

Industry Stalwarts – A Tribute

Apparel Online is starting a series dedicated to the pioneers of this dynamic Industry. Over the next 7 editions we will be talking to some old timers of the industry as they saw it then and its evolution over time. Among the early entrants are Vijay Mehta (Intercraft), Captain Nair (Leela Lace), KL Madan (Fancy International), Shiv Bhargav (Viraj Overseas), Satish Jain (Royal Embroidery), Sarla Ahuja (Shahi Exports), Mohanjeet Singh (Delfine Enterprises), Gurnam Singh (Sardar Silk House), Ashok Sachdev (India Exports).... the list goes on. These are some of the names that have come up in our discussions to identify the stalwarts, but there must be many more, Apparel Online invites its readers to help us single out some more players of the 60s and 70s so that we can recreate history for the coming generation to understand the evolution of the industry and culmination in its present form, documenting its ups and downs.

We begin this series with Vijay Mehta, Intercraft, who is considered by many in the industry as an ace marketer who was responsible for bringing many buyers into India in the early 70s, when the industry was in its nascent stage. He shares his years of experience, some good, some fun.

“The Industry in the 70s was A Mix of Fun and Hard Work”

–Vijay Mehta, Intercraft



By all accounts it is commonly believed that the apparel export industry in India has its roots in the 1960s, which was an interesting time in history when the pop group Beatles ruled the popular psyche of youth across the world giving birth to what is popularly called the ‘Hippie Culture’. The Indian ‘kurta and pajama’, with prints and embroidery became a craze among the followers of the ‘Hare Rama’ cult, an offshoot of the hippie movement and all of a sudden India became the epicenter of fashion. Enterprising young Indians ready to take the risk jumped at the opportunity to supply these cheap but highly profitable garments to the international market giving birth to what is today a multi-billion dollar industry.

Among the initial group of garment exporters, Mehta started garment exports in 1971 to Europe at a time when many considered Russia as the safest bet for international business with political alliances with the then USSR at an all time peak. Miltons of Bombay was already doing roaring business with the USSR and was considered the top exporter in the country. Companies like Sardar Silk House had created ready stock of cheap ‘kurta pajamas’ in thousands that they sold directly to buyers or other exporters and made money while the boom lasted. But, according to Mehta, the two export houses that he credits for pioneering the concept of tailored clothing in India are



Vijay Mehta and family with Mother Teresa at the inaugural function of Intercraft Ltd



(L-R) Ashwini Puri, Mohan Exports, DP Singh, Singh Exports (C&A), CL Sachdev, India Exports and Vijay Mehta enjoy an evening together

the Delhi-based India Export, whose owner Ashok Sachdev is no longer alive, for ladies garments; and Leela Lace for Cheesecloth shirts. Captain Nair was recently honoured with a lifetime achievement award on behalf of AEPC.

It has been a long and eventful journey, there are many interesting tales on how exporters got their initial orders. Mehta's story is an eye opener on innovative marketing skills. "I would walk into any store that had merchandise I felt could be made in India and offer to send samples," says Mehta. He clearly remembers meeting his first buyer who had a shop in Oxford Street on one of his trips abroad. The buyer was sourcing from Pakistan but not India. Says Mehta, "In 1971, nationalistic feels were very high so I decided to visit his shop to see what he was selling. In a store almost next to his I saw a shirt in cheesecloth with a 'Made in India' label; I reasoned that if the shirt was made in India then I would be able to source the fabric from the country so I bought the shirt for 3½ pounds and cut out a swatch as a sample to show

the buyer. The buyer liked the fabric and asked me to make a sample dress with some embroidery. I sent the fabric and instructions to my brother who took a whole month to find the fabric and get the dress stitched and embroidered. And when I showed the piece to the buyer he was very happy and placed an order for 800 pieces at 12 pounds apiece." Later, Intercraft sold around 300,000 pieces of the same style to many of their buyers around the world... the rest is history.

As the business took off, Mehta converted his residence into a factory using 100 local made Umbrella sewing machines bought from Chandni Chowk, Delhi. The salaries paid to the tailors at that time was Rs 130 per month. There were no in-house processes and the local dyers, dhobis and press-walaha were roped in to complete the production requirements. "It was fun doing business in those days as we were exploring new areas but it was also very challenging as buyers did not know or understand India and to convince them was very difficult," says Mehta. However, with his efforts, buyers like

There were no in-house processes and the local dyers, dhobis and press-walaha were roped in to complete the production requirements

We picked up undershirts (banians) from local manufacturers in Sadar Bazar and had them dyed and then hand embroidered; this became a craze with our buyers

Esprit, Mexx, Renederi made an entrance into India. Mehta recalls the opening of the first liaison office in the country. "AMC was opened in Mumbai at the Taj Hotel in the late 70s with an Italian as country manager and Namita Punjabi, who now runs a restaurant in the UK, as the India arm of the office," he reminisces.

Mehta is also credited with the title of 'King of Knits' for his pioneering efforts in popularising knitted garments. "The T-shirt business was

started in 1972 when we picked up undershirts (banians) from local manufacturers in Sadar Bazar and had them dyed and then hand embroidered; this became a craze with our buyers and we become the knit kings," he reflects amusedly. The business in knits took off in a big way and many years later in 1996 Intercraft invested Rs 25cr in an integrated knits unit, which unfortunately proved much beyond its time and never really took off. "We paid the price for being a pioneer as no

one was willing to shell out for the quality we were supplying and the project died a natural death," says Mehta.

As the industry grew, so did the requirements and processes, quota imposition, the establishment of AEPC, the initial garment fairs, imported sewing machines, quality controllers and the advent of compliance, Mehta has been a part of all the changes. "Each change brought new ways of working to the industry, but the bottom line remained the same—service to the buyer with good product," says Mehta. While in the initial stages, exporters had individual and family relations

with the buyers, as the industry grew many middle men/agencies made their entry to monitor and regulate the trade. "Today exporters only know the buying team not the owners, which has made the trade impersonal and professional," he adds. Even the staff has lost the loyalty factor, "Earlier we would hand pick freshers and groom them to work with the buyers, today they mostly come from fashion schools and believe they know that there is to learn. There is little exchange of thought and with lucrative opportunities knocking at every corner, where is the need to settle and learn?" questions Mehta.

|| Today I want to ride a bicycle so that I have the option to stop and relax, I don't want to be the biggest, I just want to work at my pace with fewer pieces but more high end products ||

—Vijay Mehta, Intercraft



Vijay Mehta with Ashwini Puri, Harish Seth (Pearl Exports), PD Sharma (Elephanta Group) and friends - it was fun in those days

After being at the top of the ladder for more than 2 decades (1971-96), Intercraft saw a major decline in 1996 from which it is only now making a strong come back. Labour crises in their resulted in the setback. "By 1996, I was riding a huge lion and whether I liked it or not, I had to continue to ride or fall off and be eaten up by the lion...I fell off as my pockets were not as deep as I thought they were and was promptly eaten up by my own lion. Today I want to ride a bicycle so that I have the option to stop and relax, I don't want to be the biggest, I just want to work at my pace with fewer pieces but more high end products," concludes Mehta.

Being a hard-core workaholic, Mehta is back at what he knows best, garmenting. FUS, the retail brand of Intercraft is geared up for a re-launch in December under the leadership of Mehta's son Nanak and buyers are again heading for the design driven products at the company auguring well for the visionary.