

# Opal and lead crystal tableware expertise

La Opala RG Ltd is a specialist Indian producer of opal and 24% lead crystal tableware. Managing Director Sushil Kumar Jhunjhunwala spoke to Glass Worldwide's John Wallis about the company's origins and current activities.



Sushil Jhunjhunwala is Vice Chairman and Managing Director of La Opala RG Ltd.

Members of the Jhunjhunwala family have been actively involved in the Indian glass industry for more than eight decades, Sushil Kumar Jhunjhunwala having personally served the industry for 45 years. In addition to being a key personality at the specialist glassmaking enterprise, he has made a valuable contribution to the All India Glass Manufacturers' Federation and the Eastern Indian glass association.

While La Opala's history dates back to 1988, the family's

involvement stems from the much earlier creation of Ashoke Enamel & Glass Works P Ltd. This hand-made producer of soda-lime bottles, drinking glasses, jars and lamps is now managed by Sushil's brother, Dinesh.

Headquartered in the extreme east of country, La Opala is India's first and leading producer of opal glass tableware and was also the first to specialise in hand-crafted 24% lead crystal items. Curious for products that were radically different, Sushil Jhunjhunwala had first been enamoured by opal glass on a foreign business trip. Being a visionary with an eye for innovation, the idea of opal tableware travelled back with him to India. "We believe in keeping our finger on the pulse of consumer taste" the La Opala Vice Chairman and Managing Director contends. "And keeping pace with the rising demand, we leapt to the forefront of innovation with breakthrough products that have helped to shape the Indian tableware market."

It was soon recognised that for the operation to succeed internationally, it would be necessary to be more ambitious than many traditional Indian family enterprises. Turning La Opala into a public limited company in 1994 brought the necessary confidence to create a successful brand identity for its opal glassware, while also paving the way for diversification into the production of lead crystal glass in 1996, creating a separate factory with an installed manufacturing capacity of 540 tonnes. This facility was built with the technical collaboration of Korea's Doosan Glass, some 80% of the resulting Solitaire 24% handcrafted lead crystal currently being sold to export customers.

The impact of a multi-brand marketing strategy is said to have placed La Opala at the forefront of Indian glassmakers in terms of turnover according to latest industry statistics. With customers throughout the world,



La Opala features in the Forbes list of Asia's 200 best companies with sales under \$1 billion.

La Opala has grown by a factor of more than eight since its conception and now employs more than 1500 people. This figure may have been greater had the business not invested heavily in production automation technology in recent times.

Having established the original opal glassworks at Madhupur, a second 4000 tonnes capacity facility was introduced at Uttaranchal. Built in 2007, this state-of-the-art operation has subsequently doubled in size to 8000 tonnes and represents the largest single production site in the country making opal glass tableware. In total, La Opala can now produce an impressive 12,700 tonnes of opal and 1080 tonnes of lead crystal glassware.>



Sushil Jhunjhunwala (centre) at a recent GLASSPEX India exhibition with AIGMF Secretary General Manohar Lal and Glass Worldwide's Dave Fordham.



Hand-crafted 24% lead crystal items are manufactured.

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The original plant was established in the eastern state of Jharkhand, north of Kolkata. As the area's largest employer, La Opala takes its responsibilities for the local community very seriously and has undertaken a number of projects that have benefited the region as a whole. Earlier this year, the Jharkhand factory was the subject of a \$1.8 million modernisation as part of Sushil Jhunjhunwala's ambitious plans to procure the latest manufacturing knowhow for his production sites.

Separately, leading Czech, Polish and South Korean experts in the manufacture of lead crystal were brought in to train the fledgling company's local workforce both to manufacture and cut its products to international standards. The glassmaker's importance to the community cannot be over-estimated and its commitment has been rewarded by the loyalty of its workforce. According to Sushil Jhunjhunwala, not a single day of production has been lost in the past 25 years, as the company has grown and flourished.

### BUSINESS GROWTH

La Opala is still growing and the next financial year is expected to see turnover increase by approximately 20%. "We are developing our products all the time with innovations and improvements" the company's Managing Director confirms. "We believe in volume and the only way that is possible is when your products are available at reasonable prices... the quality of our products is comparable with any in the world." La Opala products are available from more than 10,000 retail outlets throughout India and can be found in more than 30 different countries. The company sells via many of the world's leading retail outlets, including Walmart, Carrefour and Tesco.

This is India's only business making 24% lead crystal glassware, which has been successfully exported throughout North America, Europe, the Middle East and Asia since the company's creation. Locally, the national President's household is understood to use Solitaire crystal products for banquets and other official functions. A longstanding collaborative agreement with South Korea's Doosan Glass has assisted the organisation's growth and international success.

The company practices TQM parameters and was India's first opal glassware producer to be certified under ISO 9001, now upgraded to ISO 9001: 2008 standards. "We view environmental and occupational health and safety as an important aspect of integrated management systems and are at an advanced stage of certification under ISO 14001:2004 – Environmental Management System and OHSAS: 18001:2007 – Occupational Health and Safety Management System" says Mr Jhunjhunwala.

Having received ISO 9001-2000 certification and matched the standards of the USA's Food and Drug Administration, La Opala also received the 'Udyog Ratna' award, conferred by the Government of Jharkhand. Other accolades include Capexil's 'Most Outstanding Performer' and 'One Star Trading House' status. In 2013, La Opala features in the Forbes list of Asia's 200 best companies with sales under \$1 billion and is recognised consistently for the company's excellent export performance.

### PRODUCTION CAPABILITIES

La Opala's two manufacturing sites are equipped with machines that have been sourced from some of the industry's leading international suppliers. This includes Olivotto forming machines and Car-Met tempering lines. "We look for the best quality suppliers and if the commercial and technical aspects are good, we will consider them" says Sushil Jhunjhunwala. "It has to be a partnership with our suppliers because we do not purchase just once; they have to be correct for repeat purchases."

UK-based Electroglass supplied the 15 tonnes/day all-electric furnace at Uttaranchal, where daily melting capacity was doubled to 30 tonnes a couple of years ago.



**INDUSTRY-WIDE FOCUS**

Within the past decade, Mr Jhunjhunwala has served as President of the All India Glass Manufacturers' Federation, having previously been Treasurer, Secretary and Vice President of the organisation. "It was a great honour to be President, a role that provides a genuine opportunity to do something for the glass industry - not just for my company's personal interests but for the industry as a whole. The fellowship was very positive, with everyone co-operating closely."

A past President of the Indian section of the Society of Glass Technology and the Eastern India glass association, he is currently an AIGMF committee member and endeavours to attend all board meetings. "Until recently, the federation focused strongly on raw materials shortages and high taxes but there are no longer high taxes in India, so associated problems have more or less been settled."

According to Mr Jhunjhunwala, there are many benefits to being an AIGMF member but it is essential to be fully involved and have an open mind, both giving and taking knowledge. "The Indian glass industry has grown massively over the last 20 years and many conditions for business have changed over that time. The AIGMF provides a good platform and helps create a community." Susil Jhunjhunwala believes that business growth will continue but it is necessary to change with the times. Furthermore, he contends that the AIGMF's co-operation with *Glass Worldwide* is positive, describing the publication as the best glass magazine outside India.

Similarly, he believes that the GLASSPEX India series of exhibitions, incorporating the AIGMF international

conferences, provide a valuable local opportunity to meet international suppliers. "Even for those of us who attend glasstec in Germany, there are many advantages to meeting suppliers here in India as well."

**FAMILY INVOLVEMENT**

Sushil Jhunjhunwala has been both Vice Chairman and Managing Director of La Opala RG Ltd since the business went public in 1994. His son, Ajit is joint Managing Director and has also been General Secretary of the AIGMF since September 2012. Ajit is the third generation of the family in the business and Sushil hopes that following the completion of his education, his 14 year old grandson will be the fourth.

His daughter-in-law also works for the company, co-ordinating La Opala's important product design and advertising initiatives. The glassmaker introduces 20-30 new products every year. This high turnover is considered necessary because consumers are constantly looking for something different. The company's distinctive brands are La Opala opalware, Solitaire



A diverse range of opal and lead crystal tableware is produced by La Opala.

mouth blown/hand cut lead crystal and three Diva opalware collections (Classique, Ivory and Manish Malhotra). Throughout the range, La Opala continues to set standards in Indian glass tableware production and making an important impression with customers around the world. ■

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