

APPAREL EXPORTS: HOW LONG CAN WE CARRY ON WITH THE 'CHALTA HAI' ATTITUDE?

Prof. Rajesh Bheda



Even though the ready-to-wear concept is quite popular, I still get a few trousers custom made. Sometime ago, I had given two trousers to be made, one olive green and another black. However, to my dismay I found that the thread used for sewing did not match the fabric. When I brought this to masterji's notice, (it is very important to carefully examine his response), he said, "sahib ye to bilkul matching hai!" (This matches perfectly!). It left me wondering if there was something wrong with my eyesight. Anyway, I had to firmly tell him that my eyesight was perfectly normal and the thread certainly was not of the same color. Master, stunned of my stance, mellowed down, and says, "sahib ye to Unnis Bees Ka Fark hai! Itna To Chalta hai!" (This is a slight difference, it won't matter) "Matching dhaaga bhi to nahi milta hai, or fir kam bhi to nahi rok saktey!" (It is not easy to find matching shades of thread and we can't stop work for that reason).

This whole episode forces me to think about his mind set and this 'Chalta hai' attitude. First, he defies that there is any problem, then, unwillingly accepts but tries to prove that it is not so major and tries to blame others for the mistake. But, when I think about this issue, I am not really in position to blame my master because, he is just a small- time tailor with very little education and low exposure, when I can find similar mistakes repeated in apparel trade day in and out. One can find strikingly different color threads being used on 'side seam' operations of a well established men's trousers brand in operations, the reason being 'Chalta hai,baahar se thodi nazar aayega.'"(It can do as it won't be visible from outside).

Indian apparel export industry, from a very humble start, has gained a significant role in the country's export performance. The creativity, hard work and entrepreneurial skills of the exporting community must be commended. They have done an inevitable job for the country and for themselves. But this is not time to get complacent since, our neighboring nations have recorded better performance. In spite of a late start, their share in the international clothing trade is increasing at much faster rate than ours. At this stage we must take some time off to retrospect so as to understand where we have gone wrong.

If we pay attention to the feedback received from our customers (apparel buyers), two areas emerge as major drawbacks on Indian apparel export, '**inconsistent quality**' and '**unpredictable delivery**'. But then, quality and delivery (besides price design and service) are the most important needs of apparel of buyers. Having knowing the shortcomings, one must try to find the root cause of the problem, so as to find the probable solutions to it.

'Chalta Hai' Attitude

I am convinced that most of the problems faced by exporters are due to easily avoidable mistakes which would not have happened if we did not subscribe to this 'Chalta Hai attitude'.

One typical example is overbooking. Taking more export orders than the capacity, with the hope that buyers will give the extension on delivery date. As everyone involved in this process knows about this possible extension, no process takes place in time and either the order has to be shipped

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by air at exporter's cost, instead of sea shipment, or results in a cancellation. The height of 'Chalta Hai' was noticed in an export organization. After realizing on delivery date that the shipment was short of 20-25 shirts, the manager packed 'cut fabric waste' in two cartons so that the number of cartons was same as the packing list. Probably this complacency was due to the massive USA quota that the exporter had.

One exporter I have known used to be quantity wise the biggest supplier of men's shirts to one of the leading chain stores in Europe. Whenever quality inspections were offered in his factory, (In fact the factory did nothing more than finishing and packing) he used to stand opposite to quality inspector with small scissors in his hand. The moment untrimmed thread ends were detected; he would quickly trim the thread saying, "Abhi thik kar dete hain". Leaving me wondering as to why not pack a small clipper with every shirt he exported. The customer themselves could cut the threads. The same exporter was also known for bending the rules. Specifications required 3 ply thread to be used, he would use the cheapest available '3' ply thread.

There is no scope for complacency, this exporter, who used to be the biggest supplier was dropped from the supplier's list by the store.

Any standard of specification has certain amount of tolerance which is specified. It is seen most of the time people set their target to meet the tolerance level i.e. if measurement tolerance for any specific operations is $\pm 2\%$, on 100 cm. length, an attempt is made to produce the garment with a length of 98 to 102 centimeter. This is what the problem is, when you aim for basic minimum 98%, in all probabilities you will end up with 95-96% which is not acceptable.

Top Management and 'Chalta Hai'

As it is rightly said that there are three most important requirements for the success of **Total Quality Management** in any organization: One - top management commitment, Two - top management commitment, Three - top management commitment, and the top management has to share the vision with its organization.

The quality policy of an organization has to be clear so that employees have no confusion in their mind. To quote a quality policy of a Japanese Ship Building Co., "To produce quality ships, at a profit if we can, at a loss if we must, but to produce quality ships". How many apparel exporters have such an unambiguous policy? In fact, a good number of exporters themselves are struck with the "Chalta hai attitude".

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Unless, the quality policies of an organization reflect in day to day working of senior management, employees will start deviating from them to their convenience. It is quite common to find senior managers shipping few rejected pieces to complete the order quantity for a shipment.

Once your employees see you deviating from standards, next time they themselves will start accepting similar defective pieces, the reason is, "why waste time to wait for the manager to come and accept the same?" People may take these decisions based on the feeling that 99% merchandise is fault-free, but when a faulty garment reaches a customer it is 100% faulty for him. Another 4-5 customer complaints and that is enough for a buyer to give supplier a debit note. A recent survey in USA shows that a dissatisfied customer is likely to tell 32 persons about his bad experience.

Once the top management reaches awakening stage quality maturity, half the battle is won. The next challenge is to get other people in the organization to share the same vision. As the top management's policies become clear; are explained to employees and the same policies reflect in day to day working of top and senior management, others will follow suit. Specific to our industry, you will have to indulge a training of managers, supervisors and workers. This could be formal or informal. For example, it is very important to show a tailor what a quality garment looks and feels like. Unless he is clear about what he is required to produce, how do you expect a person who is raised in substandard environment and consumes substandard products, to produce a quality product? You need to explain why 'Unnis bees ka farak' is not acceptable.

You have to be convinced of the benefits of quality working. Practice what you preach and work towards building a quality culture.

I am very sure that the day is not far when your organization may be considered for supplier quality award by your buyer.