

Beating the competition naturally

MUNMUN GHOSH meets RS Kamat of Natural ice-creams and finds out that the best way to compete with multinationals is to be Indian.

ENTERPRISE

Till January 94, there was but one Natural Ice-Cream parlour in Bombay. At Juhu. A landmark for laymen. A paradise for ice-cream lovers. The last six months have witnessed the sprouting of five similar Natural Ice-Cream parlours in Parle, Borivli, Bandra, Lokhandwala Complex and Malad. The 38-years-old RS Kamat, owner of Natural Ice-

Crems, has definitely found a niche for himself.

The secret of Kamat's success lies in his backyard. A lush, verdant fruit-garden, resplendent with custard apples, cherries, cashew nuts, bannanas etc. The garden reflects Kamats' own agricultural know-how, the chief asset he brought with him to Bombay from his native place Mangalore, way back in '69. "Initially I was working for my elder brother, the late GS Kamat's concern, Gokul Ice-Creams," reveals the soft-spoken unassuming RS Kamat, seated in his plush Lokhandwala residence. "After some years I

thought of branching out on my own and set up the first Natural Ice-Cream parlour in '84."

Kamat decided to make his ice-creams different from existing brands by going back to nature. "I saw that we could succeed by offering natural traditional ice-creams -- ice-creams made out of milk, sugar and fruit, without the addition of any colours, essences, milk-powder or creams, things conventionally used in ice-creams all over the world." And Kamat was not wrong. Today in a market invaded by foreign brands, Natural can hold its head high, assured of a place in people's hearts. "I don't feel threatened by the entry of these foreign brands," insists Kamat. "Firstly, because we are not making ice-creams on their scale. Moreover, if new companies are coming up, then the number of consumers also is increasing sharply. When I began, my parlour it

attracted customers only from the upper class. Nowadays film stars and auto-rickshaw drivers alike stop by for ice-creams."

Today the success of an ice-cream brand depends on factors like positioning and look of the parlour, opines Kamat. "If you just place two benches before an ice-cream shop, its not going to work. The success of multinationals can be attributed to their right choice of places for shops. It's the presentation that makes all the difference, for ice-creams do not differ markedly from each other. It's largely a competition in flavours." Against 31 flavours of Baskin & Robbins, Natural offers 14 flavours at the moment. But Kamat is confident of countering the competition by introducing traditional flavours into ice-creams. "Flavours like that of elaichi, jaiphal and ginger which are inherent in

Indian culture. Also we will introduce new flavours on the basis of fruits. I intend to use fruits like custard apples, but which people avoid because of their excessive seeds. We've already introduced the watermelon flavour and coconut water flavour in our ice-creams and they have clicked in a big way."

Kamat is not afraid of imitation. "In this industry, its not easy. Like if another ice-cream company thinks of using watermelons, they'd have to invest lakhs to buy the appropriate machinery for making ice-creams using watermelons. You need a full set-up for it," Kamat observes.

As things stand, Kamat is optimistic about the five recently opened parlours. And judging by the response of customers, Natural is bound to go places. For as Kamat believes, what's 'natural' finally prevails.