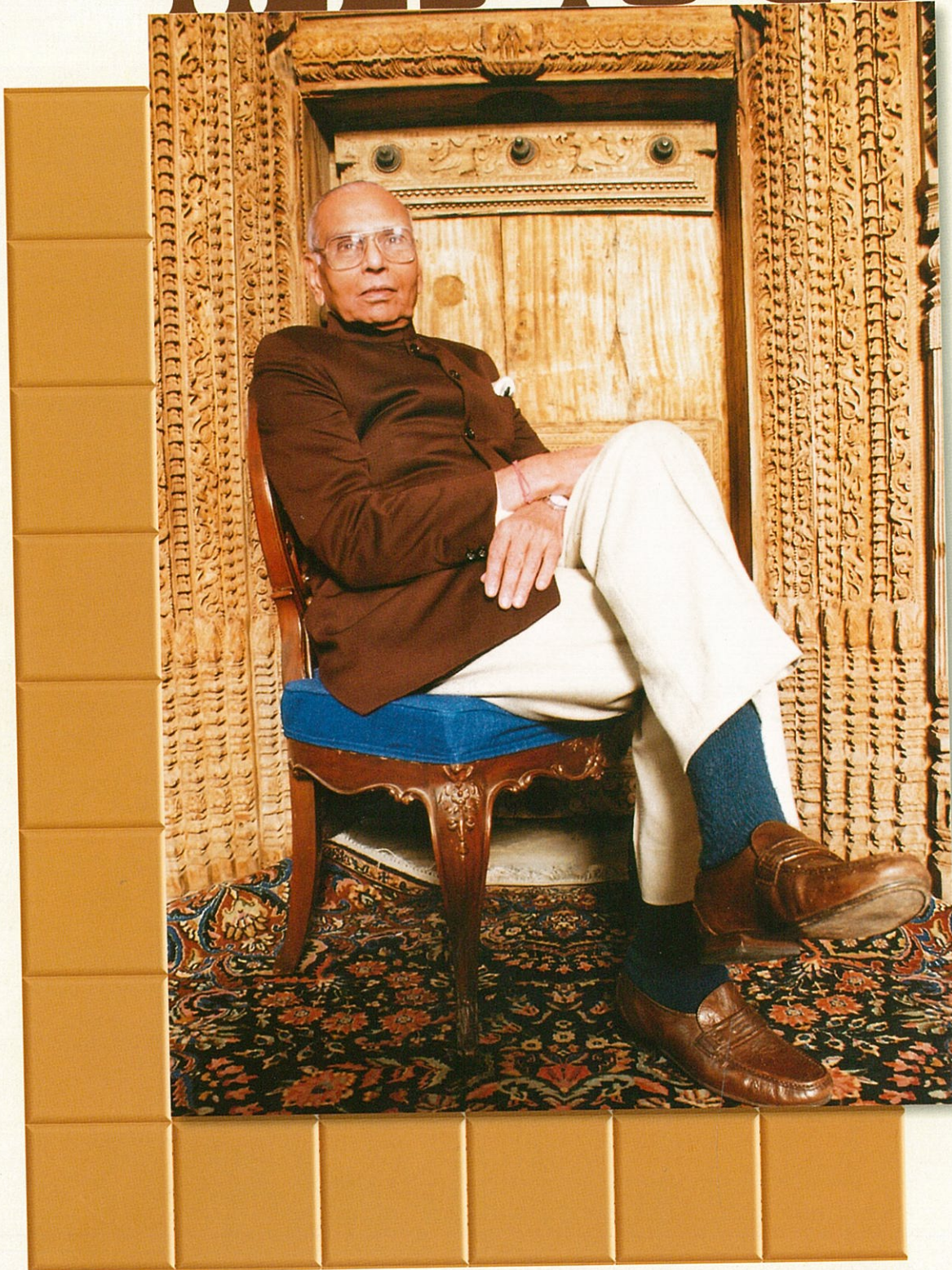


TILES TO GO



Even at 85 and a business empire grossing nearly Rs. 18,000 lakh annually, Kolkata's Hiralal Somany remains an unstoppable force

TEXT | SUPRIYA NEWAR

PHOTOGRAPHS RAMESH SHARMA



Tall, distinguished-looking, wearing a crisp *dhobi* and *kurta*, Hiralal Somany is a picture of refinement. What strikes one even more, given his age, is the fit look. An octogenarian, Somany does not look like any of the great-grandfathers one has ever met, or even an industrialist who runs a business empire that grosses close to Rs. 18,000 lakh and covers everything from stocks and glass, to sanitary ware and textiles. It is no secret that Somany is an industrialist respected by many generations as well as a recognized public figure.

AN EARLY START

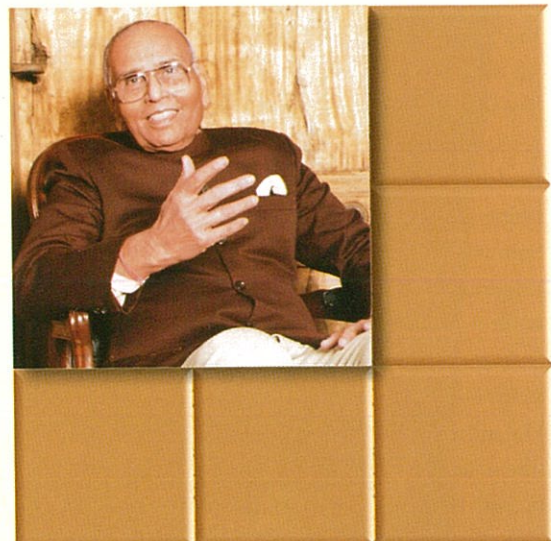
Hiralalji, as he is referred to by most people, entered the world of business and money making when he was only 12 years old. "I was still a student, when my father had a heart attack," he explains. Being the eldest of nine siblings, the responsibility of the family business fell upon his shoulders. "I lost my father when I was in my early 20s. But I had no time to weep or wail. I realized that I would have to learn the tricks of the trade quickly." So this school drop-out joined the Calcutta Stock Exchange when he was just 16. Somany felt that it was "not in his blood to work for someone else"; he insisted on being his own boss. In 1942, he got a chance to earn a sizeable sum of money. All he had to do was to supply rice to the British. However, he was not willing to fill his pockets at the cost of fellow Indians who would go hungry. Somany refused to compromise with his principles, and hence rejected the offer. While he continued to earn 10 per cent from his

stock exchange dealings, he was still eager for a challenge. "Though I had not studied engineering formally, I was always fascinated by it," he says. So, a few years later, the daredevil in him invested Rs. 62,000 in setting up a glass factory and called it 'Somany Glass Works'. Unfortunately, the factory had to be sold as it was caught in the middle of a violent communal riot. Somany did not let his experience in glass works go waste. Soon, Somany set up Hindustan National Glass Factory in Rishra (W. Bengal) under the guidance of B. M. Birla. In the first few months, the factory ran at a daily loss of about Rs. 4,000. After studying the situation, Somany took up the engineering challenge that the plant posed and made some changes. "I took a risk once again and speeded up the machines. It worked. The factory not only began running smoothly, but also began making profits," he says.

NEW OVERTURES

One victory was not enough for Somany; he wanted to start another project. He had no idea what it should be, though. "So I consulted my good friend Dr. Kane. He made three suggestions, one of which was to get into sanitary ware in collaboration with a foreign unit," he says. Somany immediately liked the idea. What followed was an investigation into the market for the product, and finally, collaboration with a UK-based company called Twifords Ltd. "I remember writing a five-page letter to the chairman and MD of the company, Mr. Hay. It left him fairly impressed, and he thought of me as someone who could do the job. The factory was then set up in Delhi." Somany's entrepreneurial spirit bore fruit wherever he sowed it. He set up other plants as well, including the famous Somany Pilkington Ltd. in Delhi, once again in collaboration with a UK firm. Thereafter, he also entered the world of textiles, particularly denim. He re-established Soma Textiles as a profit-making unit in Ahmedabad. Their gross sales for the year 2001 touched

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Rs. 17,065 lakh (according to the website of SPL).

INSPIRATION FOR PERSPIRATION

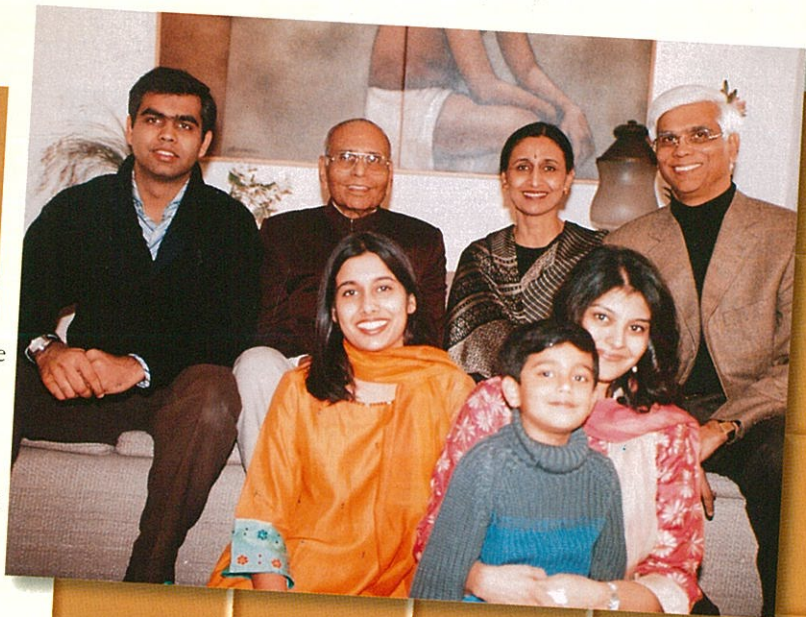
Somany's entrepreneurial journey has not been without hurdles. "I have always been a risk-taker, with a great belief in myself. So, essentially, I overcame the hiccups. But yes, I was greatly inspired by two people throughout. The first being my father, from whom I inherited my capacity to work hard and work honestly; the second being Mr. G. D. Birla, who taught me how to take decisions."

Somany also speaks of the unconditional support that he received from his wife, Kamala, through all the ups and downs. She would accompany him to many of his tours and take care of his siblings like her own children. Kamala is, in his words, "a woman with extraordinary wisdom and patience." Her passion for folk music and cultural traditions is also well known. In her company, even Somany has come to keenly appreciate Indian art and culture.

KEEP MARCHING

After a long, active association with important organizations like FICCI, various chambers of commerce, clubs and cultural institutions, Somany announced his retirement some time back. However, as they say, old habits die hard. So even at the age of 85, he wakes up at the crack of dawn, attends to his ailing life partner, and keeps a keen watch on both, family as well as business affairs. Incidentally, he is known to have opened the gates of Victoria Memorial in Kolkata every morning, for 40 odd years!

There are hardly any wrinkles or telling signs of age. One cannot resist but inquire as to how he has managed to stay in such good health. "It's not a face lift," he quips. "It is simply a matter of being disciplined about food habits and timings." Years ago, Somany suffered from a terrible ulcer. Ever since, he has religiously followed the golden rule of good health: A morning walk everyday, no matter which part of the world he is in. Soft-spoken and down-to-earth despite his millions, Somany is a man who has earned love and respect from his family and society. He sums up his achievements humbly, saying, "I have just been like a banyan tree to the family. I wanted each one of them to receive education and training, and be well settled. So to that



extent I have been some sort of a father-figure." Today, every heir to the Somany business is first rigorously trained; it is not as though the moment he grows up, the office keys are handed over to him.

Hiralal Somany believes in Winston Churchill's line: "How the war was won." His journey and victory, both, echo his belief in this axiom.



Abhishek Somany: Rise of a new scion

Hiralal Somany's grandson, Abhishek, now shares with him the responsibility of running the huge empire. This new entry into the Somany business graduated from Richmond University, UK, with a bachelor's degree in Business Administration. He did his initial training in general administration of industrial units, and later received intensive training at the Manchester plant of Pilkington's Tiles, which produces glazed ceramic wall and floor tiles. Abhishek also attended the Advance Management Course at Sunridge Park (UK), and various other MDPs organized by IIM, Ahmedabad.

After rigorous training at SPL, Abhishek took complete charge of domestic marketing and is currently Senior President of SPL. He also administers the company's plants in Kassar (Haryana) and Kadi (Gujarat).

Abhishek has varied interests like motor racing, photography, music, reading and collecting car models, and is actively involved in various clubs like the Young Entrepreneur Organization, Delhi Friends' Round Table and Poona Club, amongst others. He is married to Minal and they have a son named Ameya.