



Wedded to glass for four decades now, **Sushil Jhunjhunwala** and his brand LaOpala have emerged as a popular name in the tableware industry in India. Accompanied by son **Ajit**, he has recently forayed into crystalware that finds its place in the country's upmarket stores. The father-son duo get geared to make a presence globally

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**W**hat happens when a 19-year-old is saddled with the management of a sick industrial unit manufacturing glass bottles and jars, that too in a place like Howrah, West Bengal, infamous for its difficult-to-manage trade unions? The year was 1967 and the lad in question was Sushil Jhunjhunwala, now Chairman LaOpala, one of India's most trusted glassware brands.

# An inheritance of **GLASS**



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Grappling with issues such as labour problems, low productivity and low profitability at a tender age could hardly have been an enviable task. But the young gun proved his mettle by taking immediate measures like introducing definite costing structures, getting the unions to cooperate with the management and giving incentives to the workers. The results were far-reaching and the company started posting profits.

After successfully turning around a sick unit, Jhunjhunwala was hungry for more. Whilst he was clear that he wanted to remain in the glassware industry, he wanted to add value to his products.

### CHANGING LANES

A well-travelled businessman, Sushil chanced upon opal glass (for the uninitiated, opal glass is “translucent or opaque glass, often milky white”) during one of his visits to France and was determined to manufacture it in India. However, he did not have the requisite technology. What followed was a

technical collaboration with Hosan Glass of South Korea and a new unit to manufacture opal in Madhupur, Bihar which was in close proximity to the mines. The new offering was christened LaOpala and was set up at a cost of rupees two crore.

### WINNING FORMULA

Despite an element of novelty at the time, LaOpala did not meet with immediate success. New skill sets and technology were required, timelines could not be met and the unit suffered losses. But the never-say-die entrepreneur did not give up. He tweaked the manufacturing process to suit Indian conditions better and even sent a few engineers abroad for training. Once again what followed were profits. Since value addition was the key element of Sushil’s philosophy, he decided to opt for proper branding and packaging of his products, rather than selling through traditional distribution channels. A huge advertising campaign was undertaken and LaOpala soon became a

well-known brand offering tableware that promised to be colourful, affordable and microwave-proof. Over the years, LaOpala has steadily enhanced its image as a popular brand in India.

### BRANCHING OUT

Inspiration for a new range came yet again during a trip abroad, “I was fascinated by crystal-ware available at some of the malls in South Korea and wondered if it would be possible to manufacture the same here.” Through some friends, Sushil was introduced to Dwosan Glass, one of the largest industrial groups in South Korea. Jhunjhunwala entered into a technical collaboration with them and gave to India its first hand-cut crystal range, Solitaire, which received great acceptance from the Indian consumer. Jhunjhunwala attributes much of its success to his son, Ajit, who joined the business in 1990 and rolled out Solitaire by 1995. That was also the year in which the company went public.



### GOING GLOBAL

In order to make Solitaire a world-class product, Ajit invested in quality, technology and design. A Danish designer by the name of Per Jensen was appointed. Today, the father-son duo, supply their range of crystal to international brands such as Waterford and Rosenthal. "In fact, we had the privilege of having the French Premier as one of our esteemed customers," says a proud Ajit. Today, LaOpala has found a place in homes as far away as the Middle East, Southeast Asia, UK, France and Turkey. The company also

participates annually in one of the most prestigious tableware fairs in Germany.


### INTO THE FUTURE

In the years to come, the Jhunjhunwalas are all set to unveil yet another manufacturing unit at Satarganj in Uttaranchal. The new unit which is likely to start production shortly will boast of state-of-the-art technology. Besides this, they are also looking at an all-India retail expansion with stand-alone LaOpala and Solitaire stores. Also on the cards is further diversification into porcelain.

### ACCOLADES

LaOpala has earned its laurels well at home, as well as globally. It has been bestowed with several awards during the last eight years for excellent export performance. Sushil Jhunjhunwala himself has received an Udyog Ratna award from the government of Jharkhand.

### ALL IN THE FAMILY

A doting grandfather, Sushil Jhunjhunwala now dreams of his company touching the 200-cr mark soon. The lineage is sure to continue as Ajit's school-going son has already begun to pose pertinent business questions to his father. But then, didn't grandpa start work when he was barely 19? 

### FAST FACTS

- \* Sushil Jhunjhunwala started his tryst with a sick glassware unit way back in 1967 at the tender age of 19.
- \* He turned it around with his business acumen and the company started showing profits.
- \* Impressed by the elegance of opal glass, he set up LaOpala at a cost of rupees two crore collaborating with Hosan Glass of South Korea.
- \* Despite initial hiccups, the brand became a success story by adopting smart strategies.
- \* Joined by son Ajit in 1990 who rolled out Solitaire, India's first hand-cut crystal-ware with technology from Dwsan Glass from South Korea in 1995. The same year the company went public.
- \* The products have found a global reach including brands like Waterford and Rosenthal. The French Premier is one of their esteemed customers.
- \* Future plans include an all-India retail drive and expansion with stand-alone LaOpala and Solitaire stores. Also on the cards is further diversification into porcelain.