

Back to India via china

Rajiv Singhal brims with enthusiasm on Churchill china

WHEN Rajiv Singhal graduated in economics from Delhi in 1990 his mission in life seemed obvious. So, off he went to ISE, and then Yale. The next step should have been crunching numbers at the World Bank.

But while researching for a paper on the Peruvian economy, he decided to give it all up and start out on his own. And his attention was caught by the liberalisation sweeping India. "I started by analysing world markets for consumer preferences," he recalls.

It was a grind to start with — meeting people, networking and identifying his core skills. With import restrictions on consumer products being eased, Singhal, 28, settled down to bringing in consumer products not easily available in India.

French liquor came to mind first. Of the seven major vineyards in France, he managed to bring three to India. Then, in what can be called forward integration, Singhal decided to import foreign tableware.

Thus, his present treasure trove. From a distance it looks amazingly like a luscious fruit. Come closer, and it morphs into an exquisite cup and saucer, bursting with the chintzy floral patterns of traditional English chinaware created by the 202-year-old British pottery company Churchill. And it was launched in India during Queen Elizabeth II's visit.

"Though Churchill is positioned at the high end of the market, we are convinced that there is vast potential for quality consumer products. People are willing to pay extra for brand value," asserts Singhal.

"The quest for luxury consumer products has been growing. Products like Churchill tableware were rare or available only abroad. Our mission is to bring affordable products to the consumer," he says of his company, Ritu Overseas.

Churchill's repertoire, at Singhal's Silk Forests in the Capital's trendy Santushti complex, stretches from the modest — collectors' mugs, and lyre-shaped tableware — to the expensive. But is there a market for a cup and saucer which costs upwards of Rs 700? Or a dinner set that retails for Rs 32,000? Singhal appears confident. "We are targeting an upmarket distribution network, but that doesn't mean that others cannot afford it. People can buy it in pieces."

"Import of consumer goods is not just about serving a select section of society. We believe it will instil quality consciousness and people will demand better products from domestic producers," he says. "The 250-million middle class may well be a myth. Only a small percentage of them will actually splurge on luxury items or conspicuous consumption."

But then, who says Churchill is just an expensive bric-a-brac? All items are chip resistant, dishwasher, microwave safe and carry a money back guarantee. Churchill products are exchanged even after 50 years of use if any defects are found. "We work faster, with fewer breaks," has been the firm's production technique. "We do drop tests at every level," says Singhal. To prove it, he drops a coffee mug! And true to his word, the piece shows no sign of a chip or a crack. "It's quintessentially English in character," joked a multinational company official who had come scouting for Christmas gifts. "Solid!"

"With the government under pressure to lift import restrictions, domestic companies that have been protected for years will have to deliver through superior design and by squeezing margins," says Singhal as he does a bit of crystal-gazing for his bone china dream. And it seems to ring true.

■ N Vidyasagar



DELICATE DARLINGS: Rajiv Singhal with the range of Churchill china