

An Unforgettable Event



It was an evening in the second half of eighties.

Every announcement of delay of the Delhi - Chandigarh flight sent shivers down my spine. Sailakurd was about two hours' drive from Chandigarh and those were not the easiest of times to travel in the night with terrorists ruling the roost.

Sailakurd, a tiny picturesque place was where ABC Paper was located, and they were expanding by installing a 65 tpd stream based on rice straw fiber with the Paper Machine coming from L&T - Voith. Waiting for my flight I was reflecting on the circumstances leading us to that contract.

Eighties were the trying years for the Paper Machine Manufacturers with no new Paper Machines being installed and many used machines being imported into the country. When ABC planned the project, they did not even consider talking to L&T -Voith thinking we would not be fitting into their budget. We could not blame them - we were better known for large and fast machines. We had literally gate crashed and convinced Mr. Dinesh Khaitan, Jt.MD and son of the owner, to give us the opportunity albeit with challenging delivery and performance guarantee conditions. At 3.75 meters wire width it was indeed a small machine for Voith. L&T had to take over the entire design and manufacture responsibility. Under Voith's guidance.

For various reasons the commissioning schedule could not be adhered to and ultimately it was scheduled on the next day. Mr. DInesh Khaitan was already camping at Sailakurd. I was travelling to join him and the L&T team there.

The flight finally landed at Chandigarh around 10 pm and I was debating the prudence of travelling to Sailakurd at this late hour. Daljit, the driver who came to pick me up radiated confidence dispelling my doubts and fears and we started for our destination. However, a few minutes on the road and he made me sit on the floor of the vehicle between the front and the back seats. Better to be careful he said. The drive, which normally was a pleasant one, felt like eternity under the circumstances.

It must have been well past midnight by the time we reached ABC guest house without any untoward incident. I was surprised to see our team and a couple of senior ABC executives waiting for me with anxiety written large on their foreheads.

What a welcome I got! Almost everyone shouting in unison “how could you be so foolhardy to take the risk to travel at such hours”. Advice and admonition poured in making me feel I was facing a firing squad, the only difference being those in the squad were friends and well-wishers. Thankfully, the topic shifted to commissioning schedule and the travel fraught with danger was soon forgotten.

Next day, full of hope and anticipation, we assembled at the Paper Machine. Not many machines in the world were using rice straw pulp in commercial scale. Rakta in Egypt being the only one producing 30 tpd. The target was to make writing printing paper using a minimum of 70% straw pulp.

Mr. Friedrich Pech, the Paper Maker from Voith Germany, had already assumed charge and had commenced pre commissioning checks. Mr. Pech was a competent paper maker but enjoyed the reputation of being tough and intolerant to advice or interference when he was at his job.

We expected paper to be reeled by 9-10 pm and were looking forward to a celebratory dinner and a good night's sleep.

Hour after hour passed by and still there was no paper at Reel. At one moment Mr. Pech was at the Headbox and in the next moment he was seen running to the Press Section. He was all over the machine adjusting vacuum, pressure, dryer temperature and draw. The sheet simply refused to reach the Reel.

I watched the proceedings from a distance. Being a member of the design team, I was beginning to become nervous. One person more nervous than me was Mr. Dinesh Khaitan. He was under pressure from his father to complete the project without any further delay and to avoid his calls he had disconnected the telephone line. Our company's reputation was at stake. Mr. Pech's unwillingness to discuss the problem made me more restless.

Dinner was long forgotten. The sleep goddess had mercifully deserted us. Just when Mr. Khaitan and I were talking about the next steps, we were interrupted by a thunderous applause that almost blew off the roof of the PM hall. Lo and Behold - the sheet had reached the end station. I ran and hugged a now smiling Mr. Pech. The clock struck 5 am.

With relief and satisfaction descending on all Mr. Khaitan invited us to his bungalow and once there he said, “gentlemen let us celebrate the occasion, we made paper with 100% straw pulp.” We were stunned. The reinforcement fiber did not reach in time and it was not disclosed to avoid facing Mr. Pech’s ire.

Couple of Chivas Regal bottles made up for the missing champagne. And Mr. Khaitan dialed his father’s number.



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