

TRANSLATING DREAMS INTO ACTION



MADHURI DATAR

LANGUAGE SERVICES BUREAU

To a student of entrepreneurship, defining the term 'Entrepreneurship' can pose a serious challenge. The challenge is further enhanced when one takes a look at the emergence of women entrepreneurs. Meet Madhuri Datar of Pune and one gets a precise definition of the phenomenon. Entrepreneurship is 'reinterpreting' the world and 'translating' dreams into action. Madhuri Datar has literally interpreted and translated her dreams into action through her Language Services Bureau. Her Language Service Bureau, an unusual venture, is a standing example of a determined entrepreneur making her mark in an unknown field.

Madhuri belongs to a family with good educational background. Almost all the members of her joint family are well placed in professions like medicine, law, defense services and literature. The family atmosphere could be described as 'orthodox' with an emphasis on observing discipline but it also supported pursuit of quality.

Madhuri was not interested in a career in science such as medicine and engineering and so enrolled for Bachelor of Arts in 1963. She liked languages and opted for French as an additional language needed for the course. Her interest in the

Madhuri Datar has literally interpreted and translated her dreams into action through her Language Services Bureau. Her Language Service Bureau, an unusual venture, is a standing example of a determined entrepreneur making her mark in an unknown field.

Madhuri belongs to a family with good educational background. Almost all the members of her joint family are well placed in professions like medicine, law, defense services and literature. The family atmosphere could be described as 'orthodox' with an emphasis on observing discipline but it also supported pursuit of quality.

Madhuri was not interested in a career in science such as medicine and engineering and so enrolled for Bachelor of Arts in 1963. She liked languages and opted for French as an additional language needed for the course. Her interest in the language took her to French literature and philosophy. After completing her graduation, she enrolled for the Masters course in French and Linguistics at Pune University. Simultaneously, during the vacations she joined a short term programme in German offered by Max-Muller Bhavan, a reputed institution in the city. She also did a part-time job involving the teaching of French to students of class 8th to 11th. She completed her M.A. in 1970. She wanted to continue her studies for Ph.D. but her father did not allow her.



MADHURI DATAR

LANGUAGE SERVICES BUREAU

MA
LAN

TRANSLATING DREAMS INTO ACTION

job gave me exposure which was necessary and valuable, I became confident. In my childhood I remember that female members would not even open the door of the house when the house-bell rang. Interaction with a number of foreign nationals helped me to blossom into a personality of my own."

The passion for languages was equally supported by determination and toil. Any and every opportunity was seized to satisfy this passion. A Maulavi of Bombay became her tutor for Arabic. She even joined the evening course offered in Russian and Japanese by Bombay Sahitya Parishad. And to avail of the German classes at Pune she purchased a monthly pass from Indian Airlines for the Bombay-Pune journey! Friday afternoon after completing office work in Bombay, she would reach Pune. The weekend was spent in Pune attending the classes. Come Monday and she would be in Bombay by taking the morning flight.

Interactions with foreigners though business-like were also a great source of learning. She would request for dictionaries, additional information and literature in each language. She started with French and German, soon she became proficient in Arabic, Swedish, Russian and Japanese. She also acknowledges the fact that constant interaction with foreign nationals on the job helped her in keeping her language proficiency update and alive. Every new thing learnt had immediate application. This strengthened her proficiency which in turn offered new vistas of learning. During 1970 to 1975, she also had an opportunity to tour France for 45 days. A group of people - "Friends of France" - from India had planned this trip. There were people from all walks of life as participants in this cultural exchange tour. As an interpreter, she had the opportunity to interact with them, visit a number of places and meet people from different fields.

Her proficiency in a number of languages became a joke in the office. Her colleagues would often light-heartedly ask her, "Mrs. Datar, why don't you learn Sinhalese". But Madhuri admits that her colleagues in the police department were very supportive and co-operative. They extended all possible help to her endeavours.

She got married in 1973. Her husband was serving in the marketing department of a multinational company in Pune. Her job was not transferable so she commuted everyday between Bombay and Pune for almost two years. But the strain of this daily commuting was too much and she finally resigned the job in Bombay in January, 1975.

TRANSLATING DREAMS INTO ACTION

While Madhuri was thinking of resigning the job in Bombay, a question which reared its head often, was "who would give me a job in Pune? Is there a market for the kind of expertise I have?" She had a feeling that she was wasting precious time and energy. Eager to find a way out somehow, she approached Shri S.L. Kirloskar, a doyen of Pune's industrialists and asked for an appointment which was granted to her. During the meeting she explained her background, experience, constraints and her desire to fruitfully utilise her expertise. Shri S.L. Kirloskar gave her a patient listening and assured her that he would do something about it. A messenger came a month later with a note asking her to join the Consultancy Division of one of the Kirloskar group of companies. When the offer came from the Consulting Division, Madhuri left the job in the CID, Bombay and joined the Kirloskar group of companies.

Madhuri recalls her stay at the company: "I had absolutely no background in technology related matters. I had not even seen an engine and here I was given the responsibility to prepare reports and translate documents for our clients. At times, I used to sit with a chemical engineer and sort out the most appropriate word for a technical word from among 200 alternative words. Each assignment was opening a new frontier of knowledge for me. In an assignment for preparing technology transfer documents for a multi-national company I would have to learn about glass technology! A month later, an assignment from Atomic Energy Commission to prepare project manuals, specifications, standards from French into English would require me to know about nuclear reactors. This assignment was especially challenging. One thousand five hundred typed pages to be translated in 45 days time was no mean challenge. It involved working till midnight with fifteen typists. Cost was not important but meeting the deadline certainly was. I was carrying at that time, the files and the papers found place along my bedside in the hospital. But the exertion took its toll. Due to the strain, I had to undergo an abortion. Though I could complete the work, it was at the cost of a personal loss."

The association with a private company helped Madhuri to mould her passion for language with professionalism. In the office every minute was accounted for. It was a training laboratory in managing subordinates, clients, superiors. It gave her a grounding in managing the business rather than just translating the documents. Initially she hesitated to ask for payment from the customers of the company since the belief was- how can one ask for money!

TRANSLATING DREAMS INTO ACTION

Here dues were required to be collected in time. The language service department of the company was in fact a de-facto personal creation of Madhuri. Her passion had no boundaries. When an enquiry came for translation services in the Czech language she could not resist taking it up. Her boss encouraged her to go and learn it. She found a Czech Christian Father who had come to the Pune Christian Seminar for his religious and spiritual training. She took classes from him in the evenings to respond to the enquiry. A similar enquiry came for Spanish service. She contacted some Spanish students studying at the University and taught them English and Economics in exchange for lessons in Spanish. She worked with the company from 1975 to 1979. During this period she also attended along with her husband, an evening diploma programme in management.

Circumstances took another curious turn and these finally set her firmly on an independent track. She gave birth to her son in 1979. Being a nuclear family, initially she would take the baby with her to the office, put her to sleep in the office gallery and attend to her work. But she was not happy with this arrangement. There was no good creche in the locality and there was no alternative but to leave the job. But to her surprise, the boss and her superiors were very considerate. They suggested to her that there was no need for her to come to the office, she could do all translation work sitting at home. The company would send her work. Everyone in the company insisted that she should not leave the career she had so arduously developed. They argued that after all language was her first baby and she should not abandon it! How could she be deaf to all this encouragement? Thus the officer in the language service department of Kirloskar Consultants Ltd. transformed herself into the proprietor of Language Services Bureau. Madhuri gratefully admits, "Right from day one, I had the full support of the Kirloskars. In fact they are known for encouraging their own people and employees to become independent entrepreneurs. In the office also it was more of a family atmosphere rather than a boss-junior relationships."

The initial activities of the Language Services Bureau started from her residence. The translation jobs which she had handled earlier for the company were now passed on to her. Often inquiries which came to the company were also transferred to her. The demand for her services is easily explained by Madhuri herself.: "I did not find any shortage of work. It was because of my emphasis on quality. I continued this strategy when I started independently. I made people realise that we were costly but when it came to quality, we were undisputably number one."

TRANSLATING DREAMS INTO ACTION

There was no compromise on quality. I also made people realise that translation as a service costs money. Very often friends approach me saying "Please Madhuri, you know French, translate this for me!" I would then tell these people to go to a telegraph office and send the same message by telegram. I would argue with them saying that even for transmission there are costs involved and here I was involved in the process of changing one language into another language where many inputs had been spent, they had their costs. After listening to me people would agree. I started this business with a turnover of Rs.10,000 a year, now I have managed to reach a figure of Rs. 3 lacs."

The transition from a cosy, secured job to an independent career had both its smooth as well as its rough aspects. Though inquiries and translation jobs came to her without any need for undertaking marketing and promotional activities, balancing the house and the work was like walking on a tight rope all the time. Her husband, being in the marketing profession had to tour very often, thus leaving her to manage the household affairs on her own. On many occasions she would tour with the kids. Madhuri narrated a touching episode of her trials and struggles: "One of my clients was in Madras and they had signed a technology transfer agreement with a foreign firm. My presence was required during the final stage of negotiations and transfer of documents. I went to Madras by air and checked in a three-star hotel. My daughter was with me. I enquired in the hotel about a creche so that I could leave her there and proceed to my work. Before I left the hotel, I received a telephone call from the executive whom I was to accompany. His wife wished me to leave my daughter with her for the day. She did not even know my language but she looked after my daughter. Such spontaneous cooperation and human touches have kept me going." Her mother never ceased to be amazed at her passion for learning new languages and used to ask her - "For how many years will you keep learning? Is there no end to your education?"

The good will generated in work slowly brought her more work and new clients for translation services but Madhuri says that as the field expanded so also did the limitations. She is not perturbed about any competition in the field because she says while there are numerous experts in just one language she offers translation services in 27 languages. The services include translation of scientific, commercial, technical, promotional and industrial material from and into English including tenders, contracts, quotations, standards, patents, data and specification sheets, drawings, manuals, reports, sales and publicity litera-

TRANSLATING DREAMS INTO ACTION

ture, books and commercial correspondence. The list of languages in which these services are offered include Arabic, Bulgarian, Chinese, Czech, Danish, Dutch, French, German, Greek, Hungarian, Indonesian, Japanese, Malaysian, Norwegian, Persian, Polish, Thai, Turkish, Sinhali and many others.

Apart from her obvious strength in being able to master diverse languages, Madhuri modestly explains her success in these words: "My entire approach has been job oriented and application oriented. I have always given first preference to my work and assignments. I am good at persuasion. My knowledge of any language does not necessarily mean that I can give an excellent, uninterrupted one hour speech in this language, I am proficient to the extent I am required for this profession. Also I will not experiment with any work just because I know the language. My major concern is the quality of work."

To meet the increasing demand for her services she has developed a network of about 150 language experts whom she involves on associate basis. Initially she tried employing some assistants but during periods of no work these experts would get frustrated. Some foreign companies tried establishing their own people in this business but these did not have staying capacity. One reason cited by Madhuri was that these people had a love for their language perhaps, but not for the work! So when it came to translation activities related to industry, she had a distinct advantage. She was technically on a sound footing for which she was duly praised by a client - a managing director of a company at a meeting. The painstaking efforts to understand the essence or special nuances of individual languages has kept her ahead of others in the field. She feels that newcomers do not do their homework; they are not interested in learning and understanding technical matters. Their financial expectations are also too high for beginners. She feels that there is no competition at the top but one has to toil to reach the top.

Translation assignments could vary from one word to a five-hundred page manual. A multi-national company selling a particular product wanted her to put on its package the name of the product. It was just one single word! Another job involved preparing a 700 page manual discussing transfer of technology, spare-parts, designs, erection and commissioning instructions. Another client had got himself examined by a doctor in an European country. He sought Madhuri's services to get the doctor's notes which were in a foreign language translated into English. A family dispute between an Indian and an Arabian

TRANSLATING DREAMS INTO ACTION

citizen had to be settled with the help of her translation services to the Arabic Law !

The job varies every day as also the charges for the job. Clients are from all over the country. Usually she charges on manday basis when a longer job is involved. Otherwise the costs are calculated on per page basis. She has preferred to recruit women in her office and in the translation work because she feels that she must propagate the encouragement she had received from her employers by encouraging other women. She also encourages her typists and office staff to learn a foreign language.

During these ten years, she has developed a personal library of her own comprising about 8000 books. One can find books upto post-graduate level in any of the 27 languages she handles at her office. Along with the books, came the need to have typewriters in foreign languages. Her friends and relatives living abroad brought typewriters for her. Now she has her own typewriters in Russian, French, Arabic and Japanese.

She recounts a number of memorable experiences connected with her business. A particular company wanted certain literature to accompany the export material. The translation was to be from English into Russian, running into 400 pages. Everything was against a tight deadline and on a war footing. The company warned her that the literature had to go along with the export cargo and if she delayed, the penalty clause to be borne by the company would get automatically transferred on her account. For her it was just another deadline to be met and despite household and other commitments she obliged her customer well before the deadline.

Another memorable incident relates to an assignment with the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre (BARC). A foreign delegation had come to explore possibilities of collaboration on a joint venture. The interaction was to be between three representatives of the foreign country and 150 top scientists of BARC. Each and every word was important, each and every detail crucial for the discussion. She was called for simultaneous interpretation. The discussions went on for five and half hours. She was the important kingpin in the parleys: a lapse in concentration on her part would have been critical. After the discussion everybody congratulated her for the excellent work done by her. Not a single word had been missed or misinterpreted.

Alongwith the business activities, she has also started conduct-

TRANSLATING DREAMS INTO ACTION

ing language classes for school children. She evinces much pleasure in teaching youngsters. It also keeps her in live contact with languages. She has plans to develop this activity into a full-fledged language institute.

On being asked about her future plans for the business, she responds by saying that sky is the limit. She has reasons for her optimism. According to her, 63% of the knowledge in the world is in non-English literature which hardly reaches our country and the end-users. Whatever comes to us is obsolete by at least ten years and almost junk technology. In USA, from 1984 computer aided translation (CAT) services are in vogue. There is a school of interpreters in Switzerland, the graduates of which find prestigious jobs in UNO and other world bodies.

She was much taken up by the advancement in USA and other countries which she visited in 1984. During this business trip, she established a number of professional contacts. Offers came to her to start a branch at New York but resource was a constraint. The bankers who were approached for a loan for a new office asked for her husband's guarantee. She reasoned with them. "Can you not be liberal in your views at least, if not in your terms?"

Running the show itself generates anxiety and strain. On being asked what is her typical day, she confesses that a typical day is one when every planned activity and routine gets disturbed! Bringing up children has also been an experience of constant tension. Madhuri acknowledges that although her husband has been quite co-operative and supporting, children who are sources of joy often unfortunately become burdens for a lady entrepreneur. According to her a good institution running a creche could be the only solution to such problems faced by working women and women entrepreneurs.

Newspapers have written extensively about her; the national network televised a programme on her. "Nothing succeeds like success."

Madhuri Datar's success is best summed up in her own words: "A thought which has made a deep impression on me is not failure but low aim is crime. In Police department there was a saying- 'The impossible we do immediately. The incredible takes a little longer!' I think these principles have been reflected in my work."
