

LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD

Legend of leather sector



Shoes, wallets, sandals, belts, and different types of boots bearing the ‘Made in Bangladesh’ tag are now found in leading global retailers.

SAMAMA RAHMAN

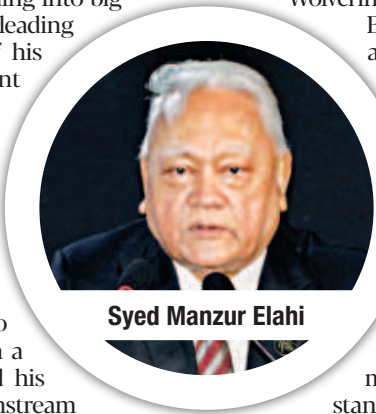
Through sheer determination, innovation, and audacity, Syed Manzur Elahi became a name synonymous with the success of Bangladesh's leather and footwear industry. Born in Kolkata in 1942, his life took a defining turn at an early age with the untimely demise of his father, Chief Justice Syed Nasim Ali, when he was aged just four. Elahi was then raised by his two older brothers, who not only provided nurturing surroundings, but created an environment that prioritised character and intellect over material pursuits. Although his heart lay elsewhere, his destiny appeared to be set in stone. “I never wanted a job. I aimed to stand on my own two feet and start a business. That was my dream,” Elahi said in an interview. “But my brothers would laugh if I ever brought up the topic. They said I did not understand business and that

nobody in our family had ever opted for that path.” So, in 1954, Elahi found himself preparing for the Bangladesh Civil Service exam, poised to follow a well-trodden path of his family's legacy in civil service. But fate intervened as his university master's finals were postponed past the date of the civil service exam, rendering him ineligible to appear. Although he was hesitant, the twist of fate led Elahi to interview with Pakistan Tobacco. Although he enjoyed financial stability and prestige during a seven year tenure with the company, he yearned for something more, something beyond the confines of corporate life. A pivotal moment arrived during a chance encounter with a Frenchman at a dinner. This individual, primarily a trader of leather goods, presented Elahi with a compelling proposition – to represent him as an agent in Bangladesh.

Despite not even knowing the difference between hides and skins, or any information about the industry, Elahi jumped at the opportunity. But familiar hurdles stood in his way. “My eldest brother told me that he would not speak to me ever again if I did this. Obviously, it became a very hard choice. But the person who really helped me at that time was my father-in-law. He told me that he supported me,” Elahi recalled. In 1972, he embarked on an uncharted journey of entrepreneurship. Starting his own business marked a second departure from family tradition, and the choice of the leather industry, an industry self-admittedly deemed “dirty and obnoxious,” represented a significant leap of faith. Yet, Elahi navigated the challenges, acknowledging the societal stigma attached to this field, and began his foray into the world of leather. Success soon greeted him in a business that appeared modest, but proved a most lucrative niche. It was not long before he contemplated expanding into big business, eventually leading to the acquisition of his first tannery, Orient Tannery. In 1975, amid the government's privatisation of lossmaking tanneries, Elahi successfully bid for the Orient Tannery, the first tannery to be sold through such a process. This marked his official entry into mainstream leather manufacturing, giving rise to a company that would live up to the name: Apex. The journey wasn't devoid of challenges. The scarcity of skilled labour posed an obstacle while the volatility of the international leather market presented a further hurdle. But Elahi kept things in control and

took the company public in 1982, raising the finance to move into more capital-intensive operations before finally making the move to footwear in 1990. This presented another problem as low quality and failure to deliver on time in the unfamiliar business of manufacturing meant that purchase orders began to drop almost immediately. After convincing Japan's largest shoe retailer, Marutomi, to order some shoes, 97 percent of the shoes did not pass the quality test. Elahi still favoured Bangladesh's advantages in the leather sector and began to emphasise the role of technology as a significant driver for Apex's success, enabling the company to compete on an international scale and deliver products of superior quality to meet global demand. Shoes, wallets, sandals, belts, and different types of boots bearing the 'made in Bangladesh' tag are now found in leading global retailers, including Fila, Deichmann, Timberland, Aldo, H&M, Marks and Spencer, s.Oliver and Wolverine. By importing know-how and adopting advanced technologies from Europe, particularly Italy, Apex achieved remarkable advancements in its manufacturing processes. These advancements not only enhanced the company's production capacity but also helped maintain stringent quality standards, enabling Apex to position itself as a leader in the competitive leather and footwear industries. This strategic move underscores Elahi's forward-thinking approach and his commitment to incorporating the best practices from around the world into the operations of Apex. It further solidifies his legacy as an

astute entrepreneur, one who recognised the importance of embracing innovation and staying ahead of the curve to achieve sustained success in the dynamic business landscape. Furthermore, Elahi emphasised loyal customer relations, active participation in international leather fairs, and relentless hard work as keys to success. His management philosophy centered on power-sharing, finding the right people, and creating an environment conducive to their growth. “You should try to conduct a meeting or run an organisation through respect, not fear. I always say that respect is a much stronger affection than love.” Apex's success story continued to unfold, diversifying into the pharmaceutical sector with Apex Pharma and investing in an environmentally friendly tannery plant in Shafipur. Today, Apex Tannery and Apex Footwear stand as a testimony to the dedication and vision of Syed Manzur Elahi. Even today, he is looking ahead. “By 2040, it is estimated that the global footwear market will touch half a trillion dollars. If we could capture even one percent of this export market, our shoe market would be \$5 billion. That's a lot of money,” he said. In retrospect, Elahi emphasised the role of public shareholders during challenging times, acknowledging his wife, Nilufer Manzur's unwavering support in encouraging him to take the leap into entrepreneurship. He also extended his contributions beyond business, presiding over various associations. Elahi's narrative stands as a beacon of inspiration for aspiring entrepreneurs, showcasing the power of hard work, enterprise, and bold initiatives in carving out a lasting legacy in the business world. His pioneering contributions have not only significantly impacted Bangladesh's economy and foreign currency earnings, but have also set a precedent for future generations of entrepreneurs to follow.



Syed Manzur Elahi

OUTSTANDING WOMAN IN BUSINESS

The visionary behind Sutar Kabbo

I especially wanted women to bring their children to work so that taking care of their child did not hinder their work. Mosammat Shirajum Munira Founder and CEO of Sutar Kabbo

FEDA AL HOSSAIN

Although the jute industry of Bangladesh continues to struggle despite offering an array of eco-friendly products that could diversify the country's export basket, Mosammat Shirajum Munira has done some remarkable work in this field. Munira is the founder and CEO of Sutar Kabbo, which specialises in producing jute handicrafts that have found their way to both domestic and international markets, including Japan, Germany, Australia and Kuwait. Other than that, she has seen exceptional success in transforming the lives of economically disadvantaged rural women in Parbatipur upazila of Dinajpur by offering training and employment opportunities at her local manufacturing unit. In recognition of her achievements, Munira won the “Outstanding Woman in Business” award at the 21st DHL-Daily Star Bangladesh Business Awards, held at the Sheraton Dhaka on October 17 this year. Sutar Kabbo specialises in crafting a diverse range of jute products, including bags, mats, baskets, and shatranji (a type of floor covering). The enterprise sources raw materials from various parts of Bangladesh, employing handloom machines and hand-knotted techniques to ensure the highest quality products. Born in 1980 in the northern district of Thakurgaon, Munira's father was a teacher and her mother served as a government officer. She is third among her four siblings. After completing her secondary education in Thakurgaon, she embarked on her academic journey in Dhaka, joining Badrunnesa College for HSC. Afterwards, she pursued Bachelor's and Master's degrees in linguistics at Dhaka University. “In 2008 I joined the ICCDR,B as a researcher. A year later, I became a research coordinator at LAMB Hospital in Parbatipur. It was during this time that my husband, who was my classmate at Dhaka University, and I dreamt of

making a more significant impact on our community,” she said. “It wasn't until 2017 that our dream materialised in the form of Sutar Kabbo,” Munira added. Her inspiration to work with jute-related products stemmed from her desire to address the challenges faced by Parbatipur's disadvantaged people, particularly women. Many of these women lacked education and income opportunities, making their lives a continuous struggle. The idea of utilising jute as an environmentally friendly and sustainable resource led to the formation of Sutar Kabbo in 2017, with a modest opening capital of Tk 10,000. Munira said recruiting women for Sutar Kabbo was not without its challenges. Resistance from families and communities was a constant hindrance as many were doubtful of women working outside their homes. But her continuous efforts were pivotal in convincing women that joining Sutar Kabbo would be beneficial for both them and their families. “I understood early on that in order for women to leave their home setting and step outside to work, I had to provide some facilities so that they would feel comfortable here,” she said. These included separate bathrooms, kitchen amenities, childcare facilities and prayer rooms. “I especially wanted women to bring their children to work so that taking care of their child did not hinder their work,” Munira added. While all this affected her production costs, she said that it was ultimately a very timely investment as the workers needed that environment to help them transition from their homes to a workplace. “I feel as a woman, it's tough to be involved with a job if there's no one to look after my children and that's something very worrying. I may have the privilege to have someone at home to look after my child, but not everyone has that chance,” Munira said.



Mosammat Shirajum Munira



“Does that mean she won't work, or if she has a talent, she won't use it to get success? I can say from experience that those who got this opportunity at Sutar Kabbo appreciated it and used it to their advantage,” she added. Sutar Kabbo faced its biggest challenge in the form of the Covid-19 pandemic, which caused drastic disruptions to the supply chain, reduced demand and ultimately led to the closure of units during lockdown. Along with professional challenges, she had to deal with personal trials too. Her five-year-old daughter has been battling cancer for the last two years and Munira has been by her side providing constant care while contending with significant medical expenses. Still, she has persevered, driven by her mission to run a sustainable operation with Sutar Kabbo, and this is evident when we look at her organisation's financial performance. Over the years, Sutar Kabbo has achieved remarkable financial success and stability. With working capital of Tk 75 lakh and assets valued at Tk 25 lakh, the enterprise boasted an annual turnover of Tk 1.85 crore and a healthy profit margin of 12 percent in 2022. Its debt-to-equity ratio stands

at 25:75, reflecting prudent financial management. The annual growth rate in sales remains impressive at 20 percent. Munira has been pivotal in the establishment of a training centre to develop the skills of Sutar Kabbo's craftsmen. Their present set-up consists of two factory units set up with 42 looms, 2 zigzag sewing machines, 2 plain-sewing machines and a designated place for hand-knitted crafts. She has also established a network with 700 rural artisans in Naogaon, Kushiá, and Kurigram who sew, needle and braid crafts. Sutar Kabbo has a showroom beside the factory and a Facebook page for online sales and marketing of their products. Sutar Kabbo is a member of several prominent organisations that share its vision and values. These include the Jute Diversification Promotion Centre, Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation, Joyeeta Foundation under the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs, National Association of Small and Cottage Industries of Bangladesh, and SME Foundation. Associating with different trade bodies has been beneficial for Munira. She said that attending various fairs

both at home and abroad helped her organisation get the necessary exposure to a wide range of buyers. She lauded the government for implementing such a strategy to give entrepreneurs like her the chance to showcase products to diversified customers, enabling them to sell their products at the fairs and most importantly, communicate and acquire new buyers. Sutar Kabbo's exceptional designs and craftsmanship have not gone unnoticed. The enterprise secured the Best Jute Product Stall Award at the 9th SME Fair. It even participated in the New York Fair in America, with support from the SME Foundation and US AID Feed the Future Project and TFO Canada, showcasing its commitment to global markets and sustainability. Munira's journey with Sutar Kabbo has been full of integrity, adaptability and tenacity that has complimented her entrepreneurial leadership. As she has already contributed to the betterment of scores of rural women's financial freedom, she dreams to expand her organisation on a bigger scale to help Bangladesh's economic development.