



BUSINESS PERSON OF THE YEAR

Rise of an apparel mogul

REFAYET ULLAH MIRDHA

Even in 1994, DBL Group, a leading garment exporter, was struggling to survive with less than 300 workers and a small factory in the capital's Farmgate.

The garment unit, which was set up in 1991, was struggling for work orders from international retailers and brands.

But the situation started to turn for the better when MA Jabbar, managing director of DBL Group, started expanding its capacity with a new vision in 1994.

Jabbar, then a fresh computer science and technology graduate of the University of Texas, had taken charge of the family business and did not look back.

Now it is one of the largest conglomerates in the country, employing some 43,000 people.

After a journey of three decades, the group has 24 business and industrial units in sectors ranging from textile, spinning, dyeing, finishing and garment to pharmaceuticals, ICT, dredging, ceramics and packaging.

The group expects its annual turnover to reach more than \$1 billion at the end of the current fiscal year, up 15 per cent year-on-year.

Of the amount, the group exported goods worth \$480 million and has a target to take it to \$520 million.

The group plans to invest \$750 million in its DBL Industrial Park at Sylhet in the next five years, targeting a turnover of more than \$2 billion in the stipulated timeframe.

The total number of employees in the group will reach 85,000 in the next five years as it has already started setting up new spinning, dyeing and garment units on 168 acres of land within an economic zone in Sylhet.



Jabbar, born in 1961 at Tejgaon in Dhaka, had a vision from his early life to be a big businessperson as his father was already doing business on a small scale in Dhaka.

Construction and trading of commodities were the focal point of his family business which was initiated by his father in Dhaka in 1958.

Jabbar completed his schooling from Adamjee Cantonment Public School in Dhaka and intermediate education from Chattogram College as his father also had business in Chattogram.

Afterwards, he left Bangladesh to study in the US. "I had a dream to be a big businessperson from the very beginning of my career," Jabbar said.

He said that on returning to the country, he had a mindset that could have easily made him a champion at any high-level corporate employment, be it a domestic or multinational company.

But instead he opted to join his small family-owned garment factory as managing director in 1994.

"Till date, I am still the managing director of the group and I was not promoted further although the group became one of the major conglomerates in the country," Jabbar joked with The Daily Star.

"I enjoy my job very much as the group came to this position from almost scratch through a struggle," he said.

Jabbar said his inspiration comes from his brother Dulal, who was killed at the Rayer Bazar killing ground by the then Pakistani army on December 14, 1971.

In fact, the Pakistani army had come to their Tejgaon house in search of another freedom fighter's elder brother but on failing to find him had taken away Dulal and killed him.



MA Jabbar
Managing Director of DBL Group

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So, his family named the company after the brother – Dulal Brother Limited. Currently, the remaining four brothers and a nephew and niece are running the group.

Continuing to lead the united family and its business, Jabbar said running such a business had its challenges but still there was a charm as everybody cooperates with him.

More of the second generation is also set to join the group.

There are 10 altogether, all sons and daughters of the four brothers who are now studying in different universities.

The company has developed a family business guideline and everybody abides by it.

The main policy of the family business is adoptability and the group developed a model of adoptability. The concept of adoptability helped the group to grow a lot.

The group is imparting training to all partners on family business governance, developed by the International Finance Corporation for efficient management of business.

Jabbar is blessed with two daughters and a son. The eldest daughter is studying at Boston University, the younger one at New York University Leonard N. Stern School of Business and the youngest son at the University of Texas.

Jabbar believes there is no shortcut to becoming a big businessperson. The company has some corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities involving schools and colleges near its factories.

Moreover, the group makes contributions to sexual and reproductive health service provider Marie Stopes Bangladesh, health and family planning service provider Surjer Hashi Network, Dhaka Ahsania Mission and BIRDEM General Hospital.

Jabbar is the senior vice president of the Bangladesh Economic Zone Investors Association and vice president of the Bangladesh Ceramic Manufacturers and Exporters Association.

He is also on the Board of Global Compact Network Bangladesh and represents DBL in the International Chamber of Commerce, Bangladesh, and World Economic Forum.

DBL Group received multiple recognitions such as a Superbrands award, national export trophy, HSBC export excellence award, Bangladesh innovation award, disability inclusive employment award and excellence in corporate governance award.

Jabbar has now been crowned businessperson of the year 2021 at the 20th Bangladesh Business Awards, an initiative of DHL Express and The Daily Star.

ENTERPRISE OF THE YEAR

Powered by product variety

AHSAN HABIB

Setting prices that reach all segments of society alongside having a myriad of products gives extra mileage to Pran-RFL Group in continuing to expand their business in local and global markets.

Even amid the pandemic, it was among a handful of companies that continued to repay loans to banks and refrained from bringing any cuts to employees' salaries and benefits, said Chairman and Chief Executive Officer Ahsan Khan Chowdhury.

He claims that the leading business conglomerate is the country's top private employer, providing jobs directly to over 1.45 lakh people.

"We dream to be a company of hundreds of billions of dollars like Unilever or Nestle," he said.

But it is tough with a small number of products in Bangladesh as there is not much of an opportunity to scale up market sales here, he said.

This has prompted the company to take up the strategy of launching thousands of products and hundreds of brands to reach all types of consumers.

Pran-RFL Group has more than 8,000 products and 100 brands.

"If every product can bring a million-dollar business, our dream of reaching hundreds of billions of dollars in turnover may come true," Chowdhury said.

Thanks to the diversification of products, Pran-RFL Group was able to continue expanding its business through all adversities and create jobs for people.

In 2022, the growth rate in domestic sales was 22 per cent while it was 13 per cent for exports, according to company data.

The company's turnover in 2021 reached around \$3 billion (considering \$1 equals Tk 86), the data shows.

"The turnover is almost nothing to our dream or a dot on a bigger map. Many food companies log business of \$100 billion in a year in the world. Even in Indonesia many companies do business bigger than us," said Chowdhury.

"So, Pran will continue to bring new products and grab new markets in the world map. Our target is to have all types of food products in Pran's portfolio," he said.

Pran is determined to reach all types of products available in the world to the people of Bangladesh at affordable prices.

However, the management of such a huge product portfolio is a challenging task, he added.

Its net profit growth rate was 16 per cent and revenue growth was 6 per cent in 2022.

Regarding its exports, Chowdhury said the company was doing well in India, Africa, America and Europe. It represents the excellence of Bangladesh in 145 countries worldwide.

Now, Pran-RFL Group is targeting to reach the Asean market, he said.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean), countries are Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam.

Pran-RFL Group aims to export products worth \$1 billion by 2025 and \$2 billion by 2030. In fiscal year 2021-22, it exported goods worth \$532 million.

Along with grabbing new markets, it is targeting to ensure prices that are within the purchasing capacities of all segments of society.

No big food company in the world targets serving their products to the high-income segment of society only, said Chowdhury.

"They produce products for all."

Similarly, Pran-RFL Group is producing goods for all and it always tries to serve products that are affordable for all segments of society.

The leading business conglomerate came about in 1981 at the hands of Maj Gen (ret'd) Amjad Khan Chowdhury, the father of Ahsan Khan Chowdhury.

"My father's target was to engage in a business after retirement and when he started to succeed, we were inspired to join the business," said Ahsan.

"The beauty of doing business is that there are a lot of challenges and overcoming them...I enjoy it," he added.

In the 1980s, when the business started to roll, there



Ahsan Khan Chowdhury
Chairman and Chief Executive Officer, Pran-RFL Group

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was a huge opportunity to do business as competition was limited at the time. Now, there is more competition and hence more challenges.

"My father started the business with real estate," Ahsan said.

Amjad Khan Chowdhury was an ardent believer in the agricultural potential of Bangladesh. He dreamt that his company would work primarily as a food and agro-processor that would create value for farmers and consumers.

At present, Pran-RFL Group has diversified into various fields like food, grains and pulses, snacks, juice, plastics, bathroom fittings, paints, construction materials, light and heavy engineering, cables and switches, furniture, home appliances, footwear, garments, stationery, toiletries, medical appliances, melamine, kitchenware, and lifts and generators.

On the company continuing to succeed long after his father passed away, Ahsan said the success of an entrepreneur depends on the labour one puts in and he loves to work hard.

An entrepreneur needs to be able to put in the effort, conquer all the odds and march forward. If an entrepreneur gives in the effort in a proper way, s/he will surely get the returns, he said.

"Luxury does not suit a businessperson running business on loans from banks. I still travel in economy class and do not ride any car of high value. I enjoy the simplicity as I run the business on bank loans."

"Once, my father was going from one bank door to another to get a loan of only Tk 30 lakh. Now Pran has loans of over Tk 10,000 crore," he added.

Pran's working capital now amounts to Tk 2,322 crore and its assets amount to Tk 20,439 crore, according to the company.

"We are repaying loans regularly and no lender had any concerns over the loan as Pran's total turnover is big."

He went on to say that the present culture of defaulting on loans in Bangladesh is not a good sign for businesses and entrepreneurs.

Those who are increasingly defaulting on loans are not only damaging their own business, but also doing an injustice to the whole business community because these funds are eroding from the banking sector and thus other small entrepreneurs are being deprived of loans that could have otherwise given a boost to their business, Ahsan said.

