

# SPICE

His was the archetypical corner shop selling samosas. Now Kirit Pathak has become the ultimate spice man, with a global sales team on the road and several millions in the bank. He talks of the changing world of Asian family businesses, of responsibility and the challenge of Europe with Neil Brommage.

**T**he scene is now familiar to us all. It could be anywhere in the UK, but in this case it's London, somewhere to the north. The Asian population grinding away day and night in corner shops and sweat shops, factories, shopping malls and restaurants, each providing for their families, immediate and extended. Year after year they plod on, doing business and watching their families grow. Occasionally, one beavers away a little harder, laying foundations; brick upon brick.

suddenly bursting onto the corporate scene as the doyen of his countrymen. In this case it's Kirit Pathak OBE the multi-millionaire head of Patak's Spices.

Patak's is currently the fastest growing grocery food brand in the UK having in excess of 60 per cent market shares in Australia, Canada and Holland, and 45 per cent in New Zealand. Their products are available in more than 50 countries throughout the world and they get through more than 45 million pounds worth of chutneys, pickles, sauces, spices and pappadums each year. All of which seems to confirm Pathak's view that "the whole world is open for us."

Kirit Pathak has achieved all this from the humble beginnings of his father who began selling samosas to his family and friends from a small shop in Drummond Street in north London back in the '50s. Whilst being anything other than an overnight success - Kirit joined his father's company back in 1970 - the company has grown at warp speed during the '90s with turnover rising from a respectable £6m to a something-to-be-reckoned-with £45m in 1997.

## Enigma

And this perhaps, is where the enigma begins, for Kirit, now Chairman of Patak's does not necessarily see himself as successful. "I don't think I'm successful enough" he says adding, "Who measures that? I don't. Perhaps really I'm not so successful, perhaps I've wasted the last 20 years."

Anyone who amasses a fortune and remains as well liked as Pathak can hardly be accused of wasting time. It would though, be easy to agree with everything he says, he is a gentle, courteous man who clearly puts everyone he meets at ease. But on arriving at the hub of his empire, modestly tucked away on a single road which in Haydock, Lancashire passes as a trading estate, it becomes obvious that this is not merely a PR exercise doled out automatically for visiting journalists. His staff of which there are more than 400 (most of whom he knows by name) are friendly and efficient, but more importantly happy in their work. Perhaps it's because they know he listens to them, from the shop-floor upwards. "By listening to every-



the entire company's force will be behind the ultimate decisions."

One of those more important decisions was taken in the mid '80s when Pathak sat down to take a closer look at his business.

Realising they needed to be much more mainstream in a serious way, he completely revamped the company's image and took on certain professionals to help build the brand further. That step of bringing in "outside" help seems to be the first indication of Pathak's views about Asian business cultures.

But only however, in order to crack the enigma, it is necessary to unearth Pathak's multi-cultural roots. His story goes back to Kasumu, Kenya where he was born 45 years ago to Indian

parents who soon after moved to London. As a young boy, an Indian immigrant was not enough for the young Kirit to deal with, he was then packed off to Ireland to be educated – by Catholics. All of this, he says, has helped in every shape and form. "I'm very religious – Hindu though officially RC – and I've taken the best of both, the disciplines of the Roman Catholic religion and the Hindu freedom to live and understand the soul's connection to all living things and to its higher consciousness... I believe God provides for us, He's there to guide us and He does. I leave the rewards to Him." Whether it's as a result of his

desire to "search for the enlightenment of God" or just pure business acumen he remains philosophical about his company's success in times when many others have failed. With growth being created from dramatic organic growth and key acquisitions he says "it's never a single thing. Whatever you do, do it well first time. Being ahead of and creating the market is important, few companies have that. They can steal but not create."

But with the hard work ethic being so ingrained in the Asian family what has taken Kirit Pathak to the dizzy heights of corporate stardom? "I have added vision to the hard work. I've always set myself very high standards and what some people sometimes think as impossible

targets - with that little bit of extra effort the vision becomes more achievable."

### Asian tradition

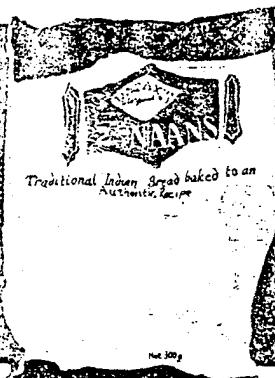
Whilst being a leader, Pathak is also a team player and it is obvious that in keeping with Asian tradition the family have played their part in this success story. His wife Meena still plays an active role as a director. "The family plays an important role in the beginnings of any business because there is a need to survive - this is a big binding factor and you pool all resources together to ensure that survival is achieved."

This all sounds like pure logic, but unlike Western cultures



Kirit Pathak's world of red chillies and exotic tastes.





where the promotion of family within business is often viewed as nepotism. Asians actively encourage it. "Normally, I would have said it was because we always feel that we are up against the odds; we are striving to survive and achieve great heights, but we are also in a minority - it is through the trust and strength of the family unit that some comfort factor is derived. I do not think necessarily that with the second and third generation Indian that this is accepted."

So does this mean that we are going to see a change in the way Asian families operate their businesses? "As we become more professional, the need to deliver results based on performance against multinational competition means that Indian businesses are having to consider meritocracy as the way to manage the growth of their business and not just rely on the trust and loyalty of family members."

Everything he says indicates that in Kirit Pathak we have a thoroughly nice guy, and we do. But let's face it, you don't amass £40 million empires without having the ability to turn the thumb screws occasionally. The same high standards he sets for himself he also expects others to reach. So when his sales people walk into his office to proudly announce this month's increased figures he is quite likely to respond with "is that all?", as he is constantly expecting more and admits to being critical about

people who don't measure up. He readily quotes his least favourite personal characteristic as "wanting everyone to be perfect."

But in Pathak there seems an overriding sense of fairness, and he is equally quick to admit his own shortcomings. Like not spending more time with his father. "My parents gave me life and opportunity and taught me values which I've enhanced. They gave me the ethic of hard work, honesty and love."

Clearly a family man in every sense of the word he has a genuine concern for those who work for him, who he judges by their honesty, and who "must be cultured people and believe in the 'family', including their own, because here we are just one big family". But his desire for "betterment" stretches further than his own family and employees and on to his suppliers and their families, customers and theirs, and so on, "If I can touch their souls or lives through our products in some shape or form, that drives me."

Patak's current "family" is spread over four sites in Brechin, Dundee, Haydock and Wigan, two of which were trading acquisitions, including Top Hat Foods which now provides the recently launched range of Patak's Frozen Meals, which are, as he would say "Eat in my home products" reflecting his guiding principle of quality in all he does.

## American market

Those principles have rewarded Pathak and his company. He has recently collected his OBE, whilst the Patak's brand has now also entered the American market. But he is clearly at ease with all of this and displays the characteristics of a man who finds it easy to relax, either walking his two Labradors or "doing jobs around the house - anything but business" he says.

Within this apparent contentment however lies a serious fantasy. He may be a Captain of Industry but he would rather be Captain of the Starship Enterprise. Beneath the cool, calm exterior of this hugely successful man lies a real life "Trekkie". Pathak would rather be Picard, Jean Luc (that is (or Captain Kirk to the non trekkie!), to whom according to his family he bears more than a passing resemblance. "My children say I look a little like Jean Luc Picard and running Patak's is a little like running a space-ship". A tight one at that!

The enigma however, remains for he is clearly a driven man. Wherever you eat Indian cuisine in the UK the likelihood is that you are eating Patak's products for they supply over 90 per cent of the country's Indian restaurants (we have more in London alone than in Bombay and New Delhi combined!). And so with his personal goal to see Patak's products "in every single country, on every single shelf in some form or another" Klingons beware, we are going to see a lot more of Captain Pathak