

A True Vision

Posted on



Following years of unique design, constant innovation and quality, Hameedia is renowned “in men’s wear, raising standards in the retail clothing industry in Sri Lanka. Fouzul Hameed, “its Managing Director displaying his passion for distinctive style and design speaks of the many successes and challenges faced by the company as he steers his aspirations for Hameedia’s future.

By Kamalika Jayathilaka
Photography Menaka Aravinda

How was Hameedia established?

The name Hameedia was established in 1925 by my father's father and his uncles. It was a family business, but after some time they wanted to retire and even considered selling the business. In 1949 my father took over the business and became the sole proprietor. The vision behind the business was to look after the family, relatives and in fact the entire village and everyone who needed support. That was a true vision.

What has been the progress since then? What have been your latest ventures?

The journey has been very long. We have not taken any shortcuts, and it has been a healthy and genuine path. First, I must thank my parents, "for giving me the opportunity to manage Hameedia. I do not have degrees or any significant qualification. "I learned from my father and my brother. First of all I learned about tailoring because we had been doing tailoring for over 60 years, and that has given me a solid foundation. As I left school I wanted to learn fashion designing and as such, attended "ESMOD in Thailand. But I could not finish the course, as the war was taking a toll in Sri Lanka and my father was unwell. Furthermore, my elder brother was not interested in retailing but in exports. Therefore, I gave up my degree and took over the business. "I do not have any regrets. Today, what I have earned through experience is more valuable than a degree.

I am proud of how we have progressed. For us money is not everything. We were always taught to tell the truth and be genuine in our business transactions. That was the wish of our parents. Therefore, we do not lie to our clients. We do not mislead them in our stores. With us, cotton is cotton and silk is silk; it is as easy as that. At the time I first became involved in the business I did not know anything about cotton or silk; therefore, "I was cheated by suppliers. But I learned the trade very fast. At the time no one respected brands and everyone was selling fakes. Everyone wanted to deal with export surpluses, which was a substantial market at the time. I was hungry to make a brand too but I could not achieve it because many people were selling fakes and everyone was buying fakes. I always believe that though it is not cheap, everyone respects a good brand.

This is not only common in the retail clothing industry, everyone tries to sell bad-quality fake products. But when you become a major player you cannot do that. It took me a long time to develop my own brand. I was among the first to fight against duplicates. But I have

not been discouraged, I recently presented a collection at the Colombo Fashion Week. We always fight for fair play. I am not saying I am 100 percent perfect. I have made mistakes and learned from mistakes. We have nearly 1,000 people working for us today. We look after our workers very well and treat them equally.

Our journey has been a difficult one. We have done much more than any other company specialising in men's wear. It has not been about selling numbers, but the quality of what we produce. I am proud to sell good clothes. We have created four brands so far. Signature is for the mass market. Envoy is for the upper market, "for those who look for a good product at a fair price, and Le Bond is equal to any good brand. The fourth brand FH is a highly fashionable brand aimed at the fashion conscious and trendy individuals who keep in touch with the changing fashion trends, but a very limited number is produced per design. However, I have realised that in Sri Lanka it is still difficult to create a quality brand and sell at a premium price. If we make a good quality shirt it is difficult to do more than a few at a time. Also, many people want to look different. They do not like to see the same shirt worn by 1,000 people. "In India however, they have to make 1,000 shirts because it is a large country. We are the only company to give a guarantee and a warrantee on a product. Whatever I sell I stand behind my customer, I am answerable and responsible.

Today Hameedia is a popular men's wear specialist in the country. What is unique about the company?

It is the public that has to decide this. We work very hard and we are very focused. We have many developments that are currently taking place and we aspire to be number one. "We are well known in the SAARC region. Last week I participated in the Karachi Fashion Week. I was very proud to take part in an event where many other designers from different parts of the world took part. "My collection was well received. People know our work. It is not just selling a brand, we go as a designer, with three brands: Signature, "Le Bond and Envoy. Then we have business partnerships with many foreign brands. What is unique about us is that we do not just sell a brand, "we control men's lifestyles.

We Have Done Much More Than Any Other Company Specialising In Men's Wear. It Has Not Been About Selling Numbers But The Quality Of What We Produce.

How competitive is the retail clothing sector in Sri Lanka? What is most challenging about running such a business?

It is rather challenging and there is increased competition, and this means hard work. We want to bring out the Envoy brand as a Sri Lankan brand with international flavour. But any brand experiences favourable and unfavourable periods, especially with economic recessions. If you look at India, they are all struggling with too many brands and everyone is going on sale. What is important is to sustain and be successful. This is the challenge. We will open a new store under the name 'Envoy Mansion' in Colpetty, which is going to be a good brand with a Sri Lankan identity, for men who require something different. We are not going to bring in major international brands right now, because it is very difficult. Instead, we will promote a few foreign brands along with Envoy with an attempt of making a significant impact. I also have my FH collection, which is a very fashionable and elegant product. Being innovative is also challenging, but if we want to be market leaders we have to keep innovating. It is very important for us and will help us develop and give us proper direction.

What is Hameedia's branch network like? Will we see further expansion in the near future?

We have 12 branches. Last year we opened one store at the Kandy City Centre and an Adidas store. But this year we are looking at opening stores under the Signature brand in Kiribathgoda, Piliyandala, Ja-Ela and Homagama because we feel that Hameedia clients have the perception that the Signature brand is expensive. We also plan to open a Hameedia in Ratnapura.

Outside the country we have one store in Malé. We are the only Sri Lankan brand that has an international store. Our export market is very small but the competition is increasing. It has also been a significant challenge. The overall clothing industry is expanding; these days every country is manufacturing. It is not easy and it will be tough for everyone who wants to expand.

'The Groom's Studio' the flagship store at Wallawatte was an industry first in catering to the needs of a groom.

Many men who get married do not care enough about their clothes. For most men, getting married is just about wearing a suit and having a wedding at a five star hotel. They come to us at the last minute to try and select their wedding clothes. However, we often see that they need support with grooming. We give them one to one training on how to take care of themselves in ways that they do not realise are important. This includes hairstyles, facial care and other ways to prepare before their special day. Our tips also include how to wear the suit properly, the shirt, the tie, even how to sit properly. We advise them on how

each minute detail is important including the shoes, belts and everything else. Most men do not know how to maintain the standards and how to look after their clothes. All they do is complain. I make sure they understand that if they want a good personality and to look smart and elegant, first and foremost is the proper use of clothing. This is the kind of service we undertake at the Groom Studio; and we are also the first to start such a service. It is not just about selling clothes. I have travelled around the world and I know that Hameedia is a unique company.

It is very challenging when you do 100 weddings a month. Everyone is different, everyone wants a dream wedding. They all come to us with their preconceived notions of what they should look like. However, most of them do not realise that each person is different and that styles are not suitable for everyone. People do not realise their body structures, height and looks. They often tend to dream of a certain icon model look when they are only five feet tall. Therefore, we give one-to-one advice and many tips to make such clients understand what would actually suit them. We tell them the truth. Women usually take care of themselves very well, especially before their wedding but men rarely do. However, when they come to us we make sure they are advised on an upgrade to their looks and personality, which is not limited to their wedding day but is continuous. This is similar to an awakening from their side. Therefore, it is not just about providing them with a suit, our services go beyond that. As a result, we satisfy our clients in many different ways.

What is behind Hameedia's continuous success?

The credit of this success should go to my staff. They are a significant part of the company. I have very loyal staff who have been with me for decades. My staff is like my family. They are all very close to me and believe in what we do; they understand our directions and we all strive for common targets.

At the time I first joined the family business I had a dream to reach a certain level, which we have already accomplished today. We have achieved so much. It is our direction, our vision that is behind the success. Now we are working towards manufacturing a world class suit with a blend of a tailor-made look and a ready made finish.

Hameedia has taken many different initiatives. Today it even has its own magazine, but not with the intention of making money. It was developed to educate the men in this country. I believe that every man should have a vision and a mission in life. This is the idea behind this

magazine. It will give them tips about what cars to buy, what food to eat and similar information. This is why I say that Hameedia is a unique company. The past 30 years have been challenging but now the opportunities in the country are great and we have endless potential for the future.

This Success Is Because We Have Been Genuine And Have Stood Up Against Duplicity. I Always Feel That A Good Brand Should Respect Every Other Business.

Hameedia reached yet another milestone in Sri Lanka's clothing industry by introducing bespoke tailoring solutions through the worldwide web. Can you explain the significance?

The term 'bespoke' runs into the history of tailoring. It is when a tailor makes clothes individually to match a person's specific requirements. Bespoke is different from 'made-to-measure', which means using a basic, existing pattern roughly adjusted to a person's individual measurements.

We felt that today clients want a perfect shirt. Currently, tailoring is expensive around the world. Therefore, many Sri Lankans who live abroad as well as foreigners come to us for their clothing needs and have inquired about bespoke tailoring. "As a result, we felt that there would be potential if we launch this.

Bespoke is very new to Sri Lanka. Under this our Envoy brand offers a total solution for men. We even provide shoes and belts in any size. In "Sri Lanka men cannot find a belt that is 54 inches but we have been able to offer that. We have also launched "Sri Lanka's first ever web portal which offers made-to-measure clothing.

What plans do you have for the future of Hameedia?

We want to go international. I want to open more stores internationally. "It will be challenging but this is our target.

I must thank my staff and my customers who have been very loyal to us throughout the years. Today we are making suits for the third generation. Some of our early customers have told me how their sons and grandsons have all bought suits from us for their weddings, and we are very proud of this. We have had the famous come to us; artistes, actors,

cricketers, politicians and even presidents of the country. This success is because we have been genuine and have stood up against duplicity. I always feel that a good brand should respect every other business.



