

by Subroto Bagchi

THE MONK WHO MAKES WINE

A desire to live in the countryside and a few years of running up blind alleys is what it took for Rajeev Samant to find his calling

When friends Kiranbir Nag and Suresh Shanmugam of Silicon Valley Bank brought home some Sula wine one evening and told me proudly that they were investors in India's leading winery, I decided to meet Rajeev Samant, the entrepreneur, the next time I was in Pune. That is how, sitting at the bar of Lemon Tree Hotel, I am listening to the story of a man who has become the market leader in less than a decade.

Where did it all start?

I was born in Bombay in 1967 to Maharashtra parents. My mother's name is Sulabha from which 'Sula' got its name. I went to Stanford as an undergrad with a full scholarship. I wanted to be an electrical engineer but pretty soon I realised that it wasn't for me. So, I looked for a softer option and I thought of industrial engineering. I did a double degree — a Masters in industrial engineering and a Bachelor's in economics. When I graduated in 1990, the US had gone into a huge recession.

Luckily, I got a job with Oracle. I joined on a Monday and on Tuesday they laid off one-fifth of the company. I panicked and ran to my boss. He said, "Don't worry! You are safe!" So that was my baptism into the Silicon Valley. I completed two years and one day, watching the traffic outside

my window, I suddenly felt, what was I doing here? I had everything given to me on a platter; what was I giving back? So, I decided that the best way to give something back was to head to India. Manmohan Singh was the finance minister at that time, and he had presented the first liberal budget; I felt that something good would happen. So, I packed my bags.

You came back to Mumbai?

No, I did not return straightaway. I just got into my car and drove down to Mexico. Around the same time, I also started trading online and made a couple of hundred thousand dollars. That was to become my

seed investment in Sula. I spent a year travelling around the world and finally in late 1993, I came back to India.

So, how did Sula actually begin?

Back in India, one day I happened to visit Nashik with my father where he had about 20 acres of land. He had come there to sell it off for a princely price of Rs. 40,000 an acre and the real estate guy was telling him there were no buyers! I told my father that he was crazy to sell and that I'd rather do something on the land. It was a beautiful piece of land; gently sloping hills on three sides with a lake! I had always wanted to live in the city as well as the country. I

was influenced by people like Tolstoy and Gandhi. There is a monk in me; I can live with very little.

My father said I could take the land and do whatever I wanted. My first idea was to plant Alphonso mangoes and grow them organically and produce a branded, organic fruit! It was a flop show! I started growing other things as well and quickly realised that conventional agriculture in India was pretty much doomed! It was a money sink basically and I realised that I needed to do something else. This whole process took around three or four years! During this period, I was learning about the land, local customs, how to deal with the locals. Amidst all this, I had started planting grapes and one day, my then girlfriend from California asked me, 'So, are you going to make wine?'

Don't tell me, wine was not part of the plan until then?

No. I had not thought of wine till that moment! What she said stemmed from the fact that 95 percent of grapes in the world

go into making wine. And here I was, not even thinking of the possibility! But then, I had no idea how wine is made.

So I went to California to see if I could find anyone to help me. I got in touch with my Stanford network. I landed up in the Napa Valley and met Kerry Damskey, an American with a Polish heritage. Kerry is today our Wine Mentor. I had done a little research before meeting Kerry. There was a study at UC Davis that applied to conditions here; I found that Nashik could be a very suitable region for wine. Armed with that knowledge, we shook hands and decided we could make some decent wine in India. I could not afford his fees; I offered him equity in lieu of half his fees. Today, he is a shareholder in Sula and his shares are worth a lot! We sold about 4,000 cases of wine in the first year! It was very difficult, as in the first six months we had sold only one truckload of wine which was about 5,000 bottles. We were 20 people then. Last year, we shipped 260,000 bottles. Today we employ 400 people. We buy from 1,500 acres of vineyards that employ 2,000

people. This year we will do about Rs. 100 crore in revenues. We will probably go to 5,000 acres within the next five years.

So, where does the monk go from here?

I have found my passion and today I feel I am doing a lot! Most of our workers come from backward classes. They used to sit on rubber tyres all day and catch fish. We brought them over and taught them wine making. During our first year, one of our guys left us to work in a petrol pump. He came back within a month and from then on, no one from here has ever gone to work away from home!"

Rajeev Samant exudes the spirit of his brand and a certain spirituality. He tells me that the richest rural areas in the world are the ones that grow grapes! From South Africa to Argentina, from France to Germany. And one day, India. On that note, to the Monk, I say, "Cheers".■

The Zen Gardener will be taking a break from this issue. He'll be back in a few weeks.

NAME
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PROFILE
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FORBES INDIA BRIEF
Every fortnight, exchange tales of the road with successful entrepreneurs



NAME
Rajeev Samant

PROFILE
Founder and CEO of Sula Vineyards

HE SAYS

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