

# *An Interview with Vice President – HR, Aditya Birla Fashion and Retail Limited - Madura Clothing, Bengaluru*

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*Interviewed by* **Shekhar Ganagaluru**, *HR Professional & Author*

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*“Self-reliance and faith in oneself are the best weapons  
to have in your armory to face today's world.”*



**Kalpana B.G.** is the Head of HR for Madura Clothing, the manufacturing arm of Aditya Birla Fashion and Retail Limited (ABFRL).

Kalpana has been working as HR Professional for three decades in several companies in Karnataka. She has rich experience of over 33 years in the garment industry, including K. Mohan Exports and Gokaldas Images. Also, worked in Digital Equipment India Ltd. She has been associated with ABFRL for the last eight years.

She holds a Master’s Degree in Industrial Psychology, Post Graduate Diploma in Personnel Management and Industrial Relations, Graduation in Journalism, Literature & Psychology.

Kalpana has contributed immensely to managing relationships with unions and ensuring that the Company's treatment of employees is consistent with its core business values and objectives.

Kalpana is well known and appreciated as she successfully handled complaints smoothly, managed grievance procedures, and facilitated counselling in conjunction with other stakeholders. At Madura Manufacturing, all employees look up to her as a pillar of strength as she establishes and maintains industrial democracy to achieve sound, harmonious, and mutually beneficial employee-management relations.

Kalpana is young, strong in mind, and willing to go miles for the success of the organisation and its employees.



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**1**

## **Compared to other industries, how difficult is it to work as an HR Leader in the apparel industry?**

Every business has its own challenges, and the apparel industry is no different. Understanding the key business perspectives and working as effective business drivers with zeal and agility is imperative. Above all, one must sustain a proactive, strategic, and time-bound approach.

**2**

## **What strategies do you and your team use to address the issues of women employees in your industry?**

We adopt a fundamental strategy of creating an environment that makes them comfortable with escalating issues or approaching the hierarchy without any fear or favour. Psychological Safety is a tenet all factory HR teams practice and preach with passion. All employees are encouraged to discuss any issue. Upward communication is encouraged in many forms, including digital.

**3**

## **Many HR Professionals say you are a revolutionary HR Leader. Why do they say this?**

I cannot comment on their behalf, but as far as I am concerned, I am more of a people's leader who works towards the greater good with an emphasis on pragmatism and high E.Q. levels. I work for my people with my heart in the right place, and I keep my interactions with internal and external stakeholders transparent and direct.

**4**

## **You are a brand as HR Leader in the apparel industry. How would you describe it?**

I have been working for three decades in the apparel industry with great passion and zeal. To date, I can say that I enjoy my work and this industry too. Over a period of time, the apparel industry has also undergone a great metamorphosis, and we will see a lot more to come. Every step/initiative taken by many of us in the industry has made this positive impact. Bringing about changes in a people-intensive sector with a predominance of women and volatility of labour is a great challenge and hence a great learning opportunity. Agility, out-of-box thinking, and emotional intelligence are essential to flourish.

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**5****In your HR journey, what achievements have made you proud?**

Results of hard work are considered as achievement, rather than any particular award or recognition that we have been receiving. In that context: Vibrant employee engagement, which brings a smile on the faces of employees, congenial Industrial Relations, and a robust open-door policy are the achievements I am proud of.

**6****From what I understand, many young HR Professionals are not motivated to start their HR career in the apparel industry; what is your advice to them?**

Please do not become judgmental over what you hear or read superficially. Join to experience the difference of hands-on and groom yourself for the future. There are a lot of talented youngsters who have taken this approach and are now heading different industries. The apparel industry is a great place to develop yourself and constantly learn in terms of volatility of technology and volumes, stakeholder management, etc.

**7****As a senior HR Leader, how do you manage your family commitments despite having a lot of professional priorities?**

I would like to call it work-life synergy as the term "balance" indicates that they are opposing forces. I want to think of one being dependent on the other. I am a better leader because I strive to be a good mother and vice versa. This perspective has helped me resolve employee conflicts on many occasions. Also, my family has been greatly supportive throughout my career and has given me the space to work and manage family commitments. At the same time, my employers have also been empathetic to my family's needs. So, I have had no issues in balancing both, as both supported me. Last but not the least, I have had wonderful colleagues who were more than family and were always there to support me, be it a personal or an occupational challenge. Delegation not only helps to build and empower them, but it, in turn, also gives a lot of support to us.

**8****You have recently been promoted to a VP - HR. What is your success mantra?**

Simple and straightforward. Work without 2Fs – FEAR or FAVOUR.

**9****What advice would you give to next-generation female leaders?**

Move forward and develop a "never give up attitude."

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**10**

## Can you elaborate on some unique HR interventions of Aditya Birla Fashion & Retail Limited?

- **5C module** – comprising the pillars of Communication, Care, Contribution, Credit & Connect.
- **Sanjeevani** – a holistic wellness initiative is covering all facets of employee life, which includes physical, mental, social, emotional, spiritual, intellectual, and environmental well-being. Womb-To-Cradle Care and Other Initiatives. Since this is a predominantly female industry, there are special targeted initiatives on pregnancy care, motherhood, the importance of breastfeeding, antenatal care in all trimesters, baby shower, lots of engagement with high participation index, working committees and self-managed pyramid team structure (L1 teams at base by workers, L2 by supervisors, L3 – Middle management, L4 – Senior Leadership team structure).

**11**

## Name the top 3 skills that the HR Professionals should possess to work in the Apparel industry.

Agility, People Connect, and Commitment to Work without Fear or Favour.

**12**

## Tell us about a complex HR issue you worked on and what you learned from it?

Working in areas outside the city presents a challenge wherein a simple concern can quickly snowball into a complex and major problem, and complex issues are never a concern. Hence, it is important to constantly gauge the pulse of employees and ensure industrial harmony. They must be addressed pre-emptively if possible and proactively, if not. On the other hand, you may take one positive step for the people, and because of that, they are ready to walk miles for you. However, if in that one step you try to bargain or juggle, then the trust is lost. It is of prime importance to build that trust and employee connect.

**13**

## How do you encourage women employees not to give up?

I encourage women to be financially independent and imbibe Swami Vivekananda's saying, "Arise, Awake & Stop not until the goal is reached." Self-reliance and faith in oneself are the best weapons to have in your armory to face today's world.

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#### 14 What is your leadership philosophy?

Cooperative and participative leadership with a strong belief in reformative and rehabilitative approaches.

#### 15 What is your definition of work ethics?

For me, my work ethics is derived from core values of integrity, commitment, passion, speed and seamlessness.

#### 16 What major threats do you anticipate for HR in the apparel industry by 2025?

CAT.

**Cost:** Raw material, Transport, Compliance, Technology & Competitive Compensation.

**Agility:** Digitization, Sustainability, Management of Textile Waste.

**Talent:** Retention and management of both skills and key talent and availability of labour.

#### 17 Who inspired you to become a leader and why?

My Primary school teacher instilled boldness in me. As mentors, my second sister and brother-in-law encouraged me to expand my knowledge. The special words to my parents, sister, mother-in-law, husband, son, nephew, niece, friends, colleagues, and employees who have always been a source of strength and inspiration. Above all are my critics, who have kept challenging me, which has motivated me to better myself and march forward.

#### 18 What should we do to strengthen women empowerment?

There is no special consideration required. Just one simple thing we all need to do is to accept a woman as she is and create that space of respect and trust that can amplify her voice & ideas. STOP Negativity.



Under the leadership of Mrs. Kalpana B.G., M/s ABFRL received the prestigious “India Green Manufacturing Challenge 2021 – 22, Special Award for Workplace Gender Diversity” from International Research Institute for Manufacturing (IRIM) in September – 2022.

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