

# THE SNAKE CHARMER

When Karan Bilimoria first came to the UK to study, few would have foreseen he would go on to found a global beer company, before taking a seat in the House of Lords – except maybe Bilimoria himself. **Ann Morgan** meets the man behind the brand

Coming out of the lift at the glass-fronted offices of the Cobra Beer Partnership in London's West End, you find yourself in an airy suite of rooms. A striking red and black break-out space and mirror-backed product display gives on to a long, light space where casually dressed staff tap away at workstations to the accompaniment of the latest hit songs. Given the informal atmosphere you could almost be forgiven for thinking that you had wandered on to the set of Facebook's offices in *The Social Network*. And you wouldn't be far wrong. Because, much like the hit film, the story of Cobra Beer started with a bright university student and a big idea.

'My ambition was to make the finest ever Indian beer,' says Lord Karan Bilimoria, who founded the company after graduating from Cambridge University in 1988. 'The idea evolved from a genuine love of beer as a product and a dislike of many of the lagers I had tried, which were fizzy, gassy brands. I wanted to produce a beer that would not only have a globally appealing taste but would go with food, particularly Indian food.'

Two decades on, and the self-made tycoon has translated that ambition into an international company and an award-winning product that has been exported to 50 countries. On the back of this achievement, he was awarded a CBE by the Queen, won a sheaf of accolades including Business Person of the Year, Asian of the Year and London Entrepreneur of the Year, was made

chancellor of Thames Valley University, and chaired numerous charities, task forces and business initiatives.

Bilimoria has also been awarded honorary doctorates by five UK universities and was made a life peer in 2006, an honour that made him a member of the British Parliament's House of Lords, where he has campaigned on issues from extending visa rights for international students to granting UK residency status to the Gurkhas. 'The House of Lords is this unique, special place,' he says. 'You have this amazing array of experts in just about every field you can imagine, so whatever topic we're debating we have people who can help address those issues. To be part of that is a great privilege and honour.'

## Rare opportunity

Yet life might easily have been quite different for the young man from Hyderabad, who, in 1981, was eager to follow in the footsteps of many of his relatives by going to study in the UK. 'My father was an Indian army officer,' says Bilimoria. 'He couldn't afford to pay for me to go so I had to find the best way for myself.'

An opportunity came in the shape of a rare scholarship offered by the firm that later became Ernst & Young, which enabled one Indian student to go to London every two years and study chartered accountancy.

Seizing this, Bilimoria completed the qualification and went on to study law at Cambridge University. It was there, while distinguishing himself as leader of the university debating team and as a polo Blue (competing at the highest level), that Bilimoria discovered his talent for selling. 'I organised the first ever Cambridge University polo tour to India,' he says. 'While I was out there I visited some polo-stick manufacturers and came back with samples, which I started selling to Harrods and Lillywhites.'

This taste of entrepreneurship prompted Bilimoria to pass up the more obviously lucrative career path of corporate finance in favour of starting Cobra Beer. With no industry experience and £20,000 of student debt to his name he launched the business from his Fulham flat, driving supplies to Indian restaurants in his battered Citroën 2CV. 'If you want to run your own company, you've got to make the leap to starting a business,' he says. 'That's the key. Then, when you're on that path, you have to be able to see opportunities.'



REX



ONE OF THE TRAITS  
OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP  
IS FINDING THE WILL  
TO KEEP GOING  
WHEN OTHERS  
WOULD GIVE UP



Karan Bilimoria  
founded Cobra  
Beer after  
graduating from  
Cambridge  
University

ANNA GORDON

COURTESY OF LORD KARAN BILIMORIA



Bilimoria as a young man and with his family in India

“WHEN FOREIGN STUDENTS COME TO THE UK, THEY ARE NOT THE ONLY ONES TO BENEFIT. IT BUILDS GENERATIONS OF LINKS”

In Bilimoria’s case, opportunity presented itself in the shape of a chance introduction to Dr Subroto Cariapa, an Indian master brewer who helped him create the beer. With an ambitious new product to sell, and a strategy of targeting the top restaurants and providing support in kind to charitable events, it wasn’t long before Bilimoria’s Cobra brand was widely known both in the UK and abroad. Numerous awards followed, with Cobra winning more gold medals than any other entrant at the world-leading Brussels Monde brewing event in 2005 and 2006.

It hasn’t all been plain sailing, though. In 2009, with estimated debts of £70 million, the business nearly folded and was only saved when brewer Molson Coors bought a 50.1 per cent stake in the company. The move marked the start of the Cobra Beer Partnership and proved to Bilimoria the importance of being able to bounce back. ‘I nearly lost everything,’ he says. ‘It was a very painful time. But one of the traits of entrepreneurship is finding the will to keep going when others would give up, and keeping the belief in your idea, your product, your brand. It’s always against the odds and it’s not an easy journey.’

**Strength in numbers**

For Bilimoria, international networks are crucial to this journey, particularly in tough economic times. It is an issue that he champions in his work as president of the UK India Business Council, and as chairman of the Indo British Partnership, a role that has seen him leading delegations to India with prime ministers Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. He feels education has a key part to play too. ‘There are so many opportunities that exist between countries like Britain and India,’ he says. ‘This is where education is so important. When foreign students come to the UK, they are not the only ones who benefit. It builds generations of links.’

Remembering his own experience, he is keen to see more students exploring the possibility of studying in the UK. ‘I would

encourage students to look to Britain first,’ he says. ‘Link in with your local British Council or embassy. Get networked into events that are taking place there. British Council offices have fabulous programmes of events that are quite often open to anybody, so take advantage of that.’

Studying has been a permanent part of Bilimoria’s life ever since he attended a Business Growth Programme at Cranfield University School of Management in 1998 and discovered the value of lifelong learning. Now also a graduate of London and Harvard Business Schools, and a visiting lecturer at numerous management institutions, Bilimoria is committed to continuing his education. All this alongside increasing Cobra’s presence as a global brand and pursuing his work in the House of Lords. ‘I’ve never looked back since the course at Cranfield,’ he says. ‘It was a turning point in my life. I don’t think I’m going to stop.’

Faced with such energy and enthusiasm, you get the feeling that there are many more chapters to come in the Cobra Beer story, a story that no one could have predicted when a young Indian student made his way to the UK 30 years ago. No one, that is, except that student himself perhaps.

‘I remember talking to one of my friends who’s now a senior partner at Ernst & Young on the day we joined as trainees,’ says Bilimoria. ‘I asked him what he was going to do when he qualified and he said: “I am going to be a partner in this firm one day.” He asked me what I was going to do and I said: “I’m going to leave the day I qualify and start my own business.” We both ended up doing exactly what we said all those years ago.’ ■

