

Rubber sheeting industry needs more attention

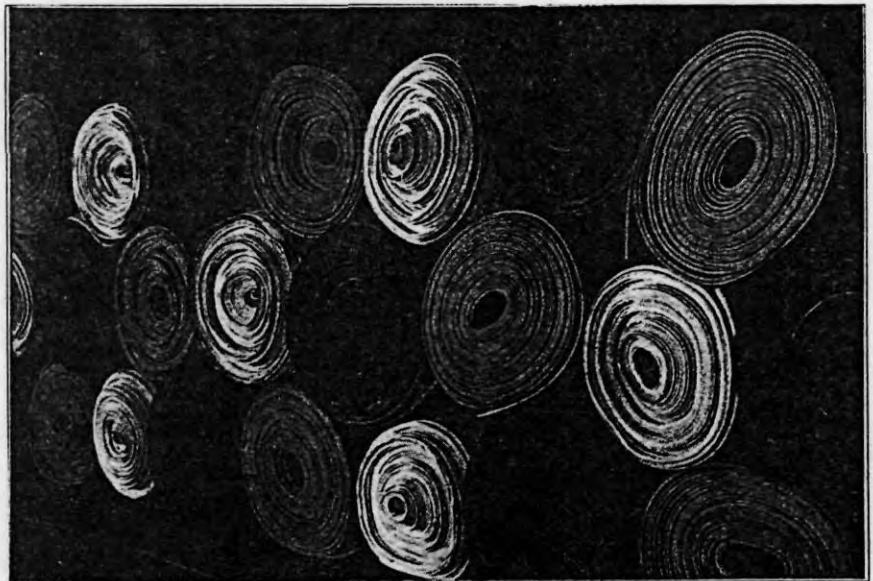
S. Mohankumar and C. N. Krishnankutty

The rubber sheeting industry is attaining more importance as the demand for it is increasing in the domestic and international markets. Considering the general industrial growth of our country, the opportunities for the development and expansion of the sheeting industry are enormous and challenging. But despite a large domestic and export market only limited manufacturers could be able to penetrate in the market. Why? The reasons are many.

Rubber sheeting is now a major item of export in the non-tyre products from India. The dramatic breakthrough came during the last two years replacing cycle tyre and tube. The export of these items earned Rs. 29.28 crores in 1991-92 and Rs. 69.4 crores in 1992-93. The situation completely changed during 1993-94 when the export of rubber sheetings earned Rs. 68.25 crores. This marked an increase of more than ten times compared to the previous years' exports of rubber sheeting and highlights the good performance in the export market. The industry is now confident of making big strides and crossing Rs. 500 crore mark by the turn of the century in exports.

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fabric reinforced insertion sheetings. All these sheets are broadly classified on the basis of its functions into two - "hospital sheetings" used as bedsheets in hospitals and baby sheets in houses and "industrial sheetings" used in different types of machines for industrial production. Besides, the manufacturers of sheetings can also make some diversified items like textured rubberised fabrics used for making rain coats and school bags, chemical proofed fabrics, hot water bag, ice bag, inflator, air cushion, air ring, air pillow, gum boot, protective



Rubber sheetings: Ready for use

As India is not known as a producer of quality rubber sheetings, adequate publicity should be given to the product and its applications in different areas

The family of rubber sheetings include hospital sheets, industrial sheets, oil and chemical resistant sheets, electrical sheets and other

footwear, mottled sheetings and special purpose insertion joints.

Plain sheets

Rubber sheetings are generally available in two forms, plain form and insertion form reinforced with light weight fabric. Demand is now more for fabric reinforced sheets as it increases strength and wear/tear resistance of the products made from it. Plain sheets used for domestic applications are usually very thin of 0.35 to 0.50 mm, width 90 cms and contain no fabric support. However the size of insertion sheets can be tailor made to different specific applications.

Both plain and insertion sheets can be manufactured by the process of calendering or spreading. About 39 factories in India have the facility to make sheets by calendering method. Of these, 33 factories were operating in 93-94 and the rest were not making sheets due to some or other reasons. Calcutta still enjoys the power of oligopoly in sheet manufacturing (12

even to meet the domestic consumption in the organized sector (see table). Besides a large quantity of sheetings is also exported every year. The table reveals that there may be some concealed production which is unaccounted in the manufacturer's records. One can expect the actual production of sheetings to at least 70 per cent of the total installed capacity.

and collect orders and forward it to the manufacturers. Hospital sheets can easily be distributed through agents. Since the duration of placing order by textile dealers varies from 3 to 4 months, one agent is sufficient to canvas the entire textile dealers in a state.

Department stores with an extended facility for textile assortment can easily sell the products made from textured fabrics. Low priced sheetings and other sheet based products used for domestic uses can also be traded through super markets. Price and cash discount are the two most important criteria of purchase in super market rather than quality and fashion. The targeted consumers in mail order business are the middle and big industries using rubber sheetings and State Health Departments for their hospital sheets. Producers should send illustrated catalogue of their products to potential customer who can shop at their site rather than paying a visit to a store or factory premise. All they have to do is to send an order from and the products will be delivered to their site within a couple of days or weeks.

Market prospects

Demand for rubber sheetings is increasing rapidly and a survey conducted by the Rubber Board recently has indicated that the total requirement of hospital bed sheets will come to 18.30 lakh metres in 1994-95 if all the beds in hospitals use two sheets per annum. Similarly, on the basis of birth rate, demand for baby sheets can be estimated to more than 628 lakh metres. Demand for industrial sheets and textured fabrics depends on the development and growth of industries and other educational/public utilities using different forms of sheets. The study has also indicated that consumption of sheetings is increasing in many sectors and will grow considerably in the coming years.

Production and consumption of rubber sheetings (tonnes)

Year	Production	Consumption*
1990-91	7412	7603
91-92	9653	9083
92-93	9835	10308
93-94	13725	13360

* Organized sector only

units making both hospital and industrial sheets) followed by Maharashtra having 6 factories exclusively making industrial sheetings. Kerala, the land of rubber, has only two factories making sheetings for industrial purposes, and a unit under public sector is now installing calendering machine to make hospital sheets.

Capacity

All these 33 factories have a combined installed capacity to make around 28,000 tonnes of different types of sheetings. Of this, 72 per cent is accounted for industrial sheets, 23 per cent hospital sheetings and the rest is for making textured fabrics. During 93-94, this industry produced around 2,520 tonnes of hospital sheetings, 10,720 tonnes of industrial sheets and 485 tonnes of textured fabrics. Total production in this period was 13,725 tonnes accounting an increase of 40 per cent over the previous year's production. It is understood that production of sheetings in India is hardly sufficient

Market strategy

Marketing of rubber sheetings is carried out by more than one system depending on the size and end users of the product. Hospital sheets are generally marketed through agency system. Sheet makers appoint their own agents to canvas and collect orders from textile dealers who are the distribution points of hospital sheets. With regard to industrial sheetings, third parties (dealers) buy sheets from the producers on commission basis of the specific dimensions given by them. Direct marketing is also prevalent in both hospital and industrial sheetings only to nominal extent. Apart from domestic market, sheetings are exported to countries like Germany, the U.K., Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Bangladesh and Gulf countries.

Agents, department stores and super markets, street markets and mail order business are the important outlets through which sheetings can be marketed more effectively. Agents present samples to potential claims

Fashion in industrial sheetings does not change quickly. For hospital sheetings, changes will take place in a short time. Introduction of PVC and polyfabric sheets will be a warning

**There are good prospects
for rubber sheetings and
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to the rubber sheet manufacturers. Consumers are now concerned about all kinds of available substitutes for sheetings. Regarding colours, they are not much interested in wild new colour schemes. They are satisfied with the

existing colour combinations available in the market. Producers on nutshell argued that market for hospital sheetings becomes rather conservative.

The above analysis clearly reveals that there are good prospects for this product and manufacturers should take advantage of this situation and try to export their produce during this season. Since the domestic demand for calendered sheets is very often combined with spread sheets, manufacturers who lack the facility to make spread sheets should also install a suitable spreading machine.

As some of the substitutes like PVC and polyfabric sheets are priced lower in the market, sheet producers could not sell their product at lucrative prices. This placed utmost importance on commitment, distribution, design and pricing.

As India is not known as a producer of quality sheetings, adequate publicity should be given to the product and its applications in different areas. Participation in trade fairs may help to secure instant export orders. Small

**Consumers
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for sheetings**

units shall organise themselves and open showrooms in major cities to display products manufactured so that latest developments in sheetings may be brought to the notice of more and more people. □

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