

Shami Ahmed and Family



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As both a brand and an individual, Shami Ahmed has crossed over into mainstream British life. If you follow fashion and want to look good, odds are that somewhere in your wardrobe is the Legendary Joe Bloggs label. Under the name Juice Corporation, the business has grown from the core Joe Bloggs brand to include designer brands such as Katharine Hamnett and Elizabeth Emanuel. Rarely out of the news, Shami Ahmed's eclectic mix of businesses, from fashion to property to finance, continues to work as well as ever. And all this from a man who started out as a market trader in

Burnley. His brand label now sells worldwide. Joe Bloggs has transcended the 80s and 90s, entering the new millennium with a fresh direction. Shami has faced challenges and hardships both professionally and personally in his rise to the top. Already worth an estimated £120 million, this is a family proud of its successes, its rebellions and its style.

Chapter 1

An Entrepreneurial Family

Born in Karachi, Pakistan on December 7, 1962, Shami Ahmed is now the Managing Director of the Juice Corporation which includes a premium portfolio of designer brands such as Joe Bloggs, Elizabeth Emanuel, Katherine Hamnett, Loyalty and Faith and Slazenger amongst others. The global success the company enjoys is attributed to the foundations laid by Shami's parents, the late Nizam Ahmed and his wife Saeeda. If growing up in an entrepreneurial environment plants the seeds of success for later life, then the little Ahmeds were in luck as all five children – Shami being the eldest son – have been actively involved in the business from the moment they could walk.

The Ahmed family settled in the north of England, in Burnley, when Shami was 2 years old. The start of what was to become a fashion empire was modest. In 1966, Shami's father set up a market stall selling socks and ladies' stockings. Hard work is the backbone of almost every Asian entrepreneurial success story and the Ahmeds are no different. Nizam and Saeeda juggled the responsibilities of raising a young family with working long hours in a strenuous business; all the children were encouraged to help out. There is no substitute for hard work and the Ahmed children had to shoulder responsibility from an early age. Bushra Ahmed is the eldest daughter and as far back as she can remember she was helping with the business. At 6 years old, she recalls, 'I was packing tights in boxes so my father could sell them'. Her brother Shami remembers catching the bus after school in Burnley

to go to Manchester so that he could help out on the stall. Fashion is a fun business, but also one which demands that you put in the hours.

The first generation of Asian immigrants in the UK tried to create a secure home environment where their traditions and values could be retained. There was great emphasis on the importance of the family unit and the wider community network. Children were brought up to respect their elders and the elders in turn would do anything to better the situation of the young. They were prepared to work long hours and make many sacrifices for a better future. Duty, obligation and trust are key words in any Asian household. The unusual feature in the Ahmed family is that they do not overly value formal education, preferring the hands-on approach instead. Whilst most Asian parents stress the need to study further, and make many sacrifices for their children to gain academic qualifications, the Ahmeds are firm believers in practical experience. The business always came first, education was not as important and this was the case for the boys as well as the girls. The lack of academic training has not held them back in any way. This is an example of an Asian success story where the first generation initiated the business and the second generation made the move from small-time enterprise to multimillion-pound empire. The children were keen to move the business forward and the parents were willing to take the risks to do this. This story illustrates that the success and effort of the first generation immigrants can be taken forward to the next level.

The Female Perspective – Bushra's Role

The comfortable lifestyle that Bushra is now so accustomed to was not in evidence during her early years when she attended Rose Hill Junior School and then Walsall High School for girls. These were both state schools and her contempt for academia is plainly revealed by her remark, 'I was crap at school and I don't care who knows it'. Like her brother Shami, she preferred practical experience to classroom

learning. Since she was clearly not academically inclined she left school at the first available opportunity and joined the business full time, an easy transition for someone who had been involved in it practically from the day she could walk.

This was a strategically important event for the family as it gave her father the freedom to launch a new venture. He was considering moving into the wholesale business in Manchester, and could concentrate on this now that Bushra was involved on a full time basis. The move from retail into wholesale was instigated by the younger Ahmeds, Bushra and Shami, who were the real driving force behind it. The Ahmeds never shy away from the risk and challenge of new ventures and succeeded in setting up Pennywise Cash and Carry, which is still thriving today.

The development of the business from a couple of retail shops to a wholesale clothes cash and carry was a move in the right direction for young Shami. Like Bushra, Shami did not study beyond O levels, left school at 15 and joined the business full time. He had big dreams and was eager to work on his vision for the family business. By now, he had the reputation of being a sharp dresser and was known for his fashion statements. He loved working with his father; they were a dynamic team, an entrepreneurial family at its best. While Nizam and Shami developed their plans for wholesale, Shami's mother and sisters ran the retail stores. In 1980 Pennywise Cash and Carry was established, based in Bury New Road, Manchester where it still operates today under the name of The Juice Corporation.

Bushra credits her formative years of 'training', when she was given a lot of responsibility, as the basis of her success today. Those early days strengthened her and made her more streetwise as she had to prove her mettle. Despite her parents' belief in her abilities she still had to prove her credibility to others. Being Asian, female and Muslim was interesting and, on top of that, she was still only 15 years old when she was given the job of making purchases for the retail shops. Trying to negotiate

and haggle, she had to overcome the patronising attitudes of men who only wanted to deal with her father. Today respect is automatic, given the phenomenal success of their businesses. Bushra is now the leading lady of the company, thrives on the fast pace of the industry and loves making decisions, wheeling and dealing and being involved in every aspect of the fashion business. She is strong-minded, sharp and impulsive, and once went into a shop to buy a T-shirt and emerged with a Harley Davidson! Her philosophy is to see your goals and then go for them, doing what it takes to achieve them. Bushra is the PR and Marketing Director of The Legendary Joe Bloggs company.

Nizam Ahmed passed away and his death was particularly devastating to Bushra, who felt acutely the devastating loss of a man who had been a tower of strength and source of advice all her life. The shock of the loss left the whole family so shattered that they feared they were incapable of carrying on without him. Nizam, however, had left a legacy of strength and unity which paid dividends. The Ahmeds are ultimately survivors and managed to endure the desolation of the following months to rebuild a stronger and more powerful empire. Bushra describes her father as the most honest man she has known: 'He was very strong willed but fair', she reminisces. He gave his children much liberty and in return gained their utmost respect. His wife Saeeda played a pivotal role in the family. Saeeda, the 'silent contributor', is credited with originating the business and despite her modest profile is a shrewd businesswoman. Like many Asian women she is pivotal to the success of the business, and yet remains in the background. According to Bushra, 'my mother is generous, sensitive to plight, charitable, honest and direct' – clearly directness is a characteristic that has been inherited by her children.

Shami – Young and Restless

Shami shrewdly managed to balance the conflicts of his youthful desire to break out and launch his own label with the Asian values of

family unity and strength. Not content with the growing business, Shami felt it had plenty of scope to grow further and he wanted to create something he could associate with. He was young, good looking and very restless; he had worked now for many years in the business and was confident. He craved the glamour of the fashion world, on his terms. Frustrated with dealing with other designer labels, he longed for his own. He was keen to promote his own identity, but stay under the umbrella of the family and remain the dutiful son. In 1986, the 24-year-old Shami created his Legendary Joe Bloggs label and it was exhilarating. He could not have known at the time that he had hit a formula for a global brand. It was his first taste of real success; he was marketing his own-brand label instead of other designers. He was ahead of the game, with his insider knowledge of the trade. Shami had identified a gap in the British market between expensive designer labels and cheaper, mass-produced jeans that anyone could wear.

His timing was perfect. The label was launched on the crest of the Manchester rave scene and even today the marketing team at Bloggs continues to watch movements on the street and in the music industry for inspiration. In the 1980s the designer jeans industry was geared for the elite but Shami felt that everyone should have the right to wear designer jeans. He saw a gap in the market for these jeans at low prices, enabling anyone and everyone to enjoy their glamour. He wanted to provide exciting garments with style, choice and, most of all, at a reasonable price.

Joe Bloggs took full advantage of the technology available, offering a wide range of washes on jeans. Shami produced a product for the mass market which is highly individual, and Joe Bloggs is one of the top ten bestselling brands of jeans in the UK today.

The Joe Bloggs operation required all of Shami's resources as he was now in the major league, dealing with designers, models and PR companies. The design team comprises both full-time staff and a network of freelance designers throughout Europe. There are also a

number of graphic designers who develop designs for T-shirt motifs, swing tickets and garment labels. Extensive worldwide travel is undertaken to research new and innovative fabrics and trims as well as to buy materials.

The operation is not simple but Shami and family ensure that it is efficient. An example of this is the in-house export department which manages all overseas accounts and deals with international sale enquiries and new accounts. They work closely with the marketing team to ensure that monthly bulletins on Joe Bloggs' activity in the UK are forwarded to distributors worldwide. Regular meetings are held with all the key teams such as design, purchasing, marketing and export for feedback and communication, essential to sustain and increase sales. Quality control measures are in place and tests for wearability, durability and comfort take place on an ongoing basis. Garments are washed, tried, tested and measured to ensure exact specifications have been met. Finally, warehousing and distribution are aided by a fully computerized order-processing system, resulting in efficiency and accuracy. The sheer scale of the operation is miles away from market stall the family once ran.

As you would expect from a company at the leading edge of fashion, Joe Bloggs is innovative and creative. The whole process from design to manufacture is extremely fast moving and Shami Ahmed has made full use of professional and technical expertise. Expansion has been swift and other ranges developed include Bloggs for youths and Junior Bloggs, as well as Baby Bloggs. They also market footwear, toiletries and music. Joe Bloggs started with just a couple of styles of jeans and T-shirts; now there are over 100 designs as well as a range of clothes. An estimated 2000 people rely on Joe Bloggs in some way for their livelihood. The products are marketed in the Middle East and Far East as well as in Europe, but the UK still remains the base of the business and its largest market. The designer clothes industry is a fast-moving, highly competitive one with a high failure rate. The high costs of setting up in the industry are a barrier to new entrants. In this sense the

Ahmeds had the advantage of having one foot in the retail industry; they had their own cash and carry operation and workforce.

Top of the Pops

Shami's marketing strategy was innovative and daring; in the early stages he worked on gut instinct, never engaging consultants or undertaking market research. He had good instincts and acted on these. His own background made him well aware of class snobbery and the frustrations and dreams of escaping from the working class. Most designer labels were elitist and far removed from the masses he wanted to sell to. He felt it was unwise to compete at that level. There was a niche in the market for the everyday jeans wearer: 'any old Joe Bloggs'. Shami was desperately ambitious and insightful, so seized this opening that the million-pound designer jean companies had left and made his own fortune. He had the ability to gauge the needs of the people in the street and give them what they wanted.

He has since departed from his classless concept and diversified into other ranges such as Katherine Hamnett and Slazenger. He also boasts an elite clientele of pop stars, sports personalities and other notables. The marketing team design and coordinate promotions to specifically meet the needs of individual stockists. They keep their profile high due to their links with pop groups like Take That, Bad Boys Inc, New Order, Apache Indian and Happy Mondays. They were also commissioned to produce the most expensive pair of jeans in the world for the pop star Prince, valued at more than £100,000. They are linked with some high profile sports personalities such as Brian Lara, who holds the record for the highest ever score by a batsman in first-class cricket. But it was their marketing campaign in 1993, entitled 'Everyone Snogs in Joe Bloggs', that catapulted them to success and resulted in 86 percent brand awareness of their jeans: they were now a household name, all be it a classy one. More recently, spoon-bender Uri Geller has joined forces with Joe Bloggs to launch a range of clothing with

the potential to allow the wearer to fulfil their dreams. Every product will be touched by Uri Geller before it hits the shop floor. Interesting!

This marketing effort is clearly a success factor in their business. Shami claims, 'the biggest failure is that many Asians do not know how to market themselves.' This is changing now as the business community has become aware of the value of marketing as a tool for success and generating sales. The first generation were prone to name businesses after themselves or their children, meaning that the name of the business often bore no relation to the product or service and in many cases was also very long, so it did not hit the right note for their target customer. They did not have the customer in mind. This is clearly changing, and today Asian entrepreneurs are at the global forefront of the marketing world and have created international, well-known brands which are household names.

Shami has since diversified his portfolio of business assets into finance and property and strengthened his fashion empire. Married now with a young son, you'd expect him to lead a quieter life. You would be wrong. Shami is not one to stay out of the limelight. He promotes his company at every opportunity and, with Bushra, has got marketing down to a fine art. He also seems to have a habit of hitting the headlines on a regular basis.

Turbulent Times – Moss Brothers

Shami's rebellious streak keeps him newsworthy, or is it just mischief that drives him? If he feels he is right, he goes a long way to prove this, leaving no stone unturned. New to the city, Shami bought and sold stakes in many retail outlets including House of Fraser, Peacocks, Austin Reed, Selfridges and also a 3 percent stake in Moss Brothers, which he subsequently increased to 5 percent and then 10 percent. The Moss Brothers Group consists of Cecil Gee, Moss, the Savoy Tailors Guild and the dress hire business. Shami became their biggest single shareholder, having accumulated many of the available shares

in the tightly-held stock. His predatory instinct took over and he made an approach to buy the company. This approach was refused and an acrimonious battle ensued where he managed to force several Board changes and have new management in place, which led to a surge in the share price. The city had some fraught months with speculation as to Shami's role in Moss Brothers and they watched him make over 200 percent profits – despite not being able to buy the company. He then sold his entire stock in 2004, leading to takeover speculation. Accused by many of being a disruptive influence, the serial investor walked away with an estimated £9 million in profits. He admits his inexperience in handling this situation and says he would deal with it differently now: 'It was my first attempt in the city, I didn't know what I was up against.'

A Marriage of Great Inconvenience – the Elizabeth Emanuel Saga

Shami went on to be involved in one of the most bizarre and headline-grabbing cases in business history. Somehow, this market trader from Burnley crossed paths with Elizabeth Emanuel, the haute couture designer of Princess Diana's wedding dress. Emanuel was feted in celebrity circles after designing 'the' wedding dress in 1981. She opened her own store – called Elizabeth Emanuel – in London's Brook Street a decade later. However, in 1997, she was in severe financial difficulties and turned to Shami Ahmed to get her out of trouble.

Emanuel agreed to sell her business and its goodwill, including a registered trade mark for an Elizabeth Emanuel logo, to one of Shami's companies. It was to be a match made in heaven: the elitist designer and the young, dynamic entrepreneur. Emanuel also became an employee of an Ahmed company. As it turned out, it was a marriage of great inconvenience and a sore point to this day. The arrangement lasted barely a month, with Emanuel walking out, never to return. The following year Shami's company filed a UK trade mark application for the name Elizabeth Emanuel.

Emanuel was distraught, according to the headlines at the time, and a court battle commenced where she tried to reclaim the rights to her name which Shami had bought in 1997. Emanuel argued that as a designer she should be entitled to use her own name and no third party should be able to do so. Her defence continued that the public would be confused and assume that the designs had been made with the personal involvement of Elizabeth Emanuel. Shami's argument was straightforward, as reported by Graeme Colquhoun:

'If she had not sold the registered trademark for 'Elizabeth Emanuel', she would not have this problem. By making her name and the name of her business synonymous with each other, and then selling the business, she had ceded control over how her name may be used. Shami argued, in effect, that Elizabeth Emanuel wants to have her cake and eat it, by selling it to him and then claiming that he isn't allowed to use it in any case.'

The case was a clear-cut victory for Shami. In October 2002 the Trade Mark Registry ruled against Emanuel.

Shami reflects on the episode: 'I bought the brand and unfortunately Elizabeth came with it, with her ego and lack of business sense.' He recalls, 'The whole saga was a nightmare.' Shami, the son of a first generation Asian migrant who grew up with the ethics of hard work, prudence, saving and investing for the future and putting everything into the business was horrified when Emanuel wanted first-class travel and champagne parties: 'We did not travel first class ourselves, so to give her that privilege when she had not produced anything was not right. We could not work together.' Things then went from bad to worse: 'she tried to sue me for the return of her name. It reached the European Court of Justice and she lost.'

Making a Fortune – Perspectives from Shami

Shami Ahmed's success came from his ability to gauge the language of the streets. His direct approach is based on a canny exploitation of street cool and his brand was endorsed by Take That and Prince Naseem.

No stranger to the limelight or controversy, Shami became one of the richest and most famous young Asian businessmen in Britain; people could not get enough of him. He epitomised the young, successful entrepreneur and went on to present a Channel 4 TV series called *Dosh* which was aimed at showing how to get rich whilst still young. Despite turning his back on formal education, he was awarded an Honorary Graduate Open University degree in 2002.

Joe Bloggs was the first British company to break into Britain's top ten selling jeans brands. The Bloggs brand was central to the 1980s Manchester youth culture. It kept pace with existing trends and created new fashions with stone washed, 25-inch flares, drainpipes and ventilation jeans being examples. Under the name Juice Corporation, the business has grown from the core Joe Bloggs brand to include designer licensed brands such as Katharine Hamnett and sports brand Head, to owning the brand name Elizabeth Emanuel and franchising Joe Bloggs stores all over the world. It remains firmly in family ownership.

Joe Bloggs has entered the new millennium with a fresh direction. For such a young company, Bloggs already has a phenomenal heritage having pioneered trends and discovered rising stars that became icons of the decade, and even the era.

In recent years, the fashion end of the business has consolidated and internationalized; the company now employs more than 2000 people across the world. More properties have been bought across London and investments in companies like Austin Reed and Woolworths have driven the finance and investment business. Having made his first million before his twenty-fifth birthday, Shami and his family do not rest on their laurels but continue to build a business that becomes more and more legendary as each year passes. The next step is to take the brands online and to grow that way. Joe Bloggs Stores are also due to open in Dubai, South Africa, India and across the Middle East.

As a boss, Shami projects leadership qualities but he is willing to listen to good ideas. He encourages young, enthusiastic, ambitious, streetwise

people to work for him. His management style is very hands-on, and he is actively involved with the day-to-day decisions and closely involved in every stage of the process from design to marketing. He is willing to invest in his company in terms of technology and talent as he feels the more you put into a business the more you get out. He employs professionals and does not believe in cutting corners.

Shami feels that he is learning all the time. He has made mistakes in the past and has learnt and developed from the experience. His philosophy is that, on balance, if your strengths outweigh your weaknesses then you are on the right road. Shami is a great risk taker; he refers to it as 'calculated gambling' and this is the hallmark of Joe Bloggs' success. The team is not afraid to take risks. Their campaigns are daring and adventurous and they try and promote a glamorous, asexual image.

Having made his mark in fashion Shami is now enthusiastic about his property portfolio. He has an eclectic mix of businesses under his belt and through family trusts. Property is his passion now and he has various properties in the UK and overseas – Dubai, Cyprus, Germany, Bulgaria. The fashion side of the business these days is left to the family, with Bushra heading up the sales and marketing and working on a new online route for selling their brands.

Turning Points

So what has kept him ahead of the game despite all the trials and tribulations? He says, 'I worked hard, I started young, and I understood the sector well.' He showed great courage in creating Joe Bloggs and touching a nerve in the fickle world of fashion. 'I have a passion for anything I do, and I do it wholeheartedly. I dedicate my life to making a success of anything I do.'

Shami has not had a smooth ride: 'I have ups and downs in each and every area of my life but I am resilient.' He explains, 'I have made money and I have lost money.' Throughout all this he has managed to

stay focused and determined. 'Losing is part of the learning curve and its value should not be underestimated.' He advises that, 'It's important to keep going, not to think of it as losing. You learn more by your mistakes and you come back stronger.'

His parents were his greatest inspiration: 'I was lucky as I watched and learnt from my parents; they were excellent role models – hard-working, sensible, down to earth.' He also credits starting young: 'I also had the opportunity of getting into the business at the age of 15. This meant I was ahead of my peers.' His parents are his inspiration and so too is his young son and wife: 'I'm doing this for my son now.' Does baby Bloggs appreciate this? Does he realize what an empire his father has created for him? As he's still under 10 years old, probably not.

Starting up Joe Bloggs was a key turning point. Shami says, 'We were in the right place at the right time.' This is modest of him; his passion for the Manchester scene and the ability to spot the right opportunities at that time held him in good stead too.

The management values in the organization to date have been largely the Asian values of family unity and even after the death of the founder, Nizam, his wife has resided over the empire, commanding the same respect. The second generation has brought in many Western business practices and ideologies but has remained faithful to its roots. Shami is currently based in London and the future success of the company is now in the hands of his brother Kashif, who is the Managing Director, and his sisters Bushra, Tabasum and Tesneem.

Shami has made his mark in the mainstream market and he is still only in his forties. He claims that his success is due mainly to the responsibility he was given at an early age. He has had practical experience in a very competitive industry and was fortunate to be encouraged and supported by his family. He is a great believer in using one's full potential and dislikes being held back or seeing others held back from achieving results. Shami adheres to the traditional Asian values of unity, drive and hard work and credits these values for his phenomenal

success. He is an example of a successful second-generation Asian entrepreneur, the charismatic owner of Joe Bloggs and beyond, who developed his father's garment business, taking it forward by developing a brand name and modernizing it. Still young, Shami has experienced a lot of success and a lot of setbacks. He has a controversial image and has challenged the status quo. Despite this, the family are a great example of an Asian success story in the UK where they have battled against the odds and used their acumen to create and sustain a global brand. They have done it through sheer hard work and shown true grit. Whatever else happens, we are sure to see Shami hit the headlines again in the future.

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