

THE SEATS THAT MOVIE GOERS HAVE OCCUPIED FOR DECADES HAVE EVOLVED FROM WOOD TO **COMFORTABLE CUSHIONED INNOVATIONS. THANK THESE WORKERS**

Red hot seats

BY NANDINI RAMNATH
nandini.r@livemint.com

Pen Workers doesn't have an official slogan, but if it went with "Giving you that sinking feeling for over 90 years", it would be wholly appropriate.

The Hypnos-beckoning recliners at the Ebony Lounge at the Big Metro multiplex in south Mumbai were made at a Pen Workers factory. So were the plush seats at the newly opened S2 multiplex, run by the Sathyam Cinemas chain, in the Chennai suburb Perambur. It's easier to name single-screen theatres and multiplexes in the country that the leading seat manufacturer has not worked with rather than draw up a list of its clients. Pen Workers seats are in Dhulia and Dar es Salaam, as well as at private theatres in the homes of Hindi movie actors Shah Rukh Khan and Sunny Deol.

Anmol Kashmiri, the third-generation proprietor who runs the business along with his brother Mohit, once even met a doctor who had installed Pen Workers seats at her clinic.

The family concern has changed its raw material—from wood to polyurethane—and expanded its business from cinema halls to schools, waiting areas, stadia and restaurants, but its cheery red frontage has been perking up Jaganath Shunkerseth Road in south Mumbai ever since the



Comfort zone: Pen Workers' Anmol Kashmiri at his office.

company was set up in 1921. Parts of the office are built over a stable and a well, which give an idea of the company's age.

The headquarters has enough space for a demonstration room containing various types of seats that recline, rock and swivel—sometimes all at the same time. The room is equipped with a screen and doubles up as a private mini auditorium. "I screen Bruce Springsteen concerts for myself here," Anmol says. "When I am pissed off, when I have production hassles, I come here."

Seat manufacturing is big business: The company makes close to 40,000 units a year and has supplied to over 2,500 auditoriums in Asia, according to

Anmol. Orders come in from around the country as well as countries like Kenya, Sri Lanka, Singapore and Tanzania.

Pen Workers started off with a small factory in Mazagaon in south Mumbai, and now has one factory each in the north-east and north-west of the city, a factory in China and a branch office in Malaysia. The company sat out a slump in business during much of the 1980s and 1990s, when audiences preferred to watch films at home on cheaply available, mass-produced video cassettes rather than venture out to movie halls. Few theatres were built during those years, Anmol points out. "Every business has its ups and downs," he says. "But no matter

FOUNDER
Munshiram Gulati

TYPE OF COMPANY
Partnership

KEY PRODUCTS
Seats for movie theatres, schools, stadia and restaurants

WHERE TO BUY
Dhobitalao, Mumbai

SUCCESS MANTRA
Dedication and diversity

what happened, we resolved to continue with the family business."

Pen Workers was set up in 1921 by Anmol's grandfather, Munshiram Gulati, who had migrated to Mumbai the previous year from a village in what is now north-west Pakistan. The company is named after a kind of wood used to make the cinema seats most film goers parked their bottoms on up till the 1960s, when the first cushioned seats made an appearance. Gulati had three daughters, one of whom married Girdhari Lal Kashmiri, a production controller with Guru Dutt Movies. Girdhari Lal had dropped into Gulati's office to select cinema seats for a sequence for Dutt's *Pyaasa* (Kashmiri

appears in a crowd shot in the 1957 movie). He eventually took over the business and recruited his son Anmol on the day the 15-year-old Palm Beach School student finished his Board examinations. "All my friends went out for a movie, while I went to our factory in Goregaon in a train," Anmol, 38, says. "I was mighty pissed off then."

Over time, Anmol became involved to a point where he had differences with his father about modernizing the business. "I want to emphasize that we are very proud of being a family concern," he says. "If you are a family business, you can compete with anybody in the world. We have the passion and the hard work to continue. Competitors have the funds and the manpower, but this isn't only about money."

Pen Workers is now well perched to satiate the changing tastes of movie goers. "Earlier, you had narrow seats and comfort wasn't important," Anmol says. "We have now gone from wooden seats to cushioned seats to push-back seats to recliners. The width of seats has changed too." The red frontage stays the same, however. "When our office was recently redone, we said that no matter what will happen, the frontage will remain," Anmol says.

"I was in Bangalore the other day, and I told somebody I work for Pen Workers. He immediately remembered the sign."