

INTERVIEW SESHADRI RAMKUMAR, ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR, NON-WOVENS AND ADVANCED MATERIALS, TEXAS TECH UNIVERSITY

'Technical textile can bring new opportunities for exports'

The textile industry is at cross roads as it is losing its export markets. While traditional textile consumption is going below the GDP growth rate of the developed nation markets, the use of non-woven and technical textiles and products is above 4 or 5% of GDP, says Seshadri Ramkumar, associate professor, non-wovens and advanced materials, Texas Tech University, USA. Seshadri, who has been fervently calling for the promotion of non-woven and technical textile industry in India to tap the growing global demand, spoke to FE's Joseph Vackayil about a road map for the development of an organised technical textile and product industry in the country, which aims at integration of the technical textiles with existing textile industry, creation of converting clusters for the manufacture of products and liberal policy and marketing support from the government.

What is a technical textile?

Technical textile is a textile product manufactured for non-aesthetic purposes, where function is the primary criterion. It is a value-added textile material used to enhance the life style of people such as hygiene products, textiles for automotive applications, medical textiles, geotextiles (reinforcement of embankments), agrotexiles (textiles for crop protection, and protective clothing (eg, heat and radiation protection for fire fighter clothing, molten metal protection for welders, stab pro-

tection and bullet proof vests, and spacesuits). Overall, global growth rates of technical textiles are about 4% per year greater than the growth of home and apparel textiles, which are growing at a rate of 1% per year. These products will become necessary items as the demography and the life style of the developing nations change.

The unique feature of the technical textile is that there is abundant opportunities in both domestic and export markets. It will be a boom for the Indian textile industry as the industry will not be subjected to the vagaries of export business such as currency fluctuation, foreign government policy changes like protectionism.

Does the country have all the raw materials for the production of technical textiles and products?

India has enough of bleached cotton, polypropylene and polyester viscose yarn and materials. But high-tenacity, polyester and speciality flameretardant, and ballistic protective materials like Kevlar, Nomex, and broad spectrum antimicrobials have to be imported. They are mainly for defence and medical applications and the government should consider their zero-duty import. Vigorous push needs to be given to the use of locally available coir and jute in a big way to produce environment-friendly products.

There is a multi-billion dollar mar-



ket for technical textiles in the developed and developing countries. Where does India stand? Why Indian entrepreneurs do not make a plunge?

The world market for technical textile products is dominated by China. It has over 40% market share in the US, the major consumer in the world. Even Pakistan has 9% share. Multinationals like Procter & Gamble is making huge investments there. India has only about 7% in the global pie. Indian entrepreneurs are not making the plunge mainly owing to uncertainties about specific product technology and about markets. I should like to propose a road map for the development of an organised technical textile industry with focus on converting clusters and marketing.

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The present action plans of the textile ministry and other agencies seem to be very general and broad-based on various categories of technical textiles. Little has been spoken about the "converting sector"—the sector which produces specific products from the technical fabric. Focus should be on products.

For markets the entrepreneurs should know about the Indian and global demand for the various technical textile-based products. They should also have awareness about the technology related to specific products and should have marketing knowhow, where to market, how to market and whom to market. The government can send trade missions on exploratory tour to international technical textile and

product shows and encourage participation in buyer-seller meets in events like "IDEA" show in Miami, USA. The next event of this once-in-three years exhibition and trade summit is in April 2010. In Europe there is the "INDEX" show in Geneva. This too is a once-in-three years programme. Industrial Fabric Association International (IFAI) exhibition in the US is an annual event. It is coming to Singapore in 2011 for the benefit of the Asia-Pacific region countries.

According to your road map how the technical textile fabric and product manufacture can be linked to the existing textile industry?

This linkage or integration is the best and easiest thing that can be done. As a first step, two converting clusters could be developed in the Coimbatore-Tirupur belt and in the Mumbai-Ahmedabad-Surat region. Investment in a converting unit may not exceed Rs 2-3 crore, well within the reach of small and medium entrepreneurs. Technical fabric for the converting units can be manufactured by the knitting units in Tirupur region and the powerlooms in the Surat belt by making minor modifications.

The Tirupur units which make only cotton fabrics could make functional fabrics by a mix of synthetic and cotton fibre or yarn by a little bit of fine-tuning of their existing machinery.

In the Mundra SEZ Ahlstrom, from

Helsinki, Finland is setting up a Euro 40 million non-woven fabric manufacturing project. Clusters can be developed to produce various products from the fabric which otherwise would be exported.

For testing and quality certification existing laboratories could be revamped with minor alterations. Centres of excellence for human resource development could be set up at Institutions like Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel School of management in Coimbatore.

The national Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT) should look into making of apparels from non-wovens.

The textile industry associations could create sub divisions to organise and support the entrepreneurs of the converting clusters.

The Centre has created four centres of excellence for agro, medical, geo and protective textiles. How can they help?

These centres are set up at the textile research centres. They can be helpful only if product-specific units are encouraged to come up.

The textile minister Dayanidhi Maran wants to create one crore jobs in five years. What could be the contribution of tech textiles?

If all the projects I have been speaking about is in place, from academic to shop floor jobs, technical textile and converting sectors can create 1 to 1.5 million jobs in five years.