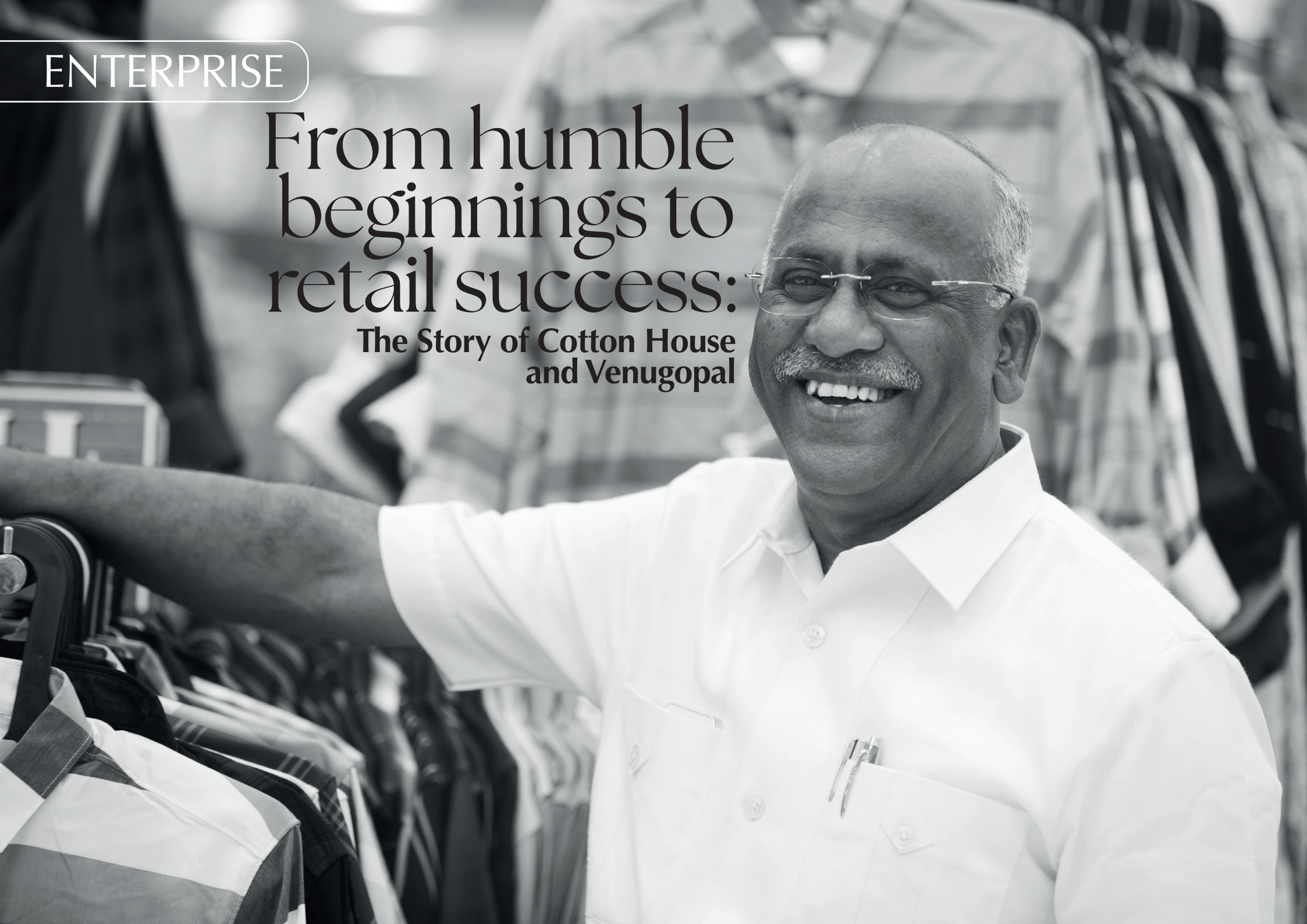


ENTERPRISE

# From humble beginnings to retail success:

The Story of Cotton House and Venugopal







It is true that people come into our lives unexpectedly, not from our seeking them out. Some become integral to our universe, while others linger briefly for various reasons and seasons, and then there are those who drift away. Yet, there are a few connections that withstand the test of time, enduring and profound.

R. Venugopal, the founder of Cotton House in Thiruvanniyur, epitomizes such enduring relationships through a career spanning half a century. On a sunny Thursday morning, the Champions of Chennai team had the privilege of engaging in a fascinating conversation with the 67-year-old, whose zest for life is truly inspirational.

Listening to Venugopal's earnest narrative was special, starting from the inception and the journey to establishing Cotton House as a flagship store. For an entrepreneur, beyond sheer business acumen, there are

numerous motivations that drive them towards what some may label as a 'successaholic' path, and Venugopal exemplifies this perfectly.

It all began when a 13-year-old Venugopal left his familiar home in Kancheepuram and found himself in Saidapet. What seemed like an impulsive decision turned out to be a resolute step towards carving his own path. Taken in by an elderly lady, who provided him shelter and sustenance, Venugopal reciprocated her kindness by working for her sons, who owned a shop in Sowcarpet.

Immersing himself in learning the trade, he earned fifty paise a day. His entrepreneurial journey kicked off with buying and selling seasonal products: umbrellas during monsoons, stationery and notebooks at the start of the academic year, and shawls and mufflers in winter,

as a roadside vendor. The state government facilitated exhibitions where Venugopal showcased his wares, learning firsthand about customer preferences from markets in Nellore, Pondicherry, Neyveli, and Trichy BHEL.

Customers at these markets bought ready-to-wear apparel such as sarees, lungis, nightgowns, T-shirts, shorts, shirts, trousers, and undergarments – a complete range for the whole family, alongside produce from the farmers' market. This demand led Venugopal to diversify into textiles and garments, sourcing sarees from Andhra, art silks from Karnataka, and synthetics from Surat. Over the years, he built enduring relationships with suppliers and vendors across India.

His strategy was straightforward: sourcing directly from manufacturers to retail affordable clothing. Sacrificing higher profit

margins for increased sales volume, he ensured customer satisfaction and loyalty.

In 2000, he launched his flagship store, Cotton House, initially operating from the basement of the current premises in Thiruvanniyur with 16 employees. Over time, he expanded to acquire adjacent buildings—one housing women's apparel and the other dedicated to menswear. Today, Cotton House offers a wide range of products, from stationery and kitchen utensils to neck pillows, gift items, accessories, cosmetics, and garments.

Venugopal prides himself on attentive customer service, ensuring the store is always stocked with special fabric for lining salwars or odd sizes that tweens often struggle to find elsewhere. He promptly restocks popular styles and introduces trends from across India, accommodating families seeking theme-based outfits or matching sarees.





His customer base expanded through word-of-mouth referrals. Proudly recalling a regular customer's mention on All India Radio, Venugopal highlighted how he has clothed a customer's daughter from infancy to college, a testament to Cotton House's enduring appeal.

His commitment extends beyond business; during the COVID-19 pandemic, he ensured employee safety with accommodations, meals, and health initiatives like online yoga sessions. Venugopal personally engages with his workforce daily, addressing concerns and briefing them on merchandise specifics to enhance customer service. Acknowledging his wife's unwavering support in managing home responsibilities, their children's education, and more, Venugopal credits her for enabling his dedication to work. With his sons now involved in the business, bringing in innovative ideas like inventory software and sustainable practices, Cotton House is poised for future growth. When asked about online expansion, Venugopal's preference for tactile fabric

assessment and rapid stock turnover pose challenges, yet he remains open to exploring new avenues.

Looking ahead, Venugopal aims to introduce international styles and couture, exploring markets in Italy, Vietnam, and Indonesia for premium textiles and fashion. Reflecting on milestones, Venugopal humbly views Cotton House as still evolving, with much left to achieve. His advice to aspiring entrepreneurs echoes his journey: "Give it your all, continuously learn and unlearn, and always strive to improve."

In his philanthropic efforts, Venugopal supports the community with initiatives like installing CCTV cameras for police patrol and shelters at Thiruvanniyur bus stops. The essence of Venugopal's ethos is best captured by a Thirukkural verse: வெள்ளத் தனைய மலர்நீட்டம் மாந்தர்தம் உள்ளத் தனைய துயர்வு. "The depth of water determines the height of the aquatic plant; one's enthusiasm dictates their success."

*By Sarayu Sriram*