

MADE IN MADRAS

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R.G. Chandramogan, Chairman and Managing Director of Hatsun Agro Product, on how he built an ice cream and dairy empire

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“More the sun, more the ice cream,” says R.G. Chandramogan, Chairman and Managing Director of Hatsun Agro Product. This is why he named his ice cream brand, Arun. Seated in a sun-filled corner office at the swanky Hatsun building on OMR, the 67-year-old speaks with a calm that comes with having tackled life’s extremes.

Chandramogan has narrated Arun’s story so many times that he’s initially matter-of-fact about his journey — he prefers not to romanticise the past. “I had no big plans, initially. I just wanted to start something,” he begins. But the moment he mentions the day he started a small ice cream business with Rs. 13,000 when he was “21 and one-month-old”, his voice picks up and he talks about his Royapuram days with enthusiasm.

Chandramogan is from Thiruthangal in Virudhunagar district. But he identifies himself more with Chennai — he’s travelled every street, every by-lane of the city on foot and on bicycles, that he knows it like the back of his hand. In fact, his life can be divided into the pre- and post-Royapuram days: if his pre-Royapuram days taught him business the hard way, his post-Royapuram days turned his life around.

It was in 1970 that Chandramogan first started making ice candies with three people in a rented place measuring 250 sq.ft. in the area — Pandian, Rajendran, and Paramasivan are names he will never forget. For, they helped create his first-ever batch of ice creams. They initially sold in pushcarts. “The first 10 years were a lot of struggle,” says Chandramogan.

With a majority of ice cream makers operating out of a cottage industry set-up, theirs threatened to become one of the over 40,000 such businesses. But Chandramogan managed to keep his business afloat and bring it into the organised sector. “We were willing to take the plunge,” he says. “In our first year, the turnover was Rs. 1,50,000. But in the 1990s, we crossed Rs. 3 crore.”

They gradually became one of the biggest players in the State in ice creams. But Chandramogan didn’t stop at that — he branched into the dairy business, since

they were constantly in touch with farmers across Tamil Nadu. Thus was born Hatsun Agro Product in 1986. Chandramogan initially wanted to call it 'Hotsun'; but he felt Hatsun had a nice ring to it. Today, over four lakh farmers are associated with them and Hatsun has created a model such that there are no middle-men between themselves and the farmers. "This is mainly to control costs better," he explains.

Chandramogan has come a long way from his tiny factory-cum-sales outlet: today, his company's constructed area measures a three million sq.ft. and employs around 8,000 people. His company launched Ibaco six years ago, that lets customers enjoy ice cream as scoops with a choice of toppings, in a nicely done-up parlour.

But their USP has always been the old-fashioned ice cream parlours that bring to mind cosy rooms with plastic chairs and round tables, a freezer in a corner, operated by one person. Arun still retains these charming parlours in many parts of the State where regulars swear by their cassata slice, a frozen dessert that they popularised. A State badminton player in his younger days, Chandramogan says he's taken a back seat in the company now, contributing to strategy and planning. "I'm directing traffic on OMR," he jokes, pointing to the view outside his window.