



A GAMECHANGER IN SO MANY WAYS

By Rupkatha Bhowmick

As I looked around admiring the breath-taking collection of artworks at the Ved residence, I recollected my last conversation with **Sima Ganwani Ved, Founder & Chairwoman of Apparel Group**...that was around five years ago.

I remembered discussing many things from the evolution of the regional retail landscape and Apparel Group's growth over the past two-plus decades, highs and lows of running a business and the importance of constant innovation to stay relevant. What struck me was how passionately Ved spoke about the Group's multidirectional growth – people, brands and geographical presence.

Five years on, I was keen to start this conversation from where we had left it last time. And that's what I got – a deep look at Apparel Group's growth story, so far.

Some highlights to start with:

- Tim Hortons recently opened its 250th store in the region.
- Skechers opened its 150th store in the region.
- 6thStreet.com opened the region's first phygital store in Dubai Hills Mall towards the end of 2022 and entered the metaverse.
- Launch of F5 Global, a homegrown sustainable brand created by the 17-year-old Sarisha Ved.

"There is so much more to talk about," Ved stated. "We have signed some really interesting joint ventures (JV) with India-

based beauty and lifestyle omnichannel retailer Nykaa and UAE-based homegrown brand Project Chaiwala."

The JV with Nykaa will enable Apparel Group to offer a unique, curated and discovery led shopping experience in the GCC. While Nykaa will leverage Apparel Group's robust retail infrastructure and deep market relationships to build its presence in the region.

Of essence is also founder Falguni Nayar's journey with Nykaa which is quite inspiring especially in a world that doesn't expect one to embark on an entrepreneurial journey after a certain age. "Entrepreneurs like Nayar are certainly changing that mindset," Ved observed.

Commenting on the JV with Project Chaiwala, she said, "Nilesh and I received a lot of support when we started our entrepreneurial journey. It's time for us to give back by supporting budding entrepreneurs from the region. We have invested in the vision of Project Chaiwala's Co-founders [Ahmed Kazim and Justin Joseph] seeing how passionate they are about their brand."

Importantly, Apparel Group has signed the 'UAE Climate Responsible Companies Pledge' that aims to increase the engagement of the private sector in the country's decarbonisation drive aligned with the UAE's Net Zero goal by 2050.



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When I look back on our journey what makes me really proud is the way we have built the business with integrity and passion, never compromising on our ethics and not for once leaving our people behind.

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Sima Ganwani Ved
Founder & Chairwoman
Apparel Group

“We are trying to become a B Corp entity by plugging any gaps in our sustainability practices,” Ved added.

For understanding, B Corp certifies that an organisation is inclusive, equitable and regenerative once it meets high standards of verified performance, accountability and transparency.

The power of people

Alongside growing the business, enabling and empowering people has also been a major focus area for Apparel Group.

“One of the biggest challenges at the time we were starting the business was recruiting and retaining good talent, which tends to be a challenge for most businesses. So, we decided to revolutionise the way we compensated our employees by starting an incentive scheme making way for them to earn significantly more [over their basic salary] through a commission-based structure,” Ved recollected. “In many ways that was a gamechanger as our people understood that we genuinely wanted to reward them for growing the business.”

“I still remember how proud Nilesh used to feel every time he saw a new car in our office parking lot. It gave him tremendous joy to see our people doing well professionally and personally.”

Cut to 2020, pandemic-led pressures compelled Apparel Group to carefully evaluate its employee strength – which wasn’t exactly “lean” – and undertake necessary steps to become leaner, smarter and more agile.

“Letting people go is never easy. It is, in fact, one of the most difficult decisions. So, we made a promise to rehire them when the situation normalised. Fortunately, we live in a country that not only showed resilience but bounced back stronger creating new opportunities and possibilities for growth. Being a product of our environment, it also helped us to deliver on our promise,” Ved shared.

At this point the conversation gradually steered towards another crucial area – gender gap – which is a deeply entrenched issue, perhaps more acute in leadership roles.

Are leaders doing enough to shift the gender balance? Is enough action being taken to achieve the desired level of inclusion in every organisation?

“Any organisation that’s keen to close the gender gap must first ensure female representation in senior leadership roles. Having

female members in the leadership team automatically sends out a strong message that gender gap cannot be ignored,” Ved observed.

“There was a time when in our Group I was the only female member in our leadership team. We decided to change that by hiring more women across all our departments in a manner that’s well thought out and merit-based as opposed to being only gender-based.”

- Today 35% of our workforce is women.
- 22% of our leadership roles are held by women.
- 84% of Emirati talent we hired in 2022 are women.

“There is a pool of great talent out there and its upon us to tap into it. Only when we start hiring credible and qualified people from both genders in every domain the landscape will become more inclusive,” Ved added.

Having said that ultimately, it’s numbers that will make a real difference, she pointed out. “Our efforts to diversify can’t be limited to hiring one odd person from a certain nationality and ethnicity. Efforts to achieve diversity and inclusion will bear fruit when done in clusters and numbers.”

The growth story continues...

Ranging from geographical expansion to exciting collaborations to sustainable development Apparel Group has big plans in store.

“We want to see an upsurge in our homegrown brands and private labels. For example, a big milestone for us is Beverly Hills Polo Club opening its 100th store in the region. We have launched our other private label brand R&B in India and Libya,” Ved shared.

La Vie en Rose will launch in India. Tim Hortons has already opened 10 outlets in India. “In addition, we have tied up with Daiso and opened five stores in India.”

Apparel Group will be expanding in Southeast Asia too in countries including Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand.

Finally, people will continue to play a prominent role in Apparel Group’s growth story.

“I’ve been seriously stressing on the fact that if anyone in our organisation is in the same position for three years, they must acquire new skills to move up or move out. We would like our people to grow in their careers, while contributing to our growth. It will give us tremendous joy to see the creation of more leaders and entrepreneurs within our organisation,” Ved stated.

APPAREL GROUP AT A GLANCE



Founder & Chairwoman

Sima Ganwani Ved

Year of establishment

1996

Geographical footprint

Across the GCC with expanding presence in Egypt, South Africa, India, Singapore, Indonesia, Thailand and Malaysia. Plans are in place to enter Hungary, Pakistan and the Philippines.

Offline presence

80+ brands and 2,025+ retail stores

Online presence

6thStreet.com • nessa.com
f5global.com • aldoshoes.me
callitspring.com/international
croscgulf.com • dunelondon.ae
hishers.com • randbfashion.com
rituals.com • tommy.com

People strength

18,500+ from 80+ nationalities

Up Close & Personal

Hailing from a business family, did you always want to set up your own business or did you ever have an alternate career choice?

Back in the 70s and 80s when I grew up in Dubai, we were largely exposed to what our parents did. In my case it was my father [Lal Ganwani, Founder & Chairman, Lals Group] a magnanimous, self-made gentleman who spent every weekend working. He even worked during vacations and holidays. In fact, I don't remember going on too many holidays together as a family. Business is something I grew up seeing, understanding and wanting to do. I didn't see myself doing anything else. In hindsight though, I must admit that I enjoyed playwriting while in school. I realised much later in life that I have a creative bent of mind. Something that I get to engage in only once in a decade now.

Are you much different as parents to your three children compared to your parents?

My children will probably tell you that we are not much different. We are strict and value hard work. Work ethics is extremely important for both Nilesh and I, and it's something we try to instil in our children. Having said that, I think we are more understanding and accommodating about their passion. To us what matters is if they are working to achieve their fullest potential driven by their passion, creativity and compassion for people and the environment that they are part of. And I must add that while our daughters are more inclined towards doing business, our son is quite science and nature oriented.

What kind of challenges have you had to navigate to reach where you are today?

Initially my father didn't think I'd survive when I was made the manager for Lamcy's women and children's wear section. I distinctly remember climbing on cartons of clothes trying to tally what the suppliers had sent verifying it against the invoices. As a female entrepreneur the first misconception I had to get rid of was the perception that girls from affluent business families do not believe in hard work. Having become an entrepreneur with a strong, often opinionated voice, I had to prove myself as a worthy leader. Balancing professional and personal life required me to be strong but also clear about my choices.

Did you ever shy away from making mistakes?

Back in 1994-95 when we wanted to start a bookstore business, we sought advice from a bookstore owner. He said, "It's a disastrous business." If that's the case, why



was he in it – we wondered! Had we listened to him, we would have saved a lot of money. We went ahead and started a concept called BooksPlus but discontinued the brand after operating it for a few years. We learnt from our mistake, and I can say that it made us resilient.

Are you accepting of mistakes made by your team members?

Our environment doesn't allow people to make too many mistakes. When we grow up in this environment, we tend to become a bit unforgiving. I feel as if people are given enough chances to innovate but not fail completely. Having said that although we are prudent and cautious, taking calculated risks has always been part of our DNA. On the other hand, our team members understand the kind of toil, blood and sweat that has gone into reaching where we are today. Even after that understanding if mistakes happen, we together take the ownership for it.

How do you define success?

To me success from a professional standpoint is when no matter which country in the world I go to when I share my business card with someone, they will recognise Apparel Group and what we stand for. Personally, I will feel successful and blessed if all three of my children achieve their fullest potential and are not just doing good for themselves but also for the world.

If you could drive one change to make this world a better place, what would it be?

If every single child could go to bed with a full stomach in a safe and secure environment knowing that they will go to school the next day that to me would be the ideal world. That's the kind of change I'd like to drive. Education allows us to open our minds to accept other people's cultures and habits and be more tolerant and compassionate which to a certain extent is missing in today's world.