

# BANGLADESH BUSINESS AWARDS 2001

BRINGING GLOBAL CORPORATE STANDARDS TO BANGLADESH



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## Blazing the apparel trail

### Business Person of the Year 2001

ANISUR RAHMAN SINHA

SHAHRIAR KARIM

A chilly day in 1964 winter. A cricket match was going on at the Dhaka Stadium. An eighteen-year-old boy was set to face the very first ball of the match. It was a crucial match for both the teams, Gymkhana Sporting Club and Narayanganj-based Eastern Sporting Club, as the winner was sure to get a slot in the first division.

The young man, who was also the captain of the Eastern Sporting Club, and his opening partner did not face any problem in the first few overs. But then came the blow with the change of bowling at one end. The boy lost his partner and in regular intervals wickets were falling at the other end. At one stage, it looked simply impossible for Eastern Sporting to reach the three-figure-mark as it lost half of the wickets with the score board ticking at just over 60. Now the onus to have a fighting score came on the shoulder on the boy with the help of the tail.

A few hundred Eastern Sporting Club supporters present at the stadium started praying. However, Eastern Sporting lost few more wickets with the score touching just

enough for a fighting score.

Gymkhana started innings and it was heading very steadily towards the target. At one stage, it seemed almost certain that Gymkhana would emerge as the winner. But, the young captain of Eastern Sporting had something under his sleeve. He made a bowling change, brought in his leg spinner at one end and opted for attacking fielding. The tactic yielded good result for his side as the Gymkhana lost two wickets in that over.

And then the rest of the match was a nightmare for Gymkhana as it lost wickets in regular intervals and lost the match by a few runs. In fact, the captain of Eastern Sporting Club made it happen through his leadership quality, placing right fielding and making right bowling change at the right moment.

It was a hard job, still he managed to lead a team of young cricketers to a magnificent win that earned the team a place in the first division. His magnificent leadership quality, temperament and cricketing skill also earned him a place in the then East Pakistan Cricket Eleven.

Now, after 27 years that '18-year-old boy', now in his mid-fifties, is leading one of the leading con-

famous apparel exporter Anisur Rahman Sinha, the Chairman of Opex Group, the largest apparel exporter of the country and debatably the biggest in South Asia.

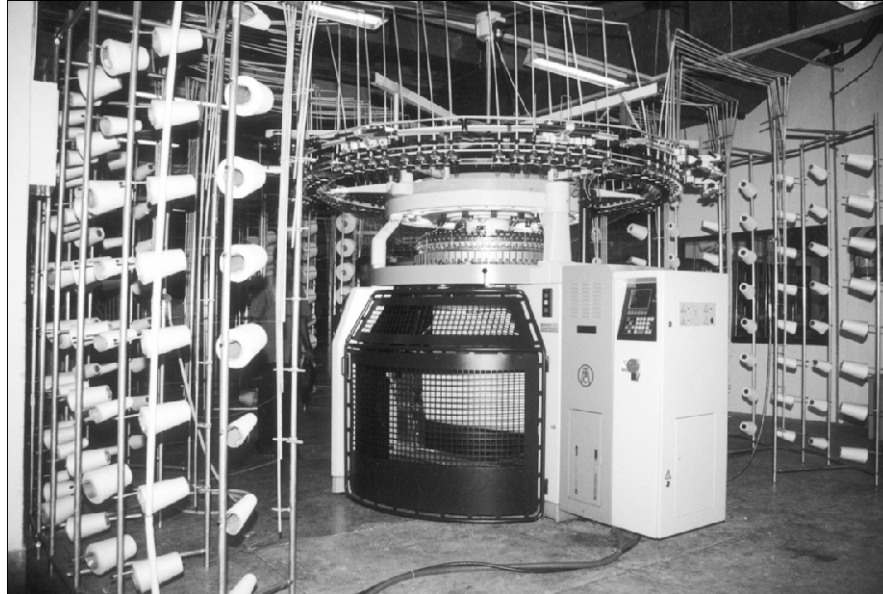
Anisur Rahman Sinha is one of the few entrepreneurs in the country who has the skills and passion for the job he is doing that made him different from others. Business is in his blood, but he never dreamt of becoming a businessman. Yet, Sinha reached a height in business that most people can only dream of.

Starting with one readymade garment (RMG) unit in 1984, Sinha's company, Opex Group, is now one of the top ones with 21 RMG units with full backward linkage support, exporting apparels worth US\$ 100 million a year.

"Whatever I did in my life I did it with conviction," that is how he describes the magic formula behind his success.

Born in 1945 in Kolkata, Sinha completed his secondary and higher secondary education in Narayanganj. Then he did his graduation in commerce from Dhaka College.

Sinha's father, late Habibur Rahman Sinha, was a jute trader during the British rule and earned reputation in business. As the business grew bigger, senior Sinha appointed a British general manager, who flew all the way from Dandy to Kolkata to look after the



Inside view of the knitting division of the Opex Group (L). Workers at one of the RMG units of the Group working in full swing to meet the deadline.

Basically Sinha's family hails from Bikrampur, Munshiganj. But his forefathers went to Kolkata to make a fortune. Coming back to Narayanganj in 1947, business of Sinha's father was going well. But at one stage came a blow. All the godowns of Sinha's father caught fire in 1964. After making a heavy loss Sinha's father had to quit business.

Although his father was a very successful businessman, business never attracted Sinha those days. Rather, during those days music, especially Tagore song, and cricket were his passion.

Avid cricket player, Sinha got a call in the East Pakistan Eleven in 1965. But he could not join as he decided to join army.

During the liberation war in 1971, Sinha was confined in a solitary camp in Pakistan near Afghanistan border. He along with his other Bengali colleagues tried to escape through Afghanistan, but got caught. Even he was tried under martial law court. By the time Bangladesh emerged victorious and he was repatriated at the end of 1973.

"It was an adventure as well as an horrifying experience. I was almost successful to escape, but as one of my colleagues got caught I went to get him free by bribing the Pakistani soldiers. But I failed and they put us on a camp in solitary confinement," Sinha said recollecting from the memory.

Just after repatriation from Pakistan Sinha retired from the army in early 1974 and set up his own business. His first venture was in construction, supply and indenting in the mid-1970s, but later Sinha switched to manufacturing in the mid-1980s as he was not getting the satisfaction he was craving for.

"My construction and supply business was going well, but I wasn't getting full satisfaction. So I decided to switch," that what Sinha said on his sudden change of mind.

His change of mind proved very productive for him as well as for the country. But initially, when Sinha set up his first RMG unit, things were not like this. At that time, he did not have any role in management and the company ran into troubled water with huge losses. Then Sinha took over the management and over the years made it one of the biggest conglomerates in the country.

Still it was not an easy sail for Sinha. He had to fight all the odds and make his own fortune. In 1991, the biggest blow came to his business career. His factory at Mirpur was damaged in a fire causing a loss of about Tk 8 crore. And worse still, he did not get the insurance money.

"When I did insurance of my factory it was a four-story building. But in the middle of the year I expanded the factory building and constructed another floor. All the fabrics were stored on the newly-constructed top floor and the fire also damaged the top floor. On the ground that the fourth floor was not covered under the insurance deed, the insurance company refused to pay any demurrage," Sinha was telling the horrific experience.

"But I am lucky that my buyers came forward to help me out and gave me tremendous support. From then I never had to look back."

It was solely his vision and sheer efforts that Opex Group has achieved a number of milestones. It establishes a solid link in the textile value chain starting from spinning to stitching including weaving, dyeing and finishing, accessories units and washing plants that made his group

the largest apparel exporter of the country. Under Sinha's leadership, the annual turnover of the group reached Tk 1000 crore with 20 per cent annual growth.

The most crucial decision Sinha took in mid-1990s that later paid-off. As dependence on foreign fabric was making it difficult for Sinha's group to make a big push, he decided to invest in backward linkage and started his textile venture in 1997. And now his textile division supplies all the cotton fabric demand of his RMG units and also supplies fabric to other RMG units. He also added new product on his export list and exported about US\$ 15 million worth home-textile products ranging from bed sheets to cushion cover to pillow-cases to curtains.

Even after making his company the largest exporter, Sinha still pushes high to be on the top upgrading machinery, pursuing management development and diversifying in other areas where the country has competitive edge. He will invest another US\$ 5 million in his RMG units by importing latest machinery in next few months.

His latest endeavour is in agro industry. The project includes potato seed multiplication, poultry, poultry feed and beef processing. By now some 600 bighas of land have been bought in Syedpur, in the northern region. He will sell his agro-products through outlets in different parts of the country. The first three outlets will start from next month in Dhaka and that will sell French fries and fried chickens.

Even after reaching to a Himalayan height, Sinha still starts his day at 7 in the morning and works till 9 at night. His first task, almost everyday, to contact his Hong Kong office and at night when

he ends his work he contacts his US office to keep himself updated about the latest development in the global textile and clothing trade.

He goes to office at 9am and the first thing he looks for is the overall production status of his factories. "By the time I reach my office the overall production status and financial statement of the other day is ready on my table. I made it mandatory so that I can be aware of the every little details," Sinha mentioned focussing on his everyday routine.

Between his works he takes a break to play golf, his recent passion. "I almost religiously play golf. I need this to take a break from the constant business tension," Sinha said.

A very good singer, Sinha also hums Tagore song whenever load of works puts extra pressure on him. Sinha's vision is now to turn his group even more bigger so that it can contribute significantly to the national economic growth. With this mission in mind, Sinha employed high-quality managers who work as members of a family. He is also in the process to open up a designing office in the USA.

Sinha as the chairman of Opex has received the annual National Export Gold Trophy for 5 consecutive years since 1996. For good performance, quality control and reliable supply record Opex also received awards from its buyers like Sears, Levi's and Mervyns.

Sinha is a different breed of entrepreneur. He loves to dream and make that dream come true. He is very much a down to earth man, who feels for his fellows. He has set up a high school at Kanchpur, Narayanganj serving the wards of workers and local people. The current enrolment is over 700.A

night school has also been set up to serve senior citizens of the community. The infrastructure facilities of a college at Kanchpur have been completed and the session will start from March 2002. A full-fledged 100-bed hospital at Kanchpur, to be run by a team of professional medical staff, is rapidly nearing completion to serve people of the locality. There are many such projects in planning stages that include a residential school cum college on the outskirts of Dhaka and a specialised hospital with all sorts of modern facilities.

A successful entrepreneur, Sinha also shown his quality as a business leader. He was the BGMEA president for the period 1998-2000. He is also president of Eastern Sporting Club Narayanganj.

One has to live with globalisation whether one likes or not, Sinha thinks, but has his own views on the most 'controversial and yet vital' issue. "Globalisation should not be a one-way traffic. It should benefit all the nations and to be precise should pave the way for a better share of global trade for the poor nations. We the poor nations have been exploited by the developed countries for hundred of years. But now, when the least developed countries were demanding their due share in the global trade, they (developed countries) are still not ready to give us our due share," an emotional Sinha said.

Sinha believes in quality management that makes the way for quality production and contributes to the development of the country's economy. Standing on the peak of success Sinha still thinks he has promises to keep and miles to go before he sleeps.



Totally computer-controlled spinning division of Opex Group that produces quality rotor and ring yarn.

100. Then came the fiercest blow. The team captain got out scoring some 30 odd runs. At last, Eastern Sporting managed to score 130-odd runs, which many said was not

glomerates of the country that employs around 27000 people and its annual turnover touched astronomical figure of Tk 1000 crore last year. It is none other than the

company affairs. After the partition in 1947, Sinha's family moved to Narayanganj from Kolkata and his father started his jute-business afresh.

## Swimming against the tide to reach the pinnacle

### Outstanding Woman in Business 2001

REHANA KASHEM

MONJUR MAHMUD

It all started as an amateur venture. Taking timeout from everyday household errands a

housewife devoted her to sheer hard work and creativity and reached a height today in the business world that deserves more than appreciation.

A self-made entrepreneur, Rehana Kashem is among the very few successful women in the country who not only built her own enterprise but also has been able to attract her

family members to help her to grow the company.

At the very beginning, she just wanted to do something amateurishly. As a typical housewife, she loved to make handicrafts like cushion covers, napkins, tea-pot covers, table mats and bed linen in her spare time. Her neighbours liked her works and often requested her to copy the designs for them.

Appreciation from others inspired Rehana to think a bit bigger. She started her venture in 1983 with a capital of only Tk 6,000. Her sales ranged between Tk 5,000 and Tk 7,000 per month on an average at this stage. As demand for her products grew, she employed around 12 women.

The year 1990 was a milestone for Rehana. Because it was then that she expanded her area of works and gave her efforts a commercial face. Apart from retail selling from her house, she started to supply products to different popular boutiques in Dhaka. Saatrang's turnover soon rose to around Tk 30,000 per month.

The first contract she received was from the well-known shop 'Bhushon' at Adel Plaza Lalmatia. Impressed by her works, the owner of Bhushon gave placed orders for punjabi. That was the beginning. Later, many shops in the city including 'Bunon' got in touch with her. From household products, she moved to dresses.

By then, it was getting extremely difficult for Rehana to cope up with the rising demand. Her husband Md Abul Kashed Khan, an employee of a private company, always extended helping hand to his wife. But now, he resigned from his job and devoted full time to run the business. Khan took the responsibilities of maintaining accounts, procuring raw materials and also helping Rehana in designs and business supervision.

Rehana, who completed junior high school education, has a very supportive family that helps her with the numerous responsibilities of running a rapidly growing business. Her two daughters-in-law Shamima Khan and Najma Karim helped her with designing and supervision. She also completed a training course on



Inspecting every bit of the works of her staff is Rehana Kashem's part of job.

marketing in 1990 and a business management course in 1994 from the Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation (BSCIC).

1993 was another milestone for Saatrang when it started producing 'three-piece' dresses for ladies and her sales multiplied shortly.

During 1997 and 1999, the company's annual turnover crossed Tk 1 crore. She participated in the 'Women's Fashion Trade Fair 2000' and was awarded the 'Best Sellers Small Enterprise' by JOBS, an USAID-sponsored programme to promote small enterprises in 2000.

According to Rehana, Saatrang's annual turnover is now around Tk 80

lakh. "Our sales went down in recent years because of stiff competition. There are so many producers in the market now and they are very much aggressive," she said.

Rehana believes that sincerity, hard work and business sense are some of the qualities must for success in any endeavour in this age of tough competition.

I keep my product prices reasonable and very much within the limit of the middle-class buyers," Rehana said. "But plagiarism is so rampant these days and others often copy my products. That posed a new challenged and we have to work hard for newer designs and quality products."

She feels that keeping prices within her target group and producing quality products for them were the main reasons for which she did not face much competition from others.

Rehana also took part in local fairs and meenabazars just to promote Saatrang. She participated in a fair at Shaheen School in 1992. "My products were so popular that I sold apparels worth Tk 60,000 on a single day," she recalled.

She contacted Micro Industries Development Assistance and Services (MIDAS) and after

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Rehana Kashem makes it sure that her staff do not make any compromise with quality.