

RUBBERISED COIR INDUSTRY

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The birth of Rubberised Coir Industry is quite amusing and interesting. Prior to the year 1960 people hardly had any idea of this novel and high utility product. In those days the world famous car manufacturers, M/s. Volks Wagon of Germany, were using horse hair as cushion filling material for their car seats. As their production increased from 100 cars per day to 300, there was dearth of this raw material. This necessitated a suitable alternative product for rubberization and which would suit to their specifications. Of various alternatives tried like sisal fibre, jute fibre, the coir fibre was decidedly found to be the best. This was the beginning of Rubberised Coir Industry .

In early 60's two renowned manufacturers M/s. Dr. Fehrer and Dr. Otto Angliether (DOA) were competing with each other to supply modern machines to manufacture Rubberised Coir products. The design and the material of construction was so excellent that we find some of their plants are still working well over a period of four decades. The Indian Rubberised Coir Industry is nearly four decades old. It was in 1964 that M/s. Bharat Motors of Chennai established its manufacturing unit. Many other units came up during sixties itself.

In the global market the important use of rubberised coir had been in the automobile industry. In Europe, most of the loyal users had been producers of more expensive cars – Mercedes and BMW in the erstwhile Federal Republic of Germany, Volvo in Sweden etc. Fiat which got most of its supplies from a plant at Gradec in Solvenia in Yugoslavia and Volkswagen had been consistent users of coir. The major plant established by Fiat in the erstwhile USSR also used rubberised coir in Japan, Datsun was a consistent user of rubberised coir. Ikeda Bussan, Mistubishi and Honda also were using rubberised coir. Another potential area for rubberised coir is for seating in other vehicles like trucks, buses, railway and sub-way coaches. It has the potential for replacing polyurethane foam in inner spring mattresses. For upholstery purposes also world consumption of rubberised coir could be improved if marketed properly. The use of rubberised coir as means of stabilising seashore lines canal and river bank was reported gradually developing in some of the western countries like Netherlands, Germany etc. There exists a very large and diverse market for bedding and upholstery in Europe and the United States and if efforts could be made to popularize rubberised coir it would be possible to get a significant share of the market, the main competitor being polyurethane foam.

In the domestic front, initially the growth of rubberised coir manufacturing industry was very slow, particularly as a led matters, owing to lack of awareness and any organised marketing effort. There was total disapproval of this product in all sectors when introduced as a healthy hygienic cushioning material. People considered it as a dirty, filthy, low cost and a rough product meant for the low income segment of the consumer market. The PU foam products in view of its soft feel used to be considered as a luxury product and had the preference of the upper segment of the consumer market. The situation gradually changed and the seventies witnessed rapid growth of the industry with product finding more and more acceptance and outlets on account of consumer public realising its unique characteristics functional, aspects and cost advantages.

After nearly one decade of its introduction, Government of India recognised Rubberised coir mattress as a healthy and hygienic product, thanks to the efforts taken by Coir Board for its popularisation through projection of its advantages and enduse applications.

Slowly many State Governments recognised rubberised coir as “wealth from waste” and advocated the use of rubberised coir mattresses in various hospitals, health clinics etc. through issue of Government circulars.

Growth During Last 4 Decades

From a handful of manufacturers, during early 60s this product got some market recognition in early 70s. Apart from Dr. Ferher & DOA Plants, some entrepreneurs started manufacturing machinery indigenously. In the next 3 decades over one hundred manufacturers have entered rubberised coir field. As per the statistics available now the industry has produced about 60,000 M.T. for the year ended March 2001 and the growth is still expected to go up in the years to come. Today rubberised coir products are increasingly used in many industries notably in transport industry like railways and buses, packaging industry (Pharmaceuticals, heavy engineering, electronics etc), hospitals, theatres and auditorium.

The basic raw material for Rubberised Coir industry is the brown coir fibre and the natural latex rubber. Over the last decade, the brown coir sector has registered a tremendous growth. Thanks to the encouragement given by Coir Board by forming a separate Brown Fibre Development Committee and through implementation of various developmental schemes aimed at betterment of production infrastructure skill development and diversification of production with the financial assistance to small units, brown fibre industry has achieved remarkable growth. Tamil Nadu State crowned the cap with the highest brown fibre production exceeding 1,50,000 M.T. out of 2,50,000 M.T. all over India. Out of 105 units assisted during 1998-1999, 80 units from Tamil Nadu got the maximum assistance totaling over Rs.68 lakhs. There is still a good potential for the growth of brown coir fibre.

Quality Issues

Over a period of 4 decades the industry recorded a substantial improvement in quality aspects. BIS has evolved its standard IS 8391:1987 and is being followed by the industry.

1. Rubberised Coir is an organic product as the important raw materials going into their manufacture are vegetable derivatives – viz – from rubber and coconut trees and a lions share is coconut fibre. As such, this product is bio-degradable and so is eco-friendly. This is the first consideration in its favour, especially when compared to its competitors, both PVC and U Foam and synthetic products. In the present day when environment and ecological considerations are top-most in every discerning person's mind, it is only natural that all encouragements and incentives are to be given to increase its production and propagating its use everywhere.
2. Manufacturing of this product – especially a very major ingredient – does not require wiping out any vegetation. It is just a bye-product from coconut husk which is discarded as a waste or used in the manufacture of coir door mats and floor coverings. Rubberised coir has actually enhanced the respectability of the humble coconut fibre used under feet (foot mat) into a novel consumer utility product which the human body can rest and recline. Therefore, price for the raw fibre has substantially increased when the innovative technology started production of rubberised coir products and this benefited the poor farmers (forming 70% of the Indian population). The waste has been turned into an unimaginable wealth. The Government of India having “Anthyodaya” as their cherished goal as enunciated by the Mahatma, should only be too happy to encourage the proliferation of this industry by devising suitable ways and means.
3. It is a native product making use of indigenously available/produced materials and so no royalty of any kind is payable to any foreign companies. It is a product of India, by Indians and for Indians. The Rubberised coir industry is thus helping the poorest of the poor villagers in generating employment in coconut farming, plucking, dehusking, defibering, coir making and as an industry it gains added importance as most of the units are set up in rural and semi-urban areas. To encourage this industry to enable it to offer better benefits to endusers, the Government may think of extending benefits similar to those given to Khadi & Village products and handloom as the ultimate beneficiaries of this industry are the poor and downtrodden.
4. It is rather encouraging and heartening to note that the humble coconut fibre from remote fields finds place in posh air conditional bed rooms of the mansions, lodges and hospitals.
5. In spite of lot of problems like high cost of transportation of raw materials and finished products across inter-state and octroi-bound city borders, high energy costs and the

necessity for maintaining an in-house power plant (as the production once started cannot be stopped in between as power supply drips or cut off on a number of occasions, for a variety of reasons), the industry prospers reasonably well. Central/ State taxes and levies should be reduced, if not avoided, altogether in order to enable the industry to compete with multi-nationals' products like U Foam, PU Foam, rubber Foam etc. Through aggressive and persistent promotional measures the rubberised coir products should be positioned as a luxury and functional products in the minds of the consumer. The industry as a whole thank the Government of India for giving due importance to this as an Agro product by totally exempting Rubberised Coir from the Central Excise Duty from 21st September 2001 even though an attempt was made to introduce Duty in the finance bill of 2001. It is expected that the State Governments will also take similar steps to encourage this industry.

6. Concession to this industry will make it preferable in the furnishing of railway passenger coaches, bus seats, cinema theatre seats and cushioning materials for hotel resorts, thus enlarging its domestic market.
7. Our present efforts in the Research & development area need to be focussed
 - (i) to make it lighter & more springy/cushioning
 - (ii) to make it sound absorbent or insulating
 - (iii) Fire resistant/retardant

Since all R & D efforts require heavy monetary inputs the industry looks forward eagerly to Coir Board for their assistance and guidance.