

19TH BANGLADESH BUSINESS AWARDS



Incepta has established well-designed factory to manufacture products of global standards. PHOTO: INCEPTA

BUSINESS PERSON OF THE YEAR

It's all about quality

AHSAN HABIB

The market was not developed, skill workforce was not in abundance in the country and finance was tight, but Abdul Mukhtar was unfazed when he decided to set up a pharmaceutical company two decades ago.

His courage stemmed from the growth potential of the industry in line with an economy ready to embark on higher GDP growth and the determination to deliver high-quality medicines that are available in developed markets but not in Bangladesh.

"Uniqueness and quality are key to success for entrepreneurs. These have been the two pillars of our success," said Mukhtar, managing director and chairman of Incepta.

Set up in 1999, Incepta Pharmaceuticals became the second-largest drug-maker in Bangladesh in just eight years, a rare feat for a company in a small market with many competing companies.

"Doctors and healthcare providers and consumers welcomed the company from the very beginning. We have always focused on the products that are important for the people but are not available in the market. This helped us grow steadily."

The annual turnover for the company stood at Tk 2,755 crore. So far, Incepta has rolled out about 175 new generic drugs, which were not included in the portfolio of other drug-makers.

The company's factory and products were all designed in the model of international standard.

"We have done everything possible to maintain product quality at global standard," Mukhtar said.

"When we found that our products were grabbing the market very fast, we analysed the reason and found that its quality is far better than competitors."

For instance, some of its products are being sold around 4 lakh units per month, very higher than 10,000 to 11,000 units of sales clocked by its nearest competitors.

In the late 1990s, Bangladesh's economy started to post growth of more than 5 per cent. This led Mukhtar, then the chief operating officer of Beximco Pharmaceuticals, to be convinced about the potential of more companies.

Subsequently, he decided to form a company and talked to many others to forge a partnership. In the end, the best match came from Impress Group, which has businesses in garments and media.

Entrepreneurs of Impress Group were his friends from his time at the University of Dhaka where he studied pharmacy.

"So, before launching the venture, I felt better and comfortable with them," Mukhtar said.

According to the entrepreneur, the main hurdle faced by entrepreneurs is accommodating the right people in the right place.

"When a company begins its journey, the hurdle gets even tougher because efficient people don't want to join a new company."

Incepta faced the same difficulty. It received a blow when two of its top officials, who were heading up the production and marketing teams, were hired by competitors.

"We were in a growing position, but suddenly things became very difficult."

Mukhtar and his wife Hasneen Mukhtar doubled down their efforts. He went to expand the market share while his wife worked both as a pharmacist in the factory and a manager in the head office to put the company on a firm footing.

She took care of the whole business strongly with daily long hours of work for eight or nine months.

"Family support is crucial for an entrepreneur," Mukhtar said.

Mobilising funds were not easy for Incepta as well. It received sufficient bank loans after three years of its successful journey and becoming a familiar name in the pharmaceutical fraternity.

National Bank was the first lender to have extended loans to it thanks to the involvement of Impress Group. Mutual Trust Bank and HSBC followed suit.

"When we became a good borrower, others came to us," Mukhtar said. Since then, the company has had no problems in securing bank loans.

Mukhtar is also talking about the challenges Bangladesh's pharmaceutical industry is going to face in the coming days.

The 2015 decision on the Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights of the World Trade Organisation says a least-developed country will no longer enjoy the patent waiver if it ceases to be an LDC prior to the expiry of the transition period.

This means that Bangladesh will not benefit from the pharmaceutical waiver once it graduates out of the LDC group in 2024, although the waiver has been granted until 2032.

"New products will no longer be available at a lower cost because of the patent protection," Mukhtar said.



Abdul Mukhtar
Managing Director and Chairman of Incepta

Uniqueness and quality are key to success for entrepreneurs. These have been the two pillars of our success

For instance, people in Bangladesh buy the medicines to treat Hepatitis C spending just \$5-7, but it may cost them \$1,000.

"We will talk to the government to register all new products so that we can supply the medicines at a lower cost for at least the next five to six years."

"But people will have to pay higher prices for the new medicines after five to six years. By this time, people's income will grow, so most people will be able to afford it."

If local drug companies ramp up production facilities to produce medicines based on their research, they will be able to supply medicines at a lower cost.

"Our export will not be affected as we ship only generic medicines," he said.

Mukhtar sought the government's assistance to help the industry reach its potential.

"When it comes to foreign currency rules and trade policy, the country is much conservative. We face challenges during international trade."

He said scientific information is regularly updated by international organisations. "We have to buy books on a regular basis to remain updated."

"The technical guidelines are valued at \$600 to \$1,200 and are purchased using credit cards. But, the Bangladesh Bank has ordered that one can't spend more than \$300 to buy books online in a single transaction."

"So, we need to take several approvals to buy the books," said Mukhtar, who studied industrial pharmacy at the Long Island University in the US.

He called for policy support on import of solvents, acids, alkali and other reagents to grow the API industry.

"We will certainly set up a robust API industry."

The business of pharmaceutical companies fell by 30 to 35 per cent because of the coronavirus pandemic. The major blow came during the April-June period, the peak of the pandemic in Bangladesh.

"People were confined to homes and did not visit doctors. Our sales were largely limited to fever, cold and sanitation-related products."

Employees gave unprecedented support during the pandemic, so Bangladesh did not see any disruption in drug supply, Mukhtar said.

"We continued to export during the pandemic that brightened our reputation. We hope we will bounce back once the pandemic is over."

Mukhtar is bullish about the potential of the industry. There is no pharmaceutical industry in most of the economies that are at the similar stage of development like in Bangladesh. Some developed countries are dependent on imported drugs.

"We will continue our export after meeting the local demand. So, the industry will continue to grow in the foreseeable period. For us, the sky is the limit."

The pharmaceutical industry is based on skill and knowledge. In the last 30 years, many pharmacists, chemists, engineers and doctors have joined the industry and have contributed with their skills.

"Our industry is now strengthening its capacities to make active pharmaceutical ingredients. As we are making basic raw materials along with final products, we will be able to compete with other countries."

Incepta exports medicines to 67 countries and employs about 10,000 people.

OUTSTANDING WOMAN IN BUSINESS

Leading the way with resolve

RHONDOKER MD SHOYEB

If women want their voices to be heard and supersede all the impediments that come their way, they have to be confident enough to express themselves articulately.

Confidence grows only in those who continuously learn new skills, sharpen their existing ones and stay well-aware of the innovations and changes that are happening not only within the country but also across the globe.

Now, anything a woman aspires to learn is available at her fingertips. Alongside reading materials on management and other relevant subjects, browsing online articles, blogs, and social media content are indispensable tools for a woman to stay ahead of the competition.

This is what Rupali Chowdhury, managing director of Berger Paints Bangladesh, believes a woman needs to become successful.

She shed light on different phases of her life and career while talking to The Daily Star after receiving the "Outstanding Woman in Business-2019" award at the 19th DHL-Daily Star Bangladesh Business Awards 2019.

She credited her successful career to the strong foundation she built during her childhood.

"I was raised in a small town in Chattogram called Patara. In the post-liberation period, a renaissance was going on in Bangladesh, and I also felt its effect," she said.

Chowdhury emphasised on extra-curricular activities while growing up.

"That period of my life taught me how to break the shackles and prejudices. My extremely supportive mother, Shalinata Chowdhury, also encouraged me to explore my true potential."

Rupali Chowdhury strongly believes people who remain engrossed with cultural and other extra-curricular activities in their childhood eventually excel in life.

"At our home, we had access to an eclectic collection of books. We actually inherited the habit of reading different types of books from our father, the late Priyadarshan Chowdhury, who was a doctor by profession, was an avid reader and subscribed to foreign magazines, including Newsweek, Times, Readers' Digest and Desh."

"The cultural activities I was involved in helped me know new people, constantly grow, become compassionate, and hone my interpersonal skills."

After completing honours in chemistry from Chattogram University, Chowdhury did her MBA from the Institute of Business Administration under Dhaka University.

"My brother Shyamal Bikash Chowdhury and my husband Abdul Haque inspired me to complete the MBA programme. I believe that was a turning point in my career. That MBA programme really helped me learn how to be successful in the business world."

She started her career with a Swiss multinational pharmaceutical and chemical company called Ciba Geigy (Bangladesh) in 1984. She moved to the port city after marriage and joined Berger Paints in 1990 as a planning manager.

She worked in various departments of the multinational company, including marketing, sales, distribution, planning and systems in different supervisory capacities, which made her one of the finest leaders not only in the paint industry but also in other sectors in the country.

The entry to the corporate world was not smooth, she said.

"Once you start working, people will only see how well you can deal with critical situations. Gender doesn't get that much focus then."

She became the director for operations of Berger Paints in 2004 and managing director in 2008.

Chowdhury served the Foreign Investors' Chamber of Commerce and Industry as president for two terms (2013-2015 and 2015-2017) and was elected again for the 2019-21 term.

Berger reached several milestones under her leadership, including the formation of two international joint ventures – Berger Becker Bangladesh in 2012 and Berger Fosroc in 2018.

During her tenure, Berger has diversified to a number of business segments, including adhesives, textile emulsions and printing ink, brought new technologies to the industry and launched environment-friendly, lead-free and odourless paints.

She considers people management skills along with functional expertise as the fundamentals of her leadership strengths.

"But I don't consider myself as a finished product. I consider myself a work in progress. This award is going to inspire me to move further beyond, inspire Bangladeshi people and create jobs."



Rupali Chowdhury has helped every entity she has been associated with to achieve new heights of success. PHOTO: BERGER PAINTS BANGLADESH



Rupali Chowdhury
Managing Director of Berger Paints Bangladesh

Once you start working, people will only see how well you can deal with critical situations. Gender doesn't get that much focus then

"I wanted to lead Berger by building an organisational structure based on meritocracy."

Chowdhury said her parents, siblings, husband and in-laws had played a vital role in her path to glory.

"Credit also goes to my colleagues and stakeholders in the companies for their splendid support. I want to express my gratitude to our former managing director Mash-Ul-Karim and our former regional director KR Das."

She said she is also indebted to the company's board of directors and majority shareholders, who gave her the opportunity to work in different capacities.

"I prefer women to be self-dependent first before getting married," said Chowdhury, also the chairman and managing director of Jensen & Nicholson (Bangladesh), a subsidiary of Berger Paints Bangladesh.

What surprises Chowdhury the most is the absence of women in the top positions in the financial sector.

Many women are now working in the top posts in multinational companies, but heartbreakingly, many of them might have to give up the job for family reasons just before taking the leadership roles, she said.

For a successful company, the leaders should believe in putting the right person in the right place, said the philanthropist, who is also an independent director of Bata Shoe Company (Bangladesh) and Linde Bangladesh.

The seasoned corporate leader said she now wants to give back to society by working with the regulatory bodies and global entities to increase foreign investment in Bangladesh.

As the number one company in the paint industry, Berger Paints Bangladesh has been consistently trying to diversify its product range, she said.

2020 had been a tough period for Berger Paints Bangladesh due to the Covid-19 outbreak.

The deadly coronavirus slashed the company's sales by almost 50 per cent in the April-June quarter to Tk 228.5 crore from the previous quarter.

Chowdhury emerged as a great leader and led the company to provide its painters with over Tk 1.75 crore to help them recover fast from the fallouts of the pandemic.

She also made it possible for Berger Paints Bangladesh to achieve 81 per cent of last year's sales in the April-September period of 2020.

Chowdhury thanked The Daily Star and DHL Express Bangladesh for selecting her for the Outstanding Woman in Business award.

"Any recognition is a matter of great joy. I am delighted to receive the award. I believe that the award will encourage other women to do better in life," she said.

"But I don't consider myself as a finished product. I consider myself a work in progress. This award is going to inspire me to move further beyond, inspire Bangladeshi people and create jobs."

BEST FINANCIAL INSTITUTION

A trailblazer in banking

AKM ZAMIR UDDIN

Dutch-Bangla Bank has become a pioneer in introducing both digital banking means and financial inclusion programmes in order to cater financial services to both tech-savvy youths and underprivileged people.

The bank has never sought instant profit from its banking businesses, rather it had given efforts to the untapped arenas in advances to attract commoners to the banking system, Abul Kashem Md Shirin, managing director of DBBL, told The Daily Star in an interview recently.

Dutch-Bangla was the first among local banks to introduce automated teller machine (ATM) service in Bangladesh in 2004.

The lender has built the largest ATM network, setting up around 5,000 units from rural to urban areas. Fast track, which is comprised of a bunch of ATMs, has been set up by DBBL in every upazila, giving a boost to the country's financial inclusion.

The fast track offers clients the opportunity to withdraw and deposit money, open new account, collect bank statement and secure many other financial facilities. DBBL is also the pioneer in rolling out debit card in 2004.

The lender has so far provided nearly 80 lakh debit cards, becoming the largest card issuer among local banks. EMV chip-based debit card was also issued by the lender for the first time in the country in 2008.

EMV chip technology is the latest global standard for card payments in order to secure the clients' information. EMV is an acronym for Europay, Mastercard and Visa, who developed this technology.

The lender is also a pioneer in introducing e-commerce in 2010 among banks when the digital platform was largely absent in the country.

Initially, it invested Tk 12 crore to roll out the service, but now it is earning huge return from the business.

In the arena of mobile financial services, the lender is also a torchbearer by embracing the branchless and digital banking model in 2011.

A tremendous success has been bagged by the lender in the field of agent banking as well.

DBBL, which started the digital banking operation two and a half years ago, is the second lender among banks to start the live operation of banking module.

The bank has already set up 4,500 agent outlets, the highest in terms of volume of the shops among the lenders that have had the digital banking window.

Clients now settle financial transaction to the tune of Tk 400 crore per day through agent banking of DBBL.

The majority of outlets have been set up in the remotest part of the country such that the unbanked people get financial services in an easy manner.

The bank rolled out NexusPay – a mobile application – two years ago and 36 lakh clients have already embraced the digital mean.

Clients have so far opened 3 crore accounts with the bank riding on its financial inclusion programmes and digital banking services.

The lender, which commenced its banking operation in 1996, now manages a large number of accounts by way of using the automated banking tools.

The tremendous success in different banking operations achieved by the bank helped it bag the DHL-The Daily Star Bangladesh Business Awards in 2019 in the category of the best financial institution.

The lender also got the same award in 2006 due to its immense effort to materialise automation process in its banking operation.

Shirin said that DBBL has recently rolled out a number of banking programmes, which are not considered as profitable ventures at this moment.

DBBL clients, who are using NexusPay, are now allowed to use fast-track lanes of five bridges by way of giving toll digitally.

Only DBBL among banks now provides such service to its clients and it will also try to add other bridges in phases.

The bank is now trying to ink agreements with the owners of petrol pumps such that drivers can refill fuel tank on their own responsibility by way of swiping debit or credit card.

DBBL has already started a pilot project with a petrol pump in Dhaka city in order to popularize the services.



Abul Kashem Md Shirin
Managing Director of DBBL

The bank has never sought instant profit from its banking businesses, rather it had given efforts to the untapped arenas in advances to attract commoners to the banking system

"But owners of petrol pumps are showing reluctance to adopt the automated service. But, all pumps will have to accept the digital means if they want their businesses to survive in the days to come," Shirin said.

The lender will also operate the ticketing system of Dhaka Metro Rail project.

Commuters will have to collect a prepaid card from the bank to use the rail.

They will recharge the card for the purpose of travelling from one spot to another by metro rail.

DBBL's outstanding performance in the digital banking arena helped it win the tender to cater the service.

Shirin thinks the bank has gone forward a lot since 2006 when it achieved the DHL-The Daily Bangladesh Business Awards.

The number of branches stood at 195 at the end of last year in contrast to 30 in 2006.

But, the bank now has plans to expand its branch banking, rather it has adopted branchless banking by way of introducing diversified digital banking model.

As much as 80 per cent of deposits were mobilised by the bank in the form of fixed deposit receipts in 2006 and the rest was kept in the current account and savings account (CASA).

But, the structure of the deposits at the bank is now completely reversed, meaning that its cost of fund has decreased to a large extent.

A CASA account pays no interest—or, in some cases, low interest—on the current account and an above-average return on the savings portion.

Based on its extraordinary financial services, the bank now sees returns on those initiatives.

The bank's net profit stood at Tk 434 crore in 2019, up from Tk 420 crore the year before.

The bank has recruited 10,000 employees to operate its banking operation.

In addition, it has appointed more than 10,000 employees through the third party.

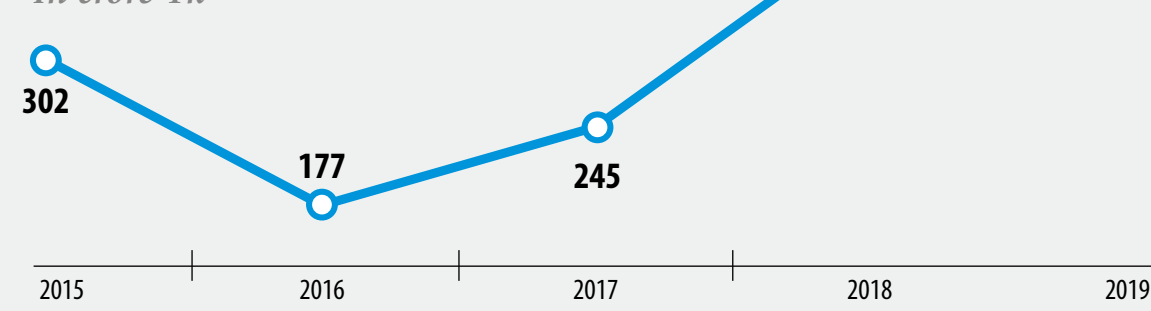
This means the bank has a total of 20,000 employees, which is one of the largest human resource volumes among lenders.

The lender has also been giving emphasis to corporate social responsibility programme for years.

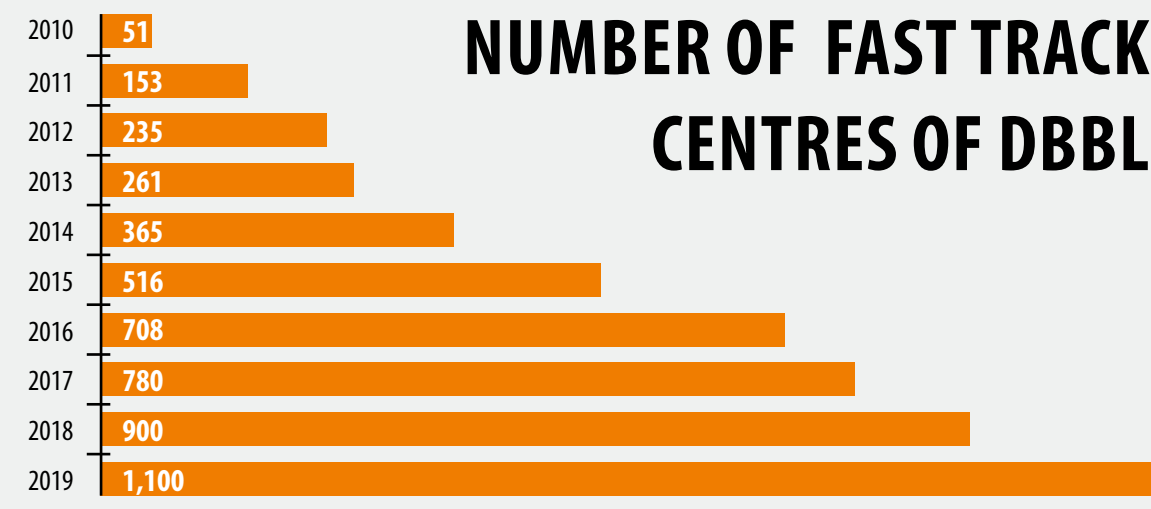
It has so far donated Tk 900 crore, which is the highest amount given by a company in the private sector.

NET PROFIT IN DBBL

In crore Tk



NUMBER OF FAST TRACK CENTRES OF DBBL



Honesty has played a vital role for Snowtex to achieve consistent growth in apparel business. PHOTO: SNOWTEX

ENTERPRISE OF THE YEAR

A snowballing venture

MAHMUDUL HASAN

SM Khaled, managing director of apparel exporter Snowtex Group, has always abided by two things in life: honesty and commitment.

These virtues, in his words, prompted him to take up a seven-day walk from Dhaka to Chattogram in his teenage years with seven schooltime friends as part of an anti-smoking campaign, which eventually got him a certificate right from the then president himself.

These principles also paid great dividends later in a career in apparel manufacturing.

After short stints at a garment factory and buying houses and three nearly botched attempts at forging partnerships, he established Snowtex in 1998 to supply accessories and trims to local clothing manufacturers.

"At first, Snowtex had one employee...and I used my home as an office. However, we gained limited success and started our own buying house and getting small orders," said Khaled.

In 2000, Snowtex got some orders from Berne Apparel, unlocking a mystery box of astronomical growth and success. Three years on, the US clothing brand made a partnership offer to establish a factory.

"In a few years Snowtex earned a few crore taka but it was not enough to establish a garment factory on our own," Khaled.

"But impressed with Snowtex's commitment and quality of products, Berne helped us with money to establish our first factory, Snowtex Apparels, in 2004," he said.

And this partnership led to the group owning three more factories, employing 16,000 people and generating an annual turnover of \$250 million.

The second factory, Cut N Sew Ltd, was also established jointly with the Berne in 2009 in response to growing work orders.

Adopting modern, green and sustainable manufacturing concepts, Snowtex Outerwear was founded in 2014. Then came the group's wholly owned Snowtex Sportswear in 2019.

Products now range from a variety of jackets, purpose-based wear, vests, overalls, coveralls and bottoms.

The company lists some 50 countries as export destinations and buyers such as Decathlon, Columbia Sportswear Company, VF Corporation and BESTSELLER.

Dedicated to the task is an 11.50 lakh square-foot production floor sitting on over 20 acres of land in Dharmal making use of 11,000 machines in 180 production lines.