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Portrait

"We are committed to contributing to society as a whole"

13 Jul 2007. **Interview with Arif Fazlani, managing director of Sopariwala Exports Pvt. Ltd.**

When we last saw Mr Fazlani, at the recent World Tobacco Middle East trade show in Dubai, he was a picture of pure motion; constantly on the go during the 2-day event and it was not easy to get a few minutes of his time. When we did, he was 'all ears' and his focus on our questions was clear and impressive.



Arif Fazlani

TJI: Can you describe some of the exciting developments happening at Sopariwala?

Arif Fazlani: We have noticed an increasing popularity with and customer loyalty to our products, such as our tobacco-flavoured molasses and our herbal-flavoured molasses as well as our charcoal tablets and our snus. I guess the most exciting development though is the launch of our cigarette brand, Souks. We are also proud of the exclusive, one-stop-shop retail chain of shisha (hookah) outlets in the prime vicinity of Mumbai, all over India and all over the world.

Is this a new concept?

No not really but it is the latest trend.

Are there many competitors doing this kind of retail?

No, which of course represents an opportunity in the best sense of the word.

What are some of the other opportunities that your company is looking into?

We are currently seeing real growth with the increasing popularity of shisha or water pipes in non-traditional markets, in this case the non-Arabic countries. It appears that this trend is defined by being both a lifestyle and a luxury.

What is your company's secret to success? What are its strengths?

We rate customer satisfaction as a barometer of success, which may seem like a cliché, but we feel it is just fine and it really is our guiding principle. "Acceptance for Improvement" is a trade formulation we nourish and hedge ahead of competition. We help our customers make their decision.

How exactly do you achieve this?

When we initially began manufacturing molasses, we did not claim that our flavours or our quality was the best but then gradually we got feedback from customers with some implying just that. From others, we took very careful notes and implemented changes where required. Our customers are not only the end users, but also the traders, wholesalers, retailers and so on who show a keen interest in this business. We encourage this lobby but we also make them aware of the consequences if this is not properly upheld and thus guide them to make a best deal for themselves. In the end, we believe our greatest strength lies in offering "best quality" at a reasonable price.

But what does this really mean? How does this translate from a concept into reality?

We offer the widest selection of flavours, molasses and bidis – both the tobacco and herbal varieties. Since our target is the non-traditional markets, we want them to enjoy the Arabic richness in volume and for that we do not mind a price with a thin margin.

How and when did you become involved in the tobacco business?

The tobacco business and the Sopariwala business share a long history. The journey began about 50 years ago with a modest family business selling betel nuts and tobacco leaves at a retail shop in Mumbai (Bombay) and that is how the name, "Sopariwala," came into being: in the Hindi language, "Sopari"

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means "betel". Back then, my father, Abdul Kader Fazlani, who was not only the chairman, but a true visionary, conceived the idea of trading in tobacco, and the business gradually grew to include a processing/sorting plant in the tobacco belt in Gujarat. With a strong perseverance to excel and a survey of good demand overseas, the business grew to include large manufacturing units with sophisticated machinery and high-quality yield. The story of diversification in other agro-produce began after a decade. It now runs under the flagship of "Sopariwala Group" and is a multiple, specialised business including export of pulses, spices, oil-seeds, cut flowers, shisha and tobacco products, all handled by eminent professionals. With the blessing from the Almighty and under rigorous training from our father, I and my three brothers, Irfan, Iqbal and Asif, handle independent business profiles, while trying to maintain a high level of dignity and remarkable performance.

How did you get started within your family's business?

In 1991, when I was 20, I began working for my family. As the eldest son, it was my responsibility to help my father carry the business load, so I joined him at a very early age and I have never looked back.

How would you describe yourself?

I would characterise my work ethic as being sincere in all aspects of the business, along with a zealotry to exploit the unconventional. We all work very hard at Sopariwala and this vigour over the past 17 years has nurtured the blend of richness in understanding, decision-making and implementation for the most honourable rewards within the tobacco business.

What has most notably changed in the industry since you assumed your current role as managing director?

Well, on a personal level, that is pretty easy to answer: despite all the hardships we have faced, we have managed to successfully enter the various tobacco products segments. Another remarkable change in the tobacco fraternity is the development of the current hookah revolution, which may probably eat up the cigarette, cigar, bidi and chewing tobacco markets.

How do you think the tobacco industry differs from others?

Tobacco is the only product which has been controversial for ages all over the world. It involves the maximum restrictions throughout the stages of production, processing, marketing and consumption.

What aspects of this industry give you the greatest pleasure?

The aspects which give me the greatest sense of pleasure and satisfaction in this business are its never-ending demand, working with our employees, and the lifestyle associated with the international aspect of the industry especially establishing contacts and opening up business opportunities. As the tobacco industry is ruled by only a few players, it gives us immense power against the competition.

What would you tell your industry colleagues is/are the greatest concern(s) for the industry as a whole?

Liberalisation in trade barriers would help growth and it is the greatest concern for all the players in the industry, especially with regard to the import restrictions on tobacco. As I mentioned, tobacco is the most controversial and restricted commodity all over the world, making it very difficult to import. It also attracts the maximum duty which has to be removed.

Do you have a motto for your personal and/or your professional life?

We at Sopariwala's are blessed to be in India, with the most fertile soil for tobacco cultivation, equipped with the most sophisticated technology and empowered with skilled and professional manpower with access to all the modern amenities. And though we aim to excel in all our business ventures, "customer satisfaction" is our prime motto.

Of which achievement in your career are you particularly proud?

The leaders of the company are not only considered business tycoons, but are also philanthropists who are just as committed to contributing to the welfare of Indian society. A fat portion of the revenues generated at Sopariwala is donated to schools, charitable trusts and orphanages for the betterment of the weaker section of society and that is the proudest achievement of all. We are committed to contributing to the society as a whole, you see.

Does your work leave time for hobbies or passions?

The working hours are fully devoted to quality output of our products and leisure is equally taken care of with family and friends.

Do you have a role model that you can tell us about?

My father, Abdul Kader Fazlani, who is the chairman of Sopariwala Group, has taught me the virtue of peaceful living and business dynamics. He is my mentor and lifetime role model.

Please finish the sentence: If I was not doing the job I am doing today,

I would be...

...packing tobacco for Sopariwala's!

Interview: Rosemarie Overstreet

Five quick facts about Arif Fazlani:

His friends would say that he is:

- industrious
- outspoken
- always eager to learn
- innovative
- self-disciplined

Five quick facts about Sopariwala:

- A family-owned enterprise;
- Diversified activities in tobacco and tobacco products;
- Diversification in other agro-produce such as spices, pulses, oil seeds, flowers;
- Recognised with the status of 3 Star Export House conferred to very few by Govt. of India;
- Since 2001 one of India's top three exporters of tobacco and tobacco products.