



N.Natarajan

# The fruits of character

A S Gopal

Through sheer hard work and with strong character base, he has built a group of his own and is enjoying the fruits of his labour. He has been a pioneer in setting up a chain of stores for selling fruits, vegetables and fruit juices. Meet N.Natarajan, Managing Director, Pazhamuhir Nilayam.

**H**e had to earn for his family when he was barely nine years old. He was studying in the third standard, and due to sudden demise of his father he had to discontinue schooling and start working in a fruit shop. He used to carry a fruit basket on his head and go from road to road, place to place, station himself at railway gates and sell fruits and all this for a wage of Rs.5/- that will be paid by the end of the week. Today he is 62 and probably more energetic than he has ever been. He pioneered the concept of exclusive fruits and vegetables stores and has built the largest chain of stores in South India. He has been a trail blazer in

transforming the selling of fruits and vegetables into a retail industry. Today, apart from sixteen such retail outlets, the group consists of two textile mills, three specialty restaurants and a software company. Meet **N.Natarajan**, Managing Director, Pazhamudhir Nilayam.

Talking about the values that have guided him to reach where he has reached Natarajan said, "I believe, without good character one cannot build anything. To me hard work, honesty and integrity, backed up by discipline and passion for your work, will produce all the results. I have always been hard-working. I am used to working at least 16 to 18 hours a day and continue to do so. I am very passionate and focused about my work. I can never be idle.

In fact I dislike being idle, for I believe only when a person is idle he gives into temptations and all other demeaning activities. Even today, I would be the first person to be at the *mandi* (central market) to procure goods for our shops."

Procurement is one of the most important aspects of this business. Hence, the relationship with the vendors is very important and Natarajan commands a lot of respect with them. "I did not learn the nuances of communication. I speak from my heart and hence I am transparent. More importantly, it is my integrity which helps me. My word is my bond and all the vendors know come what may, I will stand by my word. Hence, they take that extra care to keep me posted of all

relevant information and also supply only quality goods to us. In fact, the vendors have trained their next generation about our values and same is the case at our end too. Everyday, my next generation accompanies me to get hands-on experience as this is the key factor in our business. Even though one cannot standardise quality in this business, we have our own parameters by which we ensure our customers get the best quality at a fair price.”

Talking about the expansion that has taken place he said, “Our expansion is purely because of our customers. In fact, initially we didn't even have a name for our shop. It was our customers who insisted that we should have a name and by the suggestion from a Tamil teacher, we named it *pazhamudhir nilayam*. Customers from various cities used to visit us and buy fruits from us. During their visits they used to ask us to open shops at other centres too and that's how Coimbatore, Chennai, Pondy and Bangalore happened. Consumption of vegetables differs from place to

place and hence it is a localised business. So we chose local partners. Even today there are so many who want to join hands with us, but we are very choosy about selecting our partners. We want to partner with people who are willing to show their persistence and interest, rather than someone who look at it just as a business.”

When I asked him what about him has changed during this entire journey Natarajan said, “Actually nothing much about me has changed. In thoughts and feelings I am still the same person. I have not allowed success to enter my head. In the initial stages I used to work in a textile mill during the nights, and sell fruits during the day. I still carry the token that was given to me then by the mill. It keeps reminding me where I have come from. Even today when I see those who carry basket loads on their heads and sell, I feel with them for I know that was my starting point. I still feel I am basically the same person. I believe only if the teacher is good, the students will be good; only if the father is good, the children will be

good, and if the employer is good, the employees will be. I believe only a good human being will earn the right to question others. I am one among my employees and we have a few strong pillars, who have been with us for over 20 years, and they are part of my family. We have over 600 employees and I constantly interact with them and support them in every way. Some of them need corrections, in some we have to instil values, and I invest time on that too.”

They were the first to allow customers to feel the fruits and vegetables before they buy them; also they were the first to publish the selling rates in the press. Speaking about it Natarajan said, “We used to commit our rates, in advance, for the vegetables and the fruits, and evening newspapers in Coimbatore used to publish the same. Thus we used to educate our customers about the prevailing rates. Even though other vendors resisted this transparency very strongly, we stood our grounds. This brought about a standardisation in rates. We also made the customer feel the product before he could buy it as we



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were sure about the quality of the products we sell. In fact it only turned to our advantage. We don't even advertise. Our growth has been through word of mouth of our satisfied customers. We are not too fussy about the location of our outlet, for I believe that we cater to only a few thousand households and what we sell is a necessity for everyone; and if we can sell quality product at fair prices we will have

sector and when my son, Senthil, joined our business we thought of bringing in some systems for our trade. Since he is from a software background, we utilised his expertise, and in the process we developed a retailing software and we found this was needed in the market by many. Of late people are becoming more and more health-conscious and because we

When asked if he has any regrets he replied, "Sometimes I feel I missed out on education; but at the same time I am also glad that since I had no other fall back options, I studied life so much. Had I been educated, may be I wouldn't have entered this business. Sometimes there are a few things I don't understand - for example I can't read most of the instructions in an airport though I have found myself in most international airports. But I have no inhibitions in learning, in asking others for guidance, and I never think less of myself for I have enormous self-belief. If I decide to do something I go ahead, believing god is with me, and time and again I have achieved what I wanted to achieve."

About his future plans he said, "We never did anything according to a plan. When I started my life I did not think I would be selling fruits and then open up stores, expand and diversify into other industries. The next generation has come in and today we have certain plans to open more outlets in a set time, with right people and right systems."

When he spoke of health foods, he said, "Any product that goes through the correct process of agriculture and is harvested at the right time is good. Each and every fruit has a different nutrient and its taste is different and is unique." It seemed, as if, he was speaking about his own life. He has gone through the natural process of growing up, made right decisions at the right time, made up of the right and righteous character traits, and above all, in every way he is different and unique.

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customers, irrespective of the location. In all, on a daily basis, our outlets cater to at least 32000 customers and apart from fruits and vegetables we also sell about 25000 cups of juices. It is a common sight to see customers thronging our outlets regularly."

Talking about the advent of the software company and the specialty restaurant Natarajan said, "Our core business is in the unorganised

have enough knowledge about food products, we have come up with this concept of health food. This has started receiving good response and we will be coming up with more of them." Pazhamudir Nilayam is actively involved also in export of fruits and vegetables to the neighbouring countries and large chunks of these are supplied to institutions and large parties too.