A 'Desi' Multinational –A Case Study of Hindustan Unilever Limited

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ABSTRACT

India has become a second home to many multinationals' over the years. The fact that India has second largest population in the world is alluring because it translates itself into a huge opportunity to encash for marketers across the globe. Hindustan Lever Limited which set foot as the subsidiary of Unilever has been one such multinational which has almost become a home grown brand. The strategies adopted by this corporate leaves no stone unturned in cashing in on the tiniest niche markets available. Reaching the four billion populations in the base of the pyramid markets has been a topic of research in recent times. Lot of exploratory and case studies have been made in this field. This paper is a study on the strategies developed by Hindustan Lever Limited which has been one of the most successful companies to foray into the emerging markets in South East Asia and successfully tapped the base of the pyramid in India. A case study using archival material and secondary information sources suggest that having a global lookout and one world one market strategy is not successful when attempting to cut into base of the pyramid segments in emerging markets. The critical aspect here is developing grassroots' connection and social empathy which should translate to a cooperative spirit which will leverage the strengths and overcome the weaknesses.

Keywords: Base of the pyramid, Grassroots, Marketers, Multinationals, Niche, Strategies.

1. INTRODUCTION :

Case studies on company strategies are used to study the business issues of a firm systematically by identifying either research oriented issues and analysing them to create new knowledge or to learn a better way of solving the problems related to such issues. Accordingly, case studies are considered as a qualitative research method in business management research. Case studies mainly focus on to study and analyse an organization and its business to see new information to provide solutions to a given or identified problem. Sometimes, the case study may focus on discussing a single issue or many issues of an organization. These issues may relate to various aspects of the organizations business and its environment. A case study based on company analysis provides suggestions or recommendations to improve the performance of the organization. Company analysis can be considered as the most powerful tool to learn new skills required identifying, understanding, and solving the problems to manage and lead the organizations [1-3].

This paper is a study on the strategies developed by Hindustan Lever Limited which has been one of the most successful companies to foray into the emerging markets in South East Asia and successfully tapped the base of the pyramid in India. Different types of strategies are used in organizations while handling their business : operational challenges, tactical challenges, and executive planning & implementation challenges. They are competitive strategy or red ocean strategy [4], monopoly strategy or blue ocean strategy [5], Sustainable strategy or green ocean strategy [6], Survival strategy or black ocean strategy [7-8], White Ocean Mixed strategy [9], and Alternative strategy [10].

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Many multinational companies, around the late 1990's found that there was a lot of potential in looking beyond the existing markets. They realised that markets in India, Brazil, China, Indonesia, and South America were untapped in terms of global brands. While most of them entered to sell to the most elite class, the set of global products which was the in trend. While the elite class lapped up the products, the MNC's ignored the vast opportunity in the low income segment in these markets. If the elite segments made up of 30% of the market, there was still another 705 of the population which was untapped. This base of the pyramid segment cannot be overlooked or ignored because it accounts for 4 billion customers and per World Bank data, this market has the potential to grow to 6 billion in the coming years because this is where the population growth is happening [11]. Even though many business analysis frameworks are used in a strategic management case studies [12-19], in understanding the opportunity here we first outline the opportunities and challenges for MNCs associated with low income markets in emerging economies.

Table 1 : Challenges & Opportunities in BOP segment

Challenges	Opportunities
Unorganised Sector	**Corporate Social Tasks**
Exploitation	**Poorly Served Segment**
Sustainability	**Economic Inclusion**

Challenges in the BOP segment :

1. Unorganized Sector – One of the biggest challenges of this sector is the fact that a vast majority of the population here operates in the largely hidden economy, which is the unorganized sector. It is very hard to get conclusive statistics from this unorganised segment. As estimated statistics across the globe reveal that there is more than $10 trillion in hidden assets in the informal sector [20-21]. It is also estimated that the value of the economic transactions in the informal sector might even exceed the value of formal transactions in the organized economy in developing countries.

While countries such as India, Venezuela, and Vietnam are taking steps to bring the informal economy into the manifold by curbing unaccounted transactions, limiting financial mobility etc these practices are so deep rooted in this sector that it is task which may take many more years.

2. Exploitation - The informal sector is characterised most times by low quality at low prices livelihood sustainable products and services. While the informal economy in the developed countries is small and the primary objective of few players therein is only to evade taxes. In the developing countries, this unorganized sector is almost 70% of the customer base, for most entrepreneurs here it might be too costly and complicated to enter the formal economy. It thrives on small enterprises, sustainable livelihood activities, unregistered firms, subsistence agriculture. Most of the customers

and entrepreneurs and are poorly served by low quality vendors or are exploited by intermediaries, suppliers and middlemen [22].

3. Sustainability – For a multinational to make headway into the base of the pyramid segment, it cannot be short term focus of reaping high returns. Since this sector is characterized by exploitation and vast population base to serve the strategies to enter into the market will itself take time and is not an easy task. For instance, when Hewlett Packard, one of the earliest entrant into the base of pyramid segment with their, e-inclusion strategy, it was in waiting for approval for quite sometime till the found it viable. The MNCs might not find it viable enough because it cannot give them immediate high profits, it is a calf that has to be initially provided for and taken care of and only later on it can be milked. Many multinationals have made grand entries but failed miserable, an example could be taken of P&G's Pur Water sachets [23].

HP's e-inclusion strategy and P&G's Pur water purification sachets are two cases in point which have been often discussed and dismantled as being unsuccessful in sustainability [23-24]. So whatever the MNC's decision to adopt it needs to be viable in the long run or in the least it should lend itself to be tweaked to a societal responsibility format which can be modified in time.

These three are the primary challenges for multinationals wanting a space in the BOP markets. There are several studies on various strategies that have been adopted by these multinational many failures, some successes. But what we are trying to understand here is the core fundamentals that need to be aligned while devising strategies for penetration and reach. Similarly, there are opportunities, predominant being the opportunity to serve the 4 billion population.

Opportunities in the BoP Segment :

1. Corporate Social Tasks – Most MNC's either started off or have along the way devised the strategy to suit also their need to embrace corporate social responsibilities'. Interestingly, this also seems to be a great opportunity and win-win scenario for the BoP segment consumers and entrepreneurs as well as the corporate. Since the base of the pyramid markets are characterized by low quality of products and have little or limited access to high cost goods and services, if the MNC's after fulfilling the needs of the elite segments has to transgress to the BoP segment, they have to look at ways and means to reduce product cost. This is another face of the same coin which calls for corporate to embrace the poorly served sectors. The hugely successful Grameena Bank microfinance initiative pioneered by Muhammed Yunus in Bangladesh is a classic example of the need to balance both business strategy and grassroots' reach [25]. Here the corporate social responsibility needs to be embedded in the company's strategy.

There is a societal value creation when is an acceptance of the products and services by the BoP population and there is a value creation for the masses. From the perspective of corporate value creation, C K Prahalad in his book calls for a deep business rooting when he explains that "the basic economics of the BOP markets are based on small unit packages, low margin per unit, high volume, and high return on capital employed" (Prahalad C. K., 2004, p. 24) [26]. This translates that companies would need to develop self-sustaining business models for which high volumes of sales would cover investment and exploitation [27-28]. To get a foothold MNC's needed to start with a product that is a necessity or create and innate value for the product in the segment. They have to develop strategies that alongside profits will also lead to simultaneous poverty alleviation (by inclusion of consumers in the selling process) and a broad development of the segment. Only then the penetration strategy will be a success.

2. Poorly Served Segment – The base of the pyramid was till recently at the base of the global sellers' priority list to enter the market and serve the consumers. Even when they did decide to make and entry it was predominantly with the motive of dumping off some lower end products. To a large extent, developing countries were at the receiving end of products banned elsewhere or of cheaper quality and make. More so, the base of the pyramid segment was badly neglected.

This opened up as an opportunity for FMCG manufacturers, many sellers such as HUL, P&G who entered by selling sachets of shampoos, now there are sachets of hand sanitizers also being sold backed by a widespread advertisement through various modes to gain acceptability and make it a necessity.

3. Economic Inclusion- Another huge opportunity is for multinationals and domestic corporations to take forward their public relations by serving the BOP segment as an economic inclusion measure to take forward their corporate social responsibility commitments. The base of the pyramid markets are low income markets, marketers should with their existing experience of tapping the top of the pyramid market, strategize new ways to enter bop markets. Some companies have seen a lot of success by including the consumers and marketers in the bop segment within the strategy and making them partners in success. Partnering with non government organizations, local NGO's, creating self help groups have all been successful to ensure economic inclusion for the bop consumers. Even non profit organizations, local or village level governing bodies, like the gram panchayaths in India, partnering with multiple distributors within the bop base etc have ensured that economically viable strategies that would not fall through but continue in the long run have been adopted.

2. BACKGROUND :

Unilever is a Dutch multinational. It holds 52% stake in Hindustan Lever Limited which makes it Hindustan Unilever Limited as we know it now. Back in the nineteenth century, one of its founders, William Hesketh Lever, was well known for his work as a social reformer, and was instrumental in promoting lot of employee welfare measures such as employee savings plans, health benefits etc. He imbibed in his company which believed in a strong corporate responsibility leadership, which later was Unilever's culture [29]. Unilever's management held that the organization's long term sustainability depended to a large extent on the how company addressed consumer needs and contributed to improving quality of life in the countries that it did business in. Unilever, first engaged in India in the 1930's, India then was a large nascent market with enormous opportunity. Unilever, went on to establish three companies between 1931 and 1935 – The Hindustan Vanaspathi Manufacturing Company (edible oil), Lever Brother India Limited (soaps), and United Traders (personal products). The three companies were then merged in 1956 to form Hindustan Lever Limited [29]. Within four decades HLL went on to represent the entire businesses of Unilever in India. Due to its long standing presence, HLL had in a unique way become an "Indian company"; it was similarly perceived by lost of the population and was not seen as a multinational. The company on its part constantly worked on its corporate responsibility culture and had lot of initiatives to take care of local communities and improve quality of life in India. HUL contributed by running projects on rural development, community welfare, education, health, sustainable development to name just a few.

By 2010, HUL had become one of India's largest exporters and the largest FMCG Company with a market leadership in home and personal products. Today it stands the largest FMCG Company with 35 brands spanning across 20 categories, nine out of ten Indian households use HUL products. HUL has a reach of over 600,000 villages [30].

HUL has one of the widest and most efficient distribution networks for consumer products. And this has been its biggest strength; this logistics has been retired by other consumer goods companies also. HUL's products are distributed through a network of redistribution stockist (RS) who sold to shops and sellers. This supply chain was well supported by communication system and data management systems [29-30].

HUL realised very early that growth in India was at the bottom of the pyramid, especially for the class of products that it dealt in, especially soaps, detergents, oils which are basic necessities. They just had to find ways to get penetration into the rural and semi urban segments through the right medium. Around 1997, HUL had already launched its operation Streamline to enter into rural markets that could not be reached by vehicles. This was done with the help of local stockists, in the BoP segments; make them partners in growth and sharing the revenues with the locals. This was a measure that had a profound impact on the reach of HUL. This strategy enables HUL to reach villages with even less than 2000 people. HUL agents passed on the stocks to redistributors who had to identify “star sellers” in the local communities. These identified star sellers ensured that the products were stocked by the local retail outlets [31-32]. Overnight, HUL got mass market coverage and it was a backdoor entry by appointing persons of local communities to get retailers to stock and sell its products and services. This also ensured there was immediate acceptance in the local markets.

***2.1 Project Shakti* -** During the 1970’s, Bangladesh had seen a huge success in making retail credit accessible to the poorest of the poor under the guidance of Muhammed Yunus, Nobel Laureate professor at the University of Chittagong. HUL borrowed from this model and decided that if they had to have a first mover advantage and reach the smallest of small village in India, they needed to work with local Self Help Group’s (SHG’s). HUL devised a growth and penetration strategy by asking local SHGs to operate as direct to home teams of sales women. This growth plan called Project Shakti, was a commission based income generation scheme targeted at women. The task was easier said than done, HUL had to convince these local female members of the SHGs, called Shakti Amma’s to not just create awareness about the products but to sell them directly in their local communities. The members had to change the mindsets of the local consumers by using demonstration methods free trail methods etc. Since this BOP segments did not even have access to other modes of advertisement of television, radio to some extent was prevalent it had to actively engage consumers. Also, low education levels in these segments were successfully addressed by this strategy because HUL was using “star sellers” who was one of their own community people who could be trusted. HUL envisaged developing a win-win partnership with rural SHGs by giving them ease of access to microcredit. HUL had the credibility to work with banks and convince them to offer microcredit to local women by showing an income generation avenue to women. This breed of new micro entrepreneurs could then put it to use to sell product thereby stimulating demand and consumption at local levels. This enabled HUL to give shape to the company’s vision of sustainable living and community building.

Today, HUL has grown to a strong team of 75,000 Shakti ammas or social entrepreneurs spanning across India. Initially these, SE’s were earning about 200-250 per month, there was a lot of reluctance on the part of the women to go out door to door and market the products. HUL had introduced start sellers who were stockists who would stock the products and from whom the stock could be purchased by the SEs, HUL also realised that if they had to scale up and make this strategy sustainable they had to make the women earn more, so they hired a new layer of managers who were directly responsible for 2,000 Shakti Ammas. Their performance was measured according to the average income of the SEs in their group. HUL also provided means to provide credit to these SEs through tie ups with microfinance institutions. This gave financial mobility to the SEs, along with sustainability and scalability for the company. HUL further allowed them to boost up their income by generating revenue in addition to HUL business (example, by selling mobile phone credit etc). The SEs were also given immense hand holding support by the managers who would accompany them door to door, provide free courses on hygiene which would enable them to sell better.

Consumer data on subsistence markets is extremely limited, their tastes and preferences’ are diverse and hard to determine through traditional consumer surveys, and hence HUL built a GPS and density mapping technology to design its rural supply chains and sales networks. Also this data in population density and distance between villages played a key role in deciding the number of Shakti Ammas and since recent years Shaktimaan recruits, their placement and the volume of product the supply chain needed to handle. Due to all these efforts today, SEs earn more than 3,000 per month on average, which is a good additional income in these markets for the entrepreneurs[31-32].

This project Shakti gave income to thousands of rural women and men and access to better quality of living and hygiene awareness. Most importantly, among others, this paved the way for HUL to create a lasting difficult to copy business model.

3. STRATEGY ANALYSIS :

For any successful model or decision ir venture it is critical to study the model or decision adopted or strategy undertaken in conjunction with a deeper understanding of its impact on the business.

3.1 Strategy and Impact on business : Here we look at some of the significant strategies that impacted the business growth of HUL positively and its impact on its businesses.

Table 2 : Strategy and Impact on business

Strategy	Impact
Customisation - **Product flanking** - **Different variations of the core product for different segments**	HUL was one of the foremost companies to customise products by breaking into smaller sachets, customising it to suit the targets cost and value requirements
Rural Reach	Rural India is estimated to account for more than 50% of the total FMCG market in India; HUL has a first mover advantage in this.
Backward Integration	Integration with local farmers to source tomatoes for ketchup and such other initiatives'
Third party Manufacturing	In order to scale up business it is always better to leverage on local third party manufacturing to meet demand requirements and sustainable growth to the economy as well.
Scalable distribution networks	Following on the model of the microfinance initiatives' not only ensured bottom level reach but created financial freedom and informed choice purchases boosted by income generation for the segments untapped
Grass roots Understanding	HUL ensured that the managers at all locations spend minimum 6 weeks in the BOP markets to actively gather consumer insights and preferences' which generated more than 1 billion $ in revenues from these markets alone in India

Unlike other multinationals that came in with the thought that they had the global expertise and product knowledge and did not need to change anything, HUL from the onset looked at every market segment differently and realised very early that local adaptability and acceptability was very important [33]. Hence, they kept reinventing practices and strategies on these lines. Providing sustainable economic and social growth was also a practice inbuilt in the vision.

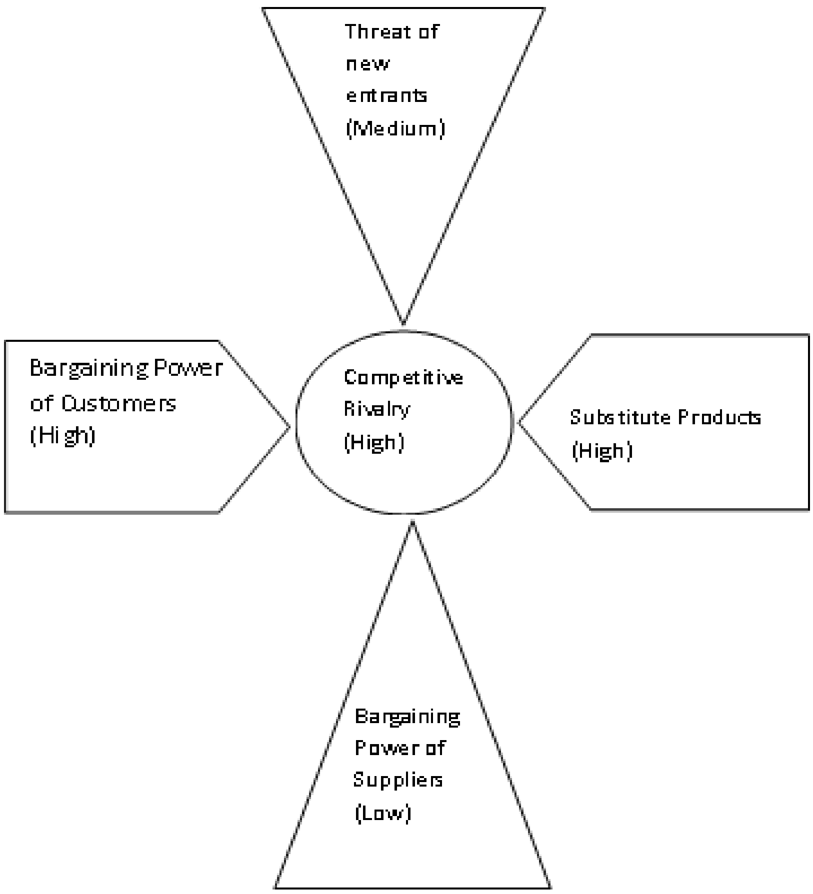

Figure 1 : Porter's Five Forces Analysis [4]

3.2 Analysis based on Porters Model and CPM matrix
Even though there are many techniques available for company analysis [1-3] here we can look at the prominent strategies of HUL in conjunction with Porters Five Forces analysis (figure 1).

An analysis of the strategies adopted shows that trying new scalable distribution channels has given the biggest advantage to HUL, while some other competitors' did try to emulate the strategy the size and strategy of the Shakthi Amma project was difficult to emulate [34]. The first mover always has an advantage in market capture and popularity. Especially, the socio-psychological patterns of the bop segment consumers are such that they do not change loyalties very easily even when there are newer players.

As earlier studies in this field have shown that the 'bottom –up learnings are critical' for the success of any organization. In the early 200s HUL ensured that every middle manager and new employees spent a minimum of six to eight weeks in the local bop and rural markets to get insights into consumer preferences', to help develop further strategies and new product developments [35-36]. While some subsidiaries of multinationals operated in bop markets, they did not have local knowledge or local partners with necessary knowledge and capabilities to reach the targeted consumers and this was a major drawback. HUL built on this strength.

HUL focussed on creating a sustainable living and improving local communities, this along with providing adequate and timely training to local entrepreneurs and other partners and recognised the importance of building social infrastructure. An analysis of HUL using Porters five forces analysis throws up the below facts listed in table 3.

Table 3 : Porters Five Forces Analysis

Competitive Rivalry	
• **Increasing competition from other rivals** • **Other rivals such as Dabur, ITC, Marico are moving at fast pace** • **Big threat from brand such as Patanjali if they able to enter the rural market as well at a fast pace**	
Threat of New Entrants • **High investment requirements for brand building and distribution networks** • **High promotion and distribution costs ensure only large cash rich firms make an entry**	**Substitute Products** • Creating a lasting product differentiation is very difficult • Price wars • Presence of large number of multiple brands
Bargaining Power of Suppliers • **Large MNCs and big domestic players are able to dictate prices through local sourcing** • **Backward integration**	**Bargaining Power of Customers** • Reduced customer loyalty • Low switching costs • Minimal product differentiation between different brands

To further analyse the milestones of HUL, we can draw up a Competitive Profile Matrix (CPM) of HUL, this will point out the major Critical Success Factors and the weighted scores for each parameter, and we have compared it with other major competitors ITC and Patanjali. The CPM shows that HUL has a higher score on competitiveness in its distribution network which has given the company its advantage, the sustainability and scalability of this network is very difficult to emulate for competitors [36-38]. Also, HUL has always been the front-runner in creating sustainable living initiatives' for the community and consumers it serves.

Table 4 : CPM Matrix

		HUL		**ITC**		**Patanjali**	
Critical Success Factor	**Weightage**	**Ratin g**	**Score**	**Ratin g**	**Score**	**Rating**	**Score**
Promotion & advertising	**0.1**	**3**	**0.3**	**3**	**0.3**	**1**	**0.1**
Product Quality	**0.2**	**2**	**0.4**	**2**	**0.4**	**3**	**0.6**
Financial Position	**0.1**	**2**	**0.2**	**2**	**0.2**	**2**	**0.2**
Global expertise	**0.1**	**4**	**0.4**	**1**	**0.1**	**1**	**0.1**
Distribution network	**0.2**	**4**	**0.8**	**2**	**0.4**	**1**	**0.2**

Price competitiveness	**0.2**	**2**	**0.4**	**2**	**0.4**	**2**	**0.4**
Market share	**0.1**	**4**	**0.4**	**3**	**0.3**	**2**	**0.2**
	1		**2.9**		**2.1**		**1.8**

In India, Patanjali has captured a critical share of the urban market and if it spreads its distribution which is not very strong now in rural and BoP segments, HUL will face a tough challenge. Patanjali has a strong image and brand appeal of an ayurvedic brand, chemical free; this has created a purchase thirst and repeats purchase need which would be a challenge to break.

4. CONCLUSION :

This paper has on the basis of archival material, quantitative statistics available in information resources and personal interviews with company employees studied the path of Hindustan Unilever in India since the 1930s and the strategies behind its successful revenue generation and in capturing the minds of the consumers as a home-grown brand. HUL has achieved all this by careful planning and strategizing with the realization that global knowledge alone is not enough. In a much diversified market such as India, the most critical path to success would be only by partnering locally, reaching out to the grassroots consumers and localizing products and sales techniques. Only when there is a sustainable value that the bop segment perceives they will be willing to give a try for newer products and offerings. A further research on the business models of multinationals and large domestic corporations in the bop segment can be made using the ABCD analysis technique developed by P. S. Aithal [39-41]. The model lends itself to a careful understanding of the advantages, benefits, constraints, and disadvantages of the system and can be used to understand strategies and business models that can be used in a better way to sustain the growth trajectory for companies like HUL. Further research in this field could look at strategies that multinationals and large corporations could adapt to sustain and protect their core competencies in permeable market segments.

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