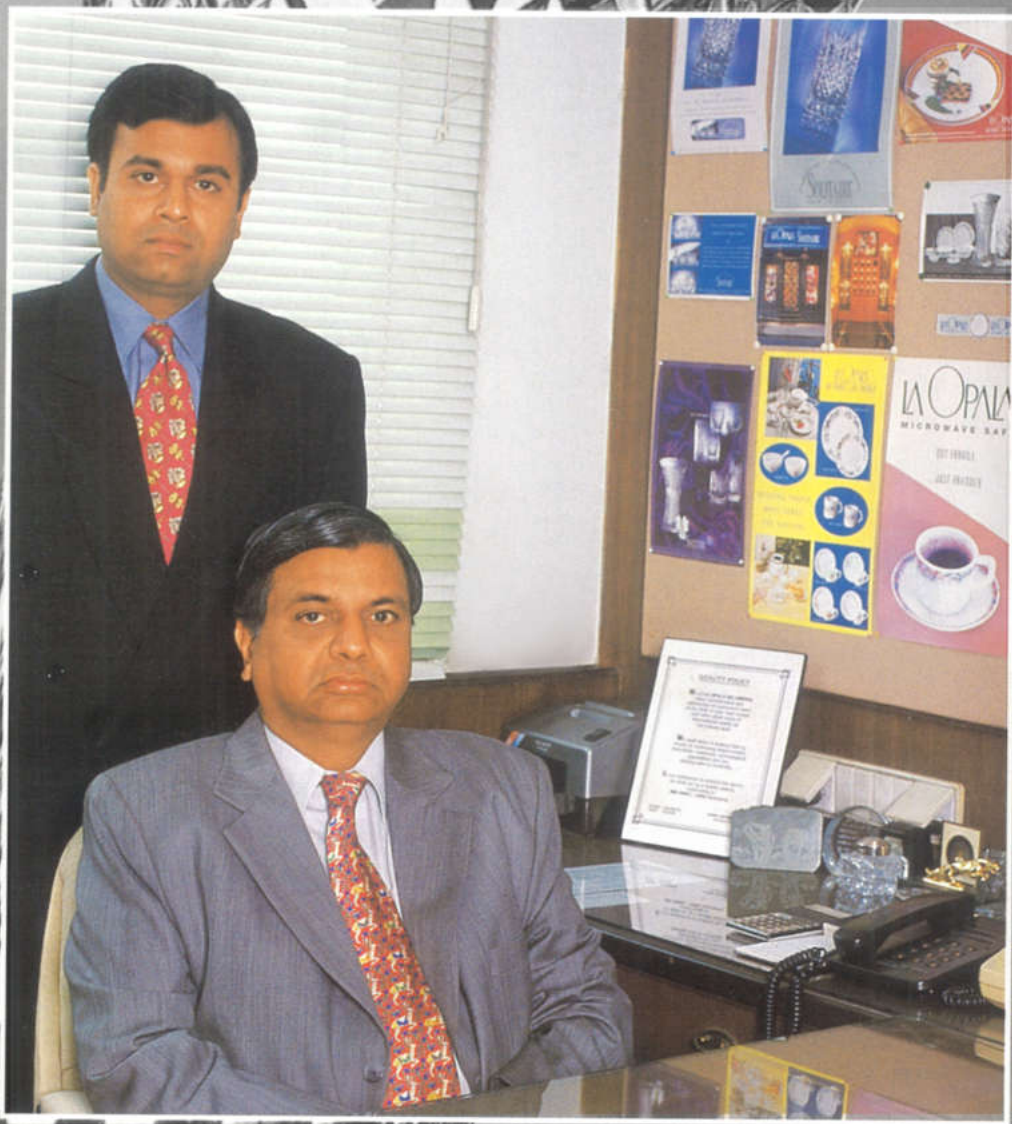
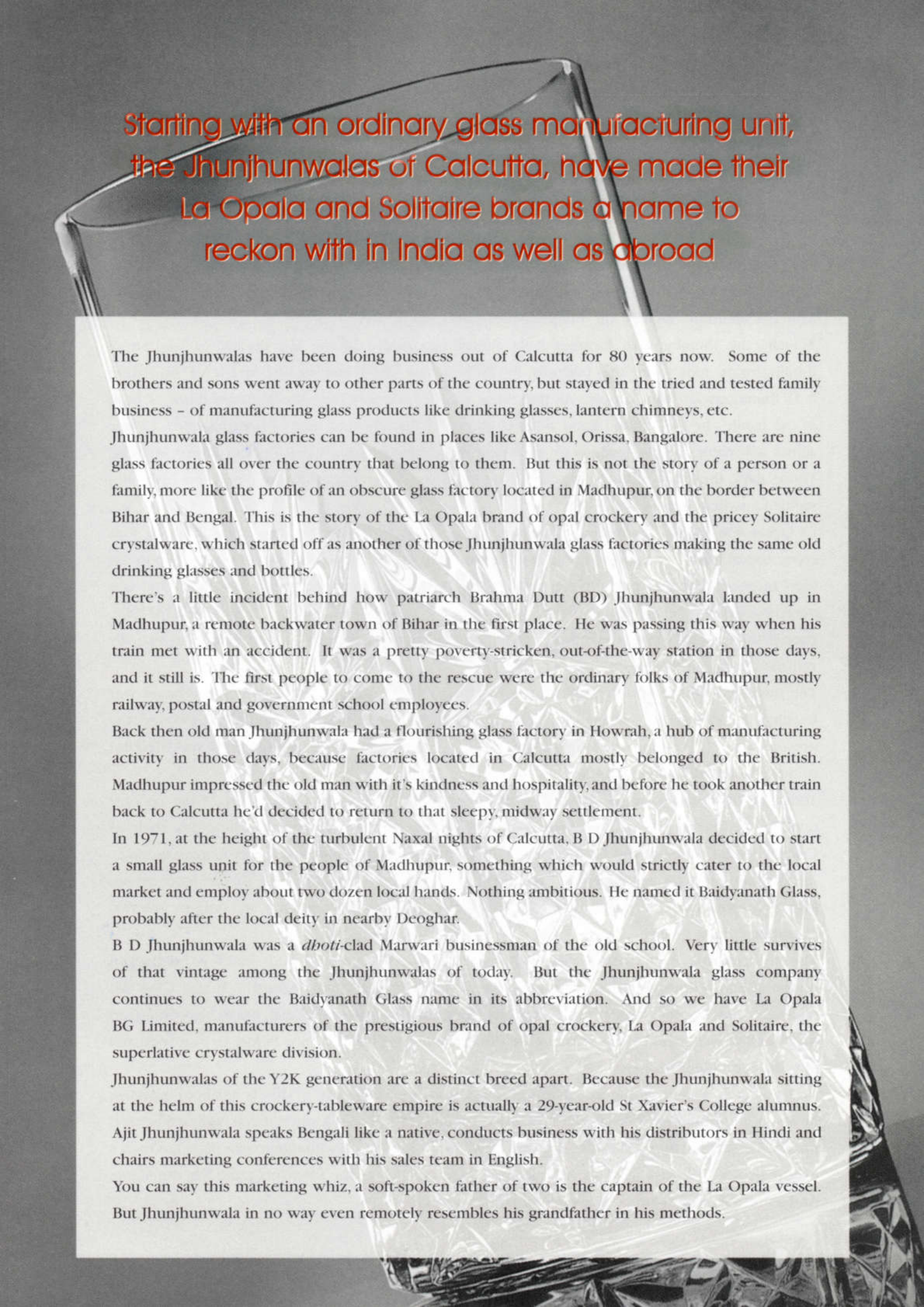


# A TOUCH OF GLASS



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Starting with an ordinary glass manufacturing unit,  
the Jhunjhunwalas of Calcutta, have made their  
La Opala and Solitaire brands a name to  
reckon with in India as well as abroad

The Jhunjhunwalas have been doing business out of Calcutta for 80 years now. Some of the brothers and sons went away to other parts of the country, but stayed in the tried and tested family business - of manufacturing glass products like drinking glasses, lantern chimneys, etc.

Jhunjhunwala glass factories can be found in places like Asansol, Orissa, Bangalore. There are nine glass factories all over the country that belong to them. But this is not the story of a person or a family, more like the profile of an obscure glass factory located in Madhupur, on the border between Bihar and Bengal. This is the story of the La Opala brand of opal crockery and the pricey Solitaire crystalware, which started off as another of those Jhunjhunwala glass factories making the same old drinking glasses and bottles.

There's a little incident behind how patriarch Brahma Dutt (BD) Jhunjhunwala landed up in Madhupur, a remote backwater town of Bihar in the first place. He was passing this way when his train met with an accident. It was a pretty poverty-stricken, out-of-the-way station in those days, and it still is. The first people to come to the rescue were the ordinary folks of Madhupur, mostly railway, postal and government school employees.


Back then old man Jhunjhunwala had a flourishing glass factory in Howrah, a hub of manufacturing activity in those days, because factories located in Calcutta mostly belonged to the British. Madhupur impressed the old man with its kindness and hospitality, and before he took another train back to Calcutta he'd decided to return to that sleepy, midway settlement.

In 1971, at the height of the turbulent Naxal nights of Calcutta, B D Jhunjhunwala decided to start a small glass unit for the people of Madhupur, something which would strictly cater to the local market and employ about two dozen local hands. Nothing ambitious. He named it Baidyanath Glass, probably after the local deity in nearby Deoghar.

B D Jhunjhunwala was a *dhobi*-clad Marwari businessman of the old school. Very little survives of that vintage among the Jhunjhunwalas of today. But the Jhunjhunwala glass company continues to wear the Baidyanath Glass name in its abbreviation. And so we have La Opala BG Limited, manufacturers of the prestigious brand of opal crockery, La Opala and Solitaire, the superlative crystalware division.

Jhunjhunwalas of the Y2K generation are a distinct breed apart. Because the Jhunjhunwala sitting at the helm of this crockery-tableware empire is actually a 29-year-old St Xavier's College alumnus. Ajit Jhunjhunwala speaks Bengali like a native, conducts business with his distributors in Hindi and chairs marketing conferences with his sales team in English.

You can say this marketing whiz, a soft-spoken father of two is the captain of the La Opala vessel. But Jhunjhunwala in no way even remotely resembles his grandfather in his methods.



Hopping from one international trade exposition to another, or taking a whirlwind tour of the country meeting his distributors, or supervising a crockery shipment for the President's Estates from his Madhupur factory, Ajit Jhunjhunwala leads a hectic life.

Actually, the Jhunjhunwala fortunes have almost quadrupled in the last decade or so. Sushil Jhunjhunwala took over the business in 1978 at age 28 following the death of his father B D Jhunjhunwala from cancer. As the eldest son, he also inherited the responsibilities as head of the family. In 1987, Sushil Babu as he is known in his office, on one of his trips abroad came across affordable foreign technology in Korea and decided to introduce opal crockery in India. Those days, the glass industry was suffering from its worst stagnation and new opportunities seemed nowhere near in sight.

La Opala was started in 1988 with a modest three metric tonnes per day capacity and a four crore annual turnover. Exports to the Gulf, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and South East Asia picked up in the early nineties. The first public issue came out in 1994 at a minimum premium of Rs 30 and was oversubscribed by eight times. Even as Solitaire, the new crystal range, was launched in 1996, Hitkari, the country's largest manufacturer of bone china crockery, hit its worst patch and virtually vanished from the shelves.

The nineties were especially good for the La Opala name. A period during which the brand was handled by no less than four top advertising agencies – Rediffusion, Contract, Clarion and the present Euro RCGC – one after the other. Virtually every trick in the advertising book was tried out to make La Opala a national brand.

Today, La Opala crockery has become a hot export commodity. In a large part of the country outside the metros, it enjoys a virtual monopoly in high-end tableware. In cities such as Calcutta, Delhi, Mumbai and Chennai, La Opala competes with imports and grey-market supplies. As Ajit Jhunjhunwala accompanies his father, Sushil, on his fortnightly trip to the modernised, high-tech furnaces of Baidyanath Glass, the transformation is a quantum jump, and not just in terms of manufacturing quality.

The rechristened Baidyanath Glass employs close to 1500 people and packs a full-fledged design studio within its gates. The technology is dominantly South Korean - Husan Glass for opalware and Doosan for crystal. "Good, clean technology at reasonable prices," according to Ajit Jhunjhunwala who cut his teeth in the other family glass-making units before he was inducted into the prestigious business.

And it's likely to employ more or maybe even spawn a subsidiary. "This is a labour-intensive business," says Jhunjhunwala. Solitaire, branded genuine 24 per cent lead crystal, is completely hand made. "The market for crystalware is growing like never before," says Jhunjhunwala, "as is La Opala's export basket." He says he's just returned after participating at the Frankfurt trade fair, the Messe Ambiente, the world's largest consumer goods exposition.

"We developed special products for specific markets," he says. "We made a special range for the American and the European markets. We had an American designer working with us for the fair's display range. The products, for instance, were bigger in size than those made for the domestic market." The response, as usual, was heartening. "We had new buyers from Europe, US, Japan and the Middle East."

Frankfurt is one of the many international trade fairs that the Jhunjhunwala father and son visit rather frequently. The other is Dubai, the gateway to the middle east and fast becoming La Opala's biggest market away from home. For the kind of quality standards that La Opala has maintained, Jhunjhunwala feels international trade fairs are the ideal opportunity to showcase their products. "Moreover, you meet potential buyers from Africa, Europe, the US, South East Asia," he adds.

La Opala BG picked up the ISO-9002 certification from KPMG in 1999, the same year Ajit Jhunjhunwala opened his company's prestigious showroom on Loudon Street, Calcutta and inaugurated a design studio at the Madhupur establishment. This year, the turnover is expected to top a modest Rs 40 crore. "We are not exactly in a monopoly situation because the grey market is very big and active in this sector," says Jhunjhunwala, who looks after marketing, new product lines, advertising and the day-to-day running of the company. And this despite the fact that La Opala is arguably one of the cheapest manufacturers of crockery and tableware in its range.

Sometime in the nineties, the Jhunjhunwalas acquired a medieval fort from the local Rajput chieftain in their native Jhunjhunu district in Rajasthan, but had second thoughts about renovating it into a heritage hotel. The reason, says Jhunjhunwala, is their conservative family code, no alcohol and no meat.

Indeed, for all practical purposes, Ajit Jhunjhunwala is fashioning a future course for the company. His plans include doubling production capacity, introducing new product lines in glassware and a new foreign tie-up to make reasonably priced drinking glasses. He brings in a certain professionalism in the running of the company.

"We are proud of our work culture. We have no such thing as politics in our company. My father delegates a lot of responsibilities and has a very clear vision," Jhunjhunwala says.

Being the eldest son, Ajit Jhunjhunwala will one day inherit his father's mantle. But he is already the acknowledged tsar of genuine Indian crystals. In his impatience to forge ahead, Jhunjhunwala seems to have little time for doing anything outside the scope of business or work. His membership at the Royal Calcutta Golf Club notwithstanding, there's very little time for leisure anymore. "Opal is very difficult to produce and very few people survive in this business," says Jhunjhunwala in defence of his 'all work no play' policy. "We have been in the glass business for 70 years but we couldn't have succeeded without a hardworking and dedicated team," he concludes.

