

# Carrying On The Luggage Legacy

Samsonite International S.A. Chief Executive Ramesh Tainwala and his daughter Anushree Tainwala, Executive Director Marketing, Samsonite South Asia share their beginnings, life, brand vision, and other interests with us..

Words by KANIKA DHAWAN | Photographs by SACHIN RUHIL

It's a bright, sunny day at Igatpuri, Nashik. Ramesh Tainwala is busy tending to his garden at his sprawling and earthy bungalow — a plot of land he bought 15 years back and took five years to build. Tainwala — a certified phytophile — and his gardener move with equal enthusiasm while carefully examining the plants and trees that occupy a chunk of space at the bungalow. For Tainwala, these aren't simple flora. They are a collectors' item, labour of love and an extraordinary hobby. He prides himself with the 112 global varieties of mangoes like Miyazaki from Japan, Sweet Elena from the Philippines, Madame Francique from Haiti and Criollo from Peru, which grace his garden that has beautifully been landscaped with arches, bridges, a tree house and a lovely pond full of big, orange Koi fish. I spot a Red-Veined Darter or dragonfly fluttering over the lotus and realise how rare is the foliage that Tainwala has planted with so much care.

"Look at that plant in the distance — it's the Odomos plant from Mizoram. I have planted it to ward off mosquitoes and other insects," he says. His enthusiasm is infectious and childlike. For Samsonite's Chief Executive, the humble Citronella or Odomos plant is worthy enough of invoking such real emotions, something we can attribute to his humble beginnings in erstwhile Bihar — Jharkhand. His ancestors hailed from Rajasthan and lived in Myanmar over many generations. "They probably went to live in Burma with the British, returned to India as refugees and settled in Ranchi. That's why I think of myself from Bihar," shares Tainwala.

His father ran a *kirana* shop in Ranchi and his housewife mother took care of the other siblings. After finishing schooling from a boarding that trained children to join the Army, near home, he headed to BITS Pilani. For Tainwala, school was his first home and had a lasting impact on him

especially because of his headmaster KK Singh who was "like a father" to him. In 1976, he joined the prestigious BITS Pilani to pursue industrial engineering. "I had got selected in NDA but decided not to join the Army because of a family situation. I still have the joining warrant, as it still remains an unfulfilled dream." By his third year, Tainwala armed with an eight-point score applied to specialise in mechanical engineering but opted for Master of Management Studies serendipitously. He passed out from business school with the second — highest score and some very surprised professors, who thought he was better off doing engineering. But that's not his style.

He is inquisitive, open to change and a person who knows how to dig beneath his own feet to create value in any situation. At BITS, when he felt short-changed because of poor English, he decided to stand for elections, not only for himself but for





all the Hindi speaking and thinking students. "We always felt out of place and were constantly conscious of our Bihari roots. I wanted to change that." And he did so by winning the election for the first two years. Even though his grades took a beating but Tainwala wasn't going to back down. He worked hard to get his grades back on track, and bring about a change in the campus environment.

When it was time to start making a living, Tainwala applied to Asian Paints and luggage maker VIP Industries — two companies that were always the centre of discussion at his management school. Unfortunately, he was selected by neither but he remained undeterred — true to his perseverant persona. "Recently, I met Dilip Piramal [of VIP] and he said it's good we didn't select you. Otherwise you wouldn't have become the chief executive that you are," he shares jokingly. Thereafter, he started working with a distant friend of his father's — Kamal Kumar Agarwal, a plastic commodity trader, following which he set up Tainwala Trading to become a commodity trader himself and a key vendor to companies like Asian paints, VIP, Kelvinator, Godrej, Safari, etc. In 1985, he set up Tainwala Chemicals and started manufacturing plastic sheets that are used in making suitcases.

In 1994, when Samsonite wanted to enter India, Tainwala hosted the then chief executive officer of Samsonite International SA — Luc Van Nevel. One night, at the newly-opened The Leela, Mumbai, a partially-drunk and frustrated Nevel asked Tainwala if he would like to become his partner. Nevel had been scouting for a "reliable partner" but his search had been in total vain. Obviously, Tainwala didn't pay much heed to this offer that was put forth to him in a state of inebriation. After a few days, Marc Matton, Vice President Marketing and Sales at Samsonite Europe NV, called Tainwala and asked him to come to Belgium to discuss the offer. After a lot of discussion and thought, he and Samsonite entered into a partnership, which continues to date with Tainwala taking care of a bigger



portfolio of operations and countries for the brand.

After joining Samsonite, Tainwala put his heart and soul in the business of making baggage. Even though his own business started floundering, Samsonite that gave him a bigger canvas became the centre of his business life. Based on the 108-year-old brand's Biblical and core tenet to "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," Tainwala plunged himself into the India unit. "Luc is my godfather. He taught me to always be good to people. He told me you must never be in a situation that you feel embarrassed to meet somebody you know," he shares.

The first three years were most trying for Tainwala as the company had

lost all its capital, and the sales were less than the salary they had to pay. At this time, Luc Van Nevel reassured Tainwala with his years of experience and market expertise that, "it takes a long time to build business." It took eight years for Samonite to break even in India, and that was just the start.

"We are one of the very few companies that continue to do the same business even after 100 years; Samsonite was founded in 1910 by the Schwayder brothers in Denver," he beams. Today, Tainwala has transformed the company from a single brand to a multi-brand company selling different products at different price points to a range of target audiences.

Of course, budget and fuel-

efficient airlines, reduced airfare, and changing consumer tastes have greatly contributed to Samonite's growth and Tainwala envisages it to become a, "10-billion dollar company in the future." Today Asia is Samsonite's single largest business. Out of the ₹5,000-crore luggage market in India, Samsonite owns 40 per cent of the 60 per cent organised market share.

Also, the growing clamour for lightweight, durable and easily-mobile baggage and their scale gives the brand a huge advantage over others. They also spend a whopping 100 million dollars on research and development, which is more than the global turnover of many companies. Samsonite recently launched its 2.2 kg-liteshock collection. Interestingly, the R&D department has

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Ramesh Tainwala plays a game of cards with his lovely daughter Anushree and dear wife, Shobha





now been bequeathed with the task of coming up with a luggage that's less than two kgs!

With brands like Tumi, American Tourister, Hartmann, High Sierra, Gregory, Speck, Lipault and Kamiliant in its kitty, Samsonite ensures each of its brand remains true to its DNA. For example, Tumi for Tainwala is the gold standard of luggage, designed for people who want top-class quality. American Tourister is a brand that connects well with the millennial because they are looking for cool and reliable luggage.

Off late, American Tourister that is helmed by Anushree Tainwala has signed Virat Kohli and Cristiano Ronaldo as its Indian and global brand ambassadors. Having studied at Harvard Business School and Cambridge, the petite and pretty Anushree is equally passionate and prepared like her father. Growing up in Mumbai in a large joint family with 10 cousins, lots of family

more important, than making the right decision. You need to decide, experiment, learn from it and move on. I think the only reason we can work together is because he isn't involved in the everyday running in India and works out of a different country, and also because I have a buffer person in between."

There is a great bond of trust between dad and daughter. "Every time I'm unable to make a decision or weighing two very difficult options or when it involves making a choice between work and family I turn to my father to talk things through because I know he will give me unbiased advice. My dad turns to me too especially when it comes to new marketing and product ideas that he is thinking of," she says.

Apart from her forthright father, Anushree who is married to Karan Maheshwari has her mother Shobha and brother Ayush (Executive Director, Bagzone Lifestyle Pvt Ltd) by her side.

When she's not devising marketing strategies and interacting with her team, Anushree dives into books and reads in her free time. She also combines her zest for nature and travel by visiting beautiful places. Some of her recent trips include Patagonia, Ranthambore and the Arctic Circle forests in Sweden. Since she dislikes noisy places, the lush Nashik house often proves to be a happy and quiet getaway. A lot of credit for the greenery around Nashik can be given to Samsonite because they have planted close to three lakh trees in the last eight years; villagers, students, employees, suppliers and government institutions have also joined hands with them to support the cause. Tainwala is also working to make Samsonite carbon-neutral by 2030 and by June, this year, the Nashik plant will generate its own energy!

At the Igatpuri residence, precious Tanjore paintings, Buddhist thangkas and cute art by family members adorn

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members and a shortage of space, she counts her "family" as her biggest influence. "They forced me to be real and scrappy, fight for what I believe in and want it," she says.

As Executive Director Marketing, Samsonite South Asia, Anushree believes everybody is a mini-entrepreneur and business leader of their work area. "I like having a highly motivated team and like to drive them at the high-level strategy, and give them sufficient room to make, and implement decisions. I get involved in details only on critical projects," she informs.

"When I look at Anushree, my heart swells with pride," says Tainwala gushing about his little girl who has him as her "tough boss" and is no way living under his shadow. "I like working for him. I've learnt the importance of making quick decisions from him. He always taught us that very often making a decision is

"My mother is the nicest person I have ever met. She is constantly running around, helping the extended family, she never says no to anything. And my brother is taciturn in nature and does not communicate much. He is my biggest critic and definitely keeps me real!"

Over the past years, Samsonite has done some interesting marketing campaigns like #takebackMondays. This year, they will be launching two new campaigns for American Tourister. One is a young and trendy concept for backpacks. It is fun and built around the idea that backpacks are a great way to show off the inner personality. The campaign will allow fans to be part of the movement and interact in a fun way. The second campaign is going to be as huge because it will bring together two of the biggest sports icons, Cristiano Ronaldo and Virat Kohli in a tongue-in-cheek manner.

walls. Sweet-scented white frangipani trees beautifully complement the distressed furniture from Jodhpur in the spacious courtyard.

Their garden continues to grow because of the single-minded efforts of Ramesh Tainwala. He even has a nursery to nurture his small, leafy friends before sending them out into his big lush green expanse.

Up next, apples are what he will be trying to grow. Even though he has been unsuccessful at it but he doesn't give up so easily. A friend of his has informed him after watching a particular episode of Krishi Darshan that a man has managed to grow apples on his balcony in the hills. Mr Tainwala is already excited to track down the apple man and seek his advice. Until that happens, he is looking at a few courses, as farming is his real passion. Didn't we tell you already that he is a constant gardener!



# Personal Memo

**Ramesh Tainwala**

**Please share the three greatest influences of your life.**

My first influence was my school headmaster, KK Singh who always encouraged me to dream. Second would be my first employer, KK Agarwal who taught me to take swift action and not waste time in arguing and debating. The third person would be the founder of Good Night - Kalyanraman Mohan who told me about the importance of marketing and the real power of creating a brand.

**What's your day like?**

I get up at 5.30am and touch base with my colleagues across different time zones. Then, I start to work on my garden. After that, I get ready and reach office by 9 am and stay there till 5.30pm, and again at 6pm, I catch up with the rest of the world.

**How do you prepare for important meetings?**

I don't like to prepare, as I like to speak from the heart

**Five favourite things in your office?**

Plants, flowers, my children's photos, books, and iconic Samsonite ads on the wall

**Your favourite holiday destination**

Bhutan

**Your greatest indulgence**

My children!

**Your favourite music**

I really enjoy *bhajans* and my children hate them!

**Your favourite movies**

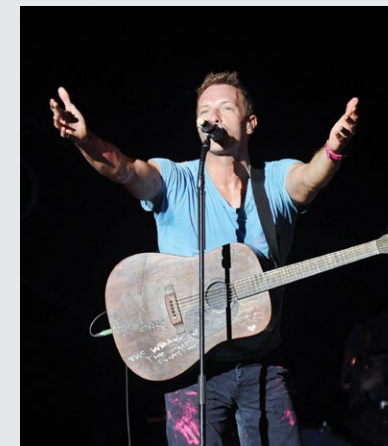
All kind of Hindi movies featuring Govinda

**What are you reading right now?**

I am reading *Scale* by Geoffrey West that creates mathematical models around death

**Your message to the youth of today...**

When you have more than your share of wealth, you need to think of people. Give back a part of your wealth!



**Anushree Tainwala**

**What is a day in your life like?**

My day in Mumbai begins at 6 am. I spend time with my husband or read and go through emails in the morning before work. I'm at work between 8.30 am and 7 pm. I like to spend time with each of my brand teams during the course of the day, and also catch up with the design, development, and the communications team. I have a long commute to and from

work but I enjoy the solitude and come up with some of my best ideas during the commute. I also like to listen to podcasts or audible books while travelling. In the evening, I generally catch up with friends and family over dinner or drinks or have a quiet evening at home with yoga or a long walk

**How do you prepare for important meetings?**

I like to prepare an agenda and time

required for the meeting, so we stay on track. I also like to clear my mind and prepare notes before the meeting so I can lead the discussion in a more efficient manner. I also like to set aside some time for open discussion during the meeting, as some of the best ideas come out of freewheeling discussions

**Five interesting things in your office**

In-development samples and prototypes, marble emoticon paper weights, a bottle of ketchup and Harvard Business Review magazines

**Your ultimate holiday destination and why?**

Bhutan. It's the perfect mix of nature and culture. I also got married there so it holds a special place in my heart

**What is your greatest indulgence?**

Domino's Pizza

**What kind of music do you enjoy? Your favourite movie and song?**

I like rock music – U2, Police, Journey and Coldplay. My favourite song is My Way by Frank Sinatra. I don't have a favourite movie though!

**What's your poison?**

A full-bodied glass of red wine

**What kind of coffee or tea do you like?**

Chamomile

**Favourite artists...**

FN Souza and Matisse

**What is your kind of cinema? A few favourite films...**

I like watching intense thrillers like *Argo*, *Captain Philips* and *Day of the Jackal*. My favourite movie of all time is *Mary Poppins*

**Any brands or designers you are fond of?**

I can't do without my Tory Burch shoes

**Which watch are you wearing at the moment?**

I'm wearing Cartier

**What kind of books do you like? Please name a few favourites.**

I read everything from classics to current popular reads and across genres. I prefer fiction to non-fiction.