



Vertical integration: the Forward Group of Companies



The tanneries place special care and attention to the quality and grading of wet blue

Forward Group is one of the largest, fastest growing leather and footwear manufacturing companies in India. The group, a conglomerate of tannery, shoe upper, full shoes and moulded sole manufacturing divisions, started as a small tannery producing El Goat skins 35 years ago on its present site on the outskirts of Chennai.

Today, its two tanneries have a combined capacity of one million square feet of finished leather per month, and its shoe upper unit and full shoe unit produces 600,000 pairs of uppers and 750,000 pairs of shoes a year respectively. An export sales turnover of \$18million for the group was achieved in 2002.

The tannery division

From modest beginnings, the first of the two tanneries now operated by the company started production in 1976 and has gradually built up to a capacity of 400,000 square feet per month. Wet blue is used from known sources, with continuous feedback concerning matters of quality. The finished range comprises goat leathers, and heavy cow hides as oil pull ups, nubucks, and natural milled leathers in substances ranging from 1.8 mm to 2.6 mm.

The second tannery was commissioned in 2002. This tannery is well mechanised with efficient handling systems, microprocessor-controlled wet end processing, and quality machinery. The capacity of this unit is 600,000 square feet per month of goat leathers, ranging from high quality glazed kid of fine grain to polished, rub off, burnish, and milled kid leathers in

a wide range of conventional and fashion colours.

Both tanneries have testing laboratories attached to them with up to date testing equipment to ensure that production meets in-house Quality Assurance. The tanneries are environment-conscious and, following in-house pretreatment, the waste waters are piped directly to Pallavaram Common Effluent Treatment Plant, where they receive full primary and biological treatment to stringent standards.

The company is an active participant in the ModEurop collections and develops its own collections for every season. These leathers are used for both in-house production of shoes, and exported as leathers to different parts of the world.

Shoe upper and footwear divisions

As a natural progression in the added-value chain, the shoe-upper division commenced operations in 1990. Since then it has grown as an independent unit, manufacturing 50,000 pairs of shoe uppers a month in a variety of styles - sandals, classic uppers, moccasins, ankle boots and high boots. The leathers required come from the two tanneries, as well as from external purchases. The unit benefited by working with various major international footwear manufacturers, and has been strengthened by this experience. These shoe uppers are now exported to leading brands in the UK, Germany, Italy and Spain.

As a response to market needs a full shoe plant was commissioned in 1994, using expertise, training and equipment from strategic partners in the UK. In record time, the factory



The movement of all leather between drum processing and machine operations is by forklift truck using specially designed and reinforced pallets. A mezzanine provides servicing for the processing drums.



The leather finishing department is clean and well equipped, with considerable space for expansion. In common with the dyeing department, the space available makes for fast movement between operations, so holding times are short.

reached a capacity of 50,000 pairs a month, while maintaining an impressive quality record with its customers with a practically zero shop-return rate. Today, it has three production tracks and it is considered a leading supplier of complete shoes for major shoe manufacturers and outlets, both in the UK and mainland Europe.

In 1997, a new shoe upper unit was started, making the full shoe unit fully self-reliant and avoiding outsourcing for uppers. This unit has six production tracks and the capacity of the upper units now matches the full shoe requirements. From this base the division expects to double its capacity of full shoe manufacture within the next two years.

Forward Shoes houses a physical and chemical testing laboratory for leather, materials and footwear testing with the latest equipment from the UK. It is also an accredited member of SATRA and is in the process of achieving ISO 9002 certification.

The company has also developed its own design cell, a rarity for its kind in India, where it develops its new styles depending

on market forecasts. The activities of this cell have been augmented and modernised with the setting up of a shoe design studio to international standards and has introduced of computer-aided designing (CAD).

Injection moulded sole unit

As the latest expansion of this group, Suoufficio Chennai was inaugurated in February, 2001 as a manufacturing facility for injection moulded soles. The plant is equipped with modern



The upper division and the full shoe units are non-congested, allowing efficient workflow between each operation.



Close attention is paid to quality control, both within manufacture and in-house testing.



Considerable care is taken in attention to detail within all footwear units.

machines, and benefits were gained through technical collaboration with and training by Malaspina Spa of Italy, a leading producer of synthetic soles with global sales.

The objectives are to produce 80,000 pairs of soles a month of international quality for the group's in-house consumption, and subsequently for sales to other Indian shoe manufacturers, as well as the export market. With design and moulds provided from Italy, the unit is producing soles in PVC, TR, leather inserts and fully built leather units. Bicolour TR soles are planned for future production.

Social welfare

The group today provides direct employment to its workforce of 1,600 people, and indirect employment to hundreds of others. Statutory benefits, health insurance and attractive incentives are offered to all its employees and the company is viewed as a responsible, equal-opportunity employer. 🌱