

Persistence And Success



He started on foot, walking from village to village, shouldering a few bottles of his Siddhalepa balm. He was met with rejection, derision and doubt. Yet, he did not give up, and his persistence has today, made him one of the most successful businessmen in the country. What started out with a few bottles of balm has become a national phenomenon with a range of over 100 products, international expansion and diversification into Ayurvedic hospitals, Ayurvedic spas and holiday resorts. Deshabandu Dr Victor Hettigoda, Founder and Chairman of the Hettigoda Group of Companies and fondly known as the 'Siddhalepa Vedamahatmaya', shares his incredible journey.

By Ayesha Inoon

Your family has a long history in the fields of Ayurveda as well as astrology. You too initially studied Ayurveda from your father Hendrick De Silva Hettigoda at the young age of 15. Tell us about your forefathers and how they inspired you to follow in their footsteps.

My family has a 200-year old ancestry as healers. My grandfather, Hettigoda

Gamage Don Carolis de Silva was an agriculturist in Galle, as well as a skilled Astrologer and Ayurvedic physician. Of his sons, my father Hendrick De Silva Hettigoda followed in his father's footsteps and studied Ayurveda and Astrology.

These gifts were bestowed on me by my father. I grew up in this atmosphere, and it came naturally to me to learn more of my father's profession. Since his death, I am continuing his legacy.

In addition to your skills in Ayurveda you have also shown great aptitude in business. How did you develop yourself as a businessman?

I have travelled this path alone and have faced many obstacles. Before I started my business I worked in many places, such as at a company in Talawakelle, at the Ceylon Transport Board, the MD Gunasena bookshop, Vidyodaya University and under former Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike. I learned many things from my experiences before heading out on my own.

In the beginning I would travel from village to village with a box of goods on my shoulder, sleeping on pavements and in temples. When I approached shops they would refuse my merchandise, saying, "we cannot sell these local herbal medicines." Still, I refused to give up and every month I would go on these ventures.

There were some days that I would only get four or five rupees a day. However, I was persistent and day by day things got better.

I had certain principles that I followed. If I earned one rupee, I would save 50 cents out of it. I've never been interested in outings or unnecessary amusements.

In the beginning the income from the business was very small. If I was going to eat morning and noon, I would have to spend out of the meagre amount of money I was getting, which was barely enough to cover my expenses. So, I would eat in the morning, skip lunch, then eat again at night. In this way I saved the money I would have spent on lunch. I followed this strategy for about five years and made a considerable gain from it. It was through such sacrifices that I have come to this position.

My goal was to become a successful and reputed businessman in my country, and I believe I have achieved this. I still come to work at eight every morning, and hope to continue working for as long as I live.

You have achieved great success with the Siddhalepa brand, a success story that started with the famous Siddhalepa balm. Today, Siddhalepa is available in about 35 countries, and in every home, large or small in Sri Lanka. You yourself have been dubbed the 'Balm King' of Asia. How did this come about?

We have a slogan for Siddhalepa - 'sema gedarakama sitiya yuthu weda mahattaya' - the doctor who should be in every home. I believe this saying has materialised. The main reason is the inherent goodness and high quality of this medicine. When a person uses it once, he seeks to use it again. That is why, little by little, Siddhalepa has reached every household.

Also, we have made sure that consumers have ease of access to this product. We have over 200 vehicles to distribute this to every corner of the country. Even a small village shop will have Siddhalepa.

Today, we also have other products under the Siddhalepa brand - oils, soap, toothpaste, Asamodagam, Thripala and dietary supplements. We diversified into this about five or six years after starting this business.

What is the story behind this wonder-medicine?

My father went to India to learn Astrology and Ayurveda. Towards the end of his stay, the Yogi who taught my father fell ill. My father then cared for him during his illness until he recovered. Out of gratitude, the Yogi gave my father the secret formula for the Siddhalepa balm. He, in turn, revealed it to me.

Really, Siddhalepa is a medicine of the gods. I cannot explain its power or greatness. To me, it is almost like my mother, my father. Even now, I wear a small bottle of Siddhalepa around my neck. This is how much I revere it.

Today, the group also operates the Siddhalepa Ayurveda Hospital and the Siddhalepa Health Resort in Wadduwa. Tell us about these ventures.

The hospital was set up 24 years ago. It has 100 beds and is affordable and accessible for people from all walks of life. The rooms have a choice of facilities such as television and air conditioning. I feel that this hospital carries out a service to the people of this country and its popularity has grown.

The resort in Wadduwa is a four-star hotel with 50 rooms. It offers a range of packages and special Ayurveda treatments for both locals as well as foreign tourists. It is especially popular among visitors from European countries such as

Germany, England, Italy, Switzerland and France.

Additionally, we also have Siddhalepa Spas, including one in Colombo, two at the Bandaranaike International Airport, two in Germany and one in the Czech Republic.

You have received numerous awards and accolades over the years, such as “Deshabandu” by the President of Sri Lanka in May 1990, the “Vishva Prasadini” award by the Prime Minister in April 1996, and in 2010, the Presidential Award for Research. Tell us about this most recent achievement and the work that led to it.

My research led to the discovery of a new medicine for controlling diabetes. That’s why I was given the award. This medicine does not have unpleasant side effects unlike many other drugs in the market today. Many people are now on this medication.

Ayurveda is one of the oldest forms of medicine in the world, and carries the wisdom of centuries, yet people still prefer to turn to western medicine. What do you think is the future of Ayurveda in this country?

I believe that the government should continue to further support the field of Ayurveda. Action must be taken against those quacks who prescribe western medicine along with Ayurveda. At the moment I would say only about 10 percent of people worldwide turn to herbal medication. But, awareness is spreading and I think in the next 100 years or so Ayurveda will gain a greater recognition.

What is your advice to entrepreneurs in this field?

Anyone who wants to start a business is going to be investing large amounts of money. Before that, they should consider what the demand for the product is in the country. Also, unlike before there are many laws and regulations regarding this business that one should be aware of. Open economy has become very confusing at present. Considering these things, I advise entrepreneurs to act very carefully when starting out.