ABDUL MONEM - 2008

Chairman of Abdul Monem Ltd

Every cloud has a silver lining. The proverb best fits the rise of Abdul Monem, whose businesses generated around Tk 800 crore in turnover in 2008.

He came to Dhaka almost empty-handed in the early 1950s, with just a secondary school certificate.

The initial days were hard to survive before he clinched the opportunity to obtain a one-year diploma degree in civil engineering. He stood first in the final exam.

That was the beginning for Monem, the chairman and managing director of Abdul Monem Ltd that has an array of businesses ranging from civil construction to food and beverages, and power to pharmaceutical sectors.

"I got two offers after my result. One was a government job and the other was to be a contractor under a partnership with more than 10 percent as a shareholder," said Monem.

"I opted for the second one," he says.

The business ran well. But seven years later his partner decided to quit.

"It was unexpected for me and my lone journey began with Tk 20,000 in hand."

The first contract he won was to supply brick for the Ishwardi-Nandail road in Mymensingh. He was able to complete the task by virtue of a Tk 60,000 loan he got from one of his well-wishers, says Monem.

"I made a profit of Tk 120,000," he says.

Since then, Monem never stepped back as his businesses grew on the back of his sincerity and ability to take high risks to accomplish challenging tasks.

The 44-kilometre Khulna-Mongla highway, which was constructed in 1984, is such a risky venture that Monem took and won.

"It's one of the tough tasks I had to go through," he says, recalling his first visit to the site before starting the construction works.

"We had to leave our jeep in Bagerhat as there was no road communication system. I along with one of my engineers wore lungi and moved inside the low-lying swampy fields to get an idea about the work. I almost lost hope after visiting the site."

The Khulna-Mongla highway is not the only example of gigantic tasks like building dam to change the river flow to save the Dhaleshwari Bridge from tide.

"Allah (God) rescued me in many of the construction works," he says.

The testimony of Monem Construction could be found in various infrastructure development projects including those aided by the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, Japan Bank for International Cooperation, and Islamic Development Bank.

Constructions of the four-lane Dhaka-Chittagong highway, access road to Bangabandhu Bridge over the Jamuna River, and Osmani International Airport in Sylhet are the living examples of Abdul Monem.

"Whatever I do, I believe in doing the best," says Monem, who was awarded gold medal in 2009 by the International Federation of Asian & Western Pacific Contractors' Association.

His indefatigable spirit has also encouraged Monem to diversify his businesses from construction to beverage.

In 1982 Monem acquired K Rahman & Company and started bottling Coca-Cola beverages.

About the business, he says: "It's a matter of pleasure to be a part of such a prestigious company. Coca-Cola is the global leader in beverage."

Five years later Monem established a new bottling plant in Comilla and Abdul Monem Ltd (AML) expanded the capacity to help Coca-Cola retain its leadership in the beverage market.

And he got the recognition from Coca-Cola. In 1991, AML was given the President's Turtle Award by the president of Coca-Cola Company, one of the prestigious awards from the global soft drink giant.

Along with distributing Coca-Cola products across the country except Dhaka and Rajshahi, AML produces and markets leading Igloo brand ice cream.

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AML is also involved in making milk products, agro-processed foods, sugar, pharmaceuticals, power generation, and business consultancy with its turnover growing every year.

In eight years to 2008, the turnover of AML, which has nine units including its CSR (corporate social responsibility) wing Abdul Monem Foundation, more than doubled to around Tk 800 crore.

Monem attributes the growth of the company to honesty and sincerity he had shown since the beginning of his business.

"Till date, I have been maintaining my philosophy of doing quality works with honesty. My inspiration was one of my sub-contractors Chan Mia who joined me on the condition that I will never ask him for any unethical acts," he says.

AML directly employs 3,000 staffs. Many of the employees have been serving the company since 1970s, as Monem believes in delegation of responsibility and authority to the employees.

The employees are also upbeat about the freedom they enjoy.

"I render my love and affection to my workers, but, when necessary, I am also strict with them," says Monem.

His relationships with other stakeholders also appear to be good as Monem maintains a good credit record with banks and pays taxes regularly.

As recognition, the National Board of Revenue gave him the Best Taxpayer Award for longest duration for Dhaka region. In 2007 Jamuna Bank offered him the Business Excellence Award.

Emerging from the grassroots, Monem also feels for the society. And as his company's commitment to the advancement of the society, AML has formed the CSR wing to work especially for the welfare of the poor.

KM REZAUL HASANAT - 2007

Chairman and Managing Director of Viyellatex Group

KM Rezaul Hasanat's moment of truth arrived in 2003: he took the most crucial decision of his life and vowed to buy the remaining 90 percent stakes in Youngones Fashions Ltd where he was the CEO with 10 percent shares.

"When other shareholders, who offered me 10 percent stake in the company as a working partner and CEO, decided to quit the business, my instincts told me to take a risk," Hasanat recalled.

There has been a gulf of differences between taking a decision and its implementation. He started looking for sources of finance.

"I approached my university friends who joined private commercial banks. I managed to make bank officials understand about the viability of my plan to buy the struggling garment factory," said Hasanat, who obtained his Master's degree in management from Dhaka University in 1988.

"Finally, I bought the company: I purchased only the name of the company, not the assets. I shifted the factory to Tongi in Gazipur district in the same year and went into commercial operations," said a smiling Hasanat. Since then, Hasanat did not look back.

Son of a small businessman, Hasanat never planned to join any corporate house as an employee. Born in 1963, Hasanat had business in his blood: he used to look after his father's construction material business in Naogaon district during his early days.

Hasanat's ventures can be termed "from micro to macro." His beginning was very humble. After completion of university education, he started his career by supplying stationery and equipment to offices in 1988.

In 1996, he got a chance to demonstrate his entrepreneurial skills as he joined Youngones Fashions Ltd at Tejgaon in Dhaka as the CEO.

The board of directors of Youngones agreed to offer him 10 percent shares as the working partner. He started working hard for the company with 2,000 workers.

Hasanat's business has now grown and his Viyellatex Group includes Youngones Fashions Ltd, Viyellatex Ltd, Interfab Shirt Manufacturing Ltd, Fashion Plastic and Packaging Ltd, and Gothic Design Ltd.

The group's annual turnover was around USD 108 million (Tk 745.2 crore approximately) in 2006-07 fiscal year. In 2006-07, its garment export reached USD 106 million against USD 56 million in 2005-06 and USD 48 million in 2004-05.

Viyellatex's buyers include G-STAR, ESPIRIT, Puma, Marks and Spencer, S Oliver, PVH, and Tesco.

An entrepreneur's journey never ends. Every year is a fresh year for Viyellatex Group Chairman Hasanat.

The most expensive investment in apparel production is spinning mill since it needs a lot of capital machinery, skilled manpower, and huge space. Viyellatex Spinning with 40,320 spindles was set up in 2005.

"The group is about to achieve its ambitious export target of USD 125 in 2007-08 fiscal year," Hasanat said.

"The group also plans to invest USD 12 million in the next one year to upgrade its production activities. The group will also introduce well-known 'lean production' system to improve workers' productivity," Hasanat added.

In garment factories, traditional production lines are disappearing. In the lean system, teams of workers sit in small groups passing unfinished garments to each other. On a production line there are many people, but the system is not in balance. If one operation goes slow, there is a bottleneck.

In the team or lean system, it is much easier to find a balance and eliminate bottlenecks since workers can easily switch between operations, according to garment factory managers.

Hasanat is always enthusiastic about new technologies as he believes only new expertise, skills, and innovations can make a business competitive. He is going to install the world's renowned enterprise resources planner software at a cost of USD 1 million to monitor the real time production activities of his business.

"Once the lean production system is introduced and the resources planner software is installed the production in terms of both quality and quantity will be improved," said Hasanat.

He is also keen to ensure better management everywhere in business. "The group puts emphasis on hiring quality human resources and financial management people."

The Gazipur-based group that employs around 8,000 workers plans to pay 25 percent more than the minimum wage structure set by the government to ensure better living condition of workers from June.

Viyellatex Group has set up factories ranging from yarn to garment and accessories, ensuring smooth supply chain.

Hasanat did not even want to depend on accessories manufacturers to make his export shipment hassle free, prompting him to establish Fashion Plastic and Packaging Ltd.

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Hasanat's Viyellatex aims to produce high-end products. In 2007, he set up Gothic Design to develop garment print techniques to woo trendy customers with trendy designs.

On the corporate social responsibility front, Viyellatex offers scholarships to poor students. It has donated Tk 2.60 million to the Bangladesh Thalassaemia Samity to purchase refrigerated equipment for blood banks. It also sponsored Tk 3.5 million for constructing an auditorium of Monsur Girls' School at Naogaon.

Viyellatex Group has purchased a piece of land at Tongi in Gazipur district to set up an 80-bed hospital.

The group tends to the environment as well. It has embarked on a plan to use 60,000 litres of recycled effluent water as toilet water per day to save underground water apart from another plan to store rainwater for daily use.

Hasanat, an enthusiastic golf player, terms barriers to business as strength. "If businesses cross the barriers with honesty and sincerity, they will definitely succeed."

MD NASIR UDDIN - 2006

Chairman of Pacific Jeans

It was a dinner some 27 years ago at a swanky restaurant in downtown Colombo that changed Md Nasiruddin's life forever and that sowed the seeds of Pacific Jeans, one of the largest and pioneering readymade garment industries in the country.

He was in Sri Lanka on a business trip – trading and ship breaking were Nasiruddin's main areas then. During a dinner with his local business partner, he was introduced to a business magnate who was into readymade garment.

During dinner, the magnate suddenly said: "Do you know, Bangladesh might be a good place to start readymade garment industries. Low labour cost there is the best merit."

Nasiruddin's business instincts told him the comment was not to be taken lightly. On his return, he contacted a Japanese firm, also his business partner, to prepare a feasibility report on RMG industry in Bangladesh. The report, when it came, proved the Sri Lankan entrepreneur right – Bangladesh has every condition to be an apparel exporter.

Nasiruddin swung into action, he ordered machinery from Japan and recruited two factory managers from Hong Kong. The factory site was bought and building built. Workers were recruited and trained. Finally, in 1984, Nasiruddin emerged as a garment entrepreneur.

His first order was from a Minnesota buyer. This was 24,000 pieces of shirts.

"It was a great time for us," Nasiruddin says. "We all worked hard and got the orders ready. We booked air cargo and sent 15,000 pieces of the order in the first phase."

The wait for payment began, but it never came. Months later, it transpired that he would never get payment for his first order as the US company went bankrupt.

"I sank into despair," Nasiruddin recalls. "It was tough struggle for us as we had to pay salary to 600 workers every month. The first year – 1984 – was a total loss. I thought I would never be an entrepreneur."

But, Naisruddin has business in his blood – his father and grandfather were traders at Khatunganj, the business hub of Chittagong. So, he got himself together and set down the strategy – explore markets and find new buyers.

So, for the next three years he started walking around the major apparel fairs – from Cologne's Interjeans Fair to Las Vegas' Magic Show. Buyers' interest was lukewarm and frustrating as Bangladesh was still an unknown sourcing destination for apparels.

Then the first break came for him. Jordache, now an extinct brand but then a big name, placed orders with him. And then, there was no looking back for Nasiruddin. C&A, Gap, and H&M – they all started coming to him.

"But I was mainly doing low-end orders just as many of our RMG owners do even now," said Nasiruddin.

But then he knows how to reach for the sky. It was a big time for shifting the global RMG industry from countries like Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore. He brought in more experts from Hong Kong and Sri Lanka and got ready to get out of the low-end range to the high-medium. He decided to expand his factory in the EPZ. In 1994, he forked in a huge amount into his project.

"It was in 2000 and I was walking down the Fifth Avenue in New York with my son," Nasiruddin recalls another turn in his life. "I stopped in front of the GAP shop and then went inside. I looked up the trousers on the front rack – all marked USA and Mexico. I told my son: One day soon, my products will be on these racks. I tell you."

His son, Tanvir, laughed. "Baba, isn't it too much of a dream?"

"I tell you son. I will be here one day soon."

And he was right. It took him another one and a half years to bag GAP orders. Today, the main rows of the Fifth Avenue store are decked with his products, proudly labelled, "Made in Bangladesh."

Dedication, honesty, and determination led him to the level he earned today in the country's business arena. And these were the driving forces of his march and he has built a big business empire.

"I strived my whole life to work on upholding the country's image abroad with involving more people in my business. I found the readymade garment sector ideal for this purpose."

Born at Salimpur village in Sitakunda of Chittagong district, Nasir has a good sense of business, which contributed to grow such an empire worth Tk 3.5 billion. The annual turnover of his business is now over Tk 7.5 billion.

It may seem unbelievable today that Nasir, in a bid to diversify his business, started importing tyre and tube and light machinery with a meagre amount of Tk 50,000 soon after the Liberation War.

His most famous enterprise Pacific Jeans' sister concern NZN Fashion, NZN Washing Plant Limited, Diamond Fashion Ltd, Jeans 2000 Ltd, and Pacific Accessories Ltd now employ over 20,000 people.

The visionary businessperson, Nasir, always puts his efforts on bringing about new dimension in his business, so he sometimes switches over to new ventures for more value addition and earning foreign exchange.

"I strived my whole life to work on upholding the country's image abroad with involving more people in my business. I found the readymade garment sector ideal for this purpose," he said.

Maintaining good relation with partners is another secret of achievement, Nasir went on.

He believes continuous research and observation before starting any business helped him achieve his goals.

He has already set ambitious goals for the future. His vision is to launch his own brand of apparel product line in the fashion retail markets of the West.

He is also committed to corporate social responsibilities involving him in different social welfare organisations. He is one of the financial patrons of an organisation that provides assistance to leukaemia-affected children. He contributes towards education of the rural people, especially for girls' education by managing and funding 100 students every year. He established four schools in his native village. He is also founding member of Bepza Public High School & College at the CEPZ.