

'Warp Knitting Will Grow As Synthetics Become The Preferred Fibre'



Vikas Sharan, Vice President, Textile Engineering – Knitting Synthetics, Non-Wovens & Carpets, A.T.E. Enterprises Private Limited, spoke to **Textile Excellence**, about the trends in the Indian knitting industry. Here are the excerpts...

How is the knitting sector performing from A.T.E.'s point of view?

There are two kinds of knitting, namely warp knitting and weft knitting. Both the businesses are performing well from the Indian perspective. Warp knitting business for us has done very well and will continue to play an important role because the demand for synthetic products is slowly increasing. Due to the high stresses and strains of the yarn as it gets processed, synthetic yarn will be the mainstay as far as warp knitting is concerned. Also, there is a lot of investment happening in activewear or sportswear sector in addition to the normal apparel business and this will increase demand for warp knitting among others.

Then, there is circular knitting which is more versatile. It is used to process cotton, blends, synthetics and others. So, from that perspective, it is more flexible and easier to set up. Also, the investment needed is lesser vis-à-vis warp knitting.

Those from the decentralised or unorganised sector can easily set up a circular knitting unit with minimum four machines. As I see it, the annual market size in India for circular knitting machines is around 1,000 to 1,500 machines across various diameters. Out of this number, around 80% of the machines are of Chinese/Taiwanese/Korean origin, while the rest are imported from Europe. There is a steady growth in the circular knitting market though not exponential, which will stay for time to come.

Circular knitting machines are coming to Gujarat, besides traditional knitting centres like Tirupur and Ludhiana. So what are the factors driving this trend?

There is not much growth as such. I would prefer to call it as a topping up. The Kolkata market has slowed down very much. Three to four years ago, a lot of circular knitting machines were installed there, but now there is hardly any growth.

However, if you take Surat in Gujarat, the circular knitting business has just kickstarted and some good quantity of machines in cheaper varieties have made their way there. One could see knitting projects coming in batches of 10, 20 or in some cases, also 50 nos. Value addition is core to this market and hence one could also see jacquard machines coming in the future. Many existing warp knitting customers are also seriously looking at expanding into circular knitting, which is a leading indicator of growth for circular knitting in Surat area. The knitting of synthetic dress materials is the main factor driving the demand for circular knitting machines in a place like Surat, since it is primarily a synthetic driven market. The Tirupur market is more cotton export driven, while Ludhiana predominantly remains into domestic markets. Tirupur has mostly a job knitting community, which works with lesser number of machines per installation.

What are the products in your portfolio for the Indian market?

We are present across the entire textile value chain from the machinery point of view namely, spinning, knitting, weaving, processing, non-wovens, synthetics, carpets, technical textiles and garmenting. Then we are also prominently into accessories for spinning and processing. In the textile machine marketing, we are one of the most diversified companies. We can give end to end quality solutions to any customer or project. Hence, the customer does not have to go to different suppliers for their varied machinery requirements. Out of the above, I handle knitting, nonwovens, synthetics and carpets businesses.

What is the kind of market share that A.T.E. has in the knitting business?

In circular knitting, our market share is lower at the moment. In warp knitting however, we have a very dominant presence across markets, be it apparels or technical textiles. Though the Chinese have been selling some machines here, it would be very difficult for them to come up to the speeds and efficiencies of Karl Mayer machines.

There has been a lot of talk about technical textiles by the government and the industry. Have we been able to walk that talk so far?

The market demand for technical textiles will keep growing steadily as the knowledge and awareness grows. The use of technical textiles can also be linked to the country's GDP growth. People should see value in purchasing and using technical textiles. Currently, the market size is around Rs. 92,000 crores and expected to touch around Rs. 1,20,000 crores by next year.

There is a lot of scope for fire retardant (FR) fabrics, geotextiles and coated fabrics of different kinds. Then we have bag filters, wipes, spun bonded and SMS fabrics in non-wovens and so on. Hygiene is another market growing steadily in India.

However, in order for these to grow faster, it is important for the government to go beyond the announcement of the policies and ensure their effective implementation e.g., enforcement of the use of geotextiles in infrastructure like roads and railways, which come under the purview of the government to be also included in the Schedule of Rates (SOR). A mandatory use of this technical textile would automatically open up a relatively sleeping geotextile market to the tune of about Rs. 60,000 crore in size.

So technical textile sector will definitely take a good share of the overall textile industry in the next five years to come. ■

'Digital Printing Is Fast Catching On In India'



Textile processing is no longer what it used to be in India or elsewhere. **S Rajendran, Vice President, Textile Engineering – Processing & ETP, A.T.E. Enterprises Private Limited**, talks about these changes as well as the future. Here are the excerpts...

Could you tell us something about the current dynamics of the textile processing sector in India?

If I look at the processing segment in India, I think it is doing well. I think business has registered a good growth since last year. In fact, last year was one of the best years I would say, when I go by business trends of the past six years.

This trend seems to continue this year as well, which is very encouraging. Looking at the current situation, it is likely for this positive trend will last for at least one or two years more.

This is our forecast at A.T.E. If you look at the overall scenario in home textiles, it seems to be doing very well. Almost all existing players have expanded or are in the process of expanding their production capacity. New players like Trident have invested in a bed sheeting project, after their terry towel project.

Overall, bed sheeting and terry towel businesses are doing very well. Another significant thing which we could mention is that the printing segment is really booming - both in woven as well as knitted fabrics segments.

There are some statistics which say that last year alone, 90 rotary printing machines were sold in the Indian market. The normal Indian market size for such machines is roughly around

40 machines. So, it has more than doubled now.

Could you elaborate on investment trends and projects in the processing sector?

The investment trend is good. A lot of investments are happening in analogue rotary printing machines and also in digital printing machines. Lots of digital printers are coming to Surat for saree printing.

This is really a positive business trend, which we expect to continue. In fact, our forecast is that demand for digital printing will increase further. Apart from that, India is very strong in yarn dyed shirting; a trend which continues. We can see good investments in this area.

In general, the knitting segment is going for investments. Earlier, this was a trend seen only in South Indian markets like Tirupur in Tamil Nadu, but now I see it spreading all across India. Even in Northern India, knit processing units are coming up, which is the case in Western India as well as Kolkata. As a whole, I would say that the knitting side of the business is quite encouraging.

State governments are getting strict about pollution norms. Is this factor affecting investment by the industry?

Not exactly. On one side,

the government is very strict about pollution norms, while on the other, entrepreneurs too wish to do something about pollution.

Earlier, there was a feeling that there would not be any returns on money spent on effluent treatment plants. Now, that mindset has changed. Entrepreneurs feel that this is something which has got to be done. In fact, most of them have set up such plants and others too are in the process of doing so.

How many digital printing machines are being sold in India every year?

Digital printing machines are used for various applications. Many such machines are being brought to India by garment exporters who use these for sampling purposes. Garment exporters have to make a short run to make a few garments, which have to be sent to buyers abroad, in order to get their approval.

In the past, they were getting it done through process houses, but again, if it is a short run, there would be a time delay or it would be too expensive, which would make it inconvenient for garment exporters. However, if they have a small digital printer in-house, they can get the processed fabric from the process house, print it, make the garment and send it to their buyers.

This kind of sampling is very convenient for them. So, most of the digital printers are bought by this segment. Some rotary printing houses in India typically use digital printers as sampling machines. Earlier, the bulk production rotary printing machine was used for sampling, due to which productivity was lower.

Now, it has been arranged in such a way that sampling will be done on the digital printer, while the bulk production will be done on the rotary printing machine. More digital printers are being bought for this purpose. Then, there are niche segments like silk or high value added products, where runs are very short.

Digital printers are used for such purposes. There are also high speed production machines which are used for furnishing fabrics, home textiles and bed sheeting, where such machines are used. So, all put together, the market for digital printers could not be less than 50 digital printing machines per year, and we see rapid growth in this area.

How has A.T.E. been faring in the printing segment?

Like I was saying, printing is doing really well and three years ago we tied up with Zimmer. In the past, Zimmer used to sell two to three rotary spinning machines per year, but last year we sold ten of such machines.

This year also, I foresee the same kind of trend. We may even sell more than ten such machines this year. Our digital printing machine business is also doing well. Recently, we sold a digital printing machine to Welspun for printing terry towels.

Does digital printing technology cut down on effluents or costs? How cost effective is it?

Digital printing does not really cut down on effluents. Demand for digital printing is driven by the fact that the end result is better than results obtained from analogue rotary printers. Results from analogue rotary

printers are dependent on the technician, but digital printers are plug-and-play.

There is no need of an engraving manager or colour master or printing manager. Besides, reproduction of quality and consistency is better in digital printing.

The end result is very good. However, at the moment, digital printing operating costs could be higher, because digital ink has to be imported. The cost of digital ink is higher as compared to dyes which are being used in analogue rotary printers, but gradually the cost of digital ink is coming down. When the cost of digital ink and the cost of dyes will be the same, we foresee a time when a complete shift will happen from analogue rotary printing to digital printing.

The cost of digital ink has come down drastically in the past three years. In five years' time, we expect digital ink costs to reduce further after which the shift from analogue rotary printing to digital printing might take place.

Can technology provided by A.T.E. solve pollution related problems at the customer's end?

Yes. Ten years ago A.T.E. took over a company which specialises in effluent treatment plants. We have sold several such units which are in operation all across India. The speciality of our solution is that, it is completely a biological system. Firstly, our system does not use more chemicals due to which there is a cost advantage. Secondly, since our system does not use chemicals, sludge formation is much lesser than other systems which use chemicals. Sludgedisposal is a critical factor.

India still exports a lot of grey fabric and the processing sector is considered the weakest link in the value chain. So why has Indian industry failed to overcome this lacuna?

Hardly around five per cent of the process houses in India have been modernised. More than 90 per cent of process houses in India are yet to be modernised. Many of our 'A' segment corporate customers, especially those running composite units, have gone for modernisation. Yarn production is very high in India. Most of the yarn is still going in grey form.

The next stage is fabric production. Fabric production in India does not match India's yarn production, which is very high. The next stage after spinning and fabric production is processing. However, India's processing units are not modern. This was the case until very recently. That was the reason why most of the fabric was exported grey.

However, gradually that trend is changing. Corporates like Arvind and Vardhman have modern process facilities and this trend is slowly catching on among 'B' segment players.

What are the future trends that you see in the processing segment?

In the 1990s, all the top processing houses were in Mumbai and Ahmedabad. That has changed and now investments are happening in processing and new markets like Panipat, Karur in Tamil Nadu, Surat, Kolkata, etc. are opening up. These are the future markets for us. ■