



Saravana Bhavan has more than 4,000 employees

SARAVANA BHAVAN

A saga of success

The **hotel chain** has rewritten the culture of eating out

By Kavitha Muralidharan

For many Chennaiites, a steaming cup of filter coffee from Saravana Bhavan is a morning ritual. For over two decades, the hotel has become an inseparable part of the city culture. Even when controversies surrounded its owner, the crowd in Saravana outlets only continued to swell. The hotel chain rewrote the culture of eating out among the metro's middle class.

It had a modest beginning. "I started my life as a cleaner in a hotel, at a young age. My first salary was probably Rs 20," says 59-year-old P. Rajagopal, founder of the hotel chain. After some stints in hotels and shops, he soon started his own provision shop in K.K. Nagar. The amount he invested in starting that shop was a mere Rs 5,000. Soon the shop expanded. The idea of starting a hotel came only when customers who frequented the shop started complaining about the paucity of hotels in the locality. "The wholesalers insisted I send them before lunch time because they had to travel to T. Nagar for lunch. It was then that I thought about starting a hotel," he says.

Saravana Bhavan, with 25 branches in India and 17 across the globe, has 4,000 employees in India and 400 abroad. "I would attribute our growth to our sincerity in the job. Even when I was new to this field, I did not heed the advice of



P. Rajagopal with sons Shivakumar (left) and Saravanan

the experienced who told me to use products of less quality. I never compromised on quality or hygiene," says Rajagopal.

Rajagopal's sons, P.K. Shivakumar and P.K. Saravanan, have followed his footsteps. While Shivakumar has done his hotel management in Switzerland, Saravanan did the same course in Manipal. "I believed they have a bright future in this business," explains Rajagopal.

Shivakumar took the initiative to start the overseas branches. The first branch, which was started in Dubai six years ago, got a tremendous response. "Today we have our branches in eight countries," says Shivakumar. Besides the unique quality and taste, Saravana Bhavan is also famous for its employee welfare. "The kind of concern the management has for its employees is something amazing and unprecedented," says Ganapathy, Rajagopal's friend and business partner. Sample this: The educational expenses of the employees' children as well as the medical expense of their family are taken care of by the management. Besides, employees get house rent allowance and house advance allowance based on their rank. "We also send money to their aged parents besides giving them monthly prizes like gold or television as a token of appreciation and encouragement. Which is why our attrition rate is very low," says Shivakumar. Besides, Rajagopal meets his employees four times a week at the Vadapalani branch to bear their grievances.

Saravanan likes to experiment with ice creams. His latest concoction is ice cream made of fruits. Besides, he and Shivakumar have contributed a lot in changing the ambience of their hotels. "Today, people come not just to dine. They want to enjoy. So, we have made changes in our environment to attract large crowds, especially youngsters," says Saravanan. Now, besides planning to export spices, the brothers are keen to start three-star hotels in two places in the city. "As for our long-term plans, I would only say we just intend to serve clean, tasty, hygienic food without compromising on quality. We want to serve even the last visitor the best food," says Shivakumar with a smile. Now you know why success smiles on Saravana Bhavan no matter where in the world it is. ☺