

Life, a colourful patchwork

A Bangladeshi couple pieces it all together in Australia

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A Bangladeshi couple made a mark in Australia by way of an upmarket textile art. It is the art of making aboriginal fabrics, mastered by Sham Lohani and Momtaj Lohani. It is the art best expressed in patchworks and quilting.

The art has a different side to it: business. Sham did not have any business acumen, no formal training -- apart from a part-time marketing management course. He just did it as if it was his second nature. The path ahead was not smooth, though.

Just after the Vietnam War, Australia slipped into recession. Sham was doing his PhD in chemistry at Melbourne University. New jobs were all but nonexistent in chemistry.

Sham did not have a permanent home in Australia at that time. He started teaching at St Paul's College, obviously for financial reasons. Sham says he enjoyed teaching but hated administration. "Teaching was a new world opened up to me."

As an alternative to teaching, Sham wanted to branch out into business. In an email interview with The Daily Star, Sham says one of his brothers had book business in Bangladesh, but that was not enough for him to start off in Australia.

"To do business in Australia, you have to be alert to know your business. You have to gather information of your products, your customers, suppliers, competitors," Sham says. "You have to keep yourself informed thoroughly and analyse the information positively."

Sham set up Ariadis Pty Ltd through years of perseverance: it now manufactures products, such as T-shirts, bags, women's wear, umbrellas, slippers, neckties and scarves -- all done in

aboriginal designs.

"We are planning to bring out a line of saris with our designs," he says. "We are a sole trader; we are not in partnership with any other company."

Ariadis trades under different trading divisions: Books 'N' Things (a book business venture), M&S Textiles Australia and Warrina Designs.

Sham started off with a tiny investment -- \$87 -- in 1979. Now his company generates about \$2 million in combined net profit a year.

Why cotton products?

Patchwork and quilting are an upmarket textile art in hobby industry and popular in the developed countries such as America, Australia, and Canada.

Quilting is done by sewing machine as well as by hand with needles. Quilters prefer to use high-quality soft and colourful 100 percent cotton fabrics for ease to stitch with fine needles. Synthetic materials are not easy to stitch with needles.

In Australia, Sham and Momtaj, fondly called Momo by her husband, launched their business as a horticultural book distributor. They were supplying gardening books to garden centres and other specialist organisations.

"In general, Australians love to read books. On demand we had imported selected books from the US, UK and South Africa. The Australian government does not have any red tape or restriction to import goods into the country," Sham says.

But things changed in the mid-1980s. The recession in Australia cut into sales of gardening books. As a contingency plan, Sham and Momo picked up craft book distributions, which led them to go into



Sham Lohani and Momtaj Lohani

patchwork and quilting books.

"I always love the dynamic nature of business. I keep my eyes open, whenever I see any new opportunity I follow it up. This is challenging and enjoyable," Sham says.

In early days of patchwork and quilting, only a handful of American fabric manufacturers worked. Some of the supply was not satisfactory, Sham recalls. So the customers were pushing them to go into fabric distribution as well.

"But we had to resist this temptation for a while only because our experience in textiles materials was virtually nil. However, after a while we decided to go into fabric distribution," he says.

"We get cooperation and encouragement from the government, trade organisations

and other sources. Hardly there is any hindrance on your way to do business," Sham says.

"However, one has to be innovative in business."

Australia is a country with 22 million people, where competition is fierce. To flourish in business, one must be innovative and intelligent, he says.

"Nowadays you can do most of the things online. These facilities and some others inspire you to do business in Australia for 28/30 years and more. I still remember that nobody in our house (family) ever thought that I could be a businessman."

A trip down the memory lane is a throwback to his early life in Bangladesh, the birthplace he left in 1968 to pursue higher studies in Melbourne. He was born in Lohani Para of

Bagarganj, Rangpur, in 1940.

After doing MSc in chemistry in Rajshahi in 1961, Sham worked briefly for a pharmaceutical company in Dhaka and then joined BCSIR (Bangladesh Council of Scientific Labs and Industrial Research). He was working in the natural product division, particularly on Ram Tulsi (*occimum gratissium* linn). Sham published four research papers on his work.

While he was doing his PhD at Melbourne University, his wife and their son stayed a world apart -- in Dinajpur in 1971. During the Liberation War, Momo and her son ended up as refugees in India. They came to Australia in October 1971, largely with the help of the Australian government.

"We lost our family homes

in Lohani Para during the Liberation War. We eventually stayed back in Melbourne and started from scratch," Sham says.

"But Bangladesh has always been in my mind ever since I left the country." Momo was born in Patuapara, Dinajpur, in 1947. They have one son and three grandchildren.

Footnote: A book, Australian Spirit: Designer projects to Quilt, Fuse and Sew, is edited by S Lohani and Barbara Macey. Momo Lohani contributed two projects in the book. This is the most comprehensive patchwork book on aboriginal fabrics. Momo is also a regular contributor of recipes in a bimonthly Bangla-language newspaper published in Melbourne.

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Demographic timebomb ticking

AFP, Tokyo

East Asia's booming economies have for years been the envy of the world, but a shortfall in one crucial area -- babies -- threatens to render yesterday's tigers toothless.

Some of the world's lowest birth rates look set to slash labour forces in Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan, where fewer workers will support more retirees and their ballooning health care and pension costs.

Shuffling along in the vanguard of ageing Asia is Japan, whose population started slowly shrinking three years ago, and where almost a quarter of people are over 65 while children make up just 13 percent.

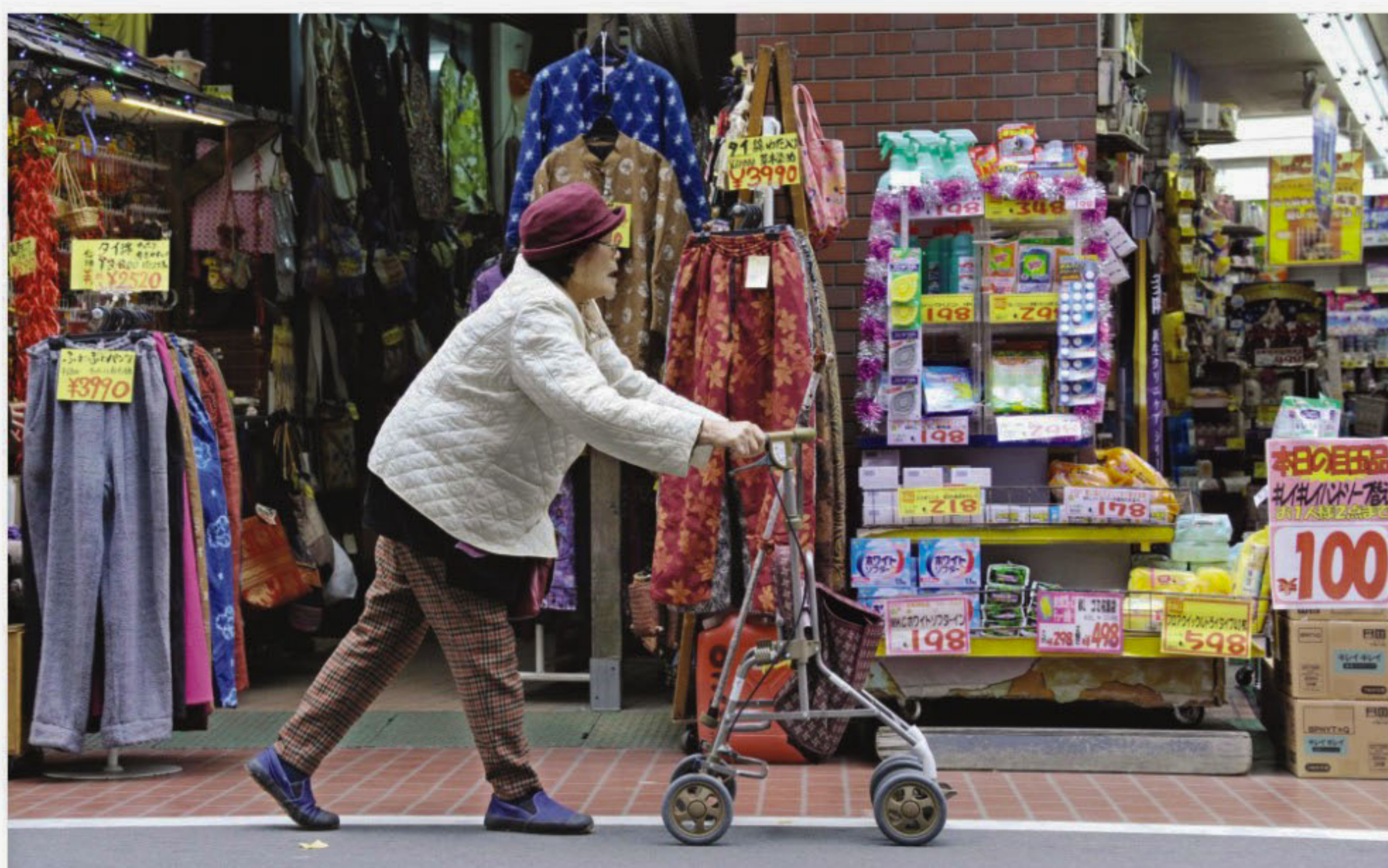
On current trends, Japan's population of 127 million will by 2055 shrivel to 90 million, its level when it kicked off its post-war boom in 1955, warns the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research.

Asian population giant China may still be near its prime, with armies of young rural workers flocking to its factories. But, thanks to the 30-year-old one-child policy, its demographic timebomb is also ticking.

"Over the past 50 years, economic and social modernization in Asia has been accompanied by a remarkable drop in birth rates," the Hawaii-based think-tank the East-West Centre says in a new research paper.

"Gains in education, employment and living standards, combined with dramatic breakthroughs in health and family-planning technology, have led to lower fertility in every country of the region."

Falling fertility rates are a common trend for societies as they grow richer, and many European nations are also below the level needed to keep a population stable -- about 2.1 children per woman over her lifetime.



An elderly woman walks past shops at Kouganji Temple in Tokyo. East Asia's booming economies have for years been the envy of the world, but a shortfall in one crucial area -- babies -- threatens to render yesterday's tigers toothless.

While in traditional rural societies children tend to take over the farm and care for their elderly parents, in modern, urban societies, many couples, with better access to birth control, see offspring as an unaffordable luxury.

China now has 1.6 births per woman, Singapore has 1.2 and South Korea has slightly fewer than 1.1. Taiwan has just 1.03 births per woman.

One way to counter declining populations is to allow more immigration -- but governments from Singapore to Tokyo have been reluctant to do so.

At the same time Singaporeans, who have turned their city-state into an Asian hub of commerce and service industries, have long been famously

disinclined to procreate.

The government has for years put on match-making events for university graduates on the assumption that Singapore's best and brightest could be coaxed into producing a generation of brainy offspring.

While that model in social engineering has failed to bring a baby boom, bureaucrats across the region have sought to tweak policies and tax codes to get more couples in the mood, but seldom with great success.

At the core of the problem, say analysts, have been gender attitudes steeped in Confucian traditions -- with men still expecting their wives to handle the childcare and household chores

that may not top a modern woman's wishlist.

Kim Hye-Young, researcher at the Korea Women's Development Institute, said: "The big problem is that South Korean women, compared to men, have too much to lose when getting married in this system."

"This reality makes marriage, let alone having a child, look like a very unattractive option in South Korea, perhaps far more so than in other countries," she said.

In Japan, where women remain woefully under-represented in corporate boardrooms, falling pregnancy still all too often spells career death.

"Women are voting with their

wombs, refraining from having children because the opportunity costs are so high and rigid employment policies make many of them choose between raising a family or pursuing a career," writes Jeff Kingston, director of Asian Studies at Temple University in Tokyo.

Other factors also play a role, he writes in a new book on contemporary Japan: many young people -- unlike their jobs-for-life fathers -- now skip between temporary jobs and lack the financial security to start a family.

Compounding the geriatric trend in Japan are long life expectancies -- a world-record 86.44 years for women and 79.59 years for men.

This means the social welfare burden is growing for a government that already has a debt-to-GDP ration nearing 200 percent, the rich world's highest.

The centre-left government in power since last year has introduced family friendly policies, from child payments to free school tuition, to ease the burden on parents struggling to raise kids in their cramped apartments.

High-tech Japan has also built robots to help with elderly care, while electronics giants have tapped a huge market for elderly-friendly gadgets, such as mobile phones with extra-large displays and buttons.

In the long run, Japan needs to take fundamental steps to deal with the growing strain of a greying society, warns ratings agency Standard and Poor's.

"Barring structural changes in old-age related government spending, a rapidly greying society will lift expenditures," it warns. "This, in turn, threatens to weaken the sovereign ratings on Japan in the long term."

Polls in Asia indicate that most people are aware of the threat that silent playgrounds and empty classrooms spell for their greying societies, but remain unlikely to rush to their bedrooms to help avert societal doom.

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