

Stories from a Coffin Factory, Nilphamari, Bangladesh – Nonfiction Writing



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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

I hereby declare that this thesis is the student's own work and effort. All sources of information incorporated here have been duly acknowledged. This thesis has been submitted with my approval.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kaiser Hamidul Haq', is written on a light pink rectangular background.

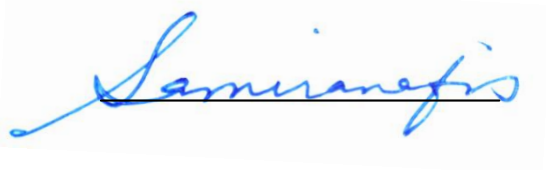
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DECLARATION

This thesis is a presentation of my original research work. Wherever contributions of others are involved, every effort is made to indicate this clearly, with due reference to the literature, and acknowledgement of collaborative research and discussions.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Samira Nafis", is written over a horizontal line.

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Above All, God is my Sustainer. I dedicate this piece of writing to the promise of more in the future.

Introduction

If coffin makers are marked by a stern, somber and serious exterior, then these are definitely not the people who will come to mind. I have had the most laughs and profound growing moments with David and Preeti How over the course of nineteen years. Every conversation with these two incredible individuals has been life-giving, concrete and relevant in today's world. Over time, I have seen first-hand their deep faith and trust in one another, their incredible ability to pick themselves up from tough falls, and most importantly, laugh at their own silliness and mistakes while appreciating the education that life throws at them.

David and Preeti How's home has been a welcome place of learning, guidance and care for me over the years. To take the task of writing their story of 19 years in Bangladesh has been a privilege and more often than not I am quaking in my boots as it is a mammoth task and I so want to do their story justice. Over the years, I have watched how much they love seeing people grow and encourage them to unlock their potential and dream bigger than they could have otherwise. I believe this is because they have also had their own grand dream of starting a business in which they have poured out love, grace, forgiveness, tears and prayers now for almost 16 years. They know what it means to pursue a dream and to see it through. They will not say they did it on their own and they will give honour to God who has seen them through the

challenges and triumphs of this calling and dream, they call business. But the important thing is, it is a story that continues to grow every day.

David and Preeti have made some difficult choices and many personal sacrifices to make this business flourish and develop. It has been a harsh and sometimes very lonely journey. But they would not have it any other way. They would say Oasis Coffins has been the reason for growth in their own personal, emotional and professional lives.

I have experienced this business vicariously through the stories David and Preeti have shared over the years. Whether it is the decision making process, discussions about production quality or issues with staff, correction of an attitude in themselves or others, these are two people who are open to learning and changing and growing, and they welcome others to do the same. Their arduous pursuit for change and excitement in creativity has helped bring Oasis Coffins into reality. With an incredible amount of love and care, they have created another member of the family in Oasis Coffins. It has been their child. The research, hard work, emotional challenges and elation from success in their products and their relationship with their colleagues, their ability to listen and learn from others, has been humbling.

This is why this story needs to be told. One must hear the story of real people, not fictional characters, who live and fight the day-to-day challenges of being a simple middle income business owner in Bangladesh. They are simple ordinary people who can rejoice, embrace,

weep, lift up and commune with others from all walks of life and in all circumstances bringing calm, wisdom and clarity, with their presence.

This is not a story about successful super-humans with invincible qualities. It is about people like you and me, who have trusted in their dream and had faith to see it through and in the process have endured the marks of harsh reality.

They chose to work with marginalized people, using the resource of the country which is an object of derision and mockery – *bansh* – and they are creating coffins, a product seen as sacrilegious by many especially in rural Bangladesh, which is full of superstitions and religious myths, where corruption is high and people are driven by their poverty and the difficult government or political pressures. Through it all, they are creating export quality materials with an incredible community of people, providing a challenging yet competitive work environment of high standards.

Here are their stories.

Chapter 1

David How's Story

“It is about learning to be comfortable in uncertainty” – David How

“So what do you guys do here in Bangladesh?”

Taking a sip from his glass, David catches Preeti's eye, they smile at each other and carrying that smile, he turns back to the person asking the question, braces himself and begins, “We run a coffin factory.”

The barrage of questions that typically follow this statement have been entertaining and informative over the years. A world is packed in that statement. The answer holds their entire time in Bangladesh, their many years of hard work, the numerous people they teach, work with and care for and finally the incredible products they produce using Bangladesh's very own sustainable resources like bamboo, jute, hogla, etc.

What led to this? How do ordinary people come to build such an extraordinary and unique business? It all started with a helping heart and an imaginative mind. David, as a highly trained Chartered Mechanical Engineer, had worked in India with boys who lived on the streets and railways stations. They were young men who were unskilled and lacked goals or motivation and needed employment. Through the NGO he was working with at the time, David wanted to equip the young men with skills that would help them be employable and created a safe community for them, to engage in until they figured out what they would do. With the incredible skills in engineering and his heart to encourage and motivate young people, David arrived in Bangladesh only to realize it will be a completely different ball game and there was much to learn.

During the research years of their time in Bangladesh, possibly 2005, one of their friends introduced them to a man named Chris who was a Funeral Director from the UK. Chris was in Bangladesh for some voluntary work and he listened to David's desire to create a business that is environmentally friendly and prioritizes sustainability. Chris suggested they look into creating environmentally friendly coffins. Also during this time, they sought wisdom from Traidcraft UK, for market research and they also concluded that environmentally friendly coffins might be a sector to explore.

The next main decision was where they would begin this journey. The answer was Nilphamari because of a few main factors. Nilphamari was known for bamboo plantations resources, it needed jobs for their underemployed population, it was reported to have horrific trafficking risk

rates at the time and most importantly there was a new Export Processing Zone (EPZ) that was established by the government and in the mid-2000s they were looking for investors.

Most EPZs have people coming from another country with an already established manufacturing companies and bringing in mature foreign skills and investment support. There is already a set of standards and ideas put into motion. They have existed before and there is constant comings and goings of expertise. There are teams to rely on and ideas that are shared widely. There was no such template for David in the bamboo coffin making sector.

This was going to be something entirely new to himself and to all those around him. There was no one else he knew in the business and there were details to sort out and much to research. So he did not want to entertain questions he would not have the answers to, which could simply be “Why coffin making?” and “What made you decide on this?”, “You must have all the answers since you started this.” Far from it. It was all too new and he needed space from the inquisitive and sometimes unhelpful crowds of Dhaka, to journey into the whys, hows and whats of it all. He would only know years down the road how on earth all this would come together. In the beginning it was just him, David, with his thoughts and many plans. He needed to devote himself to this new dream that had been birthed, scrutinized and was now ready to be put into action.

People love a romantic story of how things come together. They love it all when there are clear cut answers, a wealth of well-oiled ideas and people coming together to sustain the vision - a good story line and a happily ever after. There was nothing as such in the offering. There were

just many puzzled faces and comments that were discouraging, one of them being “No one is really doing this”. “Well,” David thinks, “that is a very good reason for someone to do it.” When thinking these words there was an innocence and a zeal for life that could be seen as naïve. Thinking back, David does not think he would have walked this path if he had known what it would hold.

Hindsight aside, David had forged ahead full of fervor and hopefulness. Relatively quickly, the government work was underway and they were established as a business in 2006. But paperwork was just the beginning. The actual work started with a team of two or three in a Mirpur office where the research was done. David had brought samples of coffins from the UK and had travelled many miles around Asia seeking understanding of the market and the raw materials.

To create their team, one of the people who was ready to travel and then eventually to stay in Nilphamari was James Khan. James was passionate about the work and although hesitant at first, was willing to move to the north. Later on, some NGO friends connected them to local NGO affiliates in Nilphamari, from where they were able to get some workers from Shupot and Leprosy Mission. Nilphamari had a lot of weaving communities. The Hindus in the area were not educated but they knew how to weave. On Airport Road in Dhaka, there is a row of cane furniture shops. With ingenuity, David invited one of those workers to come to Nilphamari as a trainer to their handful of employees, to teach the finer techniques of weaving bamboo. Connections were made to invite experts from Dhaka and other countries to the north of Bangladesh, to train and guide the handful of members. Production was under way!

Over the years, the products extended from exclusively bamboo, to willow, water hyacinth, banana leaves and many other materials. There were many products that shone with perfection but others that were discarded because they lacked the sustainability and cost effectiveness or they just weren't popular with customers. All these explorations were costly in terms of raw materials and workers time. But that is the patience one has to have with beginnings. There were a lot of trials, and more errors than they anticipated.

Many times the business feels like chess or jungle warfare. Everything requires a strategy, every corner there is a problem that needs to be solved and there is no linear way this happens. It is a juggling act with so many things to keep aloft at once. They have to constantly check what their priorities are. The initial motivation was to build people, create jobs, but now what is the priority? Building people or building a company? And can both be done well?

David's role as the tough decision maker in navigating these difficulties has been vital to the longevity of the business.

In addition to being the problem solver and decision maker, David has taken on the role of personal development coach. One of the things observed by David is that due to few job openings and too many workers, employees are easily discarded like inanimate objects that stop working and need to be replaced by someone who works better. What does that do to their mindset, their morale and their will to keep living? That is something David and his team have battled with. Even when costly mistakes have been made, they have chosen to retrain, motivate

and give many second chances. Sometimes they need to think, what would be the last straw until someone is asked to leave? And yet this was something clear from the beginning, they will treat people as people.

In the initial days, when one starts in a new place there is a savior complex. One could think they are the solution to the problem or problems. That is naiveté and youth talking. The real deal starts when the ball gets rolling. One may think everything will fall into place but nothing really does. That is when one has to realize what their steps forward will be. David and Preeti understood the dependency of their team. They will also say they realize that they come from a more privileged background with heaps of different skill sets. In fact, every individual at the factory brings skills, life experience, knowledge and culture that adds value. Everyone here is a learner. They have created a lot of space for training in their organization. They see the importance of teaching skills to their staff and understand the need for growth in individuals constantly; teaching self-awareness along with trainings in product development, vision days, physical and mental health trainings etc., to ensure that the staff feel they are invested in because they are valuable.

David and Preeti have been strategic to help all employees improve, learn, and share a sense of ownership in whatever they produce. They would like to see each individual carry the weight of the business as their own. The business is definitely moving in this direction. Ownership is no longer only at the emotional level where when something goes wrong people feel bad about it and stare at the floor or even have a cry about it, but that is as far as it went. Now, they are

increasingly seeing staff team engage in problem solving together with ownership at heart and mind levels. But creating this culture hasn't been easy. From the very beginning there were challenges. It has not been an easy feat carrying the burdens for the business singly every time there is crisis and they have a lot of those. David would say, God has seen them through major challenges and they are just glad they are able to pick themselves up and keep going back to do it all over again, every single day.

The weather was also a great contributor to dark days. Nilphamari has its own weather in the climactic map of the country, David points out. The humidity has been the cause for much grief as it encourages the infesting of mold and bugs in natural materials. This has been one of their biggest threats and every day they are trying to develop ideas of how to reduce and finally, eradicate this. Every worker at the factory is aware of the challenge of mold. It has become everyone's personal battle to keep their products mold-free. It is a fight against nature since the weather cannot be controlled. There is a lot of vigilance needed in the monsoon season but more importantly, a reliance on everyone going above and beyond on quality checks to ensure there isn't even a hint of this blight anywhere.

One challenge is the battle to keep one's integrity intact. What does it then mean to be the owner of a business in Bangladesh? You register the company. You plan to work with renewable resources and create high quality sustainable products that are good for the people and the environment. You envision the crises or the odds against you and make sure your paperwork is up to date. You target the right customers, advertise well and constantly ensure your products

meet all export standards. You have decided that you will go against the grain and create an ethical business and not give in to any subtle pushes from the external forces. But you can be held up whilst seeking permits which are fundamental to running an export business. It is possible that you land in a position of deadlock only because your desire is to avail these permits while staying true to your value of integrity. This has been a learning process as well. The desire is to live with integrity and hopefully, just hopefully, be an example of it, for all staff who work at Oasis Coffins and beyond.

Surprisingly, David says the best thing that has happened in the last 19 years is falling ill recently. For the first time in years he was unable to work at the pace he had become so accustomed to. One day, right in the middle of the factory floor he felt he was choking and, for what seemed like the longest time, could not catch his breath. This caused so much fear and startled the workers and management team, to see David as weak and so human. David thinks this has helped others to understand they need to jump in, instead of seeing him as invincible and has allowed him to step back, and say to them that they need to take responsibility. “We are all frail and incapable people, but for the grace of our Creator, so we need to pick up what we can and keep going at it like a dog to a bone, until we all learn to be problem solvers because the problem is ours collectively, not one person’s.”

During this time, David was also able to see the toxicity in relationships and the fear that had formed in him about needing to be the solver of all things. David says he is addicted to solving problems. It has been his greatest virtue and a necessity in the business he runs as he comes up with ideas to solve several mini disasters in the day as well as mega-sized ones that could cripple

their business. Yet it has also been a vice as solving problems is what keeps him constantly charged and motivated carrying the burdens of himself and many others at the factory.

He is trying to step back from it all and actually says he needs to give people the space and ability to grow. David mentions that where he lacks, Preeti comes in beautifully to fill the gaps. She sees things differently from David and has the capacity to unlock the potential or the mindset of people who have long performed below par. The business is still impacted by people who have not performed at a satisfactory level, but they are willing to be patient now that they see them taking steps toward improvement.

Having explored the highs and lows of this business adventure, a question begs asking; would he recommend something like this to others? David says something very important. He says **now** people can have someone to ask their questions. In the beginning of David's journey there was no one he could ask questions to when he was stuck but now he is available to anyone would venture into a business like his. He does not think this kind of start-up is possible by all people, but a certain kind with a persevering spirit and deep faith in the dream they began with. He also said that life is hard and "the biggest thing you have to forgive in your life is reality. Get over the hurdles of reality and pursue what you are going after because life emerges more when you keep dying to yourself."

David says working here has been a journey of deep joy and deep pain. The joy comes with creating something of value that is of excellent quality, that can be appreciated, a product of

excellent quality and plenty of hard work. The pain comes from the years of developing products and occasionally finding faults in export. The hope is to see a smoothness, like a well-oiled machine, with little or no involvement in the day to day running of the business from David or Preeti.

Chapter 2

Preeti How's Journey

“Never in our wildest dream did we think about becoming coffin makers.” – Preeti How

As Preeti How reminisces about the years in Bangladesh from 2003's bustling busy Dhaka to 2022 in eerily quiet Nilphamari, one can see the fondness of this nation reflected in her expressions, gestures and words about how this coffin factory has become such an integral part of who she is today.

Ever since she was little, Preeti was sure she wanted to help and serve people. Growing up in a family who were generous and open to many in their community, Preeti's dream was encouraged and she was able to choose education that would equip her to help those suffering in poverty or modern day slavery. She had a fascination about crime and questioned why young people would

get into it, trying to decipher their motivation in life. With a Bachelor's degree in Psychology and a Master's Degree in Social Work with a Specialization in Criminology, Preeti entered the realities of the harsh world and opened herself to learning and understanding life's painful lessons and its impact on the less privileged.

Her placement during her Masters in Social Work degree was at a Reception Centre for young boys who ran away from home, were caught by the police and were awaiting trial at juvenile court. Later she assigned to Tihar Jail, known as the largest prison complex in Delhi, under the Inspector General of Police and Prisons, where she chose to do her thesis or research work interviewing 250 prisoners on the causes of crime. The process and result of this research shook her to the point of sleeplessness for a month. Observing their harsh lives and listening to the stories of broken people had a huge impact in Preeti's life. For her first job in Mumbai, she worked as a caregiver to HIV/AIDS patients who were dying in the brothels, slums and hospitals of Mumbai. She was in charge of 70 volunteers who needed to ensure that the final days of these patients were made as comfortable and loved as possible.

Fast forward to married life in Dhaka, during the early to mid-2000s, Preeti recalls, young men in the city would regularly meet David asking him for jobs rather than handouts. They wanted to live with dignity and provide for their families. This was a motivation for a business; to provide jobs and a regular source of income to young people. There was a desire to fight centralization in Dhaka city as the city is bursting at the seams. But Dhaka seemed to be the first and foremost choice for job seekers. More than 500,000 people entered the city every year according to

research. No other city in Bangladesh holds that power even though Chittagong, Rangpur and other cities have grown a little. But the ratio of jobs available were not equal to the job seekers by a wide margin.

2004 was their second year in Dhaka. Preeti was largely a mum to her 2-and-a-half-year-old daughter, Alisha and their newborn son, Ashray. She believed her work was to support her husband in his endeavors and to be a full-time mum to their daughter and son. During that time, she and her husband were researching the needs of young people and wanted to work in areas that were not already being addressed by another NGO. Preeti and David were aware of Dhaka being the NGO hub of Asia and were sure they wanted to do something sustainable and wholesome for the growth of young people.

As they began their research on where, what and how in regards to a business, statistics showed Nilphamari district to be one the poorest in northern Bangladesh. Nilphamari shares borders with India and is only 4 to 5 hours away from the northern borders of the country and three hours away from Banglabandha, a major inland port in northern Bangladesh. The low literacy levels made people vulnerable. They were easily enticed and manipulated into being trafficked with the promise of a job and a better life. Nilphamari at least boasted the latest Export Processing Zone (EPZ) and was where most of the nation's bamboo cultivation took place.

This industry was and is not a well-established one like the garments factories of the country. Neither are they affiliated with another larger factory in another country, trying to open a small

branch here in Bangladesh. They were starting everything from scratch. They were teaching themselves every step of the way as well as teaching others, while keeping faith that it was doable. Preeti said David was constantly reading to bring himself up to speed with the needs of their growing business. They did not have a template for anything and neither could they find mentors specifically to guide them in this work here in Bangladesh. The earlier struggles led them through a lonely path of many trials and errors. This is where it helped to be in the EPZ with their guidelines and regulations, providing a sense of structure that they could tap into.

Preeti was learning to release David to this dream. She says very pointedly it was a cause she believed in also, so sometimes it came easily to her. There were other times when she missed having David around especially when their kids were sick and he was traveling or when they would simply just need him around as father and husband. Other times she was sad that she was the one at home while he was working and away. Her greatest contribution at the time was that of releasing David – freedom to do what was needed for this business that they had birthed.

In 2016, both their children were in boarding school after the terrifying Holey Bakery terrorist attack that shook Bangladesh to its core. Many foreigners left Bangladesh at the time and over all, their community of friends had reduced. It seemed to be a good time for change. By moving closer to the business, they could be present when needs arose, reduce travel time, and be closer to their team. Preeti and David decided to move to Nilphamari in 2017. Preeti became an integral part joining conversations with investors, continuing to work on founding documents of the business along with David, writing their mission and vision for the business, as well as their purpose and values statements, to now, actively being present on the factory floors a few times each week - she remains at the core of it all.

Preeti is an adviser to the business and not a full-time employee, a deliberate decision to not be too closely involved in all the decision making and production process. This gives her the knowledge of the internals but also keeps her slightly aloof yet approachable to all who need to converse about issues at the factory. But it is fair to say, the business, along with her husband and children, are foremost in her mind.

In June 2022, Preeti filled in the position of Operations Manager temporarily as their OM was leaving after 7 years of service. She picked up the role quickly along with the other work she was already a part of and enjoyed becoming more hands-on in the business. Later in the year, the company employed a new Operations Manager, who Preeti is currently assisting to settle into his position among his team. Preeti does not limit this role to the OM alone, but regularly guides and sometimes mentors many of the senior management at Oasis Coffins, helping them to understand and engage better with their job descriptions. At the same time, she is constantly open to the needs of other aspects of the business.

The joys of this place are many and the roles to be filled the same. Some of the best times have been in the trainings where several of the production staff have taken English lessons from Preeti. They are able to communicate to their teams and most importantly to their boss, a moment of great pride, able to keep their logs updated online and keep everyone updated on the work progress. Many received computer training for the first time and were ecstatic with joy since nowhere else would people give them the time to learn. Others in the worker's level

learned to tell time and have understood what time management and efficiency mean and how it could help them be more productive. The joy of learning is the reason this is so fulfilling.

Over the years, the investors have asked David and Preeti to “put skin in the game” which would attract other investors as they themselves would have invested. The investors alongside them have wanted David and Preeti to be major shareholders which speaks of the implicit trust that is placed on them - A trust they want to build and honour at all times.

Dreamer, founder, mentor, teacher, investor; Preeti How wears many hats.

“This business is like another child”, Preeti believes wholeheartedly. It is this belief that helps them love this business with everything they have got, seeing it through its ups, downs and through its wayward ways. This thought is their motivator to hold on tight and believe in what they have started. Even as things get increasingly intense at the factory and the demands of improving products, designing coffins and processing raw materials to its best quality, Preeti believes in supporting the staff, guiding them but also learning from them.

When asked about some of the toughest challenges over the years, Preeti expresses with sadness that there have been quite a few times in the early years when David had returned home to say they may not be able to keep the factory going. He could mean they will need to close down the next day, sometime in the week, in a month or close certain sectors of the production. This has happened for a number of reasons ranging from lack of orders or tight cash flow.

David once broke down in tears, while announcing the fact that some people needed to be made redundant due to lack of orders. As the people wailed in mourning, one woman in particular fell at Preeti's feet, howling not knowing how their family will carry on. In times like those, they have had to switch gears from employers to fellow human beings, and sought to find a solution to the shortcomings and crying together at the shared loss and pain.

There are also personal emotional challenges for Preeti. She has listened to the stories of many women who have come into work marked by bruises from an abusive husband or family member. She has listened to many of their stories of exploitation by family members and trusted ones. Holding their hands and weeping with them, she has had to share some valuable life lessons to empower and encourage these workers. She has listened to a husband speak tearfully of his wife's miscarriage. She has held hands with those whose children have lost their footing in life altogether. They communally mourned the loss of Suchitra, one of their female guards, with two small children and a difficult marriage, who lost her life in a tragic road accident on the highway, which is their regular commute.

In spite of all the challenges, the wonderful people who work for them have forever left their loving fingerprints on Preeti's heart. She speaks in awe of people with faces full of life and laughter despite horrendous life situations. She is daily amazed at the resilience of the workers and the will to make a better future for their children. There are women who have learned to save. There are many who have learned to stay out of debt. There are many who have a constant

income despite having husbands who may not contribute to the home. Their will to keep smiling and to keep sharing their love, have been a constant joy for Preeti as well, giving her enough reasons to keep doing what she is doing.

Chapter 3

Stories from Long Term Staff

James' Story

James Khan was a student in his early twenties, completing a diploma in a technical degree. His older brother Joy, was working in an NGO where he had met David How and was keen to introduce James to David. When they had met, David was just beginning to start research on bamboo materials. In his free time, James would just hang around David and learn from him.

When the research was beginning to take shape, David moved to an office in Mirpur, Dhaka. Working in a humble setting, it occurred to James that he had a blank canvas to work on. He could do anything here. So he started thinking of ideas to utilize the office space appropriately.

James was offered an internship with David so after seeking approval from his college, James started to work for nothing, so that he could learn. In the initial days, David started to bring bamboo goods from China so that they could understand how they were woven or put together. After much research, their first production was a PR gift of a toilet plaque that was also a tissue holder, made from bamboo. James remembers David was determined not to create something that would be merely a piece of decoration. After all, David was all about function and sustainability. So they created something that would be useful, albeit in the toilet.

When David started bringing in the real deal - coffin samples, James was too fearful to even enter the room where these were placed. Yes, they had been talking about this work, yes they were researching on bamboo coffins, so now things had to get serious. He had not expected fear to descend so strongly. It was not until he was making things with his own hands that he finally overcome his fears. He jokingly said, “I had often thought something like a spirit will pop out of the coffins and come after me.”

Once the product development and ideas were underway, David, James and their other team member Bijoy, needed to better understand the bamboo harvesting and processing area in Nilphamari. They would travel to the north from Dhaka, on overnight buses. At the time Saidpur airport was not built and travel to any part of Bangladesh was an adventure and safety hazard. To travel on the luxurious buses was too expensive and what they needed was efficiency. Nabil and Agomoni buses were their regular companions. Known for their rough driving, constant honking

and sudden sharp turns, sleep was not to be considered in those trips. David, however, was able to sleep all the way through that trip and be ready to work the next morning!

By 2008, there were two offices for Oasis Coffins. The Nilphamari factory area had been rented. This was unheard of in the EPZ, that a factory would rent only half the floor. David and his team were starting small and that was all the space they needed. They were only three members in the managerial team and they needed to hire workers to start weaving coffins.

To recruit people, James would go from house to house looking for people to weave for them and join the factory floor. Many would make promises to join but were incapable of keeping to their word. Since most people lived by the word of mouth, they would forget they had made a promise to work if something else came along, like needing to go to the vegetable market in the morning. They needed employment, but they were not bound by calendars, clocks or diaries. They lived by the strength of their memories which sometimes failed them. James became the bearer of good news in the area as he was there so often reminding people that there were job opportunities for anyone willing.

As things got busier at the Nilphamari factory, David saw the need for senior staff to reside in Nilphamari itself for efficiency. He asked if James would be willing to move. James immediately said no. David asked James to reply with certainty after the Christmas and New Year holidays. Something strange was at work in James, he recalls. He was reading a book at the time called *Who Moved My Cheese?* by Spencer Johnson and he remembers that book and the holiday

season had a huge impact on him. After his return from holidays, he was willing to take on the challenge of moving from Dhaka to Nilphamari with a new perspective.

James specifically remembers their first set of production on the 17th of June 2009. They had completed their first order of two hundred coffins and were shipping it to the UK. Unfortunately, they could not have foreseen that when put into the crematorium, an element in the coffins would react with the crematorium destroying it completely. They could not have fully tested their product here. They learned so much from that mistake. It shattered their confidence but they had to regain their composure and get ready for their next attempt.

As Oasis Coffins was growing, the environment at the factory was changing. More people joined the team and rules, regulations and audits were put into place to improve overall quality. Before when they were small, things were easier to keep track of. As they were growing tools, materials and gears went missing. Suddenly they had to keep a close eye on the coming and going of people and what they used and did not use. The workers were instructed on using protective gear for work. They were asked to take good care of themselves as their health was crucial to a good cycle of production. There were healthy snacks provided at breaks to encourage community time. Provident funds were set in place and workers also learned the importance of saving and thinking of the future. These are positive factors that motivated many of the workers at the time.

Client demands and product requirements were more specific. Oasis Coffins is supposed to only use natural dyes for colouring, but their coffins were not turning the colour that was required by

the client. After several tries, James was still unable to attain the right shade and this kept him up for a few days, as the export dates were fast approaching. One evening through a random conversation with his mother, James was able to suddenly get an idea of using a certain combination of colouring with turmeric and, eureka! Solutions like this have made the team bonds stronger and created excitement for the work they did together.

The Eco Supplies Nilphamari (ESN) needed to be opened after a few years as a space for processing bamboo. It employs around 20 to 30 people to cut, dry and process the bamboo that will be used to make the coffins. James is very involved in the smooth working of this area today. ESN is around 40 to 45 minutes away from the EPZ and in another village entirely. At ESN, the workers come from the Hindu village and have mostly farmed all their lives. Many are not able to read and write so the understanding of efficiency and time management has taken longer. Over the years, the leadership has understood that they need to set targets so the staff can complete certain tasks within the time. The line of women cutting bamboo strips need to complete a certain number before lunch and then a certain number before the day is over. Targets keep them motivated.

Seasonal employment at ESN has been a cause for hardship. In the past, the factory has had to employ people seasonally based on the availability of work and then let people go. Since James got to know everyone personally, it was difficult to see people go back to their circumstances. Now they have organized ways in which a line of workers could learn another line of work if

their sections were underutilized. This way many of the workers know several parts of coffin making and not just one production line.

James has learned that he needs to have solutions working at Oasis Coffins. There are needs and there are problems but along with the managerial team, he needs to be a motivator and learn to encourage the potential in others as David once did so for him.

Nekbar's Story

Nekbar joined Dave as a driver and office assistant and is the first official employee of Oasis Coffins. His work involved research of the availability of raw materials, where to get them, the correct, market prices for all the materials down to screws, nuts, bolts, glue, etc., and everything else needed for the factory. He had to do a lot of research. David would collect the samples during his travels and give them to Nekbar so that he could find those pieces, or their equivalent in the local market. Initially, Nekbar was required to travel to and from Nilphamari, but currently he is based at the Dhaka office and works to keep track of supplies and procurement needed by the factory.

At the start, Nekbar also looked into areas for the best bamboo growth and went to different parts of the country to understand which would be a better area to establish the business. Collectively

they realized Nilphamari had the largest bamboo plantation. Nekbar was not directly related to the coffin making process but searching the necessary tools and parts for the coffins, was an important job. He needed to make all the purchase orders to be sent to Nilphamari on a regular basis, that were cost and production effective. At that time, he recalls many things were not locally available in Nilphamari and were sometimes difficult to even find in Dhaka. His most recent challenge is to get the right shroud materials for an order from the Netherlands. He is quite concerned about finding the right texture.

One of his earliest memories was trying to design a table. David had given the tools and the ideas and he needed to assemble it right. He really struggled to make it happen. When he finally did, David hugged him with joy because he was able to complete the task. It is a fond memory and a great source of encouragement to him for being recognized for trying. He has often worried for David over the years, often wondering if the troubles of the business will push David too hard to the point of quitting. He believes David has carried a lot for this business.

Another memory still plagues Nekbar and he recalls the story with much regret. David had to travel a lot in the earlier days and Preeti would be alone with the children. Once when David was away, their little boy, Ashray was very ill and Nekbar had not been close to his mobile phone to answer Preeti's call for help on time. To him, when David is not around then they are the family who must support Preeti as much as they can, but this time he had failed his family. Ashray needed to be hospitalized. Later everything was okay but it was a time he feels he failed them. In

true forgiving form, Preeti *Bhabhi* has never held this against him. Rather, he acknowledges that over the years, Preeti has been a wise listener and counsellor to his own family.

Nekbar is an emotional *Bangali*. In his reflections, he was willing to talk about the things that worry him. He said that we need to remember that coffin making is not something people can easily accept in Bangladesh. It is also seen as a religious work as only certain people in society could work on it. Nilphamari had the indigo farming and the British rule so long ago. Things were very hard in those times. Here at this factory, they have an English boss who is trying to empower people. This is such a change to what the past was like, Nekbar muses.

Starting a business in Nilphamari has not been the easiest because everything is a struggle and a fight. Nekbar is aware that their greatest enemy at the moment is mold and bugs and they take the joy out of everything. With all the things that have been done to prevent this, they do not know what the complete solution will be but they are working every day to help the business overcome this.

Helena's Story

Without understanding anything about a business or coffin making, Helena began working with David and Preeti with trepidation and excitement. She joined the business at the Dhaka Office in 2014 and very soon moved to Nilphamari which soon became her home.

Helena loved the idea of environmentally friendly coffins and was amazed at how much was already at work at the factory when she joined. She was very encouraged by the leadership in David and Preeti and she wanted to work in a place that had the conviction to change the community around them for the better. She believed she had found such a place here at Oasis Coffins.

Helena's work initially was to build the bridge between workers and HR and work on the company ethics and values. She was to create awareness programs. Later she was moved to the HR manager position and that was the more difficult part of her job. She had to come face to face with the realities of people living in different circumstances and therefore their problems were also of a different kind. Some were victims of domestic abuse, so a lot of time was spent listening to their stories and encouraging them to come out of messy situations. Many times they would have to request help from an NGO who would do their best to protect the women from harm.

As always, there are many challenges one must face in any professional position. For instance, Helena struggled with the workers' lack of education that would expose itself in various ways. Absenteeism, stemming from the staff not understanding formal work ethics, hampered the production process and the delivery of the products. In addition, the staff often struggled to understand specific instructions. Also, there were many times she would find that the expectations of the staff towards the work was not right. There was a constant line of people who needed loans to pay off debts and many did not know how to manage money well. She felt that

systems needed to be put into place to reverse these trends. Later on, the literacy classes for basic time telling and understanding systems turned out to be a helpful tool for the staff.

Helena remembered one specific costly example of an uneducated decision. Once a worker left Silica Gel packs on top of the coffins and they were packed that way. This caused a lot of damage to a large number of packed and finished products. A group meeting was called to understand what could be done but there was no chance of recovery at that point as everything was already packed. No one owned up to the mistake. But there it was a major blunder causing major losses. Was it a case of misunderstanding specific instructions? Sloppy work ethic? Something else?

There were also interpersonal challenges during her time in Oasis. Helena has struggled with her team-mates on several occasions. She feels the language barrier was an issue and differing personalities. Helena is Bangladeshi and speaks fluent Bangla but still perhaps sometimes she felt she could not fully explain the crux of things with her Bangla and her colleagues perhaps needed more. There were times she micromanaged, which was not a good idea and there were times she was frustrated easily and struggled to remain dignified in the difficult situations. She was quick to apologize but oftentimes the damage was already done and the hurt was caused.

Furthermore, Helena would say there was a struggle also because she was one of the two women who was in a leadership position. It was not easy for many of the colleagues to take instructions

from a woman. This changed over time as David and Preeti ensure staff are made aware that they need to give equal respect to all leadership and individuals.

There were always challenges to deal with at the factory. Luckily, the Oasis leadership dealt with it collectively as a team and tried to brainstorm for solutions. There were road accidents to deal with or someone was terribly sick or there was misuse of machinery and people hurt themselves because they did not adhere to the rules of wearing protective gear. When these things happened, production work would take a back seat and they would have to resolve the problem at hand.

Among the first generation workers, many never worked in a factory before. They were the first generation of workers for their family and the first generation for the factory. In later recruiting time, the applicants/ staff were much more self-aware. Not just self-aware, but aware of others' situations as well. She recalls crying one day because of her dad's sickness and one of the cleaning ladies brought her a glass. Not a glass of water but just a glass. It was brand new and it was just one glass, but she wanted Helena to have it. It was her way of giving a gift to say that she was grateful for Helena and that she sees her pain. Shocked, Helena hugged her and cried some more.

Her time in Oasis has been wrought with learning experiences. From her boss, she has learned that David believes in people, trusts their abilities and invests in them. David trusted Helena and in turn she wanted to do so for others. She believes that change is constant and there is always room for self-development because she has watched David constantly investing time in learning.

From Preeti, she learned the importance of listening. She remembers Preeti never raised her voice at the factory to get a point across, which Helena sheepishly admits to have done a few times herself. She is amazed at the wisdom Preeti exudes. It was very helpful to her that Preeti was a little removed from the direct dealing with the factory which made her easier to talk to for all the staff.

The learning at this place impacted Helena's life greatly. She learned what it means to truly love people and serve others. She found a sense of purpose and vision. It was helpful that the team sat together to focus on the company vision from time to time which has motivated them in times of crises. She has been humbled by the generosity of the poor. She realizes that she has privileges and that she was born into them but she is not superior to anyone.

Chapter 4

Stories from the factory Workers

Anjana's Story

Anjana worked for 13 or 14 years at the Coffin factory, she thinks. She cannot remember exact dates. She came to work at the time her father was paralysed and her husband was unable to bring enough money home to support their family and in-laws. She was working at a dumpster, possibly sorting. She did not want to go into the details of the actual work but she said she didn't like the smell of this place and it gave her headaches. She asked her husband if she could work as a help in someone's home but her husband said he would be ashamed of that since his friends would know. She told him that since they were not the ones buying their rice, they cannot have opinions. Out of fear she did not proceed with that work because there could be trouble.

She heard about the coffin factory when James Khan was advertising door to door. He was politely asking people to join the weaving group. She heard this and went to look into it with a friend. Very soon they started working there. When they started, people around them said they shouldn't work for these people because they will be marked by a tattoo on their thighs. Although she laughed when saying this, there was definite fear at the time that this could happen to them. Villages are filled with myths and superstitions fueled with rumours. One needs to pick and choose which ones are convenient enough for belief. Proof is never needed.

When asked why did you work despite hearing such a shocking thing, she replied laughing, "I needed the job and as you know, nothing like that happened, so my friend and I still worked here."

Anjana has retired from her service at Oasis Coffins, is planning to sell her house in one area and start building one in another place. She smilingly said, "Of course this work made a difference, could I have thought of building a house otherwise?"

Tapan's story

Tapan used to be a carpenter and worked on contract for limited number of days. He got to Oasis Coffins through someone he knew. He needed the job as he has a large family to take care of. He lives with his extended family and is the eldest son so there are financial pressures he has to carry. He even tried working in Dhaka for a while and said he hated being away from family.

When Tapan started working at Oasis coffins one of his struggles was making something for dead people. His neighbors and family members were against it as there may be bad things that befall them as they are working for something for the dead. There are many "beliefs" related to coffin making. But he knew he needed to work, so slowly he was able to convince himself that this would be okay and was able to work. Now he does not struggle with those thoughts.

Tapan enjoys working in the willow line. In the past he found it difficult to understand specifications of the products and struggled with getting something right for a long time. He worked on one product for a long time but kept making mistakes. His colleagues had lost their patience with him and he was upset how they easily say unkind things at those times. His biggest triumph was when he finally figured out the problem.

Tapan knows that other places are not kind to their workers as Oasis Coffins is. He has heard of people easily let go from work for their mistakes. He also knows of people who work in demanding factories where they do not allow one to drink water in fear of damaging their goods. Here they can eat at set times and do things as needed. Being at Oasis coffins allows him to be close to family and have a fixed job with a monthly income.

Madhob's Story

Madhob joined the product development team a few years ago. He is a university graduate and had experience working in other places but was keen to join Oasis Coffins when the opportunity came along. Madhob lives with and cares for a large family. His father has recently taken ill and it has been important for him to work consistently so that he can support his large family.

Although initially very excited to join, Madhob did not know when applying that this was a coffin making factory. He struggled with the idea of working here and consulted his *guruji* and a senior member at the factory, who is also a Hindu to see if this kind of work was appropriate for him. Both of these respected leaders said there would be no problems working in this sector. Then he felt fully free to delve into his job.

On a regular basis, Madhob's receives instructions from David or his line leader and works with creating sample designs for the coffins to understand template, size and tries to understand the perfect usage of the raw materials. Sometimes he also works with trying to understand the

loading plans so that coffins are stacked to efficiently use the space. There are times he would have completed creating products with his team, up to 90% when they realize that they have made a blunder. During those times, it has been hard to own up to the mistakes and start again but this has been a good learning point for Madhob. It helps him to take extra care while creating the product so that time and energy is not wasted when a product is finally complete.

Madhob's moment of triumph was when he did his very best during his English training test. He especially appreciates the fact that Preeti took the time to teach them for a year and he was able to excel in the test given to him. It tells him he has come a long way. He has also benefitted from the Mental Health Trainings that take place once a month. With a son at home, suffering from E Trait Thalassemia, Madhob believes the work environment here has been encouraging to him. He has also appreciated the times Preeti and David have invited them home for lunch and cannot express his joy enough at the generosity. It has also helped him feel like he belongs here.

Shahin's story

Shahin graduated from a Madrasah with what is equivalent to a Bachelor's degree. His greatest motivation was to keep studying and he needed a place to work where this is encouraged. He has worked in a large factory before and he was not given the time for self-development there at all. The number of employees were very high and one individual's needs were of no consequence to them, so Shahin moved to Oasis Coffins and can work happily as well as study.

Shahin's work is to clearly communicate the plan of production to the workers. For his line of production, he has to keep track of how products are packed as well as the quality check of the products.

Shahin had never worked on a computer before coming here and he was excited when his leaders taught him how to use one he says smilingly. This made his work easier and reporting his tasks and receiving feedback simpler. There are a lot of other trainings he found particularly helpful one of them being the 5-S training. He enjoys the fact that targets are set for them and they have to try to achieve that before returning to report about that the following month.

Shahin believes everyone has gone above and beyond to help him adjust into his role at Oasis Coffins. When he was starting off everything was difficult and nothing made much sense but with the help of the team and especially Preeti and her patience towards teaching and guiding him, he believes things are going to go more smoothly here for him in the future.

Shapla Rani's Story

Shapla Rani has worked at the factory for around 12 years now. She is a cheerful and straightforward woman who spoke happily about her time in Oasis. She and her family have grown over the years that she has been here. She started when she was young mother of one and now has two children. She speaks about the factory as her family and her place of joy.

She said quite pointedly that this is her first and will be her last job. She enjoys everything here from learning to weave to all the work that she has been doing. She said she used to be timid and didn't know how to work well but over the years she has learned so much. More recently she has been trained to give first aid and there are also mental health trainings. This is what keeps her happy. She enjoys creating products with her team and overall enjoys the fact that she can work here.

Afterword

When writing nonfiction, there is already a story available to the writer. The area of interest for the reader however is how the writer will tell that story. That is the most difficult part and to be fair I have struggled with it immensely. Trying to protect the integrity of the business, share personal stories, without disclosing anything confidential has been difficult to navigate.

Another factor is the love and respect I have for the people who are carrying this business.

If I have been able to write about the way these two incredible people have gone against the grain and kept this business alive for 19 years then I have been able to successfully execute my assignment. If I have been able to express how much they have suffered and not quit, despite coming very close to doing so, then I have been told their story. If I have been able to tell you how much these two people care for individual lives of their colleagues and employees and pursue people to let go of inhibitions and work with integrity until they achieve excellence, then I have been able to tell you their story. Otherwise it is all futile.

Why would they want to stand alone while there are more than a handful of factories with tens of thousands employees and speak to you about their challenges which may seem minute in the larger course of life. It is because they believe, this business has the ability to create excellent quality products that are environmentally friendly and export worthy, made by a team that is learning and growing together, and is putting Bangladesh on the map for international quality work. This is the reason for choosing a story such as this.