

CHECK IT OUT

The new “BENZ” in town

Making clothes was the one consistent thing in Syeda Benazir Sadaquat's life for as long as she can remember. Her childhood consisted of making clothes for the babies that she would play with, and as time went by, it slowly moved on to designing not her own, but for her relatives as well.

“I always received positive responses to clothes that I would make. I say *make* because not only did I draw and conceptualise the designs, but I would make the entire outfit by hand,” says Benazir. With a business degree at hand from a reputable private university, she juggled two jobs initially; as a corporate employee and a Facebook page for clothing by the name “Benz Collection,” short for her own name that her loved ones usually address her by. “I saved up money from my 9 to 5 corporate job to sustain my online clothing line,” she said.

Her designs mostly comprise of single kameez pieces with a touch of chic in them perfect for the young university or office going crowd. She plays with geometric, aari, chikankari and other kinds of patterns, contemporary cuts on solid colours. Benazir also does abstract embroideries and has her own signature floral pattern that she incorporates into her pieces.

She has a party-wear line that mostly comprises of saris in muslin and silk fabrics, with a touch of fusion using katan, and other kinds of embroideries. She also takes on custom orders for the discerned customers. For Benazir, the overall finishing of the stitches is the one place she focuses the most on and never compromises in, and the collections are all reasonably priced.

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Photo: Syeda Shahtaj Sadaquat

**IMAGES THROUGH A THEODOLITE**

When hope is all we sell and buy

A friend of mine runs a small curio shop in downtown Dhaka.

Abdus Sattar (not his real name) is his able assistant. Although unlettered, over the years, Sattar bhai has learned to recognise books, differentiate the pocket watch from the compass, and identify replicas from the antic; he also tirelessly obliges to our every whim for a cup of steaming tea as we rendezvous for a routine session of evening chit chat.

Hafsa, Sattar bhai's wife, had left the country some years ago with a visa as a house help to a gulf nation. I never queried how the poor family managed the illusive 'permit of hope,' but one thing was clear, as the days passed by, the soft spoken Sattar bhai seemed visibly embarrassed when inquired of bhabi. At one point, a mere mention of his family became a taboo in our circle.

A few months ago, he asked my friend for a long leave, which he agreed to; Hafsa bhabi had returned! Another episode of silence now follows because truly, none of us are sure what happened. We prefer not to assume things and for the sake of Sattar bhai. But we all do assume!

Google for 'hope' and one will find a barrage of quotes, positive in every aspect, but for someone from a region of the country where poverty is rife, hope finds a new quote — hope is not escape from reality, hope is sustenance.

Maybe, the same is true for the thousands who arrive in the city every day with the same virtuous aspiration of a better future. To all 'muggle Dhakaiites' who had immigrated to this city decade ago, pause for a while and look around, because all you will see are known faces — VPs of private banks, struggling writers, an office accountant (cashiers, we call them) — chasing dreams of a better future (whatever that might mean!).

The plight of female migrant workers is no longer getting headline coverage; updates are not going viral anymore, yet the in-coming flow has not stopped. For a society that is desensitised to such an extent that even video footages of murder stir our emotions for only five minutes, abuse of Bengali women at the hands of their foreign employs is somewhat unworthy of our time.

Several reasons are being cited for the return of women migrant workers in such large numbers; all with similar narratives of physical assault, sexual violation, psychological trauma; the whole package of 21st century slavery, which we felt was abol-

ished by Abe Lincoln and thrown back into the abyss of human darkness centuries ago. Well, think again!

The awkward silence from the accused is eerie. As it seems, the perpetrators have impunity over such crimes. To add to the despair, in some countries, there had been reports of executing female migrant workers from other nations for alleged crimes of murder without proper investigations.

We hear of safe houses but does one even question the terminology itself? Without engaging in a play of words, does 'safe house' not imply that the world for many of these women is deemed unsafe outside such shelters? And there have even been reports of attempted suicide within the enclosures of such safe houses, for the fear of apprehension and social isolation once they return to Bangladesh.

Yes, Gulf culture differ from ours — starting from the diet to the language. This distinct difference makes it all the more important for extra caution. As new frontiers are opening up, what guarantees that the country will not be faced with such horrid tales of abuse from workers from other countries?

There is no reason to feel all who hire migrant workers are monstrous individuals. There are countless examples of men and women who gratefully acknowledge the warmth they have received from their foreign employers. The overall experience, however, does indicate that certain measures must ensure the safety of our workers, and one must not forget the male migrants as nothing indicates that their plight has improved a bit!

Bangladeshi newspaper reports have stated that as early as 2014, the Indonesian government imposed a ban on female domestic workers in 21 Middle Eastern countries. In early 2018, the Philippines followed suit and also introduced a ban on women working in a particular gulf state, after reports of Filipina maids being physically and sexually abused surfaced.

Since the late '60s, Bangladeshis have left their native soil and settled in foreign lands with the hope of a better future, but

that was termed brain-drain, and quite rightfully so.

As time passed, export of human resource turned its nature and focused on the more vulnerable unskilled workers. There are claims that illegal migrants were shipped to foreign lands in barrels! And most surprising of all, this is by no means, a worst-case scenario.

As the narrative and reality goes, the brokers are now increasing their market by recruiting naïve, unlettered, marginalised village women. Child trafficking is also common.

Many Bangladeshis have indeed changed their lives by earning hard-earned foreign currency, and this minority population is bait for women, the new targets.

It would be wrong to assume that the brokers are born evil, as social study will possibly show that their transition to a darker side is also marked by poverty, and other hardships. In a way, they too are a creation of the system, one that needs urgent ratification.

Forget monsters of alien countries, stand in front of the mirror and can you look straight in your eyes and say with pride, yes I treat my house help as an equal in my family? Yes, family! Did the little girl, who probably spent her Eid helping you serve guests, get a chance to sit with the invitee at the dinner table? As outrageous as it may seem, some families even do not share the same standard of food with their hired helps. Some are kind enough to share a spoonful of meat and fish curry, but do the househelp have the freedom to ask for a second helping?

Probably not.

As hundreds of workers are returning home, scores of field journalists are present at the airport to relay the latest development. One reported seeing a female returning home with a copy of the holy book in her hand, held tightly against the chest. What waits as she goes back to the place she calls home, a village that is probably untraceable even with the magnificently detailed Google Maps?

Is her trauma really over...is it just the beginning of a harrowing tale of abuse in a new form...will she be once again stripping off all dignity and honour? Only time will tell, but one thing is for sure, this time, perpetrators will be from our own society!

An Arab country has given citizenship to an AI. Bangladesh has entered the space age. We are all moving at a pace, we perhaps one day will never be able to keep up with. Irrespective, when matters as simple as human dignity, and as basic as the right to live freely is in jeopardy, the waters get murkier.

In a blame game, the powers that be question the judgement of migrant workers. They have maintained that one must weigh the odds before taking such life changing decisions, but I think the answer is pretty simple.

To put things into perspective, poverty or hope...you pick!

By Pothbhola