



LIVA: FROM A FIBRE TO A NEW FASHION IDEOLOGY



Birla Cellulose started in the 1940s as a vision of the Aditya Birla Group that foresaw the limitations of cotton and polyester, and identified the need for a suitable alternative, natural, man-made fibre. It is today the largest producer of viscose staple fibre in the world with five plants in India, Thailand and Indonesia and a total production capacity of more than 4,56,000 tonnes a year. Today it is in the spotlight because of its new brand of fabric for its fibre business called 'LIVA' that is charting a new course in fashion by entering the retail segment. Images Business of Fashion speaks to **Rajeev Gopal, Chief Marketing Officer- Pulp & Fibre Business, Aditya Birla Group** on their Viscose Staple Fibre business and the brand 'LIVA'.

By Zainab S Kazi & Rajan Varma.

Lets begin with understanding Viscose Staple Fibre (VSF) and the launch of LIVA. In general, are Indian consumers aware of VSF and how would you like to inform our readers about it?

Rajeev Gopal (RG): I think we need to go back to the genesis. The consumers in India are not very aware of the Viscose Staple Fibre. They are aware of cotton, polyester, silk, etc. Though they have been using garments made from VSF and liking it, but they are not aware that it is made using VSF. Cotton is natural but very boxy hence does not give a good flow. Polyester though is

fashionable, it is not very skin friendly and comfortable. And, silk is stylish but cannot be worn every day. In our research we found that there is a clear gap for something that is comfortable yet fashionable and provide them with the quotient of fashion. This is the value proposition that we are convinced that VSF fabrics and garments can fulfill. So that is the genesis of the brand.

Is there a demand for VSF or are you seeking to create the demand by awareness and how are you approaching this?

RG: Consumers are looking for products with such qualities. If we create good products using VSF, consumers will opt for it. So the task is what kind of products we make from VSF and how well we communicate this to the consumers. Till date, marketing of fibres has been the backend of the value chain whereas brands and retail are the frontend. Birla Cellulose is basically an ingredient fibre brand.

Consumers don't buy fibres, they buy garments and hence we need the brands and retail at the frontend to support this. Keeping this in mind we strongly believe it would be good to convey the unique properties of LIVA directly to the end consumer who is the decision maker. We have studied consumers with the actual products.

Were there no existing quality VSF products in India? If there weren't why was it so?

RG: We believe when a product is launched, a partnership at the backend value chain needs to be in place because unless the quality of the product produced is of a high order, the consumers will not be able to get the benefit of the product and they may be misguided. Once the value chain is strengthened, more volumes can be expected through the value chain. What has been happening is that the VSF products available in the Indian market were not of a high quality because the supply chain and value chain had not been developed adequately in terms of technology and processes to create good product out of this fibre.

Fiber companies are not perceived to be as great in communicating fashion and to grab eyeballs as brands, was generating buzz also the thought behind LIVA?

RG: Today, Birla Cellulose is in the spotlight with the launch of its new brand of fabric for



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its fibre business. Birla Cellulose is keen to chart a new course in fashion by entering the retail segment with its LIVA brand. With this new initiative, Birla Cellulose is the only company in the world to operate fully integrated manufacturing facilities extending from fibre to fashion, all under the umbrella of brand LIVA.

How have the fashion creators and brands responded so far to LIVA and what have the ones who responded gained from LIVA ?

RG: With its LIVA brand, the company has been collaborating with major fashion brands in India like Pantaloons, Van Heusen, Allen Solly, Lifestyle, Shoppers Stop, Global Desi, Chemistry and 109°F. Every product has its own experience and the challenge is to stand out and define the experience it offers and make sure it keeps getting elevated. It is all about creating

an association in the customer's mind. We believe it is important for customers to understand what they are getting. These are brand promises for a consumer to appreciate.

Today they are only looking for one aspect 'fit', and how it looks on the body. But this is also about enabling them to experience the wearing comfort. In essence, LIVA is a promise to consumers that garments with the LIVA tag will have the most fluid, soft drape, assured by the quality backing of the value chain accredited by the Aditya Birla Group

Coming back to VSF, what do you think of its future role and how are you promoting it?

RG: It is important that this viscose based industry develops. Unfortunately VSF consumption in India is very low compared



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to global standards. But the fact is that, the Indian textile industry has grown by quite significant numbers because India is a high consumption market. The Indian value chain is primarily dominated by cotton and polyester, and appropriate investments in technology and processes were not made. Thus cotton and polyester have grown quite handsomely as compared to VSF.

First reason for this is that there was no pull from the consumers and brand and second is that there was no push from the value chain. So one has to create a pull and push to make sure that we create a great brand. Therefore, our first task even before we launch the brand was to create the right supply chain. With LIVA we are trying to integrate a highly fragmented industry.

Birla Cellulose's endeavour has always been to focus on increasing consumption of viscose apparel by partnering with value chain partners -- the spinners, weavers, knitters, garment maker and designer community, towards a profitable growth. Keeping this in mind and the challenge mentioned, we have tried to address this issue by creating LIVA Accredited Partner Forum (LAPF). This is basically a group of value chain partners – starting from spinners, to fabricators to processors who



will make our fibre and process it right, using the right technology to produce fabrics of the right quality which meets the LIVA standards.

How exactly does the accreditation forum operate?

RG: The accredited forum has a certification mechanism with support on marketing, vendor management, design innovation, product perfection and sustainability. Once they demonstrate the capability, and we help them do that by providing the right resources and know-how, and accredit them through our certification. Therefore only that fabric which passes through our certification is extended the LIVA chain. The forum members have tremendously improved their product quality, marketing services and delivery mechanism which has been appreciated by leading brands who procure from them.

We do see a lot of advertising support for LIVA, can you share some more on your overall reach out strategy?

RG: The company has planned specific promotional efforts which will enable LIVA to reach out to the target audience so that they understand what LIVA is all about. With this launch, the company is extending the reach on a pan India basis to create greater awareness and product availability. Initially we are collaborating with the frontend brands and in this season of spring-summer we have done six of them (that includes Madura brands, Pantaloons and a few external brands as well). The idea is that the consumers should start noticing these products in the shops.

Firstly, we have a 360 degree media plan in place including digital media to communicate LIVA benefits directly to the consumers through print and outdoor media. The idea is to create a brand in the

consumers mind where they see a great value and they then go and ask for it at the stores.

Secondly, visual merchandise to enhance the consumer experience has been focused in about 500 stores. With the fragmented retail in India, the company has joined hands with TRRAIN to educate retail staff across the country into finer nuances of consumer experience since their touch-points are ten times more than the purchase. The idea behind this is to make customers notice these LIVA products. They should use them, feel it and ask more of it. Now obviously this does not happen overnight. It shall take some time. We shall invest with brands and undertake co-marketing initiatives.

Lastly, in SS15, LIVA tagged garments are available at stores, spread across over 54 cities within India. When they buy the garment, the tag will reinforce the brand essence and promise of LIVA. LIVA has also signed up with Bollywood star Kangana Ranaut.

Are the fashion though leaders supporting LIVA?

RG: LIVA also comes out with a research trend forecast through international

agencies and fabric designers. We also engage with merchandisers of the brands to talk about what collections would form a complete story for that brand and collaborate with fabric the sourcing team. Designers are always looking at innovations in fabrics and fibres as to what new things they can create. We make a collection ourselves where we have top designers with us on board. Satya Paul wants to do a collection of sarees for us.

Designers will not give us volumes but a niche premiumness. We are also tying up with fashion institutes where we are going to students and introducing LIVA to them.

What are your thrust categories?

RG: As part of its marketing strategy, the first phase of launch is focusing more towards women's fashion. The products are ideally suited for ladies kurti, skirt, legging, palazzo, western wear, nightwear and intimate apparels. I must also share that LIVA has also been enriching men's fashion and home textiles products in our research. LIVA is profitably blended with polyester or wool and the resulting fabric has terrific application in men's trouser and suitings, in addition to women wear and the home textile.

What is your criterion for deciding what brands you work with and what is your future vision for your partner brands?

RG: The strategy is to co-market LIVA with leading women's apparel retailers to build its availability, traceability and aspiration for consumers, ranging from tagging of the garments in partner outlets to in-store promotion and in media. The brands have to be desirable brands. We do not wish to associate with brands that are not high on consumer's radar of perception. They need to have a substantial size. They should fit into our category as we are primarily currently on women's wear. Very soon we shall have sarees as well. There is huge potential for exports of Indian traditional clothing first to the Indian diaspora and then I foresee Indian brands becoming global brands in this class of clothing. We need to get aggressive in-terms of marketing our ethnic wear. With LIVA we believe we have the right tool to reach places. In India we are the only manufacturers of VSF fibre so if we do not do it, no one would do it.



ABOUT RAJEEV GOPAL, CMO- PULP & FIBRE BUSINESS, ADITYA BIRLA GROUP

Rajeev Gopal is the Chief Marketing Officer of Aditya Birla Group's Pulp & Fibre business. Gopal is responsible for leading the integrated global marketing organisation. Prior to joining the Group, he was the Managing Director of Wimco, and later became its CEO in 2002. He started the safety matches business for ITC and achieved a leadership position within three years. He has had nearly three decades of association with ITC Limited where he had joined as a Management Trainee.

He has several accomplishments to his credit, including integration and turnaround of the safety matches business and development of a brand portfolio in keeping with the consumers' needs. He has been a recipient of several accolades including CAPEXIL's, a Government of India organisation and Top Export Award in 1997. He is a graduate in Mechanical Engineering from BITS, Pilani.
