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Sunil Amarasuriya with Navin, Shanya and Rehan

B.P. de Silva Holdings

Involved in both manufacturing and distribution across a whole host of sectors, B.P. de Silva Holdings is a classic family-controlled holding company. Apart from its obvious business success, the group is also proud of its family heritage, which stretches back to 1872. Transitioning to the fifth generation, B.P. de Silva's current strength stems from the founder's belief in working toward goals greater than any one individual.



“The term ‘family business’ itself says volumes about the intricacies of balancing the aspirations of family and self.”

Navin Amarasuriya,
Managing Director,
B.P. de Silva Holdings



Balage Porolis de Silva founded the company in 1872.



B.P de Silva enjoyed a period of sustained growth as Singapore grew economically in the 1960s.



Sunil Amarasuriya with his family.

Singapore has its fair share of family-controlled holding companies. Its openness to trade and business have been among the dominant features of the city-state since it was founded as a trading post by Sir Stamford Raffles in 1819. Among the many businesses to prosper during Singapore's modern history has been B.P. de Silva Holdings.

The early beginnings on the banks of the Singapore River

Founded in 1872 by Balage Porolis de Silva, B.P. de Silva had its early beginnings as a jewelry manufacturer and retailer on the banks of the Singapore River. Today, it has grown into a diversified group across a multitude of industries, staying true to the founder's principles and reputation.

The selection of companies includes B.P. de Silva Jewellers; RISIS, known for gold-plated orchids and sculptures; and The 1872 Clipper Tea Company, which sells top quality Sri Lankan tea. Family-owned and run for 144 years in the luxury goods business, they plan to continue the lasting legacy through building homegrown brands.

In a letter to his son, the founder wrote: "Never waver from quality, even when you cannot afford it." His exacting nature

demanded only the best, and his jewelry pieces reflected this ethos. From the earliest days along the Singapore River, he brought highly skilled goldsmiths and silversmiths who would become the backbone of his workmanship, and the early immigrants who hailed from Sri Lanka.

Balage's work soon became highly sought after by the rich and powerful of the day. His clients included many members of royal families across the globe, including the British and Thai royal families. Arguably, his most inspiring decision was to not pass the business on to his son, whom he did not consider up to the task.

Diversification away from trading

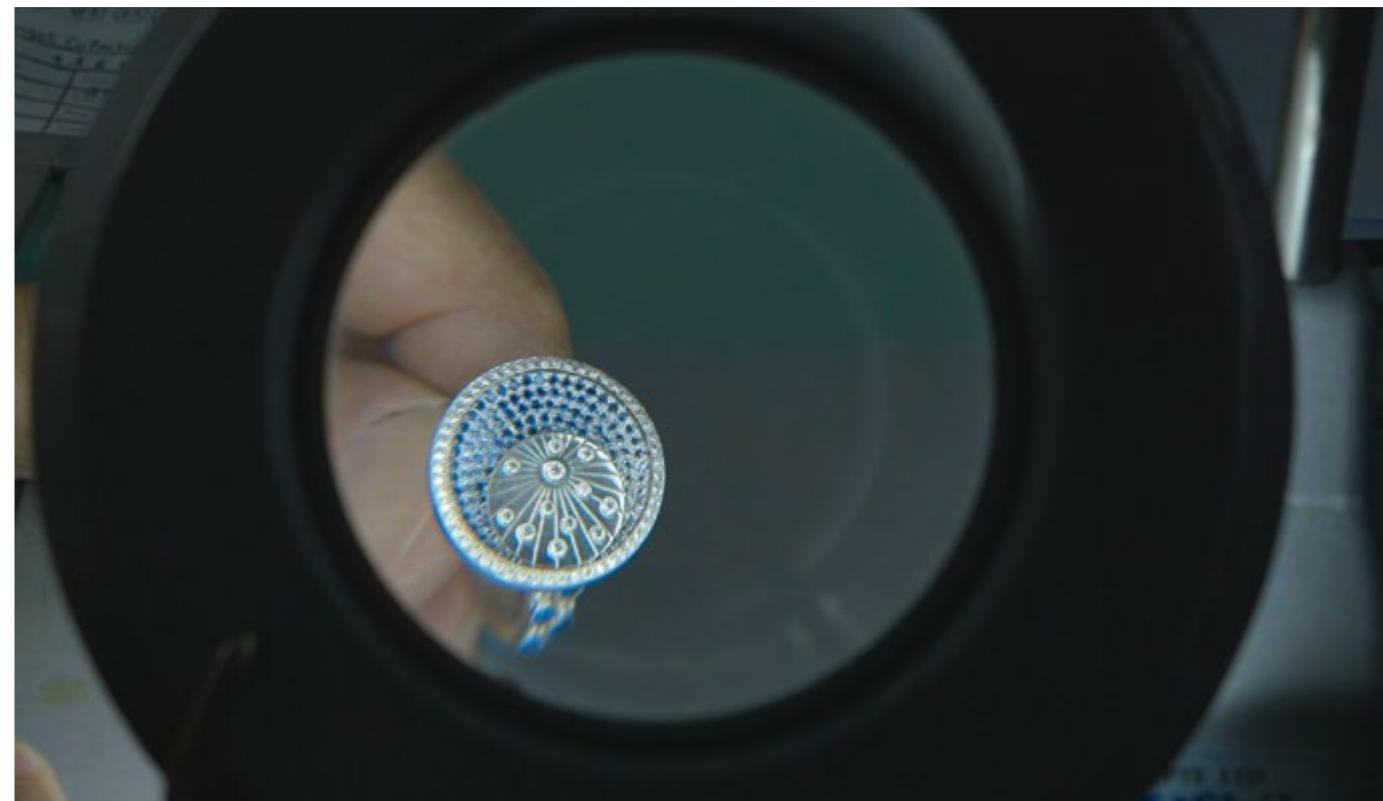
Instead, in 1930, Balage passed the business down to his daughters through their husbands and a group of trusted managers. The move was a very early example – possibly the first – of management shares issued in Asia. This proved to be successful, and the strong governance and leadership drove the business forward through the second generation. During the Second World War, one of the managers who issued those very shares hid almost all of the assets, despite great risk, and returned the business to the third generation after the war.

Sunil Amarasuriya, now 66, took over the running of the group from the third generation more than 30 years ago. Along with other members of the fourth generation, he faced business challenges, as well as those that came from a large base of shareholders who were descendants of the founder.

The big distribution of shares created discord among different groups, and a decision was taken by Sunil's father, Sepala Amarasuriya, to take out a large loan to gain control and stabilize the relationships between ownership and management. Unfortunately, one year after he managed to secure control, he became paralyzed from a stroke.

Speaking about these times, Sunil told the Singapore-based newspaper *The Business Times*: "The loan [which his father had taken out to gain control of the business for his side of the family] was hanging over when I took over. My prime directive was to repay it and get the business going again, as well as to ensure that my father got the best possible medical care."

He diversified B.P. de Silva away from trading, closed underperforming divisions and entered into a joint venture with the Swatch Group. Working closely with Nicolas Hayek, the CEO and Chairman of Swatch, he led the development



Highly skilled goldsmiths and silversmiths create individual jewelry pieces.



The 1872 Clipper Tea Company sells top-quality Sri Lankan tea.



The clipper nowadays with family members.



The subsidiary RISIS is famous for its gold-plated orchids.

and distribution efforts for all of its key brands, and helped to develop their presence in Asia.

One of B.P. de Silva's successful acquisitions was RISIS, which is famous for its gold-plated orchids. RISIS was born as a spinoff from a Singapore government project to develop a gift that would uniquely symbolize the city-state. B.P. de Silva bought the company in 2001, as part of a strategy to shift away from simply trading or distributing products from foreign brands, to creating its own.

Sunil has always had a strong attachment to the watch market, hence B.P. de Silva's acquisition of a share in Audemars Piguet, one of the last independent, family-owned watch companies in Switzerland. Under his leadership, B.P. de Silva prospered and regained much of its former momentum, while branching out into new areas like hydroelectric power, water purification and tea.

Preserve the values of the founder

The fifth generation – Sunil's two sons and one daughter – fully appreciate the efforts made by the previous two generations to unify decision-making through a consolidated shareholder base. The three siblings currently work in different subsidiaries of the company, each tasked with gaining operational understanding to ensure that they will be good stewards.

Collectively, they have a common understanding that their primary role should be to preserve the values of the founder while ensuring the continuity of the business. They are extremely mindful of the lessons of history. Even at their relatively young ages of 31, 28 and 24, they are developing methods of governance that will ensure that the effort spent by previous generations to create a stable organization is built on in the future.

Currently, non-family member Wee Swee Poh is the Chief Executive of the group. She took over from Sunil in 2009. B.P. de Silva's board of directors comprises a diverse group of non-family independents, each with their own speciality.

This principle of bringing senior managers from outside links back to a decision taken by the founder. When it came time to hand over the business to the second generation, he controversially decided to exclude his only son from his succession plans, instead issuing shares to his most trusted management, who executed this responsibility with great success.

The lessons of the past live on in B.P. de Silva. Family has grown to mean more than simply genetic lineage – rather the embodiment of ideals and values that have served the company since its earliest days. Now taking a back seat role, Sunil is no doubt more than confident that the next generation can lead B.P. de Silva to success in the years ahead.

Sunil Amarasuriya with Navin, Shanya and Rehan

Company name:	B.P. de Silva Holdings
Generation(s):	4th and 5th
Founded:	1872 in Singapore
Industries:	Jewellery, watches, luxury gifts, food and beverage, tea, water purification and hydroelectricity