



INTERVIEW

A legacy continues

Thomas Archer Bata, the Chief Marketing Officer and part of Bata's Executive Committee, is not only running a family business, but also carrying the first name, Thomas, for generations. Star Lifestyle recently engaged in a tête-à-tête with Thomas Bata, and Patricio Alegria, Chief Collection Manager, Bata Bangladesh to learn more about the company, its presence in Bangladesh, and how things are forever evolving.

Throughout the world, Bata is often considered a local brand; such is its connection with the masses built over the decades it has operated in various countries.

"When it comes to food, people do feel that their own individual cuisine is the best, but when it comes to fashion, the answer varies. Fashion differs beyond borders and when people's trust is brought into it, you have to give people time to get accustomed to change. In order to improve the brand, innovation is key and there is no room to take unnecessary risks," says Thomas Archer Bata.

In Asia, the general perception is that foreign fashion is more modern and sophisticated. However, this scenario is slowly changing, for example in Korea, the market has matured. But in most of the countries it is not so.

Thomas believes, "There needs to be a balance between traditional fashion and international fashion, something that, in recent times, is seen in India and Bangladesh, where global brands are entering into the local scene. When people see something new, it naturally piques their interest and Bata wants to be the one spearheading those new trends. For many, the brand Bata has a lot of emotion attached to it, something that needs to be utilised properly."

Patricio Alegria, Chief Collection Manager, Bata Group, Bangladesh, shares Thomas Bata's perspective and related it to the Bangladeshi context.

"For Bangladesh, Bata has been the main brand for quite some time, but now, key players are coming and we have to stay on top of the trend, offering our client new things. These new collections of Bata coming in like 'Red Label' and 'Insomnia' will vamp our existing collection for sure, and give clients what is new and international, so that the people in Bangladesh think Bata being there for so long is also international" says Alegria.

To stay on top, Bata has taken an innovative approach. They will update the collection

in Bangladesh more frequently, which is already showing positive results.

"If they are accepted by the consumers, we will be bringing in more," he added.

Sharing his vision for the new image of Bata, Thomas Bata says that they are revamping their e-shop so that Bangladeshis can buy the best of what Bata offers locally. The most important challenge in Bangladesh is that there is an extremely high import tariff. If we import a shoe in Bangladesh, the final price for the customer is very high. So what we have to do is to take our designs and try manufacturing those in the country. This inevitably means that the shoe is not going to be the same because the material is not going to be the



same. So the challenge that Patricio Alegria faces is to bring more global styles, and produce them locally."

To explain how the trusted Bata Company strives to serve their loyal clientele in the best possible way, Patricio says, "What we are doing in Bangladesh is quite interesting. We are importing goods not as finished products. We are actually taking the same collection but importing them as components rather than complete products. We import the upper part of shoe, insole, and outsole, and we manufacture it here. This way, we ensure that the people get the same collection as they are available internationally.

The protectionist import policy of the government is a challenge in South Asia. Even in countries like India, the duties keep coming up. So it is becoming more and more difficult to import footwear."

This year, the Bata Fashion Weekend was held in Italy. Milan, the host city, is one of the fashion capitals of the world and as Thomas Archer Bata puts it, "A city where trends actually emerge."

For two days, Palazzo Mezzanotte, 'Midnight Palace', a 20th century building and the seat of the Italian stock exchange was transformed into a centre of fashion and design. The venue also unveiled exclusive Bata collections like the limited heritage line and more.



"For choosing the location for our fashion show, we go for feasible and iconic locations. From today's (27 April) launch, I think it was a beautiful collection, and if I were Angela (the name of their new line) a 35-year-old working woman, I think today's Bata would have a lot of options for her. Angela's closet is a new branding strategy, where Bata is urban and trending, and this closet has been developed after laborious research," he said.

"Angela's closet is something unexpected by Bata consumers, we see this as a way to reinforce our promise of making comfort sexy and making sexy comfortable," says the Chief Marketing Officer of the company and adds,

"We do bring in new designers, and we have design studios in Italy, Singapore, Canada, and Venice, and we are doing a collaboration with Aldo for our Red Label Collection.

We are trying a lot of things to get inspiration where one or two will work out for us. We are being innovative so that we do not seem dull. It is important in countries like India or Bangladesh where the middle class is growing; we cannot only offer traditional shoes because when the middle class grows, they ask for more."

Thomas Archer Bata truly realises the challenge of the market and Bata as a footwear company are maneuvering through strategies to keep the presence clearly visible and more by being innovative and targeting urban youth.

"The young designer's challenge is an innovative programme that we have started last year. We have involved schools, and designs come in from their students. We produce the best ones, and these go into the stores as limited edition ranges," said Thomas.

As these designers are given their due credit, Thomas feels pride in saying that the winner from last year's competition is living in Paris and doing very well.

"For him Bata's challenge was a step up" he adds. Clearly such a platform gives young designers visibility and helps them to get staged, show off who they are, and the extent of their creativity.

Finally, as his concluding remarks, Thomas Archer Bata said, "We started Bata Fashion Week, immediately after I came to the company two years ago. I think it hits a lot of challenges with one concept and we are working on some pretty attractive projects in Bangladesh, which we shall announce soon."

And this promise gives the new generation of Bangladeshi fashion enthusiasts, something to look forward to.

By RBR

Photo courtesy: Bata