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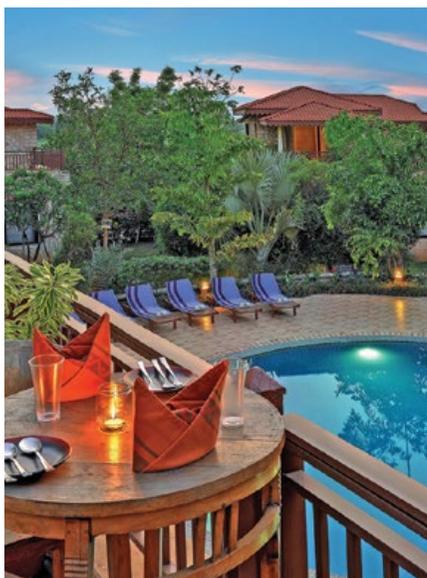
FESTIVE MARCH

ALTRUISTIC ENTREPRENEUR

Binod Chaudhary, Chairman, CG Corp, and Nepal's first Forbes billionaire, sheds light on the Hospitality Industry, his flagship brand Wai Wai Noodles, and his journey towards spiritual fulfilment

KAMAL GILL

For Binod Chaudhary, Chairman of CG Corp, a multinational business conglomerate headquartered in Nepal, touching lives of people is ingrained in the DNA of his business. Whether it is helping the earthquake victims of the country rebuild their broken lives or promoting spiritual welfare in the country, the CG Corp has always been at the forefront of doing business with a deep sense of social and ethical awareness. Today's Traveller caught up with this entrepreneur-cum-philanthropist, who spoke at length about his wide-ranging business interests, his conglomerate's flagship product – the immensely popular Wai Wai noodles – and his spiritual journey with Sri Sri Ravi Shankar.



How has your journey been so far?

As a conglomerate, we are extremely proud of our journey thus far. Although our presence in the Hospitality Sector has not been for more than two decades, today, we are a name to reckon with. We are highly diversified in terms of our business interests and strategies. We are owners and business partners and have forged joint ventures with some of the leading names in the industry. We also have acquisitions and funding arms to our credit.

Presently, we have more than 85 hotels in nine countries and aim to expand our portfolio to 200 hotels by 2020. Our hotels range from mid-scale to upper mid-scale, from wellness resorts to business hotels, from in-house brands to partner properties. Some of our most popular brands include, CHC Bungalows, The Farm at San Benito, The Zinc and The Fern. The Group also has a tie-up with The Indian Hotels Company Limited (IHCL) and after an extremely successful stint with Alila Hotels & Resorts, we sold it out to the Hyatt Group. We are now developing a new product called The Zinc Journey, a chain of boutique hotels that aims to provide luxury boutique experience to travellers. The first destination chosen for the opening of this brand is Sri Lanka, but this is to be followed by similar properties in Hunan, Nepal, Bhutan and other such exotic places. We are extremely proud of the fact that we are partners of well-known properties across the world, such as Taj Exotica Maldives, Taj Samudra, Taj Safari Meghauli Sarai, etc.



Binod Chaudhary

You have an extensive business portfolio – how do you remain connected to your diverse business interests?

My businesses are like my babies. It has been a long journey of 45 years, although I must acknowledge the role played by my father, who started the business in a humble way. Now, my sons are involved in the business. I have delegated the charges of various departments to my sons, Rahul, Nirvana and Varun. While I have taken a backseat, they bring in business, strike new deals and so on. Despite having a wide range of business concerns,



our linkages run deep, our roots remain firm. Finally, we believe that whatever we do we must touch people's lives positively. No wonder, our tagline is, 'Touching life everyday'.

Given the current uncertainty in the business environment, how do you respond to the changes taking place around you?

Although our business interests are quite diversified, our core values are intact; our heads are firmly on our shoulders. It is difficult to disrupt our business overnight. While there are quite a few disruptive players in the Hospitality and Travel Industry today, not all of them are equally successful. While companies such as OYO Rooms and Airbnb have changed the game to a considerable extent, they have also faced the challenges. I do recognise the full potential of technology-driven travel, but some fundamentals in the hotel industry will not change any time soon. You still need to be physically present at a property and experience it for yourself. No amount of technology can change that.

Apart from your business, you have a spiritual side to your personality. Would you like to share your spiritual journey with us?

To embark on a path of spirituality, you must experience, what I call, 'Guru's Calling.' This is something you cannot consciously cultivate – it must come naturally to you. When you are rich and powerful, you may indulge in spirituality as a public relations exercise, but that will not work. This is not something you can plan. When your Guru believes that he has a role to play in your life or you have a role to play in his life, it will automatically happen. I can say this with certainty, since I myself have experienced this. I tried to avoid meeting Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, though Kavita Khanna, wife of late Vinod Khanna and a dear friend of mine, was constantly pushing me to meet him. Eventually, I did meet him almost 15 years back and my life has never been the same ever since.

You do write about your spiritual journey in your autobiography, don't you?

Yes, I do. My autobiography, titled 'Binod Chaudhary Atmakatha,' published in Nepali, narrates my spiritual journey at length, which had a profound impact on my life. I come from a hardcore business background, where everything is about cracking deals, pushing yourself and the people you are surrounded with, so imagine the impact this life-changing experience would have had on my life.



Has this spiritual connect helped you to realign your business interests with people's interests in mind?

I can say without a shadow of doubt that my Guru has showed me the path which I follow. Our Shaswat Dham is a place to seek divine knowledge, natural bliss and peace of mind. We have provided over 500 artificial limbs and plan to provide another 500 soon to below-the-waist amputees, in partnership with BMVSS of Jaipur Foot. In the aftermath of the devastating earthquake in Nepal, we went to the remotest corners of the country to help people rebuild their homes. As I look back at my life, it seems to me that we have been touching people's lives since the beginning of my career.

When we launched Wai Wai noodles, little did we realise that it would enjoy a cult following. It has proved to be a great leveller, cutting across the class divide in the country. It is also a great convenience product, which gives you 350 calories at Rs 10. In fact, an interesting anecdote is that during the period of political turmoil in Nepal, both army men and Comrade Prachanda's boys were surviving on Wai Wai noodles. That's why I say, Wai Wai noodles has greatly touched people's lives. My association with Sri Sri Ravi Shankar has only reinforced my commitment towards helping the people of my country.