

BUSINESS OF HOME DELIVERY OF DAILY MEALS : SOME SELECTED STORIES ON MICRO- ENTREPRENEURSHIP OF WOMEN OF KOLKATA

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Abstract

Rice, dal, brinjal fry, vegetables, fish or mutton curry, with some chutney thrown in...sounds just like home food? That's what Kolkatans are loving about the many new services that promise healthy, homely and reasonably priced food. Working couples, the elderly, bachelors - basically anybody unable or unwilling to spend time in the kitchen and at the same time loathe to eating out because of rich and oily food - are part of this new trend in Kolkata. A few people like it so much that they have practically shut down their kitchens! Many educated and modern women of Kolkata are grasping this opportunity and they are not making few bucks, but also doing big businesses of lakhs of rupees annual turnover over the years.

The study attempts to explore the different commercial aspects of such entrepreneurial initiatives like strategizing such ventures at the initial years, opportunities and problems associated with such business and further developing innovative ideas to make such more ventures to come up with more professional vigor. In the process of this exploratory research a selected number of successful women entrepreneurs of Kolkata from home delivery business have been interviewed and appropriate methodologies have been adopted to get the best possible results.

Key words: *Healthy, homely and reasonably priced foods, working couple, elderly and bachelors, different commercial aspects, innovative ideas, professional vigor, exploratory research.*

Introduction:

Rice, dal, brinjal fry, vegetables, fish or mutton curry, with some chutney thrown in...sounds just like home food? That's what Kolkatans are loving about the many new services that promise healthy, homely and reasonably priced food. Working couples, the elderly, bachelors - basically anybody unable or unwilling to spend time in the kitchen and at the same time loathe to eating out because of rich and oily food - are part of this new trend in Kolkata. A few people like it so much that they have practically shut down their kitchens! Many educated and modern women of Kolkata are grasping this opportunity and they are not making few bucks, but also doing big businesses of lakhs of rupees annual turnover over the years. This new trend of a different types of women entrepreneurship has not only ensured better standard of living for dependent families, but also creating a different breed of entrepreneurs in this part of the country. Some of the entrepreneurial ventures have been so successful that branding initiatives have been successfully initiated and few of them have also converted in well known restaurants of Bengali delicacies in the city, where people can throng and enjoy their weekends with families and friends.

Kolkata is a thriving city with millions of population. As per the report¹, the city has the population of about 10.3 million, among which about 40% are occupationally engaged either in service or in business. The report also says that about

4000 people enters the city everyday for relatively permanent settlement objective, out of this relatively new settlers, 30% settles down permanently. Apart from that, the city has about more than 12% of the population, whose age goes beyond 60. In this demographic set up, the many new services like packers and movers, home delivery of daily meals, house keeping agencies etc. have come up at a phenomenal rate, which was not even thought ten years back. Smelling these phenomenal opportunities, new breeds of young as well as seasoned entrepreneurs have jumped in the bandwagon. However, in the subsequent courses of the research findings, attempt has been made to highlight some of the achievements by the women entrepreneurs, who have successfully ventured in to the business of supplying daily meals to the homes over the years.

Success stories : A glimpse:

A Kolkata based Non-government organization (NGO) called "*Institute of Self Employment For Women (IMSEW)*" has conducted the survey on 15 women entrepreneurs from the same trade from South Kolkata localities (covering areas like Jadavpur, Garia, Lake Garden, Jodhpur Park, and Tollygunge) during January-March, 2010. In the survey report, the details of their average monthly turnover, net monthly earning, number of average clients served etc. have been mentioned in details. The report gives the comprehensive view on the trend of the same. The key observations from the report can be stated as follows:

- All of the surveyed women are married, 35-50 years of age,

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minimum qualification is graduation , running the business for 3-5 years .

- Their existing client number varies in between 35-70 per day .
- Their monthly gross sales turnover stand in between Rs. 50000/- to 80000/- and net monthly income (excluding wage paid to the people under them , rent and electricity bills , purchasing cost of raw materials etc.) stand somewhere in between Rs.22000/- to Rs.45000/- per month .
- Individually, they have created employment for about 3-5 people and the combined number of total people directly employed by them are 50 (as on 7th April ,2010 , the report has been published) .

Another study has given the findings on few more successful ventures, where some of the initial years of home delivery of daily meals business have been gradually converted into few notable Bengali delicacy restaurants of Kolkata , where the original home delivery business has been kept as a parallel service as well . Some of the such ventures have been popularized under the brand names like *Bordi's Rasoi*(Elder sister's Kitchen), *Aahar* (Meal) , *Dui Burir Hessel* (Two aunties' kitchen) , *Born Bong* and *Aap ki Passand* (Your choice) . While some other researches have shown that many such restaurant brands possess their short-term plans to enter catering business as well by targeting the corporate , social occasions like marriage etc. and other ventures like catering to the students of different colleges and institutions. So, a small journey from the kitchen of the family has taken a quantum leap in the direction of setting bigger family ventures.

Moreover, in search of primary information, a selected number of women entrepreneurs from the same business of home delivery of daily meals have been interviewed through structured questionnaire. This interview has attempted to explore the relevant areas of their businesses, future plans and problem of any type they are facing while carrying out the business.

Research Methodology:

The first step in the research process has been to determine the issues those need to be addressed for the purpose of the study. Initial talks and discussions have been held with the selected number of women entrepreneurs from a specific locality of Kolkata . In the process of collecting data both primary and secondary sources have been explored as far as possible . However, due to unavailability of the published official records on the number of women entrepreneurs in the business of home delivery of daily meal business of Kolkata , the combination and judgmental sampling technique has been used for the purpose of data collection. The "word of mouth" search revealed that in the specific area of South Kolkata , specially two highly populated localities like Behala and New Alipore , 30 women have been interviewed in this kind of business at the time of survey . Combining the both the areas the total covered portion has been about 150 square kms (15x10) and the total population stands at about 6 lakhs. The areas have the unique characteristics of concentration of both highly affluent and poorest slum dwelling population.

Research findings :

A total of 30 women micro-entrepreneurs have been surveyed on the following parameters like Age and marital status , educational back-ground , whether supported by others

(family members , friends or both) , level of initial investment , gross monthly sales turnover (in 000s) ,net monthly income (in 000s) ,employment generated as the direct consequence of the individual ventures , duration of business (in years) .

Following table shows the detailed profile of the micro-entrepreneurs covered under survey :

Table : 1 Detailed profile of micro-entrepreneurs

Age	35-39	40-44	45-49	50 and above
	06	11	12	01
Qualification	Matriculate/High school pass-out	Graduate	Post-graduate	Professionally qualified
	03	16	11	0
Marital status	Unmarried	Married	Separated/Divorced	Widow
	01	27	01	01
Ventured and run by	Only self	Self+ family	Self+friends	Self+family+friends
	10	15	04	0
Doing business for (years)	< 5 years	5 years-10 years	11 years- 15 years	>15 years
	04	18	10	0
Gross monthly turnover (Rs.)	< 50K	> 50K-< 60K	>60K-< 70K	> 70 K
	05	20	03	02
Net monthly income (Rs.)	<20K	>20K-<30K	>31K-<40K	>40K
	09	11	09	01
Employment generated	< 4	4	5	>5
	08	15	06	01
Initial Financing (Rs.)	< 3K	3K-5K	6K-8K	>8K
	13	10	6	2

Source : Primary data

From the above findings the general observations can be made as follows :

- Majority of the micro-entrepreneurs (40%) come under the age bracket of 45-49 years .
- 53.33% of the surveyed women are graduate , followed by the 36.66% of the post graduates .
- Most of the women entrepreneurs covered under survey , i.e. 90% are married .
- 50% are supported by their families in venturing and running the business .
- Majority (about 60%) of the surveyed women are running their business for 5-10 years .
- Gross monthly turnover of the women entrepreneurs are varied , but maximum , i.e., 66.66% of the surveyed women have the monthly turnover in between 50K-60K .
- About 36.67% of women entrepreneurs covered in the survey fall in the net monthly income category of 20K-30K .
- About 46.66% of the women entrepreneurs have employed 4 persons directly at the time of the survey .
- 43.33% have started their business with initial investment of less than 3K .

Based on above observations , a careful selection of 05 entrepreneurs have been done based on certain parameters like highest monthly gross turnover , highest earning (net income per month) , highest number of regular customers served (at the time of survey) , highest ratio in between monthly sales turnover and monthly net earning , highest profit per customer per month etc. They study has further attempted to explore the secrets of such success which may be the instance for others engaged in the same type of business in future.

The following table has shown the status of the top five women entrepreneurs in the business (covered under survey) with the key performance indicators of their business :

Table 2 : Key performance indicators of the top five women micro-entrepreneurs

Name	Net monthly income	Ratio between Gross sales turnover (monthly) and Net monthly income	Number of regular customer	Net Earning per customer per month (Average)
RAKHI DAS	Rs. 32000 (Approx.)	41.02	26	Rs. 1200 (approx.)
DOLON BISWAS	Rs. 34000 (Approx.)	45.33	27	Rs. 1290 (approx.)
BIBHARANI SARKAR	Rs. 28000 (Approx.)	41.79	23	Rs. 1220 (approx.)
MAYURI SEN	Rs. 27000 (Approx.)	41.53	21	Rs. 1260 (approx.)
DEPALI MUKHERJEE	Rs. 25000 (Approx.)	42.37	21	Rs. 1230 (approx.)

From the above table it has been observed that though the net earning per month varies from Rs.25000 Rs. 34000 (i.e., Rs. 9000 gap between highest and lowest within the top 5 micro-entrepreneurs bracket), yet the no significant difference has been calculated on the issues of ratio , net earning per customer , numbers of customers served regularly etc. . Here the highest ratio has been observed as 45.33 and the lowest as 41.02 , whereas highest per customer net earning per month has been estimated as Rs. 1290 and lowest as Rs. 1200 . On the issue of customers served regularly , highest number has been found as 27 and lowest as 21 as on January 2011.

In the process of survey , it has been observed that all of these top five micro-entrepreneurs are actively planning for expanding their business in near future . For the same purpose they have also chalked out distinctive strategies as follows :

Table : 3 Business plans for future by top 5 women micro-entrepreneurs

Name	Business Target by January 2012	Strategies planned	Problems faced
Dolon Biswas	Doubling the regular customer numbers Increasing the per customer earning per month by at least 40%	Increasing the number of young customers specially living in apartments in groups working in call centres. Supplying non-conventional dishes like Chinese or Thai foods with higher price	Kitchen capacity , trained coo k and fund crunch.
Rakhi Das	Doubling the sales turnover. At least 45% increase in number of direct customers.	Increase the ratio between net monthly income and gross monthly sales turnover . Expanding the customer base into new neighborhoods . Promotion through local shops , food chains , cyber cafes and retail estate brokerage services .	Paucity of fund Staff shortage for meal distribution and higher market rate of wages Higher cost of raw materials.
Bibharani Sarkar	Doubling the sales turnover At least 50% increase in number of direct customers	Supplying meals to offices Introduction of snacks service Customized services like special food buffet during occasions etc.	Shortage of fund Shortage of manpower High competition from organized catering services supplying lunch to the offices .

Mayuri Sen	Opening of a restaurant of authentic Bengali foods Increasing the regular customer numbers by at least 40%.	Decrease in the number of items in meals but increasing the quality of the varieties as options like single meal option , combo meal option etc. More focusing on restaurants business.	Shortage of capital to start restaurant business .
Deepali Mukherjee	50% increase in regular customer 50% increase in net income per month.	Participation in food festivals Opening new kitchens in new localities Corporate lunch service	Fund shortage . Manpower shortage

The survey on these five entrepreneurs have revealed a lot of other issues , much important for further research specially for future small/micro-level entrepreneurs .

1. Almost 90% of the respondents indicated that innovation is most important for sustainable growth in their business. All the 05 respondents have strongly emphasized on product innovation, which means serving new dishes without any additional charge. Four respondents have expressed their opinion regarding innovation in marketing like developing some channels for extended location coverage. Remaining one respondent has not given any feedback on the issue.
2. On the issue of family support, the need has been acknowledged by all the respondents. Though about 90% entrepreneurs from the total sample size of 30 have acknowledged the role of their family members in starting and running their meal delivery business , yet clearly different mode of opinions are visible among them about the level of this family engagement in business. When asked about the extent of family support (which includes immediate and the extended family as well) they are currently getting , 80% respondents have responded at the moderate scale , 10% at very high scale and another 10% at very negligible rate .
3. On the issue of the problems faced by these breed of women entrepreneurs, a ranking scale has been used, by which the respondents have been asked to prioritize the problems . The areas of such problems have however been set on the basis of normal conversations occurred in due course of research etc. From the feedback , it has been identified that all the respondents have identified the social factors like inadequate work-life balance as the most important problem. Though most of them (80% moderate support from family , refer point 2) receive some kind of support from family , still they have been share a lot of other family responsibilities side by side as well . Even about 5 or 6 respondents cook themselves for their family members separately , whereas they employ the kitchen staffs for the purpose of their business.
4. Regarding the problems from the commercial fronts few major issues have been identified by the respondents , which can be classified as follows :
 - i. It is no less a complex business situation . The combinations of purchasing, preparing, selling and servicing require maximum possible balance. The raw material is getting costlier day by day, are mostly perishable and it should be cautiously observed that the

closing inventory must be equal to zero , specially for those , who also allow the flexibility in terms of "Flying customers".

- ii. Meeting varied customer expectations in terms of spice component , taste component and retaining them has also been identified as a major challenge for most of the respondents. Most of the respondents have opined that the customers not only buy meals , but also expect at the same time expect it appetizingly prepared and served . In other words, the customers are expecting restaurant like services at home.
- iii. None of the surveyed women entrepreneurs have registered themselves with any tax department etc., none of them have valid trade license, none of them have filed income tax returns etc. Therefore, whatever is the prospect of their business, their business is not a legal entity in the eye of law. Simply on this ground they can not approach the banks or financial institutions for entrepreneurship loan , which are plenty in scope , specially for the women entrepreneurs.
- iv. The turnover rate among the kitchen people is also very high. All of the women entrepreneurs normally pays the monthly wages to their main cook at the rate of Rs.3000-3500/- , the helps (mostly two in numbers) get Rs. 1300-1500 and delivery person gets Rs. 800-1000 (if only delivery is the job) and Rs. 1500-1600 (if delivery job is combined with help work at kitchen). All these types of people leave their jobs suddenly without any prior intimation , when ever they get any better alternative anywhere. Some of the women entrepreneurs have disclosed the stories that how badly they have fallen in the crisis by such sudden vanishing act of these people.

Recommendations :

The basic problems identified from the study can be classified as follows , based on which some recommendations have been developed :

1. Most of the women entrepreneurs have definitely some level of entrepreneurial zeal , but the way they are running their business lacks professional or managerial approach. Though , they have achieved a lot , yet their amateur attitude should be converted into real professional one.
2. Many of them have tasted the flavor of success. Their earning have significantly increased over the years . Many of them are dreaming of expanding their business , but till the day of survey none of them have gone for organized business mode , like tax filing etc., which can help themselves to get legal validity in the eye of law . Funding support from banks and financial institutions will not be a problem in that case.
3. Home delivery of daily meals is a type of business , which has a limitation in scope and therefore , big dreams are difficult to achieve easily. Growth is possible , but that is also limited in character . Therefore, expansion of such business in any form or shape like organized catering or restaurant may be the future option. In such cases involvement of the family is essential.

4. Finally to say, innovation in all possible shape , dimension is required to pursue on continuous basis for growth of any business . In this case , this is no exception. Though some of the women entrepreneurs surveyed under the study have talked about innovation up to a limited extent , yet much can be possible to done. Innovation can be done in terms of marketing strategy making , in terms of customer service , in terms of purchasing and food preparation etc.

Conclusion :

The detailed study reveals that the business has the immense opportunity to generate self-employment for the large number of women in Kolkata as cooking is the passion and the art imbedded in the Bengali culture . Not only the women and in many cases their families can be financially benefited by these initiatives , but also large number of employments can also be created through the recruitment of cook, kitchen staffs , delivery men etc. The report prepared by IMSEW (2010) has predicted the possibility of creating about 5000 direct jobs , both full time and part-time nature by 500 women micro entrepreneurs in the business of home delivery of daily meals across Kolkata , only by increasing their business scale by as minimum as 40% . The report further says that the customers dependent on delivery of regular meals will increase at the average rate of 39% across Kolkata. This trend is higher in the upcoming areas of Kolkata , where people like students , young professionals and married couples are coming from outside for temporary period and very limited or no time to prepare their own meals . These are the affluent generations and can be tapped for delivery of meals as they are always ready to pay more to have quality and hygienic foods at their home or in some cases at their workplaces. Therefore , this opportunity for the growth of a women entrepreneurial class is highly possible in Kolkata. Only requirement is extending policy support by including this business into the list of small scale industry category.

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