

The evolving story of USHA: Meeting the needs of an aspiring, new India

India is witnessing a rising trend and USHA fully intends to be part of this upward surge in India's growth

This is not the first time that there has been a huge call to "Make in India". The first came during the Independence movement when the word was Swadeshi, to make and consume in India. Now it is "Make in India", in an international language - to make here and sell over the world, including India.

USHA was born in 1935. Much like Jeff Bezos of Amazon, Bill Gates of Microsoft, Steve Jobs of Apple and others, who slaved away in a garage before achieving success, Mr Bansal slaved away in a Calcutta garage designing and making an "Indian" sewing machine, in the face of competition from the world famous Singer Sewing Machine, Pfaff from Germany and assorted offerings from Japan. He believed that sewing machines would be the soul of India as they would liberate women from domestic servitude and caste and cultural superstitions one day.

Like these garage geeks, Mr Bansal also lacked the resources to take his product to the market and, like them, he needed an Angel Investor. He found one in Lala Sri Ram and shared his idealism and dream for India and thus Jay Engineering Works was created - the manufacturing vehicle and USHA Sales, the sales company, which later merged to form the present day USHA International Limited.

The Best Light Engineering Facility in Asia

What did manufacturing mean in those days? There were no modern manufacturing business management skills, no technical skills, no industrial worker skills, no trade skills, no real union skills and so on. What Lala Sri Ram brought to the game were real entrepreneurial skills that married the lack of everything to basic marketing skills, true grit and the power of dreams. These attributes melded to create a then state-of-the-art integrated sewing machine manufacturing facility that was for years hailed as the best light engineering facility in Asia. In Calcutta it was known as 'Jewel of Bengal'. However, this did not last long, militant trade unionism on the one hand and inward-looking political activism for self-reliance on the other, caused India to become isolated, for businesses to move out of Calcutta and for USHA to create an additional manufacturing hub in Hyderabad.

By this time electric fans had been added to the product range and USHA sewing machines and fans were exported to 55 countries (out of only 92 in those days). The company had offices in New York, London, Hong Kong, Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok, with hire-purchase operations in far Eastern countries which were much poorer than India on a per capita basis in those days.

When USHA set up its manufacturing base in Sri Lanka, in the early 1960's, it was felt that this was a new multinational company in the making. Even the longest reigning monarch in the world, Queen Elizabeth II of Great Britain, had appreciated the USHA sewing machine on a visit to Sri Lanka. The product was sold

in the United States as well and was thus considered a true Indian champion.

Building Brand Awareness

With regard to domestic marketing, in an era when there were no proper roads, no electronic media other than radio, little print media outside the major metros and a not-so-well-developed Bollywood or even marketing agency network, Lala Sri Ram contrived to have sales persons go on bullock carts/cycle rickshaws/cars/vans and, using local performers and hand-wound gramophones playing USHA jingles on 78 rpm records, to attract crowds, steadily built brand awareness across the country. He set up 1,200 sewing schools in what were small towns in those days (many of which now have populations exceeding 1 million), and these became essential training centres not only for building sewing skills but also in promoting the sales of sewing machines.

Lala Sri Ram was succeeded by his son Lala Charat Ram (LCR) who visualised a vast and international future for the company. He felt that automatic sewing machines were a requirement of the future and, as early as 1965, tried to introduce them into the Indian market.

The market however, was not ready. He was to try to introduce automatic sewing machines later in the mid-1980's but the market was still not ready as India remained mired in relative poverty. It was only in the mid 1990's, after the liberalisation of the economy, that true prosperity started percolating into the Indian economy and LCR's dream of automatic machines took off. USHA is now the largest seller of Janome automatic sewing machines, by volume in the world.

In India, collaboration with the Janome Sewing Machine Company of Japan, the world's largest automatic domestic sewing machine company has transformed the creative and lifestyle space in this category. The label is called USHA JANOME.

In the late 1970's, LCR felt that USHA should branch out into small domestic appliances. He felt these were essential for the growing needs of a population that was sure to get into modernised homes just as it had in every developing country in the world. Thus a range of mixer grinders/coasters/bettles/electric irons/cookers/water heaters and more were introduced. These have become an integral part of the product portfolio of a rapidly growing USHA International today.

Breathing New Life into the Operations

The 1990's saw the management pass on to Siddharth Shiram, the third generation of the family. His job was to not only control operations but also consolidate manufacturing facilities in Calcutta - getting them out of industrial sickness. By virtue of a unique agreement with the Government of West Bengal, four fractious industrial unions, the bank and the company, new life was breathed into the operations. By this time, the economy was already

prospering and a whole new generation of dynamic young persons was rising to the fore and the USHA brand, which was considered by the nation to be excellent value for money, was facing challenges from some international brands as well as not fully meeting the needs of an aspiring India.

Refreshing the Brand

It was then that Krishna Shiram, the fourth generation of the family, took the reins. He comprehensively "refreshed" the brand, consolidated it and brought enormous creativity to its branding thereby changing USHA's traditional image to one that provided an aspiring India with exciting new products based on technology and innovative design. He also modernised all USHA's offices so that young persons could find it an excellent place to work from. He modernised the chain of retail shops, created a haberdashery on Linking Road in Mumbai - a world class first-of-its-kind in India. Called "THE HAB", it promotes and sells everything that a creative sewing person could need to make unique projects from home. Furthermore, he instituted a training school at the Head Office called "USTADI" (USHA Sales

Training and Development Institute), set in place research operations with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and sought to integrate technological processes within the company that would serve it well into the future.

Looking ahead - well into the future - and with the clear prospect of GST, Krishna Shiram created a system of warehouses that would yield distribution benefits in the future; set up a responsive service network with its self-owned call centre system for complaints to ensure that once sold products provided continuing satisfaction and instituted a sales and marketing drive which more than doubled sales within three years.

The dream of liberating women was fulfilled by the steady increase in a new sewing skills training system in un-electrified villages. Called "Sital Schools", today more than 15,000 such schools operate across India and the neighbouring countries of Bhutan, Nepal and Sri Lanka and many more are being planned in conjunction with State Governments and other business houses. Further USHA is using the platform of supporting sporting activities involving women and partly sponsoring the best Indian cricket teams, to promote the feeling of an excellent lifestyle full of cheer and good health. USHA is clearly being



Queen Elizabeth II appreciating the USHA Sewing Machine in Sri Lanka

positioned to be the best "Indian" brand in the Indian market - one that can compete with the best international brands in their respective fields and one that increasingly has the confidence to take its products and its brand to international markets successfully.

USHA's recently created TISVA brand aims to bring high quality designed electric lighting products to discerning customers across India. Together with all its other household products, USHA has virtually become a one-stop-shop for high quality, reasonably priced products, based on the latest technologies and designs to meet the aspirations of a demanding new Indian.

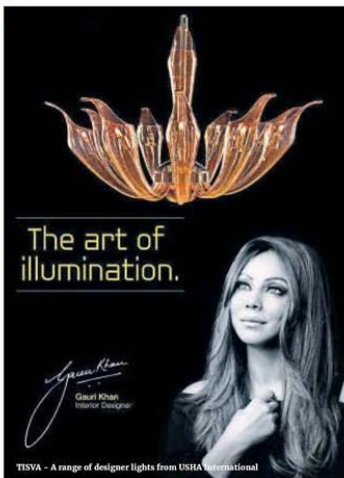
This, in brief, is the story of USHA so far - a brand that has an Indian pedigree and one that has successfully overcome the vicissitudes of time and circumstance. The family that runs USHA, in its fourth generation, has an Indian lineage. India is witnessing a rising trend and USHA will be a part of India's rise.



USHA cooking appliances



USHA Sital School in a remote village in Gujarat



TISVA - A range of designer lights from USHA International