

## The 'Knight' of the 'Knitting' World: Ranjit Jacob

Written by Valsala Menon

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A stickler for time, clarity of thoughts and speech, and highly creative; that best sums up Ranjit Jacob, Managing Director of J.K. Fashions Pvt Ltd. He joined J and P Coats in 1970, which is currently called Madura Coats. A year and a half later, he joined Hindustan Lever. By the late 70's he had resigned from there and joined Godrej Soaps. In the early 80's Ranjit decided to shift to Chennai and joined an export house. Here, Ranjit was asked to take over their garment division and that helped him gain much needed expertise.

Gradually he was bitten by the entrepreneurial bug and a strong instinct impelled him to start thinking on the lines of opening his own garment export business. "Once you decide to start out on your own, the idea grows on you like cancer and you are not able to let go- affirms Ranjit". If you are already from a business community, starting out on a fresh venture is easy. My parents were government employees. They were appalled at the very idea of me resigning from a well paid job to venture out on my own.'

"I got friendly with a banker and managed to convince him to finance my business." He literally struggled his way through the initial days. You can't directly start exports. I started off doing job working for other exporters. I rented a small factory with little capital. We procured materials from the other exporters, cut, stitched the materials and returned to them. That is job working". Ranjit had a partner, who was a chartered accountant, but he was basically a dormant partner. Within a year, Ranjit had bought out the factory for his own. The second year saw him procuring the latest machinery for the factory. By the third year he bought his second factory and in the fourth year, his third factory was bought. It was a meteoric rise, slow and steady but with firm foundations.

By the late 80's Ranjit Jacob had procured his first export order. The 90's saw him well established as a garment exporter, with more customers and increasing exports to America, Europe, Middle East and the Far East. "Towards the mid 1990's we gave up exporting to other markets and concentrated solely on Europe, especially the Scandinavian countries. The size of

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the orders was small but they paid him extremely well. People in Scandinavian countries are reserved but extremely straightforward. Once they approve of your work ethics and commitment, they are your steadfast friends for life"-opines Ranjit.

Slowly, the export scenario changed. "Earlier, an exporter was considered a privileged person. No taxes, widely traveled and living a luxuriously posh life. But now, we too are being taxed and the competition from China is very steep. The margins have gone too. Yet, now people are more aware that Chinese garments are not durable".

Ranjit says that the European countries have four different seasons unlike in India and they use different kinds of clothing for all four seasons. Hence, the orders are constantly sustained. Bangladesh, Srilanka and Pakistan too offer stiff competition in the field of garment exports. The Scandinavians are very strict on child labour laws. They come down to certify that factories do not employ children. During recession, nearly 30,000 people lost their jobs in Thirupur alone. "We have 300 people working for us. We too are cutting down labour and outsourcing work. India by itself is a very big market. Exporting is all about job working for a country abroad. The fabric, designs, buttons, and even the quality thread is provided by the country to which we export", says Jacob.

"It is every exporter's dream to create and sell his own brand. My achievement is, I have created my own brand-Karsburg. What usually happens is, we find a brand name, attach it to a product and make it known. Within the last five years, I have achieved that"- proudly declares Ranjit. Karlsburg has its exclusive range of apparels and men's accessories. He invited some of his friends to get themselves involved in exporting of garments. They sat together and brainstormed for a brand name and finally settled on 'KARLSBURG' – a name which spelt class and also had an universal appeal to it. It was one of the brand names of the outer clothing in Germany. They registered it in India as their own.

In 2005, they started a fairly big outlet at Anna Nagar , Chennai. "I wanted to be unique, so I met up with a friend who knew the airport director at Chennai. Thus I started on my spree of opening showrooms in all major airports in India. I made it clear that I wanted my Karlsburg show rooms to be in the departure area of the airports so that, people waiting for their flights get ample time to visit my showrooms". Ranjit opened showrooms in 20 major airports all over India. Ranjit faced difficulties initially as most of the advertising agencies were not willing to work for Ranjit. He found a practical and ingenious solution to his problem. "I wanted only live people to model for my shirts, and one of my friends, the CEO of Cavinkare, Mr. Ranganathan agreed to model for my range of men's wear". The same year, Ranganathan was declared as the entrepreneur of the year and Times of India , in their lead feature article, commented that

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Ranganathan was modeling for Karlsburg and this is the only men's wear range that used real life successful entrepreneurs as their models.

His next move was to get his ads into in-flight magazines. "We are charged 1,75,000 per month for Jet airways in flight magazine. In a month, we pay 7 to 8 lakhs for these advertising".

Director Priyadarshan is his childhood friend and he offered to model for the brand. I am aspiring to increase our turnover to a hundred crores and its my dream to open 100 more outlets all over the country and abroad. Recently, I opened my first Karsburg showroom in Kuwait. '

The latest addition to Karlsburg range is their exclusive men's perfume "It took us six months to decide on the right fragrance that would truly appeal to a lady. I plan to diversify into women's range shortly", he declares and he is waiting for the right brand name that would complement Karlsburg.