Ion Exchange India Limited
Q1 FY25 Conference Call
August 05, 2024

Moderator: Ladies and gentlemen, good day and welcome to the Ion Exchange India Limited's Q1 FY25 Earnings Conference Call.

As a reminder, all the participant lines will be in the listen only mode and there will be an opportunity for you to ask questions after the presentation concludes. Should you need assistance during the conference call, please signal an operator by pressing "*" then "0" on your touchtone phone.

I now hand the conference over to Mr. Anuj Sonpal from Valorem Advisors. Thank you and over to you, Mr. Sonpal.

Anuj Sonpal: Thank you. Good afternoon, everyone and a very warm welcome to you all. My name is Anuj Sonpal from Valorem Advisors. We represent the Investor Relations of Ion Exchange India Limited. On behalf of the Company and Valorem Advisors, I would like to thank you all for participating in the Company's Earnings Conference Call for the 1st Quarter of Financial Year 2025.

Before we begin, let me mention a short cautionary statement. Some of the statements made in today's Earnings Call may be forward-looking in nature. Such forward-looking statements are subject to risks and uncertainties, which could cause actual results to differ from those anticipated. Such statements are based on management's beliefs as well as assumptions made by and information currently available to management. Audiences are cautioned not to place any undue reliance on these forward-looking statements in making any investment decisions.

The purpose of today's Earnings Concall is purely to educate and bring awareness about the Company's fundamental business and financial quarter under review. Let me now introduce you to the Management participating with us in today's earnings call and hand it over to them for Opening Remarks.

We firstly have with us Mr. Aankur Patni - Executive Director; Mr. Vasant Naik - Group Chief Financial Officer; Mr. N. M. Ranadive - Group Head of Financial Planning and Risk Management and Mr. Milind Puranik - Company Secretary.

Without any further delay, I request Mr. Vasant Naik to start with his opening remarks. Thank you and over to you, sir.

Vasant Naik: Thank you, Anuj. Good afternoon everybody. It is a pleasure to welcome you all to the Earnings Conference Call for the 1st Quarter of FY25.

For the quarter under review on a consolidated basis, the Company reported operating income of INR 5,676 million, an increase of around 18% year-on-year. The EBITDA reported was INR 641 million representing an increase of 31% year-on-year and the EBITDA margin stood at 11.29% with the net profit of INR 448 million, an increase of around 35% year-on-year, while the PAT margin was in the region of around 7.89%.

Let me now take you through the quarterly segmental performance on a consolidated basis:

In the Engineering division, the revenue for the quarter was INR 3,235 million, increase of 13% year-on-year. The EBIT for this segment was INR 188 million representing an increase of 26% year-on-year. The segment witnessed steady order inflows of medium sized jobs during the quarter. The domestic enquiry bank remains robust and we are hopeful that the finalization of some large value opportunities will accelerate in the next few months. The Engineering segment recorded improved turnover on year-on-year basis largely due to the execution of some of the international contracts. We expect the pace of execution of the larger EPC jobs to increase in the coming quarters. At the end of Q1 FY25, the total order book for the Engineering division stood at INR 3,394 crores.

Coming to the Chemical segment:

The revenue for the quarter was INR 1,994 million, an increase of 36% year-on-year. The EBIT was INR 498 million, an increase of 36% year-on-year. The segment recorded improved revenue year-on-year while maintaining steady margins. Lastly, the Consumer Division segment, the revenue for the quarter was INR 660 million, increase of 9% year-on-year. The loss for the quarter was INR Rs. 34 million versus Rs. 15 million in the same period of the previous year. The segment has shown revenue growth on a year-on-year basis. Our new product launches are gaining acceptability in the market.

We can now open the floor to the Q&A session.

Moderator: Thank you very much. We will now begin the question and answer session. The first question is from the line of Chetan Vora from Abakkus Asset Manager. Please go ahead.

Chetan Vora: Sir, on the Engineering side, I was looking at the UP order book. On the Q-o-Q, the order book has just gone down by Rs. 17 crores, so how do we see the order execution for the year, which is close to the order book and as of now, is Rs. 813 crores which we were earlier guiding out to be completed by FY25?

Aankur Patni: The order book position remains good and we are expecting good order flows in the ensuing months and quarters. That would ensure that even while we continue to execute, the orders at hand will support future growth continuously. As far as execution is concerned, we are expecting that during the subsequent quarters the invoicing will improve compared to where we are today. The next quarter and thereafter, we should be seeing improved execution of the UP contract. It had a slight impact of the elections and the related cash flows, which we expect will gradually get removed as the months move. And therefore, as I said, the second-half is expected to be significantly better than the first half.

Chetan Vora: But do we foresee that UP order will be getting executed by the end of this year?

Aankur Patni: UP contract would get substantially executed by the end of this year. However, it is also a function of the funds which get released for the contract for completing the remaining portion and the second element is of course the approvals which we receive from the government, but we are very hopeful that by the end of this year, a substantial portion will get completed.

Chetan Vora: Sir, on the profitability, the previous quarter despite our large chunk of revenue of Rs. 500 crores, we had reported a margin of 9.6% and then you had told us that there was some legacy project which got latent, because of that there was a cost overrun and we expect the similar thing to continue at quarter 1 of this year. But looking at the margin, the margin looks to be quite steady on the Y-o-Y level. So whether the cost spillover was seen in this quarter, it is now we are largely done?

Aankur Patni: There was a cost spillover and as I had mentioned that contract which has had an adverse impact on the overall engineering margins, is not yet executed fully and therefore overhang of its impact would continue in the next quarter also and it will taper out after that. But in terms of the Y-o-Y stability, that is something which is also a function of the other contracts that we are executing and which have supported decent margin level. Therefore, in spite of a slight adverse impact coming in from one or two issues, we have managed to maintain those levels.

Chetan Vora: And by when we expect the legacy project to get completed, by what timeframe from here on?

Aankur Patni: I would expect that the next quarter would continue to face this particular project's impact and only thereafter it will start to taper out. By the end of the fourth quarter, most of the contract will get fully executed.

Chetan Vora: And sir, on the chemical front, the revenue growth was 15% and with a good sort of profitability, how should we see this vertical, sir with respect to chemicals for the full year?

Aankur Patni: Chemical business continues to do reasonably well and we are expecting the growth momentum to continue as you have seen in the 1st Quarter. Likewise, the margin also remains at a reasonably robust level. As we have been mentioning in the past also that if the input price scenario, the foreign exchange scenario and the overall supply dynamics do not change in a very material way, we should be able to maintain these margin levels.

Chetan Vora: Sir, lastly from my end and we are expecting, in our presentation and at the start of the concall, we always mentioned that we are looking to, we are working on few of the large deals which will be getting fructified in the coming quarters, but it is now since many quarters we have been seeing the same statement by when we can see the deal like UP, we could be getting a deal like UP, sir?

Aankur Patni: The reason that we are not including those numbers in our overall enquiry book as well as we are not specifically commenting on those anymore is because of the uncertainty about when the fructification of those into our order book would happen. We remain quite hopeful because there is positive movement on at least a couple of them and it is a question of when that thing finally converts into something which we can announce. So as soon as we can do so, we will certainly inform the exchange.

Moderator: Thank you. The next question is from the line of Sunil Kothari from Unique PMS. Please go ahead.

Sunil Kothari: Sir, my first question is regarding the management change we are proposing by first October 24, mainly you are becoming now Non-Executive Non-Independent Director, so what is the reason because what I found since last many years, you are actively participating and the way you have grown the Company's profitability with this, the way you are interacting with the investor community also, what will change and what are the reason if you can little bit to explain qualitatively that will be really helpful?

Aankur Patni: Well, we had appointed CEO last year and had made an announcement on the exchange, and the various forums with the investors. He will be completing a year in September. And this is a very planned move on part of all the four people from the promoter group that we need to hand over the operating functions of the Company to an independent Professional management. As announced, the CEO would be taking over the role of the MD. Myself, along with Mr. Dinesh Sharma, both of us will become Non-Executive Non-Independent Directors designated as Vice Chairman. The current CMD would be relinquishing the post of Managing Director. We will continue to remain associated and actively involved in helping the Company grow further and in whatever manner to support its future operations. As far as the investor community is concerned, I will certainly be available and I will remain engaged. It is probably in the interest of the investors and also for the sake of continuity & growth of the organization as a whole and for professional improvement in its management that we have taken this call and hopefully it will usher in a new period of growth.

Sunil Kothari: And one more question on, sir, the way we develop this chemical segment, resins, chemical membranes and in a very challenging time across the chemical segment of the country in international, we have done really well, we maintain profitability which is very respectable and very high also. I would like to know from you because you always mention about the work capability, R&D, new products, new projects. If you can talk a little bit more on how you see in next 3-5 years, what I understand is now US also slowly coming back to some normalized demand and we are very keen and prepared to penetrate on a higher scale those markets, how prepared we are on this segment, what we see for next 2-3 years?

Aankur Patni: We have always been positive about the chemical segment as a whole and certainly because it drives profitability to a greater extent in terms of margin percentages. And that is the reason that we have initiated the capacity expansion moves both for resins and for other chemicals, which to a large extent are also targeted at the international market. With the relative improvements in the European and the North American markets, our exports of chemicals have improved and we will continue to see improvement as the quarters go by. We continue to invest substantially on innovations in R&D and that is the reason also that the product portfolio continues to undergo a change and we are moving towards more and more value added products to ensure not just profitability but also a competitive edge. In terms of how we are being able to penetrate the markets in North America and Europe, the strategy which we have been following over the past few quarters have been to increasingly create customer confidence and trust and also ensure that we are able to fulfill their expectations while maintaining competitive edge and profitability. This process has yielded good results and I am sure that with increased bouquet of products that we offer for these specific markets and the relationships and partnerships that we are continuously forging, we would be able to take full advantage of the increased capacity, thereby creating a much bigger revenue pie coming from the international market.

Moderator: Thank you. The next question is from the line of Tushar Raghatate from KamayaKya Wealth Management. Please go ahead.

Tushar Raghatate: Sir, just wanted to understand in our chemical segment, what sort of peak revenue we garner for FY25?

Aankur Patni: We had indicated an overall growth of roughly 15% for the Chemical segment. If there is a change in it as the quarters progress, we will again advice on the call.

Tushar Raghatate: Sir, in terms of CAPEX from the Chemical segment, when can we see the revenue contribution happening from which year or quarter?

Aankur Patni: The resin project is now at an advanced stage of execution at Roha, we are expecting the commercial start of that operation in the next financial year and it will take roughly 3-4 years for it to reach optimum capacity utilization.

Tushar Raghatate: And sir, in terms of Saudi Arabia, UAE opportunity when can we see good sizable order coming from there?

Aankur Patni: We are already seeing good improvement in terms of our customer relationships and increased flow of opportunities & orders from that market. I would expect that in another couple of years that geography will start giving us substantially increased revenues.

Tushar Raghatate: Sir, in terms of our engineering business, any particular segment you are targeting, maybe reverse osmosis or desalination or any specific area?

Aankur Patni: Engineering opportunities being pursued by us in that geography are quite broad in scope wide and it is not as such specific to a particular technology. We would be looking at opportunities of large, medium and small scale including desalination opportunities. We are sure that with our manufacturing setup there, the opportunities there would not be restricted to a particular size or sector or technology.

Moderator: Thank you. The next question is from the line of Saket Kapoor from Kapoor Company. Please go ahead.

Saket Kapoor: Sir, firstly, about the Engineering segment, you alluded to the fact of some missing problems with the UP project and also with the legacy project. Could you dwell slightly more into where are we in terms of execution phase for the UP project and it was only the election that was the reason for lower execution or what is the residual value if you could give some understanding?

Aankur Patni: I will request Vasant to share some of the numbers attached with the project in the current quarter as well as the residual values.

Vasant Naik: Regarding the UP project, the current residual value is around Rs. 813 crores roughly which, as was mentioned earlier, we are planning to execute a significant part by the end of the current year.

Saket Kapoor: Current calendar year?

Vasant Naik: Current financial year.

Saket Kapoor: And what was the key reason, sir? And can you quantify the contracted value that we got executed out of this Rs. 315 crores that pertains to the UP project?

Vasant Naik: For the current quarter, the UP contract execution was around Rs. 26 crores.

Saket Kapoor: And a number for March, just to compare the pay?

Vasant Naik: It was around Rs.110 crores**.**

Saket Kapoor: It slowed down a lot and sir, what were the key reasons you alluded to this?

Vasant Naik: These were already explained earlier in the call as well in the last concall that because of the election season being on and the uncertainties surrounding the whole process, there was a slowdown in the overall execution and the funding for the project which as we explained, is expected to improve as the quarter moves on. From the second-half onwards, we expect that significant increase will take place in the execution of this project.

Saket Kapoor: And what was the value of the legacy project that affected the margin for this quarter?

Vasant Naik: Specific project wise details, we don't give other than for the large projects, so this unfortunately I will not be able to share.

Saket Kapoor: Sir, coming to the consumer product division, I think so the lot has been spoken about our trust on growing this segment for a profitable journey, so where are we in midst of reaching that critical mass when the segment will start to be EBITDA positive also, if you could give us some targets or the way forward for the segment for this financial year? We clocked the topline of Rs. 254 crores for last financial year, what should we look in terms of growth and how profitable can be or whether when can we return to profit?

Aankur Patni: We have been calling out the consumer segment growth prospects and we remain excited about the growth which the segment is being able to achieve along with the acceptance of the various new products that we have been launching. The focus over the last few quarters, as we spoke little bit in more detail during the last concall, was to ensure that we achieve a much larger scale of operations. And therefore, without immediately focusing on achieving EBITDA positivity, the primary focus for the time being is to reinvest whatever surpluses are being generated by the business into further growth. And expansion of the teams, expansion of infrastructure and whatever it takes for the operations to achieve a much larger scale. Hopefully if we are being able to succeed in our overall growth pursuits, we would quickly reach a scale where EBITDA positivity happens on account of the scale by itself. The margins at a gross level remain very good. The product margins are comparable to the best which exists in our other segments. It is only that we are investing substantially in expansion of its capabilities, manpower, the infrastructure. That is what pulls down the EBIT level profitability of the segment.

Moderator: Thank you very much. The next question is from the line of Dheeraj Ram from Ashika Stock Broking. Please go ahead.

Dheeraj Ram: So post budget, what we expect is the water treatment segment to improve its execution and order inflow. So in this regard, we have seen many companies entering into water treatment business such as WABAG, Welspun Corp, VPRPL, Triveni Engineering and EMS Limited. So how do you position yourselves in this particular market and how do you plan to grow from here for next two years?

Aankur Patni: Well, the numbers which have been shared by various ministries and industry forums and indeed the policy actions which are being driven by the central government, the state governments and governments at even lower levels are very positive for the water and wastewater industry in general. I do expect that the investments or policy directions will not just be limited to large infrastructure or civil oriented construction, but also increasingly towards higher technology interventions which will ensure that companies like us would have an even larger play. We are keenly hearing from the government their intention to spruce up action on improving the quality of water, not just the supply, they are also more seriously looking at tackling specific contaminants which affect pockets of our country. They are talking about increased technology interventions at a very distributed level to ensure the reach of high quality sanitation and high quality waste water treatment for recycle, to reach remote rural areas of our country. Along with this, there is increased focus on making our rivers clean and augmenting the quality of our groundwater. There are several such initiatives by the government which would have an impact on technology companies like us. I do expect the future therefore to be quite interesting.

Dheeraj Ram: And one more question on what do you expect the return on investment of the Roha plant that you are currently working on?

Aankur Patni: I can tell you that we are looking at roughly a 3-year to 4-year period to reach optimum capacity utilisation. Out of the Rs. 400 crores odd investment, roughly around Rs. 125 crores are targeted towards a specific technology intervention, which has other benefits beyond capacity augmentation and we expect an asset turnover of over 2 times should be calculated on the figure of 275 crores. Our margin levels, barring unforeseen or exceptional circumstances, should stay in the ballpark of current levels.

Dheeraj Ram: And one last question, what is the bidding criteria in this EPC segment? What does one see to go for bidding process? Is it the bank guarantee or is it the order book or something like that?

Aankur Patni: Bidding criteria vary slightly from customer to customer, but they would certainly look at your technical abilities, credentials as also your financial capabilities. Bank guarantees and all that come at a much later stage.

Moderator: Thank you very much. The next question is from the line of Aejas Lakhani from Unifi Capital. Please go ahead.

Aejas Lakhani: So my questions are two. The first one is, you have stated that there is a growth guidance of about 15%. If I were to break that up segmentally and assume the rates of growth that consumer is seeing in line with historical and given that Roha is still a year away, and given that the chemical segment operating utilization capacities are fairly high, is it fair to sort of derive that the growth is largely going to be driven by engineering? That is question number one, and question number two is how should we think about your operating margins for the year?

Aankur Patni: For engineering segment also, the indication that we had given earlier during the current call is a 15% to 20% topline growth. We also have been indicating that we should be moving towards the margin levels achieved in the financial year 22-23 and therefore upwards from what we ended for 23-24. Hopefully we would be able to give you a more firm number as we move through the year.

Aejas Lakhani: Mr. Patni, just a quick follow up on that. So you mentioned 15% to 20% growth on the engineering side, today in the chemical plants what kind of capacities are we operating at?

Aankur Patni: That is roughly in the 65% to 70% range.

Aejas Lakhani: And sir, would that mean that you still have your ability to extract greater revenue is still available in those facilities or is it that the next leg of growth is severely dependent on Roha and Roha coming on stream?

Aankur Patni: No, there is a headroom available there. But the aspiration is not just to look at that headroom, but to grow at a faster pace in years to come. Roha and other capacity additions in the chemical segment would aid that.

Aejas Lakhani: And sir, could you just expand on that one statement you made that out of the Rs. 400 crores investments in Roha, Rs. 120 crores are going into enhancement. So what does that really mean? How does that impact business? If you could just expand a little bit on that, sir?

Aankur Patni: That Rs. 125 crores are into a new technology, which could improve the overall profitability and there are other advantages also which ensue from that. We should be able to declare it a little bit more explicitly once the capacity comes on stream.

Moderator: Thank you very much. The next question is from the line of Pratik Kothari from Unique PMS. Please go ahead.

Pratik Kothari: Sir, first question, you did mention that we are closer to a couple of contracts, the larger orders in your finalization, so these are domestic or international?

Aankur Patni: They are international.

Pratik Kothari: But I understand the timeline of this usually is very uncertain and nothing that we can predict, but just again from an international side, sir, how do except this so that we are close to how are we looking at in terms of finalization, in terms of inquiry, earlier we were hoping for much more from Southeast Asia, Africa, Middle East, you can just talk a bit more on that?

Aankur Patni: The target markets for large engineering orders remain the same, which is the Middle East, Africa and Southeast Asia. Beyond these large or very large projects we are also getting a steady stream of smaller inquiries as well as the orders from that same region. We are quite sure that with all the initiatives that we are taking in these respective regions, the overall order flow, not just engineering but so for the other segments, the overall order flow from these regions is going to improve.

Pratik Kothari: Is there any anything which is progressing on Sri Lankan order?

Aankur Patni: Sri Lanka, the pace at which we have been doing further invoicing or execution remains extremely muted as we have been sharing. It is a function of the funds which get released by either the Sri Lankan authorities or with the intervention of Government of India. We have seen some infusion of funds and that specifically has come from the Sri Lankan Government who have over the past few months released significant sums of money under the current circumstances. And to that extent we have also been able to invoice small values. The remaining contract, which still remains to be invoiced is somewhere around 10%-12% and as soon as we get significant commitments or clarity on further fund flows, we should be able to close out the balance unexecuted portion at a very quick pace. This can easily happen within the current financial year. But then again, we have to be quite clear about how the various fund arrangements are being made and whether we can then be certain about closing the contract.

Pratik Kothari: Sir, I think the year or two back, we announced this expansion in Orissa, for the what do we intend to do there?

Aankur Patni: As of now, there are no further details to share with all of you, but as I had indicated earlier also, we will certainly come back to all of you and make an announcement once there is further development on that front. Our intention is to expand capacity for the other chemicals and do some backward integration in line with the growth that we are aspiring to achieve in the domestic and international market. Once it reaches to the stage where we have further details to share with the investor community, we will do so.

Moderator: Thank you very much. The next question is from the line of Saket Kapoor from Kapoor Company. Please go ahead.

Saket Kapoor: Sir, can you give some more color on our recent acquisition, the foreign Company which we acquired since when we look at the consolidation in the chemical segment and also for the engineering part, for the engineering segment, the profitability is lower and for the chemical segment, the profitability has improved. So if you could just give us an understanding of what changes between standalone and the console number in terms of profitability?

Vasant Naik: In terms of the engineering segment, the reduction in the margin from a standalone to the consolidated is largely on account of the losses which we have made in a couple of our engineering subsidiaries. Typically, these subsidiaries scale increases in the second-half of the year and their profitability should improve. This largely explains the delta between the standalone margin and the consolidated margin of the engineering segment. As far as the chemical segment is concerned, is largely because of improvement in performance of some of our overseas subsidiaries as well as the consolidation of the subsidiary MAPRIL which was acquired in June of 23, in the last week of June 23, so in the current year we have consolidated 90 days, full quarter numbers while in the previous year it was only one-week number.

Saket Kapoor: And what are we looking, sir, in terms of MAPRIL contribution growth aspect for this year and what are the utilization level there?

Vasant Naik: You should see similar level of growth what we have seen in the standalone segment of the chemicals, around 15%.

Saket Kapoor: Sir, when we look at the bid pipeline of say Rs. 8,000 crore and the type of business execution we have done in terms of the UP project, can you give some color in the same vein of what would be the value of projects that we are bidding? My understanding is what kind of repeat orders or the same set of business we can cater to as we are doing it for the UP Jal Nigam?

Aankur Patni: I think our overall inclination is to do more and more jobs in the segments where we make higher degree of profitability and where our risk perception is lower. Our ability to do contracts of the nature of UP or Sri Lanka or any one of these remains quite high. A lot of the orders that we are trying to pick up both internationally and domestic, tends to be in areas, in sectors and with the margin profile where we feel a little bit better covered in terms of risk. So it is not like a question of our ability to multiply in terms of capability, more a question of the specific areas where we want to grow and consequential impact on our bottom line and balance sheets.

Saket Kapoor: Yes, sir, that is correct. My question was whether there are more orders in the pipeline or in the bid pipeline of similar nature of the one for the UP Jal Nigam project which we are taking?

Aankur Patni: In the enquiry bank, there is nothing of that nature. But the opportunities exist and we are evaluating it, but they are not a part of the enquiry bank.

Moderator: Thank you very much. The next question is from the line of Dheeraj Ram from Ashika Stock Broking. Please go ahead.

Dheeraj Ram: Sir, we were into this demineralization segment and could you please let me know what is the market size of this segment in India or globally?

Aankur Patni: We are not into demineralization segment only, that is a small subset of the activities that we do and there are several other technology areas where we are actively present and which are in fact part of almost all large projects that we do. You can get more details about the various technology areas where we operate from our website which elaborates in quite a lot of detail about the various technologies and products.

Dheeraj Ram: Yes, I have understood that demineralization is a subset of a particular project, so?

Aankur Patni: It is a subset of the technologies we deal in, demineralization is one of the technologies where we operate, but there are several others.

Dheeraj Ram: And what is the O&M revenue that we are currently doing?

Vasant Naik: Around 20% of our engineering segment revenue will come from the services and spares.

Moderator: Thank you very much. As there are no further questions, I would now like to hand over the conference to Mr. N. M. Ranadive from Ion Exchange Limited for closing comments.

N. M. Ranadive: Thank you all for participating in this earning concall. I hope we have been able to answer your questions satisfactorily. If you have any further questions or would like to know more about the Company, we would be happy to be of assistance. We are very thankful to all our investors who stood by us and also had confidence in the Company's growth plan and focus. And with this, I wish everyone a great evening. Thank you.

Moderator: On behalf of Ion Exchange Limited, that concludes this conference. Thank you for joining us. You may now disconnect your lines.