Garment Industry in Bangladesh

Raging against the Dying of the Light

by Hans Rolloos

VER the past fifteen years the garment industry has become the most succ-essful industrial activity in Bangladesh. 'Made in Bangladesh' garment products are exported to more than fifty countries. The country ranks number eight on the list of garment suppliers to the United States of America and number ten for the European Community. Last year the total garments export value amounted up to 1.7 billion dollars, 43 per cent of the country's total ex-

Not so long ago the main export item in Bangladesh was jute. The crop has dominated the country's export for centuries. Already during the time of British colonization jute was grown in many parts in the delta area of Bengal. Raw or semi-processed jute was shipped to England for final processing into jute bags, carpet rugs and other jute products. After the second world war most of processing was transferred to East-Pakistan, now Bangladesh. Cheaper synthetic oil-based materials and outdated and inefficient production methods have made that the world demand for jute has gone down drastically. This development has seriously affected the jute industry. Another reason for the decline in the jute production is, that India has taken over a large part of the existing world market for jute. There the jute production and processing industry is better organised and therefore more competitive.

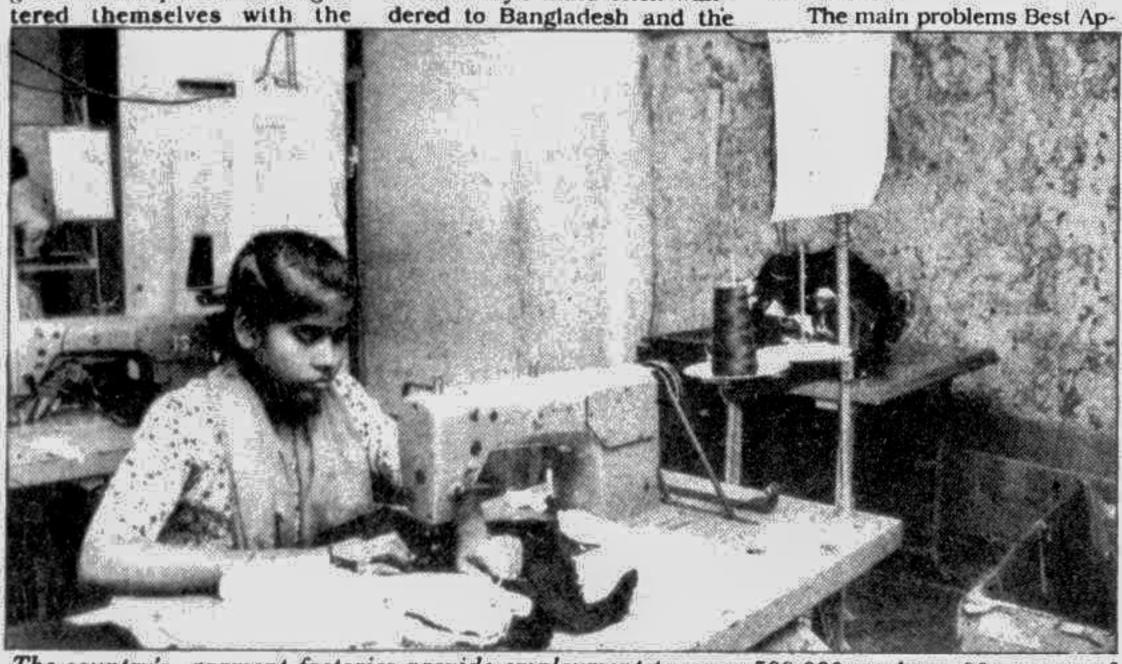
The production of garments is a totally new industry for Bangladesh. Except for the traditional handloom industry and some silk and muslin production, the country never had a real production base for textile products. Until its independence in 1971 most of the ready made garments and fabrics came from West-Pakistan, England and Hongkong. The small production capacity already in existence was destroyed during the liberation war. At the same time many of the former factory managers left the country.

The development of the present garment industry started at the end of the seventies. South-Korea and Hongkong were facing serious garment quota problems. These quota are set by the European Commission and America, the world's largest garment buyers. Also the increase of wages in South-Korea and Hongkong made these countries to look for cheaper production centres beyond their borders. Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines and Bangladesh became their main areas of interest. In the beginning most the garments did not get the label of the producing country. However, with

increasing production volume and product quality, more participation and investment of local entrepreneurs the situation gradually changed. Nowadays it is estimated that over eighty per cent of garments produced in this country are labelled 'Made in Bangladesh'. Starting in backyard alleys as small scale production centres the garment industry has expanded enormously over the last fourteen years. Already over a thousand garments companies have regis-

Friesian and Bangladeshi people have a lot in common. For centuries the Friesians have fought against the incoming seawater. Gradually by building dykes and polders they were able to safeguard themselves against floods and storms. The Friesians are a tough breed. just like we Bangladeshis." Although fully settled in the Netherlands and running a popular Bangladeshi food restaurant in Groningen, Chowdhury's mind often wan-

In spite of its continuing growth, international competition becomes stronger by the day. The day President Clinton is going to open the door for products from Vietnam, Bangladesh will be in deep trouble. Low wages are not enough to keep competitors at bay. Productivity and political and social stability are even more important. "Let the government see to it, that there is stability and a reliable technical infrastructure," is Chowdhury's opinion. "The private sector will do the rest.



The country's garment factories provide employment to some 500,000 workers, 80 percent of whom are women. - Photo: Shehzad Nooran

Chamber of Commerce. Together they employ an estimated 500,000 people of which eighty per cent are women.

Enamul Chowdhury is the owner of Best Apparel, a middle size garment factory in Mirpur. Over the past four years he has produced 3.5 million T-shirts for the Netherlands market. "You can easily say that on a nice summer day at least one in ten of the Dutch people is walking around in one of my Tshirts," he said when I visited him in his busy office. "I make them in thirty different colours." Although thirty-six years of age. Chowdhury has already led an interesting and dynamic life. Not able to find a suitable job in his home town Bogra and eager to get experience in foreign countries he left Bangladesh with a college degree when he was twenty years old. After working for a number of years in Greece, Germany and England he decided to settle himself in the Friesian town of Drachten in the northern part of the Netherlands. Chowdhury You may wonder, why Friesland, the land of cows and milk? Well, a friend already lived there, and then I fell in

many problems his country is On the second floor the T-

shirts are ironed and packed in plastic covers. This is also the place where the final quality control takes place. The best workers are employed here. Every T-shirt is carefully checked before it is packed. Chowdhury: "My client in the Netherlands demands top quality. When a container arrives with 50,000 Tshirts he takes a random sample of ten pieces. If he finds that one or two are incomplete, the whole container is rejected. You can imagine what this means for my company."

The garment industry is a blessing for the women in Bangladesh," says Chowdhury when we go down the stairs to the second floor of the factory "Traditionally, women in this country are confined to their homes. Go to small towns and you rarely see women on the streets or in the market. The garment industry has made our women more progressive and enterprising. The women in this sector now earn their own money. That makes them more emancipated."

Is there a future for the Bangladesh garments industry?

parel is presently facing are the irregular supply of electricity, the relatively high prices of the 'local textile products and the high lending interest rates.

> It is clear that the textile factories suffer from the same problems as the garment industries. Irregular power supply, strikes, delays during import and export, low productivity and a number of other reasons make that Bangladesh is less cheap than the government thinks.

> Being a born optimist Chowdhury is not pessimistic about the future of his country. "I know that the government is aware of our problems but presently lacks the political tools to do much about it. Still it has to act quickly, time is running out. The world is rapidly changing. Bangladesh may soon loose the special privileges and donor sympathy it had so far. We then have to earn most of the money we use with our own hands. We better start doing this as soon as pos-

The writer works for a EC sponsored project in Bangla-

The Rural Youth

Development, Destiny and Destination

by ABM Nurul Anwar

HE world youth popu-Estimates of youth population by sex, lation was 738 million in ▲ 1975. By 2000 AD addi-Year Total population Youth (15-29) Proportion 15-29) tional 1.18 billion young people (In thousands) (In thousands) (Percent) will struggle for space, jobs, ed-Total emale ucation and amusement on the planet. Youth population in 1980 45689 Asia, Africa and Latin America 74907 29.18 28.86 29.03 will almost double in the quar-1990 16369 15196 31565 28.80 29.22 ter century between 1975 and 1995 118321 16505 34116 28.67 28.83 2000. This increase is likely to 2000 65610 19862 17812 36774 affect economic growth and so-

vating the prevailing problem. Young people of Bangladesh constitutes the major share of total populace and can play great role to change the lot of the people. This force need to be utilized in the war against poverty, deprivation, hunger, human resource. illiteracy and unemployment.

cial progress adversely, aggra-

The United Nations, defines youth as persons belonging to the 12-25 age group. But the definition of youth varies from country to country and is rooted in the biological and legal factors, as well as in socioeconomic and politico-legal structures. The UN definition encompasses late childhood. adolescence and young adulthood. The Ministry of Youth and Sports, Government of Bangladesh considers young people in the age category of 15-30 years as youth, while Department of Social Welfare defines youth to include persons between 16-25

years of age. In Bangladesh, one acquires voting eligibility at 18. The age group 0-35 years nearly accounts 75 per cent of the total population, while 15-30 age group constitutes 29 per cent. It is needless to underscore the potentials of this

Projected figures at five-year intervals beginning from 1980 to the year 2000 (Table 1) further show a substantial increase in the proportion of the total youth in the country 21.96 per cent in 1974 to 28.86 per cent in 1980. The upward trend in the youth proportion seems to continue. However, the estimated average annual increase of the youth population from 1980 to 2000 are in smaller magnitude, as compared with the average annual increase during 1961-74 and 1974-80. This is due to the optimistic assumption of rapidly declining fertility rates in 1975, 1980 and

1985. The predictive power of these assumption is contingent upon many factors involving socio-economic, demographic and psychological variables.

The importance of migration as a component of population change has significance beyond its impact on altering population size and its composition both at the sending and receiving areas. Most of the social problems confronting various developing nations like Bangladesh, possibly have a strong migration component. But, geographic mobility has its good side too. Migrants may well serve as agents of change. In Bangladesh out migration from rural areas mainly occurs with the youth between the age range of 15-29.

The rural-urban migration of the youth affects the socio-economic and demographic bal-

ance in both the rural and urban areas. Their migration means rural areas are left with the less educated and less progressive people who lack leadership capability in development programmes.

The youth are burdened with double poverty: (a) limited access to gainful employment and (b) as a member of a poverty stricken family.

Despite such an acute situation of the vast majority of the population the major extension organizations in Bangladesh which work upto village level (Department of Agriculture Extension the Directorate of Livestock Services, the Directorate of Fisheries and Bangladesh Rural Development Board) have not yet included youth extension programmes. This is a major weakness of the national research and extension organizations in Bangladesh compared to advanced countries. Unwarranted exclusion of the rural youth from the scope of extension programmes have further aggravated the situation in the rural areas. Participation of rural youth in the development plans has been sporadic and is not based on sound programme planning.

The Ministry of Youth Development (now redesignated as Ministry of Youth and Sports) was created in December 1978 to provide unified direction and coordinate all youth development programmes.

UN General Assembly in 1979 adopted a specific programme recommended by the 24 nation Advisory Committee for International Youth Year (IYY) in 1985 calling for a local and national focus for the youth. Under this programme, each nation was to look at the situation of this youth in the age category of 15-24 years. Youth are the bey to the future. but many observers feel that the 15 to 24 year old age group has been ignored for too long. Young people today live in societies undergoing rapid social and economic change in which to find productive employment grows ever more difficult.

Now the country is on the threshold of launching a long awaited rural youth programme all over the rural areas. Poverty is taking away all the potentials in the youth. The solution to develop rural youth is not a question of philanthropy. It requires overall well-planned na tional policies and sincere ef-

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For Minimising Losses in Fishing

N a world of rapidly increasing human populations, the opportunities for producing greater quantities of food have gradually become more and more limited. Over-fished lakes and seas are two serious but familiar examples.

An obvious way to increase the availability of this important source of dietary protein is to minimise the often substantial losses which occur after the fish have been caught. In areas where fishing is an important local industry they have been adapting or introducing new

processing techniques - improved and fuel - efficient fish-drying kilns have been successful by Lake Victoria in Kenya; ice boxes have been encouraged on board small fishing boats in the Bay of Bengal; and the prospects of processing waste from the fish industry in aquaculture projects are being assessed.

Sine Qua non for Family Size

IGH infant and child mortality and morbidity in Bangladesh are the main hurdles to bringing about a change in the quality of life of the people, which has direct links for achieving the desired family size. The Human Development Report 1990 published by United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) identified that the first priority to achieve human development should be the significant reduction of

child deaths. The UNDP report mentioned that in Bangladesh the underfive child deaths per thousand lessened to 184 in the year 1989 from 262 in 1960. The present child death rate is 110 per thousand live births. But this progress should not generate satisfaction of the achieve ment. To reduce the gap by 2000, the under-five mortality rate should be reduced by 8.2 per cent annually. Six per cent of the worlds under-five child deaths occur in Bangladesh. Nearly 870,000 children die every year and everyday 2,400 children die -100 every hour.

It has been estimated that nearly 65 per cent of the infants and children could be saved by relatively simple, inexpensive, effective low-cost methods. The intervention cost to save a child is only Taka 350.

The other health and nutritional problems are vitamin A deficiency, iron deficiency, todine deficiency disorders, infectious diseases such as diphtheria, tetanus, whooping cough. poliomyelitis, tuberculosis and measles contribute to morbidity and mortality. Intercurrent infections and illness occupy 75 per cent of a child's life time in this country. Most of the infants deaths are within 28 days of their births because their mothers were not immunized. Immunization of child bearing women can save both the mother and the new born from

tetanus. After the success of the immunization coverage rate, plans are underway to distribute vitamin-A capsules, oral saline packets and family planning materials to the mothers from the rural out-reach immunization centres. Massive plans are by Saleem Samad

underway to distribute antibiotic medicine through the immunization outreach for controlling pneumonia deaths.

love with my wife Janneke.

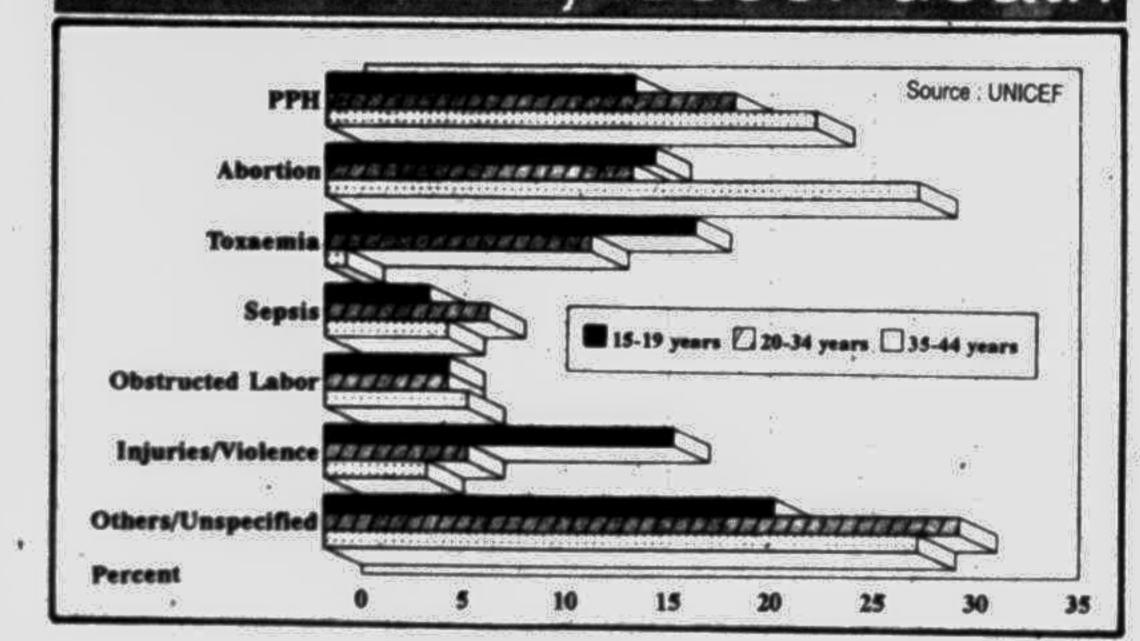
Through her I discovered that

reduction in child deaths could now be achieved. Infants born closer together than 24 months. for example, are approximately Demographers have linked twice as likely to die in an early

literate mothers are less vulnerable to diseases and malnutri-

Social investment from female literacy means reduced fertility, reduced infant mortality, lower school dropouts, im-

Lesser birth, lesser death



between lesser deaths with lesser births. Which means with the reduction of child deaths. the birth rate will decrease at an equal curve. First, an infant death ends the suppression of ovulation which is caused by breastfeeding. In absence of any other method of birth planning. a new pregnancy becomes more likely. Secondly, the death of a child can also prompt couples to replace the loss by a new pregnancy sooner than would otherwise have been the case. Third, when child death rates are high, many parents compensate for the anticipated loss of one or more of their children by giving birth to more children than they actually want, thus jeopardizing the size of the famfly. This 'insurance effect' is a major reason for the persistence

of high birth rates. Population specialists strongly urge the promotion of birth spacing as also one of the most important means by which

childhood as babies born than two years apart. Promotion of birth-timing - as a method of child protection - would also obviously drive birth-rates downward.

The women must be empowered with knowledge and information about child survival and basic health hygiene. Rural and urban mothers should be empowered with knowledge to immunize their children, prepare oral saline and birth spacing. Empowering more parents specially mothers to use low-cost methods could prevent further child deaths annually. Less tangibly, empowering parents to protect their children's lives helps to increase their sense of control over their lives.

Other ways of empowering women - for example, through literacy or informal education programmes - have also been found to be strongly associated with both lower death rates and lower birth rates. Children of

proved family nutrition and less vulnerability to dowry related violence and early marriages.

Despite poor economic growth, Bangladesh can change the quality of life of its people. The need to prioritise the goal and re-orient the budget is great. Many countries like Sri Lanka, Uruguay and Zimbabwe made significant progress in human development and improved child survival and development with poor economic growth.

Political commitment of the government, political leaders and policy planners is wanted to bring about qualitative change of the nation. Social mobilisation of society leaders. social managers, professionals, journalists and even entertainers can create pressure on the politicians to implement the priorities of human development target.

The writer an Ashoka Fellow. runs Development Features.

Asia is Where the Action is

HE Asia-Pacific economies are expected to grow by an annual average of seven per cent through to 1995. China is the locomotive with double digit growth despite the current slowdown and problems of overheating. such as infrastructure improvement and environmental concerns.

"Asia is where the action is." says Malcolm Dowling, assistant chief economist of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) By contrast, he estimates annual gross domestic product (GDP) growth for the world as a whole at less than two per cent over the next three years. An he adds: "The world is not doing very well.

At a World Bank/IMF seminar in Manila, Dowling cautioned that poverty "remains the most pressing issue in developing Asia." Despite the dramatic growth since the 1970s the number of poor Asians -estimated at 800 million people showed that "the war against poverty in Asia is far from over."

Dowling said some Asian countries were being choked by infrastructure bottlenecks, such as water and power shortages and growing urban decay. Increasing environmental con-

Abby Tan writes from Manila cerns in several countries might

limit development. The ADB forecasts China's growth rate for 1993 at 13 per cent, but because of overheating and corrective measures. this should slow to 10 per cent next year and nine per cent in

Dowling said that unlike 1989, when the Chinese economy suddenly dipped after a period of overheated growth, he expected a "soft landing" this time for Beifing. ADB Vice-President William Thomson said

1995 - still well above the re-

gional average.

that because China acts like a locomotive for the region its slower growth will affect the rest A Bank report said that despite the credit restrictions in July to coll China's economy

the booming investment sector combined with robust consumer demand suggests that inflation in the next two years will be at least as high as in 1993. It said important trade liberalisation. tied to China's application for Gatt membership and strong domestic demand for high technology capital goods, would lead to sustained high growth in imports of about 25 per cent

Slower export growth resulted in a current account deficit. The trade and current account deficits are anticipated to continue in 1994 and 1995. with import growth continuing to outpace export growth, despite a possible currency devaluation. Dowling said Hong Kong, in particular, would be

affected by China's growth rate. Asia's so-called tiger economies should show at least five per cent growth in the next two years, with Hong Kong and Singapore performing well but South Korea and Taiwan struggling with structural adjustments.

The Bank said Hong Kong and Singapore would continue to benefit from serving the needs of a dynamic region, with the British colony's performance being tied closely to that of China

Singapore "will combine a growing offshore relationship with the Malaysia-Indonesia-Singapore growth triangle and development of selected hi-tech products, including computer disc drives and financial ser-

The ADB said the export performance of the four newly

industrialising economies (NIEs) should continue to improve next year as the world economy finally begins to recover. Strong growth in public and private in-

vestment is also forecast. Dowling said "strong growth in the range of seven to eight per cent is feasible" for Singapore. In South Korea, growth is expected to slump in 1993 for the second year running because of high wages, anaemic investment and sluggish exports. A recovery is expected in 1994, following restructuring, with 6 to 6.5 per cent growth predicted by 1995.

In Taiwan, the scaling down of an ambitious government development plan and slow export growth restrained overall growth this year, Repaid increases in investments in China are expected to dampen domestic capital formation. Taiwan growth is forecast at 6.5 per cent over the next two years.

In Southeast Asia, favourable external and internal conditions will push growth in the next two years, with an average of more than seven per cent by 1995. Thailand will lead, with about eight per cent in the next two years because of a more stable political climate combined with rising foreign investments.

Malaysia, which has shown the way in the past two years. will slow because of infrastructure bottlenecks, while the region's laggard, the Philippines. will grow by 3.5 per cent next

year and five per cent in 1995. Vietnam and Laos are also predicted to perform strongly with forecasts of 6-8 per cent growth as they undertake further political and economic re-

In Indonesia, favourable conditions in the export and financial markets, coupled with a more relaxed monetary policy are expected to propel Jakarta's economy in the next two years.

Dowling pointed to the major structural reforms in India. Indochina and India could turn into the new "growth nodes" for Asia. — Gemini News

The writer is a Singaporean journalist based in Manila. She writes on environmental and developmental tssues.

