

CHETAN BHANDARI:

Planning and Strategizing for Greatness

As we sit across each other, treading the waters of recognition, the importance of the conversation slowly set in. We were talking to the man behind arguably one of the biggest and growing eatery franchises in the country. More importantly, this was a rags to riches story of a venture that seemed to do all the right things at the right time. Chetan Bhandari, Chairman of Bajeko Sekuwa, transformed his family business from a humble 'Sekuwa Pasal' to a chain of restaurants that has gradually dominated its segment.

Dinanath Bhandari, Chetan's father, embarked came to Kathmandu a quarter of a century back, and opened up a 'sekuwa' (Skewered barbeque meat) shop near the Tribhuvan International Airport. The small eatery fast gained recognition as "Bajeko Sekuwa" amongst its customers, on account of the Brahmin "baje" who run the place. And the name stuck.

Although he was always involved in the business, whether it was taking orders, cutting meat or collecting bills, Chetan Bhandari officially came into the picture when his father went to India and left him in charge for a couple of weeks. By keeping a few loopholes in check, Chetan was able to significantly improve the revenues at the shop. In hindsight, that was tentatively when Bajeko Sekuwa set sails towards what it is today.

And what it is today is a brand name. Bajeko Sekuwa has become a household name and their expansion in terms of branches and their venture into the packaged spices industry have paved ways to a greater future. It has been a commendable journey for Bajeko Sekuwa, and we were eager to find the plans and strategies that made this enterprise a marketing success. In order to do so, we found ourselves at their establishment in Battisputali with a feast of jhaneko sekuwa, hyakula dameko and timmur chicken laid on the table and Chetan Bhandari waiting for us.

"Dad wanted me to get a job, I wanted to grow the business." Explained Chetan. "My father wanted me to become a Section Officer because to him that meant that I would have a secure future. I personally wasn't sure about what I would do. After my Bachelors I tried my hand at Nepal Police for the post of Inspector. I failed the first time on the written exam, the second time I didn't even get that far. It was the time of the Maoist insurgency and the dangers related to the career sort of deterred me from the idea of becoming a police officer."

Then I received an offer at a resort and took up on the offer. I was set to start work in a month, but that's when I took up work at Bajeko Sekuwa officially and plans changed."

The change in plans turned out for the best as it was Chetan's input that was detrimental to the success of Bajeko Sekuwa. There were many factors that were involved in the ascent of the brand but the number of branches opened in quick succession was an integral step. However, it wasn't theoretical knowledge that led to these strategic steps but simple logical thinking that spurred the decisions.

"I did a bit of research in Internet cafes, met a few friends and relatives that came back from

abroad and I was exposed to words like franchise, outlets, etc. That got the wheels in my head spinning.” Said Chetan. “Kathmandu is big, and we weren’t utilizing this at all. We didn’t get our pens and papers to make a business strategy but instead we just did things that made sense.

“Chetan continued, “We saw customers coming in, opened up a new place and luckily people came there too. The first three outlets were in the outskirts of the city but it wasn’t until we opened our outlet in Gairidhara that we penetrated the heart of the city.”

Before this Bajeko Sekuwa was predominantly filled with male clientele, and people didn’t really relate family outings with the eatery. This meant that the business was losing out on a majority of the demographic. This is when Chetan Bhandari decided to switch things up.

He went on to elucidate, “Gairidhara’s outlet was what changed our thinking about our business. We were named Bajeko Jambudip Sekuwa Corner at the time. It was a catchy name so we stuck with it but removed the word ‘Corner’. Then we needed a logo. There was a lot of discussion on this with ideas that included sekuwas amalgamated in the logo. But we wound up with a welcoming happy face on the logo that set a happy mood and one that has become iconic in some ways.

“His father wasn’t too keen about the name at first. As Brahmins, selling meat dishes isn’t the most appropriate business and blatantly naming their business as “Baje” didn’t go down well with him. Neither did he like the idea of selling alcohol. Before, people used to bring their own alcohol and Dinanath Bhandari found solace in the fact that he wasn’t selling the alcohol. But for Chetan that was an opportunity going to waste.

“Building an attachment with your customers is a crucial aspect of business, and that was part of our ethics long before we established these branches. Even back when we served a skewer of meat on a bed of ‘bhuja’ and soybeans with a side of raw onion rings laid on a newspaper, we had a good relation with our customers. My mother refused to let her customers drive or ride home after drinking, and some of our old customers still remember to this today. To her it was just a business, but she did it out of the goodness of her heart. And look at the value it gave to our customers.”

Most of the business decisions were done in an organic manner without much extensive planning, but things have changed in recent years. There is professional planning and strategizing that goes into each step that Bajeko Sekuwa takes. Chetan further explained “in the last few years our team has made purposeful steps towards bettering management and consequently business growth. I have mentors who guide me in different aspects of the business and that has really helped give direction to our business.” He continued, “Despite the successful outlook of the business, there is room for improvement and that is what we are working towards improving. We are now focusing on further narrowing our vision and core competencies this November. We’ve always known what we do and who we cater to. Foreign expats aren’t our target market, we cater to the people that like Nepali flavors and foods. However, as a business we have to know what to avoid as well.” When asked about going globally, Chetan answered: “I want to. Things will get clearer this November once we set course on our plans and strategizing. Like I mentioned, we will know what we shouldn’t do. For instance, we can sell

pizzas and lasagnas here, but is it the right thing to do? We don't want to do things that are a waste of time and resources. If taking things globally is the right thing to do, we'll definitely take the necessary steps to get things done."

However, Bajeko Sekuwa as a brand has stepped into businesses abroad with their packaged spices. The Nepalese diaspora is increasing a lot in Nepal. The Nepalese abroad have a higher capacity to spend, so that market is very lucrative. And their packaged masalas work on this concept.

Bajeko Sekuwa has continuously improved their business strategy and come this November extensive reviews and changes are going to be implemented. Their aim is to further narrow the focus of their brand and define their work culture and ethics. Along with existing mentors and heads, experts will be hired from Nepal and India for advice. An expert who isn't familiar to Bajeko Sekuwa will take charge of the project so that they get an unbiased opinion.

Bajeko Sekuwa and Chetan Bhandari have prospered in what most consider an unfavourable business environment. Nepal is notorious for its unpredictability, obstacles and lack of opportunities. However, Chetan has a different take on this: "I agree when people say things are difficult for a business in Nepal. That means there are many opportunities that have been left unexplored because of this mentality. If you can overcome the obstacles, these opportunities can open new avenues for people, which is fantastic."

Published: Oct. 11, 2017

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