



(REVIEW ARTICLE)



## Spicing up with changing times: A study with special reference to Dindigul Thalapakatti Restaurant

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### Abstract

Food provides the required nutrients for every human being. Good and healthy food provides the essential energy for proper growth and development of the human body. It will also help to maintain a proper immune system. Tasty food will treat the taste buds and good food is considered to be a joy forever. Biryani is supposed to be the most delicious non vegetarian food item. It is the most sought after dish among the foodies. Though, the dish has its origin from the Mughals, it has been prepared and served across the world under different flavours. Although there are many restaurants serving Biryani, Dindigul Thalapakatti brand has attained widespread popularity across the globe. The sixty four year old restaurant chain was started as a small outlet in Dindigul in Tamilnadu by Mr.Nagasamy Naidu under the name Anandha Vilas Biryani Hotel. The founder used to wear a turban called “Thalapa” which became synonymous with his brand and cooking style by earning him a nick name “Thalappakatti Naidu” which eventually became the name of their brand. This paper attempts to reconnoiter the journey of Dindigul Thalalpakatti in spicing up with the changing times.

**Keywords:** Biryani; Brand building; Dining experience

### 1. Introduction

Food provides the required nutrients for every human being. Good and healthy food provides the essential energy for proper growth and development of the human body. It will also help to maintain a proper immune system. Tasty food will treat the taste buds and good food is considered to be a joy forever. Biryani is supposed to be the most delicious non vegetarian food item. It is the most sought after dish among the foodies. Though, the dish has its origin from the Mughals, it has been prepared and served across the world under different flavours. Although there are many restaurants serving Biryani, Dindigul Thalapakatti brand has attained widespread popularity across the globe.

#### 1.1. Thalappakatti Naidu - The Founder

The sixty four year old restaurant chain was started as a small outlet in Dindigul in Tamilnadu by Mr.Nagasamy Naidu under the name Anandha Vilas Biryani Hotel during 1957. He always used to wear a turban called “Thalapa” which became synonymous with his brand and cooking style by earning him a nick name “Thalappakatti Naidu” which eventually became the name of their brand. The founder was very particular about the taste and took adequate efforts to make sure that the Biryani prepared at his hotel was delicious. He scrupulously selected the ingredients from rice to masala to meat. The unshakable nature and lip-smacking taste can be endorsed to the fact that all the constituents were

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prepared by Thalappakatti Naidu himself. High quality and taste are of prime importance and the brand has attained extensive reputation across the globe.

### **1.2. Nagasamy Dhanabalan -The Managing Director**

Mr. Nagasamy Dhanabalan, the third generation entrepreneur started his career as a front office receptionist in the United Kingdom a decade ago is now the Managing Director of Dindigul Thalappakatti restaurant. Mr. Dhanabalan, grandson of Thalappakatti Naidu runs the Rs.200 crore business. Things changed after he took over the business. Most of the biryanis emerged from royal kitchens. But Dindigul Thalappakatti offers a different kind of biriyani with a rural flavor. He was not sure whether he would be able to scale up and run the business successfully. But he was certain that the unique flavor would definitely appeal to the taste buds of the food lovers. To corroborate his dispositions he loomed the entrepreneurs behind two Chennai based chain of restaurants and collected the necessary inputs before establishing his restaurant in Chennai. The Dindigul-based eatery was extended to Chennai with one small restaurant has more than 40 outlets across the globe.

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## **2. Review of Literature**

Shonali (2017) states that the foreign antecedents and home-grown aroma of Dindigul Thalappakatti has conquered the world by starring seeraga samba in the US. Soma (2013) is of the view that Thalappakatti's story is about exploiting the housewife's talent in preparing a unique style of biriyani. Dhavamani (2013) mentions that Naidu's grandson D Nagasamy alias Satheesh, won a long drawn battle to retain the trademark 'Thalappakatti' with the Intellectual Property Appellate Board (IPAB) ruling that the Chennai-based Rawther Thalappakattu had dishonestly laid stake to the name.

### **2.1. Need for the study**

The business which was started as a small Betel nut shop by the founder Mr. Nagasamy Naidu took off with the opening up of a small four seater hotel. It made him realise that his wife's unique style of biriyani had potential to go places. He started by serving his locality, the biriyani brought in many fans from the neighbouring cities. Mr.Dhanabalan Nagasamy gave a new facelift to the restaurant and established around 40 branches in eight years. They currently operate in Paris, Dubai, Kuala Lumpur and California, and are eyeing the market in Sydney, Abu Dhabi and Muscat. In India, the plan is to expand to tier-2 and tier-3 cities in Tamil Nadu and then spread to other cities. The restaurant chain also has a foothold in the delivery model, with a focus on delivery through their website, thalappakatti.com. The company, which operates via centralised kitchens in Chennai and Dindigul, wants to open in 10 cities over the course of the next year. The growth of this food outlet is phenomenal and offers valuable lessons to the students, researchers, academicians, budding entrepreneurs and the general public. Hence, this paper makes an attempt to study the secrets behind the success of this restaurant and gauge the struggles of Mr. Dhanabalan in piloting the food outlet to the pinnacle of glory and success.

### **2.2. Objectives of the study**

- To study the success formula of Dindigul Thalappakatti restaurant.
- To gauge the effectiveness of Mr. Dhanabalan in taking restaurant to superior altitudes.
- To appreciate the efforts of Mr. Dhanabalan for making a mark in the Indian food industry.

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## **3. Methodology**

Information for the study was collected from both Primary and Secondary sources.

Primary data was collected by interviewing Mr. Dhanabalan and the employees of Dindigul Thalappakatti restaurant.

Secondary data was collected from various online sources, books and journals.

### **3.1. Limitation of the study**

The study is confined only to Mr. Dhanabalan and Dindigul Thalappakatti restaurant.

#### 4. Dindigul Thalappakatti restaurant - The Spicy Journey

Dindigul Thalappakatti Biryani, which started with just one outlet in a small town in 1957, has gone places. The Rs 200-crore biriyani brand now has 40 branches across the world and is cooking up other plans of expansion. Nagasamy Dhanabalan started out as a front-office receptionist in the UK and today he runs a Rs 200-crore business. Circumstances forced Nagasamy to return to India in 2009 to tend to his ailing father. At that time he decided to take over his grandfather's small biriyani business, now named Dindigul Thalappakatti Biryani. Just as famous as the biriyani was the white-turbaned man behind the counter. Over time, the restaurant went from being called Anandha Vilas to Thalappakatti Biryani. In Tamil, thalappa means the traditional turban. From 1957 to 2009, Dindigul Thalappakatti had only one outlet in Dindigul itself. The family experimented with a branch in Coimbatore, but it didn't do as well. Things changed after Nagasamy took over the business. When he first suggested expanding the business beyond Dindigul in 2009, the family was resistant. The mention of biriyani evokes images of a pot of aromatic long-grain rice with strands of saffron, pieces of caramelised onion and tender chunks of meat, all cooked to perfection. India has a wide variety of biriyanis. The Lucknawi biriyani is known for its subtle flavours, the Hyderabadi biriyani has its identity rooted in its spices, while the Kolkata biriyani incorporates boiled eggs and potatoes. Most biriyanis originated in royal kitchens. But Dindigul Thalappakatti offers a different kind of biriyani, one with a typical rural flavour. And so, Nagasamy's father was skeptical if a rural recipe would appeal to the palate of Chennai's urban palate. Nagasamy too was unsure of whether he would be able to scale up and run the business successfully, but he decided to go ahead anyway. What he was certain about that the unique flavour would appeal to food lovers everywhere. He convinced his father, who put up the necessary capital to set up their first branch in Anna Nagar, one of Chennai's prime residential areas.

##### 4.1. Brand Building Lessons

It seems almost unfair to compare the original 'Thalapakatti' Nagasamy Naidu with Colonel Sanders, the creator of KFC. But the stories are similar. What started as Anandha Vilas became so strongly associated with the white-turbaned man behind the counter. He was the face of the biriyani he had made famous. It seemed only natural to rename the restaurant to what had brought it so much fame. After Nagasamy's grandfather's demise, that is exactly what they did. It is said that imitation is the sincerest compliment. The success of the Thalappakatti brand soon spawned competitors with similar-sounding names such as Thalappakaatu and Royal Thalapakattu, which could have, over time, taken away from the brand equity of the original. Nagasamy decided to take the legal route and won the rights to his brand name. The next task was to create brand differentiation by giving the new restaurants a casual fine-dining look. In Dindigul, the biriyani was served in a small hut-like outlet with the huge deghs used to cook the biriyani placed outside to serve as visual signatures. But this would not work in an urban setting, so the "look and feel" for the expansion was more in line with what was acceptable to the typical Chennai customer. The consumer that the brand targeted belonged to the middle and upper-class segments, mainly people wanting to enjoy good food with their families. Differentiating the brand and product helped Dindigul Thalappakatti Biryani flourish, but timing was an equally crucial factor. What worked for the brand, especially in a market like Chennai, was the fact that biriyani had by then become extremely popular. Dindigul Thalappakatti Biryani's core offering has always been mutton biriyani, but to accommodate the demands of its growing clientele, the brand expanded its offerings to include chicken and minced meat biriyani. Varieties like Chicken 65 Biryani, Paneer Biryani and Mushroom Biryani, among other options, are also available. The menu also has barbecues and other South Indian delicacies like Mutton Sukka and Karandi Omelette.

##### 4.2. Fighting the Biryani Battle

Two similar-sounding brand names competed for primacy in the biriyani market, and the older one prevailed. Ending a long-running dispute, the Intellectual Property Appellate Board here has ruled that Dindigul-based 'Thalappakatti' is the genuine trademark and that Chennai-based 'Thalappakattu' is an imitation. The Bench comprising its chairman Justice Prabha Sridevan and its member V.Ravi upheld the order passed by Deputy Registrar of Trade Marks in favour of Thalappakatti Naidu Ananda Vilas Biryani Hotel, Dindigul, and dismissed the applications of Thalapakattu Biryani and Fast Food, Chennai, for trademark registration. The dispute arose in the early 2000s. The Deputy Registrar in 2010 allowed the application of the Dindigul restaurant for its registration 'Thalappakatti', but refused the claim of Chennai restaurant. The Thalappakatti Ananda Vilas Biryani Hotel was the prior and genuine adopter and continuous user of the mark 'Thalappakatti'. The mark 'Thalappakattu' is an imitation and was likely to cause confusion. Aggrieved by this, the Chennai-based restaurateur filed an appeal before the IPAB. The proprietors of the Dindigul-based mark claimed that way back in 1957, Nagasamy Naidu started the Ananda Vilas Biryani Stall. It later became famous as Thalappakatti Biryani Naidu Hotel since the turbaned Naidu was called 'Thalappakatti Naidu'. After him, his son and grandson carried on the business, which expanded to Coimbatore and Tirupur, and acquired a huge reputation because of the quality of its biriyani. However, Chennai-based restaurant 'Thalappakattu Biryani & Fast Food' claimed that its promoters' ancestor Sulaiman was the Chief of the Horse Regiment in the palace of Raja of Sivaganga. As he wore a turban, his family came to be known as 'Thalappakattu Rawthers'. They started the hotel business on a small scale in 2005 and as a mark

of respect to their ancestors; they adopted the word ‘Thalappakattu’. According to them, they served extremely delicious biriyani and the adoption of the name was bona fide. Dismissing the claim with Rs.20,000 cost, the Bench concluded that in the face of the evidence adduced by the Dindigul’s Thalappakatti, the only conclusion “can be of dishonesty in adoption.”

#### **4.3. Food shared is happiness multiplied**

Private equity firm CX Partners has bought majority in Thalappakatti Biryani for Rs 260 crore. The capital will be used by the promoters of Dindigul Thalappakatti, which makes a localised biryani different from Hyderabadi and Lucknowi, to expand in metros across India and also overseas. The investment by CX Partners will also help it professionalise the management. With more capital, they are planning to take the number of outlets to over 200 in India with a focus on South India. Overseas outlets contributed over Rs. 60 crores. The firm operates in two models viz., casual dining and Quick Service Restaurant (QSR). Dhanabalan says while casual dining is popular in Chennai; QSR is the best way to study newer markets. The biriyani chain invests ₹1.5-2 crore in a casual dining outlet, which takes about 18 months to break-even. In case of QSR, the investment is ₹45-80 lakh depending on the area. It sells close to 5,000 plates per day internationally across the four branches.

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#### **5. Conclusion**

The company is also focusing on improving its online delivery share. Currently, close to 25 per cent of sales come from online platforms. Players like Zomato and Swiggy account for about 15 per cent and the firm’s own delivery platform accounts for the rest. To improve the online sales, the company is working on a mobile app, which will be launched shortly. Thalappakatti Biryani has been delighting people from the rich to the poor for the last 50 years and the journey goes on.....

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