.

His Pride Hotels recently ventured into the below-the-radar north-eastern part of India with Pride Terrace Valley Resort Gangtok, the group's first property in the region. The 45-room luxury resort boasts of elegantly furnished rooms and suites replete with all modern elements.

This is Pride's 16th hotel and Jain says the group has a plan to add about 500 rooms in Goa, Nagpur and Pune. By 2022, he is looking at taking the total to 20 hotels and resorts. Currently, Pride Hotels Ltd is operating four brands Pride Plaza, which is an upper-upscale luxury hotel, Pride Hotels which is an upscale hotel, Pride Resorts, the 3-star upscale resort and Pride BiznoteL, a mid-market hotel.

Jain brings his exacting standards, his eye for details and global hospitality standards to Pride Hotels. He is a hands-on leader but believes in empowering his team. He often delegates responsibilities, ensuring that the general managers of his properties have a large say in how they run a hotel.

Ultimately, Jain's ambition is to make Pride into a national chain. "I want to position The Pride Hotels as one of the leading Indian hospitality companies in India to manage mid-market and upscale hotels and resorts. The emphasis is on setting up a service culture to impart excellence in all spheres of guest interaction and surpass guest expectations," he says.

Pride Hotels is focussed on guest experiences and monitor customer reviews to identify strengths and weaknesses in the system. However, it is their 'Indian-ness' that sets them apart, Jain says. "There is traditional Indian instrumental music playing in the lobby and the welcome is always traditional too." Jain is looking to expand through the management route, particularly in Tier-2 and Tier-3 cities. ■

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# SOUVAGYA MOHAPATRA

Executive Director, MAYFAIR  
Hotels and Resorts



MOHAPATRA MINES  
THE CULTURAL HEART  
OF EASTERN AND  
NORTH-EASTERN  
INDIA AND WRAPS  
THEM IN LUXURIOUS  
EXPERIENCES.

In the oft-neglected eastern and north-eastern parts of the country, Mayfair has established one of the finest hospitality brands of India.

The hotel group, which began the journey with one property outside Rourkela, today has several world-class hotels located in eight destinations, spanning four states. And the man behind this heady achievement is veteran hotelier Souvagya Mohapatra.

For his properties, Mohapatra mines the cultural and ethnic heart of eastern and north-eastern parts of India and wraps them in luxurious experiences. The architecture of his beautiful hotels combines colonial flourishes with local accents. The Mayfair hotels are also a base from which people can explore the less-travelled-to destinations, located as they are in captivating settings like mystical mountains, tranquil beaches and vibrant cities. While most of Mayfair properties are located in Odisha and parts of West Bengal and Chattisgarh, the group has also ventured into Goa.

Mohapatra constantly ensures upgradation and innovation, launching initiatives to improve operational efficiency. "We are very open to adapt to new technologies, gadgets, software and processes. We keep a keen eye on new destinations that can be nurtured and developed."

Among Mayfair's up and coming properties is one at the foothills of the northeast, on the outskirts of Siliguri with a room inventory of 100. Another 5-star deluxe 252-keys property is underway at Kolkata, which will commence operations by early 2021. As an active member of Odisha State Tourism Promotion Council, Mohapatra has helped promote the state as a destination, even taking on greening efforts after the devastating cyclone. Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik, in fact, recently launched a new golf Resort of Mayfair Hotels, to be built at the cost of INR 125 crore at Satapada in Puri district.

Mayfair aims to become an established national chain in the coming years. "We are not looking at any tie-up with international hotel chains. Our sales strategy is in place. Currently, we are focused on markets in eastern India but are looking to tap the potential of Tier-II cities," he said. ■

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# SUNJAE SHARMA

VP – Operations, Hyatt Hotels and Resorts



SHARMA IS THE MAN DRIVING HYATT'S ASSET-LIGHT GROWTH IN LEISURE AND CULTURAL DESTINATIONS WITH AN EMPHASIS ON TIER-II AND EMERGING CITIES.

Sunjae Sharma has been an integral part of Hyatt's 34-year journey in India. His leadership skills, business acumen, industry foresight, and strong relationships with internal and external stakeholders speak volumes about his professional capabilities.

Before being appointed as vice president of operations for India, Sharma was the area vice president for South and West India and general manager of Grand Hyatt Mumbai, where he oversaw the strategic and financial performance of 16 hotels.

Sharma is the perfect man to lead Hyatt's well-etched out expansion plans in India. "We started 2019 with the expansion of the Hyatt Centric brand by opening Hyatt Centric Candolim Goa and the addition of two Alila properties — Alila Diwa Goa and Alila Fort Bishangarh (Jaipur) as part of our global acquisition of Two Roads Hospitality. We will be launching four more new hotels in 2019," said Sharma.

He is the man driving Hyatt's asset-light growth in leisure and cultural destinations with an emphasis on Tier-II and emerging cities. "Our expansion strategy will see the emergence of Hyatt properties in destinations such as Dharamshala, Alibaug, Malayatoor, Jaipur, Udaipur, Dehradun, Vadodara, Vijaywada and Trivandrum, which are important Tier-II markets."

Sharma, who has worked with Hyatt since 2014, is very perceptive about the evolving luxury market. "Over the years, there has been a big change in the way hospitality players look at luxury suites," he said. "The multiplying needs of the corporate sector for stays at higher price points has led to unprecedented expansion in the space. Now, the focus is on the overall experience and going beyond opulence. The designs have changed and become minimal," he added. ■

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THE  
POWER  
LIST  
2019

# VIJAY THACKER

Director, Horwath HTL India



A CAUTIOUS RISK-TAKER, THACKER OFTEN GUIDES HIS CLIENTS TO TAKE CALCULATED AND MEASURED RISKS.

Vijay Thacker has his fingers firmly on the pulse of the market. A large of the industry depends on his analysis and consultancy to make big decisions. And to think that Thacker, a chartered accountant with over 38 years of experience in public accounting, has no background in hospitality.

Yet, for over three decades now, he has worked as a consultant in the hotel and tourism industries and is valued for his expert opinion. The hospitality veteran consults the industry on transactions, valuation and advisory services. Under his leadership, Horwath HTL also offers internal audit and risk consulting services. Horwath's incisive hospitality industry reports are much in demand. Their recent reports plump for the mid-market segment, which today accounts for 43 per cent of all branded rooms in the country.

The consultancy also helps smoothen out owner-operator relationship, offering a perspective from both ends of the corner. "The Indian hospitality industry presents several opportunities, including geographic and product diversification, as well as the spread and expansion of its global footprint. Also, opportunities offered by the digital world and creating a blend of products because users often don't know what they want." A cautious risk-taker, he often guides his clients to take calculated and measured risks, consistent with their risk appetite and long-term objectives.

Thacker says he is often working and travelling; taking time off is an alien concept for him. Instead, he indulges in long walks, watches sports and reads regularly. ■

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# VIKRAM OBEROI

CEO & MD, EIH Ltd.



OBEROI BELIEVES  
THAT TOURISM AND  
HOSPITALITY ARE NO  
LONGER SEEN AS ELITIST  
BUSINESSES, GIVEN THEIR  
POTENTIAL TO GENERATE  
EMPLOYMENT.

As the son of Mr PRS Oberoi and scion of the Oberoi hospitality empire along with his cousin, Arjun, Vikram Oberoi, the CEO & MD, EIH Ltd. has an innate passion for the discreet world of luxury hotels and an unerring eye for detail. He has risen from the ranks, working closely with his father. He learnt the fine nuances of running luxury hotels as general manager of The Oberoi Rajvilas, Jaipur, in 1997.

Since then, Oberoi has held several management positions with the group and helped re-engineer systems to ensure that The Oberoi Group is future ready. Several Oberoi properties have gone on to win accolades not just in India, but even internationally. The group hotels have also won several Readers Choice Awards given by global travel magazine brands.

Vikram has attributed The Oberoi Group's success to their focus on guests, their needs, desires and experiences. "What we have always said is, let's focus on our guests, let's focus on our people and let's always do what is right. Let's follow the values that were started by Rai Bahadur Mohan Singh Oberoi, reinforced by Mr PRS Oberoi and now enshrined in our *Dharma* (The Oberoi code of ethics). When we have to make difficult decisions, our approach is always let's take the right decision, not the easiest decision. From my perspective, our culture, our values, the commitment we have to our guests, the commitment we have to our people is of paramount importance and that will never change."

Focused on the operations end of the business, Oberoi believes that tourism and hospitality are no longer seen as elitist businesses, given their potential to generate employment. Open to operating hotels on management contracts, Oberoi said, "If we are going to expand at a faster rate, we will look at management contracts because that's the best way to leverage our goodwill and brand. Most of our upcoming ventures are going to be asset light." ■

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# VIVEK BHALLA

Regional VP – South West Asia, IHG



BHALLA HAS STRATEGIES  
WELL-SUITED TO THE  
DYNAMIC ENVIRONMENT  
WHERE CONSUMER  
NEEDS ARE CHANGING  
CONSTANTLY.

Vivek Bhalla, as IHG's chief strategist and thinker, has taken up the battle against OTAs to ensure that the group drives bigger business through its portal. In this war, he is using technology as a weapon to woo back customers. IHG has rolled out a personalised reservation system in partnership with Amadeus that takes a lot of cues from how airline reservation works.

It befits Bhalla's reputation as a shrewd strategist that IHG is pioneering this initiative. Pushing boundaries comes easy to the hotelier. He is driving the group's expansion plan in India, particularly with the Holiday Inn brand, besides helping to grow the up-scale brand Crowne Plaza and the luxury brand InterContinental region. Bhalla will drive IHG's expansion in the subcontinent by leveraging the great infrastructure that they already have in place.

Bhalla has strategies well-suited to the dynamic environment where consumer needs and demands are changing constantly. "The hospitality sector is a service industry with people at the core. By enhancing our investments in our people, we ensure that we are the preferred employer of choice and have the right talent who can deliver great guest experiences."

His ability to focus on the task at hand works brilliantly for the hotelier. He is always on the uptick, keeping abreast with new tools and technologies to upgrade guest experiences, working with new technologies, many of them cloud based.

In his last role as director of operations, SEAK, Bhalla was responsible for the operations of IHG's 30+ hotels across Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines. Bhalla said, "The brand has gained tremendous momentum in the country and we have also made significant progress towards our commitment to strengthen our mid-scale portfolio in India." ■

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# ZAID SADIQ

Executive Director – Liaison & Hospitality, Prestige Group



SADIQ HAS A KEEN PERCEPTION OF THE MARKET TRENDS, PARTICULARLY OF THE DIFFERENT MICRO-MARKETS AND ALSO, WHAT WILL WORK IN WHICH MARKET.

A few years ago, Zaid Sadiq managed a coup when he bought the Conrad group to Bengaluru, the storied luxury brand's second property in India. But many weren't surprised; Sadiq is known to have pulled off such significant feats even earlier.

Sadiq, who graduated from The London Hotel School, joined the Prestige Group in May 2006. He is actively involved in the public relations affairs of the company, including liaising and hospitality. The Prestige Group has been credited with introducing some of the most reputed international brands in the world to South India – from The Hilton Group and Marriott International for hotels; the Banyan Tree for resorts; and Oakwood for service apartments.

His hospitality business focuses on diverse market segments, targeting and driving both short and extended stay guests along with traditional, GenX and GenNext business and leisure travellers. A man known to take calculated risks, The Prestige Group invests in different scales of hotels, from The Sheraton Grand Whitefield Hotel and Convention Centre to Conrad.

Sadiq has a keen perception of the market trends, particularly of the different micro-markets and also, what will work in which market. Along with his team, he meticulously plans and invests in properties. Sadiq has helped push Prestige's green initiatives, using energy-efficient technology. He was responsible for the hotels adopting Voice Over Internet Protocol that allows guests to place calls using the same wire used to provide internet as well.

Known for his negotiation skills, Sadiq has zeroed in on potential partners to operate assets professionally, ensuring that he zeroes in on the right brand for the different properties. Prestige has associations with global brands such as Marriott and Hilton, who ensure that the transition process between the owner-developer and operator is smooth. ■