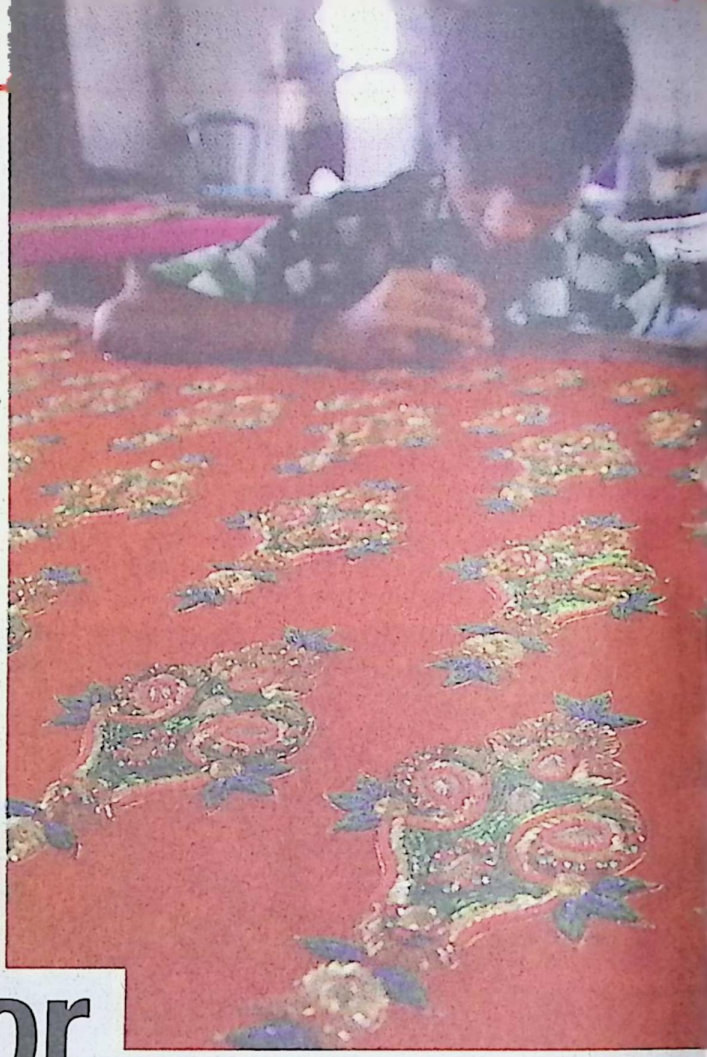
During the monsoon, when village women are unable to go out because of heavy downpour, they stay at home to embroider flowers, animals and human figures to tell the stories of their lives on the quilt with colourful yarn and needle. This thousand year old tradition has been turned into a profitable business that employs thousands of people.

While some works are done using the speed and skill of modern sewing machines, other crafts are created using age-old techniques. According to the Mirpur Benarasi Palli Cooperative Society, in Mirpur alone, about thirty thousand weavers, dyers, hand spinners, embroiderers and related artisans have been using their skills to produce around 620 million meters of fabrics every year.

Interestingly the total fabric production from Mirpur meets the 65 percent of consumers' demand in the country. It also provides employment opportunities to thirty thousand Bengalis and Bihari refuges in Mirpur alone.



Age-old Crafts for Contemporary Markets

ANANTA YUSUF

PHOTOS: PRABIR DAS

According to the local craftspeople, during the Partition of India in 1947, 125 families migrated from India to different places of Dhaka. And they brought along their skills of weaving to create the much-wanted apparels of today. After the independence of Bangladesh, the artisans shifted their living to the refugee camps of Mirpur. Gradually their small handloom industry began to expand and so did production and revenue.

Starting from a small cottage industry it has expanded into a huge business. In the early nineties, a big marketplace grew, now commonly known as Benarasi Palli. Although the craft floated from Benaras, India by non-Bangalis, gradually the number of Bangali artisans has also risen and at present the number of Bangali artisans is almost equal to those of non-Bangalis, including Biharis of refuge camps.

Although Mirpur is famous for its unique Banarasi it also produces some eye-catching *karchupi* and embroidery on clothes that will adorn women of all ages. An octogenarian Atia Begum is running the handloom business for half a century. She recalls that during the nineties to compete with Indian clothes the art of karchupi and benarasi weaving came into being. However after the advancement of textile technology embroidery became an easier and speedier job.