

# Working Title The Lawyer and the Hotelier

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## Working Title

by Anuj Agrawal

*Sumant Batra started his legal practice in Chandigarh in the early 1990's. Looking to build his practice, he shifted to Delhi where he founded Kesar Dass B & Associates. After specialising in insolvency and corporate regulations, Batra was eventually elected as the President of INSOL International, the first Asian to occupy the post. Roughly fifteen months ago, Batra launched Te Aroha, a hotel in Dhanachuli, Uttarakhand. In this interview with Bar & Bench, Batra speaks about his career, building a law firm and what drove him to open a hotel.*

**Bar & Bench:** Born in Hissar, Haryana, you graduated from Punjab University and were a litigator in the Punjab & Haryana High Court. This was roughly in the early part of the 1990's. Back then, did you ever, ever think that you would be running a hotel?

**Sumant Batra:** Never. The aspiration then was to grow and earn a reputation as a lawyer. It was only backed by this motivation that I moved to Delhi in search of a wider horizon, broader spectrum.

**B&B:** Going back to your career. You shifted to Delhi in 1993 and worked with a law firm for barely a few months before starting one of your own, Kesar Dass B & Associates. Could you tell us more about your decision to go on your own? Were there days when you felt that perhaps you had rushed in too fast?

**SB:** Three months to be precise. Having practiced on my own for three years and earned a reputation as an arguing counsel it was challenging to work as a junior lawyer left to drafting pleadings and briefing senior counsels. My appetite and potential were larger I thought. I felt underutilised and untapped. So one fine day I decided to quit. I took a two-month break to set up a tiny office in a basement in Central Market Lajpat Nagar with one clerk and two desktops.

I remember it was really small and would get flooded in the monsoons. We started with a small consumer dispute matter as the first brief from ICICI and then there was no looking back. In a few years we moved our way up to the top. Yes, there were many anxious moments both when I moved to Delhi and when I decided to set up my own firm. After all I was stranger to Delhi with no godfather and limited resources. Age was also against me. But I believed in myself and was willing to work hard. I decided to turn my very disadvantages into my advantages and always offered something different and out of box in my approach. I guess that paid. But I must add that I am grateful to my clients who believed in me and trusted me with the most high profile and complex matters.

**B&B:** And so you built your firm and a reputation as an expert in corporate restructuring. Gradually, you shifted to policy/regulatory matters. Did you find the shift from commercial litigation to policy making a difficult one?

**SB:** It was not difficult though one has to be willing to go through the learning curve. Policy advisory is very complex and challenging requiring multi-faceted skills. Not only do you need to know your subjects well, you also need be in synch with the socio-economic and political environment of the countries you work in. Besides, you ought to possess diplomatic skills as you inter face with the top players in public and private sectors. On the top of you must be willing to live out aircrafts and hotels which is what I did do.

**B&B:** Continuing on, you were a member of INSOL International and in 2007 you were elected its President. What was that experience like?

**SB:** It was and probably remains the highest point in my career. It was very prestigious as I was the first Asian and the youngest President of one of the most prestigious professional bodies with a presence in over 40 countries and members in 77. To me it was about having made my country proud. Also, there was immense responsibility to perform and deliver and live up to the trust and confidence reposed on me by the global community. I worked hard and I would like to believe that I left a mark. My family made great sacrifices as for over 6 years I was living INSOL every single day.

**B&B:** And then came Te Aroha. Could you tell us how the hotel was built? What was the reaction of your family and friends?

**SB:** Having worked so hard over 20 years and made it as a lawyer, I was determined to *change* my boots at the age of 45 and not hang them! Having lived out of hotels of all kinds including some of the best and most unique across the globe I took a liking for the hospitality [sector]. When you check-in and check-out every day you know your hotels. You walk into the lobby and you know if you have arrived at a right place or whether you are going to have a stressed stay. With this kind of familiarity and understanding, I thought starting a hotel will be a good idea. Also I have been advising hotels as lawyers so do understand a bit of commercial side of it. We had built this summer house in a lovely place in the mountains years ago. I decided to convert it into a hotel.

I love mountains and the place where the house was built. There could be no better choice. The family, particularly my parents and wife, were sceptical and apprehensive and quite justifiably I would say. After all I was at the top of my career and could command any kind of fee for my specialisation. To walk away from it one fine day and set up a hotel in a remote village in the Himalayas did not sound sane after all. But I was determined. Eventually the support of the family started building.

**B&B:** What was the initial vision behind Te Aroha? Are you happy with the way things have turned out?

**SB:** I was clear in my mind that I wanted to put together something unique and of high standards. No one else could have done this for me but myself. I went about hand-crafting it. No architects, no designers, and no consultants. I was supported by my wife's younger brother who worked round the clock to craft what is nothing but a place created out of love, passion and hard work. I am absolutely happy with what I see although hospitality is dynamic and one needs to work constantly to keep things going and stay popular.

**B&B:** Te Aroha was recently awarded the TripAdvisor Travellers Choice Award for 2013, a pretty significant achievement given the fact that it is barely fifteen months old. What do you think attracts people there?

**SB:** A number of things. The element of surprise that something of that scale and quality could be created in a remote place like Dhanachuli. Of course [there is] our service and Dhanachuli is exceptionally beautiful. Some people also say it is inspiring for them as some day they wish to do what I did.

**B&B:** And this hotel is not the only "odd" thing you have done is it? You have also written books, and plan to start a café. Any advice for lawyers who are planning to do something similar to what you are doing?

**SB:** Live your dream! Now.