

STAR PHOTO

ON a wintry morning in 1978 in my office in Chittagong Deputy Commissioner's house, I meet this maverick former civil servant now turned an entrepreneur asking my help to get his imported garment machinery off loaded from Chittagong customs. This was Nurul Quader, a senior colleague of mine, who had left the service to pursue his talent in the private sector, and had hit upon this rather adventurous concept of making readymade garments following the South Korean model. There was some snag in clearing the equipment for the fledgling industry he had set up, which he called Desh Garments. This was done in no time, but for me the million dollar question to him was why at all he had landed in this adventure when he had scores of other opportunities to try his business acumen.

The maverick that he was, Nurul Quader (known as Jhilu Bhai by us younger folks) told me tongue in cheek that it was because all other businesses were already taken. He had to try something untried. My next question to him was about when we would be able to see his industry take off. To this, Nurul Quader gave his characteristic response garbed in a story. He said my question reminded him of the urgency with which he would ask his mother as a young boy whenever he felt hungry, "Where is dinner?" when he fully knew that his mother was still cooking. In his case, he said that he had prepared the stove and the pot, but he was still waiting for the cooks to arrive.

The cooks in the case of Nurul Quader's kitchen (the industry in this case) were the hundred plus workers that he had sent to South Korea for training in making the garment. He had hoped that with the return of these workers, not only would he start up his joint venture (with South Korea) in garments, he would also begin a new industry and open a new avenue of economic growth for the country.

Even after a visit to his new plant later and watching all those new workers running electrically operated sewing machines, I was sceptical about whether an industry could run depending on workers trained abroad. I would be proven wrong. Because, only in a matter of years, through the core group of trained workers and the trainers later brought from Korea, a new generation of workers would be unleashed into the country who would take Nurul Quader's dream to a new and unheard of level.

When Nurul Quader began, garments were a mere spectre in our exports. Jute and jute goods still occupied a big chunk of our exports in the seventies, and fish and shrimp export was just growing. Consider this: In 1976, our country earned a paltry six million dollars by exporting manufactured garments. This was not even two percent of our total exports that year. Today, more than two-thirds of our export earnings -- over ten billion dollars -- are from garments. From the lone pioneer factory that Nurul Quader set up in 1977, we have now more than 3,000 that help us make that kind of money from abroad. From a few hundred workers and later some more that Nurul Quader employed, we have now roughly three and a half million workers -- the majority of whom are women who work these machines day in and day out.

When I first came to US in 1981, I could never imagine that I would see in a garment the label "Made in Bangladesh." Today, thanks to