

Restaurant business and a pandemic

FROM CENTRE

"But I didn't give up. Then, there were building owners complaining about our riders (food delivery men) coming in and out of the kitchen, throughout the day and so much more. But we managed through all that and more, and developed a concrete system that is currently acceptable by all," Mansur said.

Today, when things are getting slightly better in the restaurant sector, Mansur and both her restaurants, are already well experienced.

"Adaptability is the key and maybe, just maybe, this will help us pull through the pandemic," Mansur hoped.

DELIVERY DILEMMA

Food delivery and online purchases of provisions are like parallel lines. Both have to exist together in harmony for businesses to carry on. While in Bangladesh, online delivery of 'anything' is a relatively new concept; it is gaining traction. We decided to speak to Ambareen Reza, CEO of Foodpanda Bangladesh, to explain the situation from the other side.

"We are trying our best to continue business as usual in the current scenario. There are challenges — we are observing some restaurant closures and slight dips in supply in metros, but it is not alarming," said Reza.

Inquired about the delivery staff and their willingness to work through the pandemic, she seemed positive. "At a time like this, we have been proactively reaching out to riders on preventive measures for Covid-19; providing the entire fleet of riders across Bangladesh with facemasks and hand sanitisers; we are also in the process of procuring PPE as mandated by the government. Besides, riders have been undergoing temperature screening daily at the hub offices before commencing work, and because of this, they feel safe and are willing to work for us," Reza explained.

However, as customers, we have all noticed a significant drop in the number of enlisted restaurants with the Foodpanda app, and we were curious as to their strategy to tackle this drop in registration. Reza promptly replied, "Few restaurants are facing operational issues because their kitchen staff have gone back to their hometowns during the lockdown. Some are facing inventory issues such as supply chain restrictions because of the pandemic. We are working closely with each of our restaurant partners to ensure their availability and helping them adapt their operations and streamline their menus so that they can still serve customers with the best quality food and service."

But are Bangladeshi citizens ready for the future?

"This pandemic is teaching everyone to adapt fast — whether that be working from home, maintaining social distancing, sanitising regularly or even using online payment methods. We have seen a significant increase in the 'opt-ins' for online payments and contactless delivery on our platform. The need for adopting online payments was never this crucial — the pandemic has definitely sped up the process for Bangladesh," Reza elaborated.

Putting all eggs in one basket has never

been a good 'decision making strategy' and Reza seems to agree, while discussing the future of Foodpanda Bangladesh to remain afloat, come what may.

"As all other businesses, of course we are impacted too, but I am more worried about the Covid-19 impact on the restaurant ecosystem in Bangladesh. We are trying to scale our business in other verticals to ensure that the livelihoods of our delivery drivers are not severely impacted," she said.

While food delivery is their core business, the company has decided to rapidly expand to delivering groceries and medicine as well, due to the need of the hour, and hence — Pandamart. The delivery company plans to keep on introducing more 'verticals' such as home chefs for home cooked meals and cloud kitchens to stay buoyant in the long term.

THE NEW WORLD OF HOMECOOKING

Over the past few years, the importance and health aspect of home cooked meals have come into public focus more and more, leading to less frequent consumption of restaurant food and increased spending on home-cooked meals. Realising a potential in that, many companies have emerged in the market, catering the healthy



and homely. That is the story of Cookups, the Bangladeshi platform for home-cooked meals, as well.

The unique platform took the market by storm, but how has the modern, healthy, and homely platform been faring during Covid-19?

Namira Hossain, CEO and Co-Founder of Cookups had a lot to share. "The first week of the lockdown was difficult as we had to suspend operations. However, since then, things have changed and we have been back on board and running. We were quick to respond to the crisis not just in terms of products offered but also with our focus on quality — both in terms of hygiene and taste. We furnished our cooks with information regarding hygiene practices and gave multiple trainings to our riders on best practices. This earned the trust of our diners," she said.

It is common knowledge that most of the homecooks in Bangladesh are women, especially homemakers, who use this platform to be financially independent, while doing something that they love, and a lockdown definitely affected their livelihood, stripping away their primary

means of earning. Yet, "thankfully, things have improved, and now there is actually a greater demand for their food — safe home cooked meals," Hossain added.

THE BLOW TO SUSTAINABILITY

Up until now, all the stories shared were that of struggles, but for the more established restaurants. But a large section of the restaurant business that was booming before the pandemic hit comprises of newbies. The reality is that much more difficult for them, with huge fixed costs; a cut-down on revenue and sales is yet another injury to add to the bruise.

We decided to speak to the owner of one such high-end restaurant, in the centre of the capital and discuss their strategy for survival through the pandemic.

Sausan Khan Moyeen is one of the partners at O' Play Restaurant, a new Italian cuisine venture that opened quite recently. She owns this restaurant, along with Navin Ahmed, Azrin Alom and Samira Hamid.

"Initially, we didn't know how to handle the situation, and since O' Play is a family restaurant, it was a bigger concern for us, as we couldn't take any risks with children. First, the big parties with large gathering

because spending personal money on business is not an efficient way to run it," she said.

Given the current situation, the entrepreneur was naturally fearful of the future. "For a long-run solution, especially if the pandemic continues, we need government assistance and/or some sort of bail-out package. This is my second business and that's why I am still standing, I can't even bear to think about (the troubles of) others whose first business is restaurants," said the anxious entrepreneur.

HARD-HIT HOTELS

Hotels too are part of the restaurant industry, to the extent that these establishments have eateries operating within them. And hotels too, are feeling the same plight — along with a bunch of other hotel-related losses due to the plunge in the hospitality and tourism industry the world over.

Dine-in is out of question; some hotels are not even enthusiastic about offering takeaways and home deliveries.

Seeking anonymity, a staff from an upscale hotel in the city said, "By the time the first lockdown announcement was made in our country, there were barely any guests remaining. We have closed our kitchens. We are not yet keen on takeaways or home delivery either as it will be challenging to ensure the same premium quality and service."

MAKING SENSE OF IT ALL

Times are bleak. The Food Talk, a reputable and exclusive Facebook group, is a mirror of all this. Taskin Rahman, the group's founder, says these are 'dark days' for his online community.

"Our group is extremely active during Ramadan. It is generally easy to start off vibrant conversations on food in this month. However, this year, even the very nature of conversations has changed," he said. "It is no longer, for example, about the 'best haleem in town' but rather 'who is delivering haleem in town! That's not really a food-related question; it is a logistics-related question."

He feels business has dropped substantially, even if one takes into account takeaways and delivery services.

"It calls for government intervention. If a chunk of restaurants shut down completely, imagine the effect it will have on the overall industry. Therefore, the government needs to provide protection for this sector," Rahman concluded.

After all, restaurants are not just about recreation and culture. It is also not simply limited to chefs, waiters, et al. It is also, directly or indirectly, about large suppliers and not-so-large butchers and farmers and everyone involved in the supply chain, and a whole range of other organisations surrounding the core ecosystem. The culinary industry encompasses a wider array of stakeholders and economic issues than meets the eye, and a majority of them are struggling through troubles of an unforeseen scale at the moment.

By Mehrin Mubdi Chowdhury and M H Haider

Photo: Foodpanda, Horse and Horse Patisserie, Sushi Samurai, Cookups, Air Kitchen