



Printing: the next big thing for Bangladesh

MD FAZLUR RAHMAN

THE printing industry in Bangladesh has the potential to become the second highest foreign exchange earning sector, after the ready made garments sector, a leading entrepreneur said yesterday.

"It can add immense value. During a recent visit to the US, I received a number of queries," said Hasina Newaaz, proprietor of Orchid Printers, one of the country's largest printing houses.

"With great opportunities for the sector, it can be the next big thing for Bangladesh," she told The Daily Star.

There are over 7,000 printing houses in Bangladesh. Of them, 3,000 are in Dhaka.

Hasina said there is no alternative to seeking lucrative markets to running a business. "We have the capacity to do that. There are a very few countries in the world that can offer cheap products -- which is something we can do."

"However, it will require huge capital. Here, the government has a role to play in helping set up world-class printing houses."

Hasina, a good student all along, said, "After completing my masters in Bengali literature from Rajshahi University I could easily start a job, but I did not. Giving birth to my daughter soon after my masters, I realised that with a nine-to-five job, I would not be able to take care of my son."

"I wanted to do something, staying at home," said Hasina.

She said starting this business was like a tradition in her family. "My father was in the printing business. I had access to his business. I learnt the ABCs of this trade from him and got inspired."

Hasina first started a small business in 1978, exporting turtles, snails and hilsha fish to Hong Kong. "I exported the marine items to Hong Kong for four years. When the business came to an end due to some environmental concerns, I had to find something more long-lasting."

She tried her luck in the ink business initially, but her Japanese business partner suggested she gave a go at printing. Hasina got the capital to start the business from the proceeds from export earnings. It was in 1982 that she started printing with Japanese machinery.

People were suspicious at first about the quality of the work of a Japanese machine, she



Hasina Newaaz

said. "But introduction of a Japanese machine in the Bangladeshi market revolutionised the country's printing business."

She said getting established as a young entre-

preneur was not easy. "People were not comfortable with a businesswoman. I was also below 30 years of age then. But I stuck to my goal."

"My family members, especially my husband,

helped me a lot. I would not have been able to come so far otherwise," the 58-year-old said.

The mother of three started her business with work orders from a family friend. She also received some work orders after being enlisted with National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB).

Hasina said the printing business in Bangladesh is being hampered due to misuse of the bonding system that makes honest businesses uncompetitive.

She said the 61 percent duty on imported materials is a huge blow for the industry. "The government should reduce it drastically."

Hasina plans to take her printing business to a new height and earn fame in the global arena. The government has to extend easy loans to help the sector expand beyond borders.

She said entrepreneurs in the printing business should not look up to the government. "We have to find the market."

Hasina said they are offering the same rate as three decades ago, but the cost of production has gone up. "We are running at very low profit margins. It has become tough to maintain honesty in the business. However, I will not compromise with quality."

Orchid Printers, located at Banglamotor, employs about 100 workers and only serves multinational companies. Hasina's products are exported to countries like Australia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and the US.

Hasina said they have been providing dress tags to the country's garments sector for three decades now with the help of old technology. "We can export more products."

Hasina feels the number of skilled workers can be raised with government assistance.

Even though they began three decades ago, they are still in the same place in regards to technology. "We are lagging behind as we have not adopted the latest technologies."

"Printing is capital-intensive. Nobody will make a huge investment for a small market, like Bangladesh. So the government should come forward."

"Capacity should be enhanced on an urgent basis."

She thanked the SME Foundation for proposing the government to consider the printing industry as a booster sector.

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The right start

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ASPIRANT women entrepreneurs should first fix their goals and prepare accordingly before the launch of any new venture to be successful, said a leading entrepreneur.

"They should also obtain trade licences and maintain all necessary paperwork. Otherwise, the banks will not be too interested to finance their project," said Shayla Sultana Mily, a director and fashion designer of Charka, a boutique house in Dhaka.

"I have seen many entrepreneurs doing business for a long time, but do not have their papers sorted," she told The Daily Star yesterday.

After obtaining a master's in applied art from Home Economics College in Dhaka in 2005, Mily teamed up with a partner to start 'Charka'.

"We decided to make and sell out own products, instead of imports or sourcing items from local producers."

Setting up a factory in Jigatola in a rented house, hiring a few hands, and renting a small showroom with the brand name of 'Charka' were the first baby steps they took towards achieving their goals.

They chose the name 'Charka' as it is related to the country's heritage. "The new generation does not know about it. So, we have kept a 'charka' (spinning wheel) in all of our four showrooms."

The mother of one collected the initial capital requirements from her family. "We started with Tk 6 lakh. Later, we reinvested our profits and took out some loans from banks."

Her creativity pulled her into this trade. "When I was pursuing my degree, I made graphic designs on the side. I also learnt drawing for a while, and worked in an animation firm. When I was a student, some of my designs were published in newspapers

and won awards -- which encouraged me."

With immense support from the husband and parents, she said, "My parents take care of my five-year-old son when I am away. My husband gives a lot emotional support."

"My business partner also understands. He extends a lot of support so that I can manage both my family and professional life."

Mily said there are many women entre-

preneurs in Bangladesh. "They know their work, but are unaware of how to proceed and prosper. They do not know where to start and how to promote goods. I want to promote them."

There are about 300 people working directly for 'Charka' at its factory. Besides, about 1,000 people are involved with the fashion house directly or indirectly.

Her shops sell items like salwar kameezes, saris, fatuas, panjabi, and home

decoration items like curtains, cushions, covers and furniture, made from local fabric. "A major feature of Charka is that we do our own designs. Both my partner and I design all our items."

Not eyeing exports at the moment, she said, "We have been in the business for only five years. There is huge demand in the local market and I want to cover that first."

Still, some products are making a way into Canada, Australia and the USA as some non-resident Bangladeshis are buying products from Charka and selling at their shops abroad.

Mily said capital was a major concern initially. "I started with a small fund and I did not have the capital for expansion."

"The banks I contacted wanted to know whether I own the showroom and have a house or land in my name or not. In Bangladesh, most women do not have property in their name. On paper, the male members of family always own property."

"Personally, I knocked at the doors of many banks in the first two years of my business. I told them my ideas and plans."

She got her first loan when she became a member of Bangladesh Women Chamber of Commerce and Industry (BWCCI), an association promoting women entrepreneurs.

Not know that women entrepreneur could obtain loans of up to Tk 25 lakh at 10 percent interest according to a Bangladesh Bank circular, she said, "Banks do not even give this piece of information to women."

"Being a member of BWCCI, I learnt a lot. Banks now pursue me to give loans, as I am established now."

Mily said the price of her items is rising due to a rise in yarn prices. "We are under huge pressure. If we increase the prices of our goods, clients do not want to believe the real reason behind the hike."

They are trying hard to keep price reasonable to cater to the middle-income groups even if the profit margin is narrow.

"We are also trying to use environment-friendly fabric and items by ignoring chemicals."

The 31-year-old said many rural loom-owners have stopped working and switched to other professions as they cannot afford to buy yarn at higher prices.

"Now I have capital, four showrooms, but I am not getting enough fabric to increase production ahead of the upcoming Eid festivals."

Mily said her responsibilities have soared after winning the EBL-BWCCI Award.

"Many entrepreneurs now call me for guidance on how to make a start. I am trying to meet their demands as well."

In five years, 'Charka' is a popular brand among youngsters. However, the journey to this place was not easy.

Banks should change their mindset towards women entrepreneurs, as the number of women not making regular payments is few, she said. "I do not know why financial institutions do not cooperate with women entrepreneurs."

She said the 10 percent interest rate is still too high for budding entrepreneurs. "It should be slashed."

Mily said banks do not come forward when someone starts a project. "When someone progresses to a certain stage, they come forward. If banks prepare a mechanism to help start-ups then we will see more women entrepreneurs in the country."

'Charka' also arranges workshops to train people who want to set up boutiques. Since inception, nine batches, each comprising of eight to 10 members, have completed the three-month long course so far.

All of Charka's showrooms and the factory are taken out on rent. Mily said she plans to shift to own building. "But it will take time."

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Shayla Sultana Mily