

Automotive Axles to grow portfolio

The pioneering Meritor and Bharat Forge joint venture turns 30, rolls out its millionth axle, and also plans to introduce four new product families soon, says **Eliot Lobo**.

Meritor Inc and Bharat Forge celebrated 30 years of their highly successful partnership in the Indian market at a function for customers, suppliers, and employees in Mysore in the second week of April.

(At the end of March the leading OEM-independent global supplier of heavy duty axles for trucks and buses finally reverted to the name it first assumed when it was spun out of Rockwell International in 1997 till its merger in 2000 with Arvin Industries. Through the ill-fated decade as a combined entity, the Meritor axle business remained the company's biggest brand and the flying bull logo its most evocative symbol.)

For the first decade beginning 1981, the two companies' first joint venture, Automotive Axles Ltd (AAL) had to be content supplying components such as housings or machined carrier castings to Tata and Ashok Leyland, which assembled their own axles.

But since the early 1990s, when it started to deliver fully dressed axles of its own design to Ashok Leyland, there's been no looking back. Today AAL delivers axles to, or is working on projects with, every single manufacturer of trucks and buses in

Baba Kalyani and Chip McClure unveil the millionth axle.



India bar none.

The company has consistently introduced axles of performance levels that did not exist in the market, chairman Baba Kalyani pointed out to reporters. "We first made the concept of the multi-axle (6x2) truck a reality. Operators saw significant gains in tyre life, fuel efficiency, and, consequently, their return on capital."

AAL also pioneered tandem axles for (6x4) trucks used in mining and construction, with reliability engineered



Patrick MacNamara, the joint venture's guiding force from the Rockwell (now Meritor) side, was felicitated at the occasion. The 53-year Meritor veteran was responsible for technology transfer and application engineering of every single product Automotive Axles has introduced to date.

for that demanding application, he added. "Today 80 percent of the vehicles used in these areas have our axles."

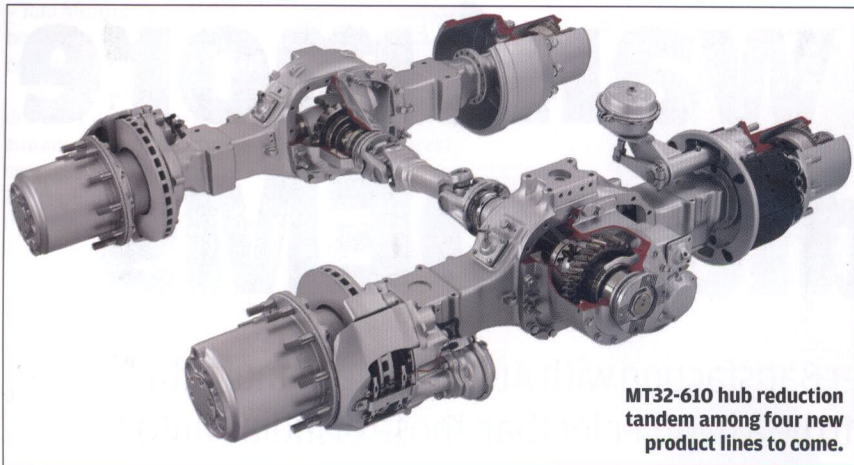
Having released its millionth axle, an RS120 (used in mediumweight trucks like Ashok Leyland's Ecomet 1112) at the occasion, the company is now gearing up to introduce four new product families over the coming months, Kalyani said.

These include the 611-series bevel-gear hub reduction axle sets for 4x4 and 6x6 vehicles and ProTec 50 high-mobility independent suspension for the defence market. For 18 years AAL has been the sole supplier of axles for the Stallion military trucks in India. It is also the largest supplier of military axles in the US, to customers that include OshKosh, BAE, and Navistar.

The three other product lines are the MS13-240 two-speed axle for 4x2 dump applications and 6x2 and 8x2 haulage vehicles and tankers; the MT32-610 and MT32-616 hub reduction tandems for construction and mining; and axles for a variety of off-highway vehicles including terminal tractors and all-terrain cranes.

Tripling turnover by 2015

The company expects to do business worth "Rs



MT32-610 hub reduction tandem among four new product lines to come.

FACTFILE

With manufacturing facilities located at Mysore, Automotive Axles Ltd is currently one of the largest independent manufacturers of rear drive axle assemblies in the country and with more than 20 years of axle-producing experience and advanced gearing technology from Meritor HVS (India) Ltd, has been manufacturing reliable, long-life heavy duty drive



AAL's two-speed axle.

axles. This capability allows the company to meet the steer, drive and trailer axle requirements of customers. The marketing and field service support is provided by Meritor HVS (India) Ltd.

1,100 crore plus" in the year to September, and wants to triple this by 2015, Kalyani said. Towards this objective AAL, which will touch a capacity of 15,000 axles and 60,000 S-cam drum brakes a month by October, plans to set up two more plants, one for an expansion of the existing capacity, and another for the "speciality" axles. While there is adequate space on its Mysore campus, the company is also investigating locations in north and central India.

Meritor chairman, CEO, and president Chip McClure spoke of the time and effort his company had invested in nurturing "the oldest and most successful" of the joint ventures it operates in major markets across the globe outside of North America and Europe. "We have built an unsurpassed understanding of suppliers, customers, and what the market requires."



Crane axle off-highway is one of the new segments AAL is getting into.

While the focus till now has largely been on importing capabilities into India, Meritor is increasingly looking at exporting capabilities, such as in product engineering and purchasing, he said. He revealed that the Bangalore Technical Centre, operated as a 100 percent Meritor-owned entity, has emerged as a global centre of excellence for certain product lines — which ones he did not specify.

On the manufacturing

The military application Protech 50 independent suspension could be offered for commercial applications as well; hub reduction military 611 is specially developed for India.

and purchasing side particularly, Meritor would seek to leverage off Bharat Forge's strength as a Top 3 Tier-1 exporter from India. AAL already exports 17X gearsets to Meritor's Cameri (Italy) plant and 177 gearsets and housings to a plant in China that supplies bus axles. (This is the same gearset that goes into the drive axles of Volvo's B7R and B9R chassis.) It also exports carrier assemblies and housings to Renault Trucks in Lyon Saint-Priest, and housings to North America.

In 1999 the second joint venture, Meritor HVS India, was formed by carving the application engineering and marketing teams out of AAL. As a result, AAL is a pure manufacturing company with a single customer, Meritor HVS India (MHVSIL).

MHVSIL is looking to enter the air disc brake business, and has launched an aftermarket

organisation that is studying opportunities in remanufacture of a variety of truck components of all makes. It wants to grow deliveries to the vast trailer market, into which Automotive Axles Ltd presently supplies a minuscule 2,000 tag axles a month.

Autocar Professional learns the company has been in discussions with ANG to take over the latter's Noida plant for trailer axles, one of the options a Meritor source admits it is considering as an alternative to setting up a greenfield operation.

Meanwhile AAL is more than midway through a comprehensive reengineering exercise with the establishment of the AutoAxle Production System, a lean management system modelled on the system in place at Meritor plants overseas. More on this in a subsequent issue. ■

