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TAJ MAN THROUGH AND THROUGH

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SOMNATH MUKHERJEE, GENERAL MANAGER OF THE TAJ WEST END, BANGALORE, TELLS US OF HIS JOURNEY THROUGH THE RANK AND FILE OF TAJ AND WHY HE'S READY TO TAKE ON NEW CHALLENGES.

BY: **BIKRAMJIT RAY**

YOU COULD call Somnath Mukherjee a Taj faithful. He's been working for the company, which he joined, back in 1992 as a management trainee and has no plans to leave, from what he told BW Hotelier.

In fact, one of the first memories of a Taj General Manager (GM) he has was that of his first, Shirin Batliwala, "I remember her in a red saree writing down details about me with her red Natraj pencil," Mukherjee tells us. But then, he is a trove of memories about Taj Bengal, where he worked from 1992 till 2006.

But Mukherjee lets us into a little secret, "I never thought I would be a hotelier. After school I was trying for my joint entrance exam and my father wanted me to be a doctor or an engineer like any other Bengali boy. Somehow I landed in Hotel Management College following one of my seniors. I was very fortunate to get selected on campus for Taj Bengal". Ask him and he is adamant, "I belong to Taj Bengal or Taj Bengal belongs to me."

Mukherjee claims to be the only person he knows who worked as manager of every single restaurant at the Taj Bengal and remembers the time when he oversaw the renovation of the iconic Sonar Gaon restaurant in 2004. "It was soon after that I won the FHRAI award for best restaurant manager," he said. It was also then that he shifted out of restaurants as into butler service.

"Mr Abhijit Mukherji who was then the COO advised me--if you want fast track growth, you need to move out of restaurants and into to butler operations. I as also working side by side as an assistant F&B manager then," he tells us. This was when he got another break when Taj Bengal's then GM, Taljinder Singh (who is now Taj Mahal Palace in Mumbai's General Manager and Area Director) moved him in 2006 to the Umaid Bhawan Palace in Udaipur as F&B Manager.

What Mukherjee landed in was a hotel more like





a shell, in his own words. It was just after the group had taken the property over and the restaurants were not refurbished and the staff were 'hard to train'. "I thought that the company had sidelined me," he confessed, before of course his determination showed and he decided to embrace his assignment. It was with the help of his then GM Sanjay Umashankar (now GM of Vivanta by Taj President Mumbai), he began to get into his own. It was also his luck which saw him organise some of the most high profile events of his professional life: Liz Hurley's wedding with Arun Nayar and the Vogue launch in India.

"I was the F&B Manager then," Mukherjee recalled, "I was in every day in touch with Liz Hurley and Arun Nair. They would come every month and I would sit with them. It was

great exposure for me".

The three day event stretched his team but also taught him the importance of logistics and planning, as did the 450 sit down dinner for Vogue's launch also at Umaid Bhawan Palace. "Doing a 450 people sit-down dinner in Bangalore or Mumbai is very different from doing it at Umaid Bhawan Palace. You don't have anything. No Staff, no manpower, you have to assemble everything from outside from all over the country, beg, borrow, request," he remembered.

But all this meant he also got his just rewards, a promotion to EAM at the hotel and then a transfer to Varanasi as GM of both the Taj Gateway and the Nadesar Palace Hotel.

"This was in 2009, when they were opening Nadesar Palace. I was in charge of both the Gateway Hotel as well as



the Luxury hotel. Nadesar Palace gardens were overrun with trees and creepers like a jungle and full of snakes. It was not like the award winning hotel that you see now. In two-and-a-half years, that I was there, every year, we got the best hotel award from the group," he says proudly. Soon after he did a short stint as GM of the Rambagh Palace for 11 months, which he claims is the most fantastic hotel he has worked in.

"It was a dream hotel. I will still say, I was at the peak of my performance as GM of Rambagh Palace. What a fantastic set of HoDs, I had. It gave me an in-depth lesson on what luxury service and quality was really about," Mukherjee added. Mukherjee's move to his current position as GM of the West End in Bangalore, was because of various factors, including his family. His pride in his product hasn't diminished one bit

though. "The performance of this hotel in the last one-and-a-half years has improved significantly in every parameter-- guest engagement scores, staff engagement scores, profit of the hotel, revenues," he says.

Finally we ask what makes a successful GM? "Your Staff. You can be given the best hotel of the world. If the staff is not with you, you cannot survive. My strength is my staff. I have great ability to motivate my staff. Because I have come up the ranks in Taj, I know their pains, their issues, I know what they want from the management. I can hit the bulls eye. I know what they are trying to say, even if they are not saying it," he concludes.

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