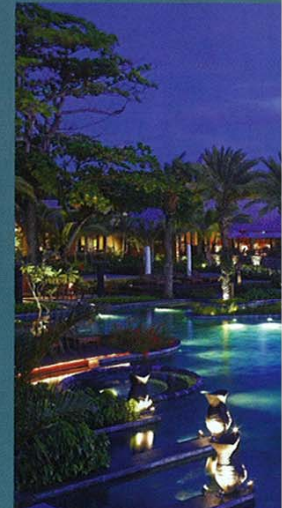


An amazingly diverse portfolio of companies still gives rise to innovative excellence in all of them, RANI SINGH discovered when she went to meet Bhanu Choudhrie



SKY IS THE LIMIT

Bhanu Choudhrie's boardroom table standing in his modern offices in London's Victoria is designed by his wife Simrin. It was made so that everyone sitting around it can see one another. It symbolises the thought and sensitivity with which Bhanu approaches his work.

On the walls of the boardroom are several paintings by India's famous artist, Paresh Maity. This is no coincidence; the Choudhrie family supported the painter when he was first starting out. Bhanu is showing me a limited edition book of art works by M.F Husain which he has helped to publish.

"Paresh Maity, in his early days, painted our family car collection; we have vintage cars in India. He painted these cars in watercolour. You can imagine what these paintings are worth now. We were incredibly fortunate to be able to support this amazing artist at the beginning of his career. My father saw so much talent, so much beauty and potential in his work back then. It is wonderful to see him recognized as one of the leading artists of India today," says the gently-spoken Bhanu who won the Asian Voice's Entrepreneur of the Year Award in 2008.

Bhanu Choudhrie is Executive Director of C&C Alpha Group, which "backs high quality, entrepreneurial teams to develop new ventures or further expand their growing businesses," according to their website. Air Deccan and Ebookers are just two of the group's success stories.

CCAG's portfolio of companies includes healthcare, hospitality, aviation,

agriculture, real estate and utilities. There is an unusual relationship between the Choudhrie clan and the Group. "The family takes a back seat in the running of the business. The business is run by professionals. We have a group CEO and investment management team and then each company has its own CEO and professional management structure. The family concentrates on art and charity work."

Hence the passion for exquisite work produced by artists from such diverse art movements and geographies. "We have just launched the Stellar International Art Foundation to promote Asian art and culture in the UK," explains Bhanu. "For our first project, we have been shortlisted in a bid for a space in London's Hyde Park, very close to the Serpentine Gallery. We have realized that nobody is privately promoting Asian art and culture in the UK. The idea is to promote and support these artists, forming a bond between the Foundation and the artist so that in future...if they have an event, the artist can show their work at the Foundation and feel really connected to that space and to the Foundation. The Foundation is here to last for generations."

The Choudhrie family, originally hailed from undivided India in Pakistan and later settled in Delhi. They were always successful entrepreneurs, be it in India or later in the UK where they have been doing business for over 30 years.

"My great-grandfather developed the first township or residential colony in India,

which still bears his name, Barnavsidas Estate in old Delhi. He was initially successful in real estate development before venturing into catering and other business. My father and my uncle funded several films which became very successful," reminisces Bhanu. The family also owns coffee and tea plantations, apparel goods companies and set up joint ventures with Adidas and the Taj group.

Bhanu studied at Modern School in Delhi before joining Boston University in the USA. In 1999 he decided to join the family business and soon became an Executive Director at their London headquarters. "I worked with the CEO and the top management team of our company. Though I had acquired all the theoretical knowledge of how to run a business effectively, I still lacked the practical experience; the real touch and feel for what makes a business succeed or fail. Our top management team helped me quickly adapt to the realities of a fast-moving business environment. We put together a Group Corporate Strategy, to give direction to the family's investments in the years to come and negotiated a grand plan that the family was able to agree upon."

Clearly the plan is working well. The Choudhrie group has managed to make profits even in the hospitality sector, where many companies have suffered in the economic downturn. "We launched a number of projects in the last twelve months. We are looking at the Maldives, the Seychelles, Thailand, Malaysia, Cambodia, Vietnam; countries where there is still an



FOR AMBITION!

enormous potential in the tourism industry.” Bhanu feels these countries offer “value for money” and “wonderful weather” and also present great opportunities in this sector. In India, the group is launching hotels in the mid-market, two-star, four-star, and five-star properties as well as boutique hotels. “There is huge demand across India; the population loves to travel.”

Bhanu feels the health care sector also currently offers opportunities for growth over the next year or two. “We are strong in specialist psychiatric care and long-term geriatric care. Dementia is becoming a very serious problem in the UK and other countries. We found that there is huge demand for specialist dementia services amongst vulnerable groups of people who otherwise simply wouldn’t be getting the care that they need. We see the same thing in our provision of psychiatric services, for example, to young people or those who also have other disabilities to contend with.” In an echo of the sentiment that went into the design of the board room table, Bhanu explains that they tried bringing pets to the care homes, to provide “pet therapy” to residents since “animals are very helpful in healing and help the elderly cope better when they have that sort of emotional connection.”

“Aviation is another area of the business that is high up on my agenda today,” says Bhanu. “I am very excited about the future of this business. We were the first in the world to launch Multi Pilot Licensing (MPL) training, taking a new recruit from start

to finish in eighteen months. The use of state-of-the-art flight simulators enhances the training process. We have a centre at Gatwick and we find that there is so much demand there. A lot of airlines use London as a hub, so it is easy for them to use Gatwick as a training base. We moved our 737 New Generation simulator to London and are seeing a lot of demand. We also have training centres in the Philippines and the UAE. I see much potential in aviation training.”

In addition to the rapidly expanding in-house portfolio, Bhanu is also enthusiastic about ventures which the investors have successfully backed in the past.

Ebookers was an online travel agency concept “which became one of the most successful in Europe. We went public about six to eight months after we invested in the company. We made a modest investment in that venture and the exit from that business was very successful for us.”

“We were one of the seed capitalists for Air Deccan when they started – we, along with a group, helped to fund the business. It quickly became the largest low budget airline

of India. Again, as a group, our investment into the airline was moderate but we knew that the potential for low-cost air travel in India was immense. I think our predictions have proven accurate.”

As with any true entrepreneur, Bhanu has many more exciting plans up his sleeve. “Outside our normal business activities, we have launched a division to help finance Indian film production and distribution. There is a lot that can be done, whether it is art, short film, or the typical Bollywood movie. These films need to be promoted and taken outside India.” He also revealed that April 2010 will see the launch of the group’s first film, but is not prepared to divulge the actual subject or the big names involved. All he will say is that “it is a Bollywood movie but based on the life of a famous saint.”

And as if the intrigue around that isn’t enough, Bhanu ends the interview with another favourite topic, “Football is a sport which, since I moved to the UK, has really interested me, both as a business and in terms of its popularity. It is a sport that is so important to people here. In just the same way that every child in India dreams of becoming a great cricketer, British children dream of playing football for their country. I really admire their passion for the game! I’m sure that given the right backing, that sort of passion for football could be felt outside the UK too. Maybe you will see us investing in the sporting world in the UK and in India very soon!” 

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