

LIVING

Aarong Goes International...

The pre-eminent traditional handicraft departmental store has opened its branch in London to be followed by others in New York, Paris and Vancouver. This culminates two decades of innovation, creativity and marketing genius of this venture of an experiment that proved to be a tremendous success. The Daily Star devotes today's Living Page to introduce the readers to Aarong.

Revival of the Traditional Past

WHEN people talk about Bangladesh: they nostalgically talk about the days of past. The glamour, the heritage that were. But never for once do they step beyond these mere talks or writings, at times perhaps, to bring back that magic and colour.

Mustins and the tragic end of its special artisans, *Jamdani* (figured Muslins) and the cruel commercialization of the craft, *Nakshi* and the rarity of it, these are the widely known art forms of by gone tradition and culture. But then there is, the almost lost golden fibre, the famous *Rajshahi* silk and the not so famous yet in vogue the *Jessore* stitch clothes, the cross-stitch or *Sujni* work of *Jamalpur* and *Chapainawabganj* — the list goes on, what about these works?

Revival of all these or rather recapturing the past has become an issue now. BRAC has initiated programmes and strategies to increase the quality and marketability of these indigenous crafts. BRAC opened a rural craft centre in Dhaka called *Aarong*, which in Bangla means a village fair. Their idea was to promote traditional crafts through its retail out-let and to provide support service to disadvantaged artisans.

"Our very own indigenous art work was dying and losing the excellence, we at BRAC decided to recreate a taste and demand for these fine craftsmanship and thought it absolutely necessary to intervene," says Maheen Khan, Design Manager, BRAC.

"First, we decided to document and catalogue the designs and motifs of these traditional art forms," says Chandra Shekhar Shaha, Product Development Manager. Then they made extensive documentation from books, research materials, products, samples. The year to year documentation and coding were not only from Bangladesh they also studied other countries' forms too. "We tried to document all artistic forms even Islamic, from Indonesia to Peru to everywhere, the search continued. We made a resource centre for our design institute," Shaha explains.

"It is a library of ideas where we explore imagination and try to implement these in our own structure and keep the contents purely in Bangladeshi style," continues Khan. "We visit museums and private collections of traditional art: talk to old masters and conduct research to catalogue old motifs," she explains.

Second, they experiment by adapting the indigenous designs and techniques to new lines of craft. "We used *Jamdani's* motifs on block-printed sarees, embroidered garments and woolen rugs. Women were engaged in fine quality embroidery of *Jamdani* motifs into cotton and silk garments. This not only serves to revive a national art form but also develops another line of craft production for women," she reports. They have also made new lines of *katha* products like children's clothing, cushion covers, table mats, baby quilts, wall hangings and so on.

"Third, we wanted to strengthen the technologies and productive capacities of disadvantaged artisans. We decided to locate master craftsmen were with whom apprentices could be trained. BRAC also started a textile design and service workshop," says Shaha. These crafts, in old days were bought by the rich. They were patronized art. But now because of poor standards and some slipping into disuse, they are no longer patronized by the affluent.

In an effort to find new markets and patrons BRAC schemed to revive and adapt traditional skills and designs to new lines of functional and marketable items. "What BRAC means by revival is the effort to revive in women (and men) the original skills, imagination and creativity to produce art in the traditional form," Khan clarifies their point.

A *shalwar kameez* or even a *panjabi* was always worn by people, only their style changed time to time. *Aarong*, keeping in mind the latest cuts and designs, moulds tra-

dition into their clothes. motifs from *sandesh* (a sweet meat) *sach* (molds) or traditional *pithas* (Rice cakes), made in the village, are used as their design element. These are transformed through time, adapted and used very fashionably, which makes their dresses very fashionable yet traditional. Their panjabis are particularly famous and in demand for their uniqueness.

"Each new collection, is designed months before it is launched. Starting from the colour of the thread to the end product, they are planned very systematically," explains Shaha. "Colours are decided upon first, for summer we would use such and such shades and for winter something else," continues Khan. The threads are dyed matching the exact shade then the weaving begins. "We have our own weavers and also appointed individual weavers from the village."

After the weaving, the yards are sent for embroidery and block, screen printing but before that the designers set the rules and give the lay out. What motifs to be printed where and in what colours or the design of the embroidery work; she explains. All these jobs are linked together and done simultaneously. "The colour of the thread to the last garment — all are integrated so that the finished product works," says Khan.

All these procedures or stages of work involve BRAC's own artisans, their own Rural Development Programme (RDP) members also few from

and 3400 are in the fields-inside the village.

"Here the first sericulture, weaving, printing and other income generating activities were undertaken and developed for women. Manikganj, now covering more than 250 villages remains BRAC's key laboratory area for trying and imparting training on various kinds of development initiative," says Fahmida Anjum in charge of Manikganj foundation.

Jessore area which deals mostly with *nakshi katha* projects has about 1950 women working in the fields and 50 inside the foundation. This area has served as a laboratory for activities addressed specifically to the needs of women there. Besides these two, two other foundations are in the pipe line.

"These women are paid on the basis of production: non-skilled labourer get around Tk 35 while the skilled ones draw Tk. 70 per day," Anjum says. "We always pay in cash or cheque, whatever the artisans desire and there is no credit business. For some poor workers we even arrange advances," says Shaha. "We support our worker 100 per cent and have all kinds of facilities, from medical to financial, arranged for them."

Having good and sincere relationship with producers is very important. "We encourage individual producers, besides our own sources, we have them working for us as well," explains Khan. Sometimes they take the artisan's design and also give their own.

better replicas what we offer here. Take our cushion covers for instance we choose special colors, have matching trimmings in the border. T-shirts have more Bangladesh-based prints on them and so on," says Shaha.

The success behind Aarong's products of this project of BRAC is their sincere, more down-to-earth relationship with artisans, their research and total dedication to revive or recreate the legend of Bangladeshi art work and crafts.

How much is it possible to rewind into the fantasy land, that Bangladesh was, is only visible and also feasible in Aarong shops across the country and in foreign lands.

Promoting Ethnicity with Style

AARONG has become a household name not only for making rural handicrafts trendy but for its revolutionary approach to marketing. Departmental store shopping is not a new thing in the rest of the world but for Bangladesh, it represents a change in the personality of the consumer. Whether Aarong has created this change or is merely adapted to it is of course a matter of speculation but the fact is that it is a store that caters to the increasingly modern, fashion conscious shopper for whom time is money. A peek into one of Aarong's outlets in Dhaka reveals its dual objective of promoting rural arts and crafts and blending them with con-

modernity. Cards, children text and story books and a good collection of coffee table books are also offered.

The second floor has sarees with attractive *nakshi kantha*, block print and vegetable dye designs. Breath-taking *Katan* sarees with intricate, motifs are included. Men's accessories such as ties, leather jackets, belts and sandals are also offered. A large section on this floor is devoted to children — cotton and silk dresses, shirts, *panjabis* and toys. The other side includes household gift items, — lamps, *nakshi kantha*, plaques, tapestries, mugs, ashtrays etc. One of Aarong's special displays includes a beautiful palanquin in wood and *nakshi*

the products. "We have 28 professional designers to help us to keep on changing the design and style of our products," says SM Sajid, General Manager, Central services. With better quality, greater access to move around and touch the items and an overall better personal service, says Sajid, Aarong is very popular amongst its middle to upper middle class clientele.

While Aarong has a large number of local customers, its Tk. 22.616 million sales figure includes an export component of Tk 43.65 million. Aarong's success abroad has allowed it to open an outlet in London offering the same variety of products as in the Bangladeshi outlets. Prices will be hiked up a little to cover the higher costs in London.

The main goal behind operating outlets abroad, says



Ladies' fashion wear



temporary fashion.

The first thing one notices about the Lalmatia outlet, is a kind of bigness about the place that is both physical and psychological. There is nothing cramped or over done about the store, with just enough space to move around and look at things in one's own time without feeling bombarded by too many images or overly solicitous sales people. Moreover, the fact that all products are organised into various sections, allows the hurried customer to go to a specific part of the store and find exactly what he is looking for. This, together with the benefits of fixed prices and of course, airconditioning, makes shopping easier, quicker and less of an ordeal.

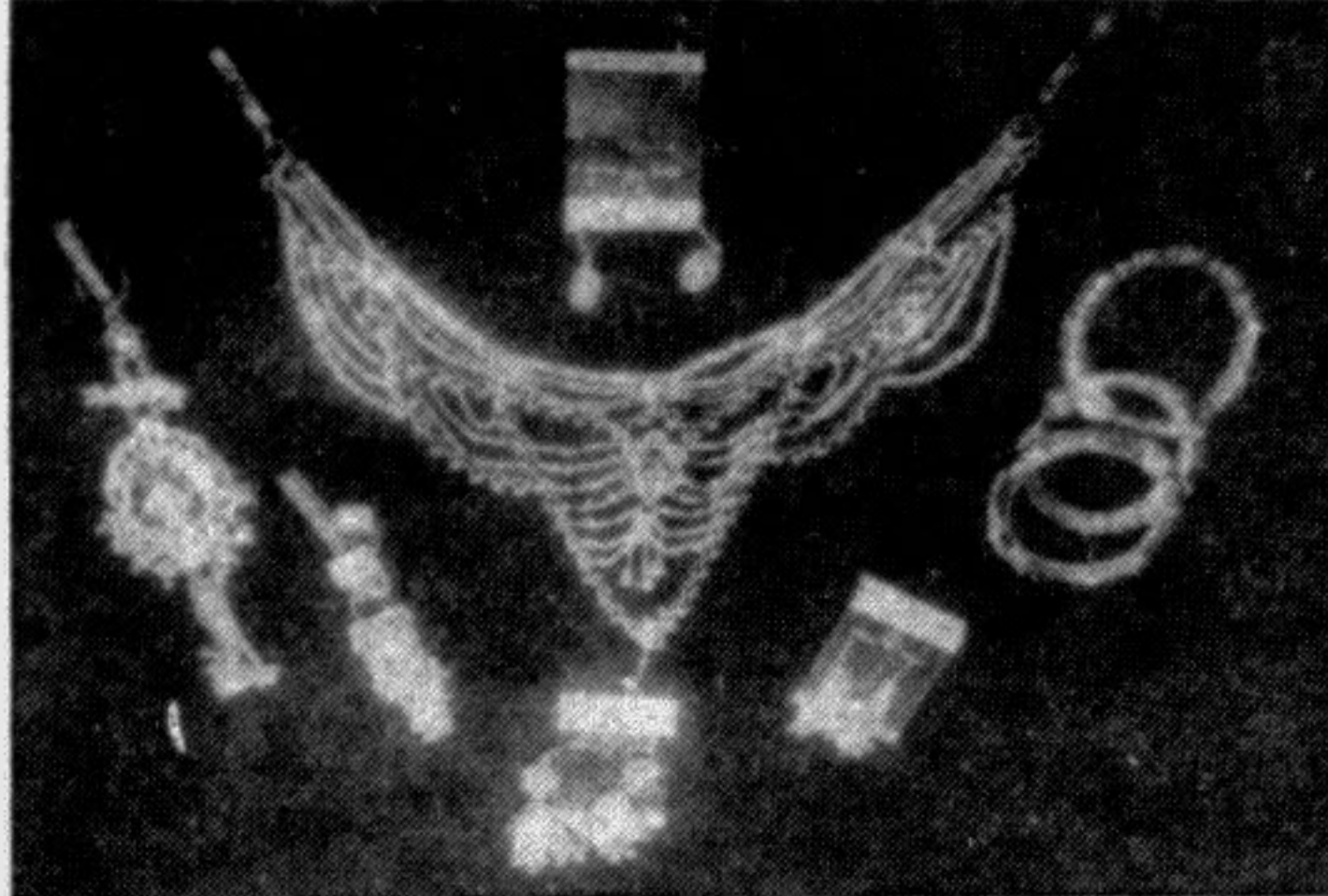
Everyday over 300 people walk into the Lalmatia store, something that has allowed Aarong to enjoy an annual sales turnover of 22.616 million Taka in 1993. An attractive, tasteful outlay by Surya I. Hussain, is one of the reasons why people like to visit Aarong. Like many western departmental stores Aarong has displays for its products to show what they look like in real settings. A dining table in the middle of the linens section shows how simple *Nakshi Kantha* place mats look with a right table cloth, complete with matching napkins and pretty candle sticks and crockery, all a la ... Aarong. Similarly a bedroom display with an antique looking wooden bed, again *nakshi kantha* bed cover and pillow cases with side tables and quaint wooden lamps on each side, gives the household section, a cosy, lived in look.

"This July 9 we have opened our London store and plan to open one in New York and one in Vancouver sometime around September. The economy in Vancouver is booming now and our market survey shows that we will have a very good market for ethnic products thereon," she continues.

All items for these foreign stores would go from remote unknown villages of Bangladesh. With this endeavour, the women here and their crafts would set new limits and reach new heights. Keeping in mind the environment and climate not to forget the different type of clients, they are working out exclusive products and emphasising more on household items, silver jewellery and garments. "Our products for these international store are an upgrade or



Leather goods and ornaments



Photos by Md. Amran Hossain

Rejuvenating the Roots

by Fayza Haq

AARONG has been a pioneer in reviving ethnic motifs and designs in clothes, accessories and household goods in Bangladesh. Aarong's Product Development Manager, Chandra Shekhar Shaha did his B.F.A. from Dhaka in '80, joined this institution when Aarong was taken over from MCC by BRAC in '81. He did a year's course at the National Institute of Design at Ahmedabad from '85 to '86. Maheen Khan, the Design Manager, who went to school in California, worked with Aarong in '87 and '88. She came back in '93 and has been working as a full time designer since then. She did her degrees in fashion design and textile, each course being a four year programme. She also worked in Los Angeles for three years as a textile designer.

"We have been constantly integrating our designs which originate from tribal patterns, *'jamdani'*, *'nakshikantha'* and food product based patterns. There are the Islamic influences of geometrical motifs and arabesques, some of which we have taken from Turkey

and Iran. We have standardised our products which must reach a certain level of excellence. It was Aarong which introduced the long length of the *panjabi* in '86. We encouraged handloom in all sectors from garments to household goods. We support 25 groups of master weavers each group varying from five to 25 members. It was Aarong that diversified the use of *'nakshikantha'*. We presented it in various products. We try to vary our products to hold the interest of our customers," the designers say.

The fashion of hand-block printing was first done by Comilla *Khaddarbut Aarong* began an organised income generating project in Manikganj for women in '76 with ten women that BRAC handled. The Rural Development Projects channels it through the *Ayesha* Abed Foundation, founded in '83. There are now 200 women dealing with block printing alone.

"In '75 Marty Chen and her team gathered together old *'kantha'* pieces. We got photographs from museums in USA and UK. There are 2,200 women in Jamalpur and 1,800 women in Jessore working in *'nakshikantha'*. While Aarong provides all the fabrics, designs and silks threads, they are strict about maintaining the layouts and the designs. The *'kantha'* stitch is used for the *'sari'*, ladies' garments, children's clothes and *'panjabis'*. Household goods like pillows, bedspreads, wall pieces and scrolls also contain these designs," the designers add.

The *'jamdani'* work is done in Demra where Aarong works with the master weaver who get other weavers according to the requirements. The technique is a skilled one and handed down from father to son. In '91 Aarong organised the first *'jamdani'* exhibition at the Shilpakala Academy. They had laboured for two years to organise this show. The quality of the *'jamdani'* had been dropped in the sixties and seventies due to lack of patronage. Aarong introduced the element of *'jamdani'* for the first time for men's *'panjabi'* and in household products like carpets," the designers add. "As in the case of the *'panjabi'* so also in the field of *'shalwar kameez'* Aarong has taken initial steps to popularise it. The *'shalwar kameez'* is not traditionally a Bangladeshi costume but has now become popular because of its comfort.

In all the sections ranging from household goods and fabrics to jewellery, the designs are provided by Aarong studio. "In case of the rugs, first we come up with the concept of the design, then we do the layout and put in the colours. The weavers are asked to match the colours to the yarn. In rugs, *'jamdani'* and contemporary designs and geometrical patterns are kept in mind," Maheen says.

She continues, "As regards jewellery, 80 per cent of our silversmiths are village based. We have a large concentration of indigenous jewellers in Tangail. Our designers work with silversmiths. We try to improve the quality and finishing. Our main objective is to provide a design service to our silversmiths so that our products are marketable. Usually our artisans have primitive tools. We have done the same with brass, papier mache, ceramics, clay, cane, bamboo and jute."

Aarong has been exporting to UK, USA, Canada, Holland, Germany, Finland, Sweden, Norway, Switzerland and Japan. "We are sending hand-block printed dresses, shirts, household products like tablecloths, bedcovers, napkins and leather products like boxes, photo frames, wallets, keyring cases, bags and purses. Ethnic silver jewellery, specially earrings, is also in demand. Fifteen per cent of what we produce we export," the designers inform.

What they would like to communicate to the clients is that Aarong exists to provide service to the artisans and to promote the traditional crafts of the country. "We always hope and try to satisfy the needs of our customers. We still have a long way to go. We are constantly trying to achieve a level of excellence. While Aarong tries to explore and revive the traditional handicrafts, we hope we can take our crafts and traditions to the world market. We must focus ourselves to the world outside so that people can really appreciate," Maheen concludes.



Photos — Courtesy: Aarong

the years Aarong's series of products especially the clothes have gone through a change for the better becoming more in tune with fashion and more sophisticated. Colours now include striking peaches, greys and pistachio greens for silks and muted beiges, greens and oranges for the cottons. Accessories like hand bags and travelling bags have better finishing and style, with innovative embellishments like two-toned sequins and tie dye cloth bags. Other items on this floor include oxidized or pure, silver, gold and pearl jewelry, embroidered leather jewelry boxes, photo frames and sandals, all of which have that ethnic look with a touch of

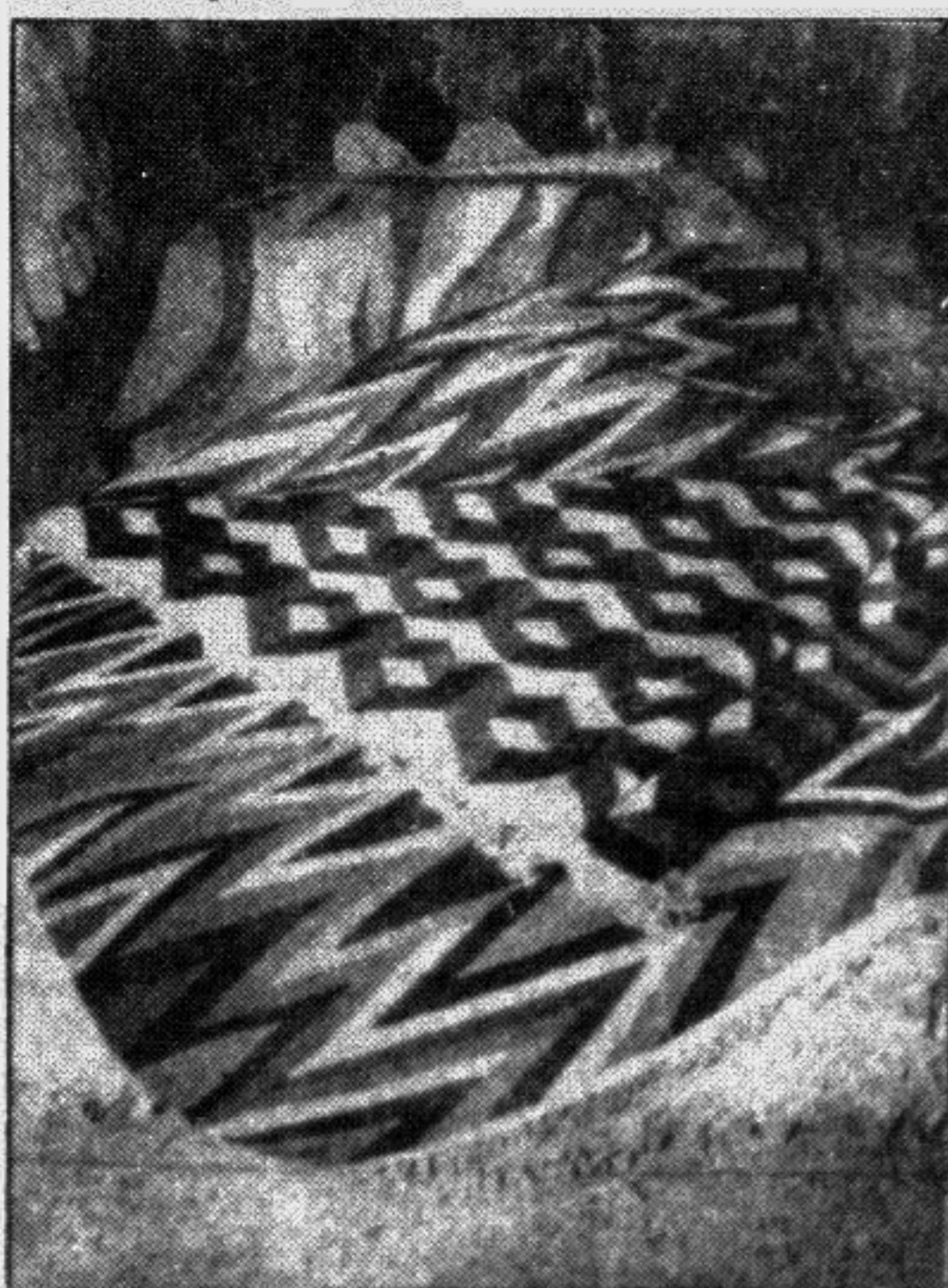
kantha that is on hire for Taka 1500 a day.

The third floor has the famous Aarong *Punjabis* and *Kurtas* in block print or embroidered silk and cottons. Batik cottons shirts, tie & dye T shirts and block print silk shirts are also part of the men's collection. Another section includes lamb's wool blankets, and jute rugs in bright colours and modern designs. A small cafe on this floor, offering light snacks and a wonderful view of Sher-e-Bangla Nagar gives a breather from hectic shopping.

There are several key ingredients to Aarong's success. One of them is constantly bringing variety and novelty to



Leather goods and rugs



Photos by Md Amran Hossain