

LEADING CASE SYSTEMS HOUSE

Speciality Group claims to be the leading PU systems house for CASE (coatings, adhesives, sealants and elastomers) materials in India. It is the, "only Indian business making CASE systems based on pure MDI as well as TDI and other isocyanates," claimed Mandar Lele.

The group's strength in niche applications in the CASE market rests on its three units. These are elastomer part maker Urethanes Pvt. Ltd, engineering plastics part maker Nand Composites Pvt. Ltd and Maitreya Polymers & Speciality Chemicals Pvt. Ltd.

The group was set up in 1982 to make printing rollers, using a special two-component system based on polyester and TDI. It eventually became a franchiser to customers making PU rollers and started supplying systems to them.

Through this, the firm developed expertise in high-performance elastomers and started making rods, tubes and wheels, forming Speciality Urethanes to do so, in 1989, said Mandar Lele. At that time, he said, it was difficult to import materials because import duty was so high, at about 190 percent.

Speciality Urethanes was the fourth or fifth unit to start making cast PU parts in India, but very soon

became a leading enterprise in the area, he claimed.

A rethink saw a move into making prepolymers, initially for captive consumption, primarily based on TDI, because MDI is not made in India, Mandar Lele said.

Maitreya Polymers, set up three years ago, started by making prepolymers and systems for printing rollers, "for our roller company Nand Composites," which has started injection moulding PU parts also. The unit offers Supramer PU prepolymers, Supracure curatives and chain extenders for high-performance cast PU elastomer uses and for clear aliphatic microcellular urethane systems.

Also on offer are Supracote PU and hybrid PU dispersions, used in leather and textiles and other coatings, said Mandar Lele.

"After this show, we will be launching our MDI-based systems also," he added.

The Speciality Group has a 6000-m² production base on at an industrial estate at Satara, connected by an expressway to Mumbai.

Speciality Urethane says it is now the largest producer of cast urethane products in India, claiming that its Suprathane parts have the "lion's share of the Indian cast PU market."

Mandar Lele describes Maitreya Polymers as the

"think tank of the group." Its modern manufacturing, R&D, and analysis facilities allow it to design, develop and deliver customised PU intermediates of high quality and consistency, the company says.

Nand Composites makes engineering plastics products, including sealants and adhesives, under the Supraseal name.

In dispersions for coatings, Speciality Group has a strong partnership with Townsend Chemicals of Australia, and sells Townsend's polyester polyols, TPUs and urethane/TPU adhesives in India.

In antivibration parts it has an arrangement with Getzner Werkstoff AG for rail parts. Similarly it has a deal with AMC Mechanicaucho in Spain to market their vibration isolation parts in India.

Currently, Speciality Group aims to complete "our basket of CASE products," in the family-owned and run business.

Turnover for group as a whole is around 200 million Rupees (\$4.7 million) and has been growing at up to 20 percent year on year.

Maitreya's revenue has tripled in three years, but that is because it was a small start-up business, offering a unique service as the only prepolymer supplier in India, he pointed out.

In prepolymers, Maitreya also offers turnkey technology to other countries, such Sri Lanka, Singapore, Malaysia and the Middle East, to allow them use of the technology to make these materials for cast PU products, Mandar Lele said.

"We don't offer that within India but outside, it is not my market region, so I can do that," with no conflict of interest within the group, he said.



Mandar Lele with his father Makarand

operations do not need to feel threatened by PU "because they can actually embrace the technology and help diversify their product portfolio."

Mandar Lele put the number of active makers of PU elastomer parts in India at about 100, many of them small companies.



Paul Fitzgerald of Dow Hyperlast

Fitzgerald agreed that the market "is very fragmented," and commented that it is led through the materials-handling and mining and steel businesses. "Obviously its growth will follow as industrial sectors grow," he said.

Despite the different technologies in traditional elastomers and PU, Fitzgerald feels "there is no reason why rubber companies can't convert into PU organisations, because they have elastomer mentality."

Chandrakant Nayak, Dow's systems house director in Mumbai, said the CASE market is definitely growing, with many new applications coming along in the oil and gas sectors, but it is in a very "nascent stage," he added.

I-K sealants potential

Mandar Lele pointed to some examples indicate

how Maitreya Polymers aims to gain momentum and grow in sealants. One is that India currently makes mostly two-component types with only a couple of companies offering moisture-curable one-part sealants in cartridges, he said. "This is a small market that's developing. ... I feel that would go up because we are getting enquiries for prepolymers for sealants now," he commented.

The second expanding area lies in dispersions, where Maitreya's customised solutions are key to its growth.

All the very big players in dispersions are all present in India, he said, adding that there are still customers "looking for small volumes and customised products, they can't take standardised stuff from the big guys.

"That's how we carve our niche, we give them customised products," Mandar Lele explained. It's also the "beauty of PU, that we can change the chemistry and give them the product they are looking for," he added.

Coatings are a big market, Mandar Lele said, with the majority of PU use in non-automotive areas, "because that's dominated by the big players." Non-automotive uses are dominated by acrylic polyols and isocyanate 2K systems: "I hardly find any water-based products are used here, but people are quite interested in using them for floor and wall coatings, so there is quite a lot of development going on the customer's part," Mandar Lele said. Primarily, adhesives are solvent-based TPUs or solution-

polymerised polyesters types, he added.

Strategic location

Discussing prospects for MDI manufacture in India, Mandar Lele said there are now local facilities to store and distribute MDI, and imports are now easy after the government lifted many import restrictions, cut duties, and reduced limits on currency transactions. "The opening of the Indian economy has really made all this easier ... so I don't see that India should really have producers for these speciality markets," he commented.

Another factor which he feels will aid growth for Speciality Group is that India is a, "strategic location ... If you draw concentric circles from India, there are many regions that India can reach that are not reachable from Australia, Europe, the US or Japan," he explained. This includes, "African countries, the Middle East, the new Russian countries, all the emerging markets. And we feel that India is a good hub for shipping to these markets."

Govind Lele also stressed this aspect: "When our company started, we wanted India to become a hub for speciality polymers and chemicals manufacture, as the location is so good. Within a 2000 to 4000 km range are 40-odd countries, including the emerging markets in west Asia [which westerners call the Middle East]," He added Pakistan and East Africa to the list of countries that Speciality Group is now starting to get enquiries from.