

Handicrafts in Bangladesh

A PHOTO-STORY BY JULIA BRENNAN



Map of Bangladesh

Area — 55,126 square miles (the size of England and Wales)

Population — 80 million



Julia Brennan is a student now at Columbia University New York, who collected the material for this book early in 1976. It is a fascinating study of different aspects of hand-craft production in Bangladesh and provides some excellent in depth material for those interested in the concepts of aid through trade or for those who would just like to learn more about day to day life in a developing country. The major importer of these crafts in the UK is TEARCRAFT Ltd, Carlisle Sq, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, NE1 6UF, who will be happy to supply further information. The address of the Jute Works in Bangladesh is PO Box 2154, 74 Indira Road, Dacca, Bangladesh.

In January and February 1976, I went to Bangladesh to do a photojournal on the handicrafts of the country. I was given the winter term off to do an independent project. Louisa Brooke, designer for the Jute Works in Dacca (the Women's Handicraft Marketing Organisation) gave me a brief description of interesting and relevant production centres that I could visit. She also arranged a Bangladeshi travelling companion, Robert Gonsalves, who helped with questions, scheduling and translating. Aside from this guidance I was on my own. I photographed, commuted to and from the Jute Works, visited and enquired at voluntary organisations, travelled near and far to production centres, read material on Bangladesh, listened and asked an incredible number of questions. Nobody there is in a hurry and I spent hours talking to one or two people. These conversations were my main source of information. If I gave the time, I received patience and co-operation in return.

Most of the time I travelled by local transport and visited the rural areas which make up 90% of Bangladesh. The villages are beautiful and the poor blend into the environment so much better than in the cities. Families live together and share happiness and misery.

Out of the difficulties of the last few years, religious conflicts, the liberation war and the recurrent natural disasters, has come a flourishing handicraft industry. To me, the most interesting handicrafts were those which illustrated the background and day to day life of the women who made them. In this book I have tried to show the social customs and the aspects of rural life which play such an important part in the creation of the articles.

I hope my study will serve as a foundation for others to improve on and also help the handicraft market of Bangladesh. I thank everyone at the Jute Works for making this project possible, letting me use the Jute Works as a base, arranging transport, and waiting patiently for this book. I also thank Richard for his editing, Bill for his printing, and Breck for letting me live in his darkroom.

J.B.

SETTING THE SCENE

The handicrafts of Bangladesh are a traditional skill. The place mats and sikas that add beauty to an already graceful living room in Europe or America emerge from a very different setting. Sometimes they have been made in a "bari", a home made up of several cottages serving family, cattle, kitchen and storage requirements and built round a courtyard. Some come from dusty refugee camps, others from desolate warehouses.

From materials that are found in most parts of Asia, Bangladesh has produced unique articles. Out of jute, a wavering reed-like plant, graceful sikas (plant holders) are woven. The intricately knotted and woven household hammocks emerge from skeins of raw white jute. Starting as a long silky skein of white hair, through careful weaving, overlapping and braiding, the sika appears. From long strips of cane, beautifully shaped baskets are made. The cane is finely split and coiled into a design which is simple, lovely and useful. Ordinary swamp reeds are woven into small prayer mats. Each one different, revealing the thoughts of one woman. These crafts and others are all part of Bangladesh's culture, tradition and daily life.





Sikas are a common household article made from jute which grows throughout Bangladesh and is harvested in the summer.



An average village woman rises at about 6 or 7 o'clock and after washing, praying and waking her children, she prepares breakfast for her family. It is usually left over dinner or chappatis (round unleavened bread made of wheat flour and cooked on an iron griddle). A woman never eats with her children or husband, but eats alone when they are finished. Cleaning dishes and washing clothes is next. Often a woman must walk a distance to fetch water. If so, she pulls her sari over her head in observance of purdah (the black veil which secludes women and prohibits them from meeting or talking to men outside the family). Washing, often a six metre sari, is scrubbed on rocks and then dried. In winter the bedding is also put in the courtyard to air. Paddy (unhusked rice) must be boiled and then spread out in the sun to dry. The paddy must also be husked and women spend hours pounding it with a big wooden pole. The main meal is eaten in the early afternoon and the woman spends hours pounding, chopping and stirring rear the chula, a hot clay oven burrowed in the ground. All these tasks require physical strength, as there are no gas jets nor running water. At sundown, preparation for the evening meal begins. The family eats late, around 9 or 10 o'clock and the mother doesn't spread out the bedding until later. The woman's whole day is devoted to her family and it never changes. In and out of these daily demands, a woman finds a little time to work on her handicrafts.

However, not all women have a secure family to work for and live with. Many are widows with children to feed and no husband to support them. Villages are filled with young girls who have been rejected by their families because they are unmarriageable. No woman can get a job. These women not only need money, but an occupation. This is where the original idea for the handicraft programme sprung from. The programmes make a small change which means so much to the women. They can provide a daily meal, savings for a house or cow, a bit of praise from a husband or a little bit of self-assurance. The women work hard for changes like these. They show interest and motivation and often must deal with marital conflicts in order to work. The work is all done by hand, slowly and carefully. Often the hands are limp and hungry, or withered and old, or tired, but always determined. In each case the personal effort, time, strain and thoughts are the creative forces for these handicrafts.

Out of the idea for craft programmes developed the women's handicraft co-operatives, a system based on working and sharing together. The co-operatives are organized on a small scale so that the idea of desperate and hungry women sharing together is not idealistic. A co-operative does not just include sharing work and money, but responsibility also. A co-operative is building together, as money is a common stock. The individual payment for an article is so important to a desperate woman, that often persuading her to participate in a monthly saving pool is difficult. However, by sharing together and discussing



Women gather for co-operative meetings about once a month. It is an opportunity to have talks on hygiene, family planning and diet, as well as an informal social occasion.

the pros and cons of the work and their expectations, the importance of working together and the long term perspective is achieved.

The co-operative is not entirely working together. The initial payment for each separate item is on an individual basis. It is up to the woman how much she wants to produce and earn. This provides a healthy sort of competition. Each woman receives 50% of each sale item in bonus at the end of the week or with her wages. This is where the individual effort is rewarded. The co-operative is held together by a president or manager who will call meetings, admit new members, check the items, often purchase the jute or grass wholesale and then distribute and keep the books of individual production, sales bonus and rejections. It is a big job which requires understanding and co-operation on the part of the members.

In fact, the co-operatives' success depends on the enthusiasm and participation of the village women. They must be willing to teach





The wooden crates go by truck to Chittagong, the country's main port, where they will be shipped to parts of Europe and America.



handicraft skills to others and work along the simple and direct co-operative guidelines. The most successful of the co-operatives are those which function independently of any Jute Works or volunteer agency assistance. Women begin to realize their skills and capabilities and respect each other as part of a whole effort.

Since the start of handicraft co-operatives eight years ago, there are about fifty throughout the country, which market through the Jute Works. The women have learned to do very fine work and have raised their living standards. Apart from the material benefits, the opportunity for women to work and be slightly independent has made a small change in the strict social customs and the standard of women in Bangladesh. Traditionally, women are inferior. From childhood, a girl is raised only to be married, serve and bear children. Women accept and never complain. In every class and facet of life, the women are rarely visible and never dominant. Educated women find it hard to get a job in their desired career. Even some of the highly educated don't accept professional intelligence and activeness of women. Parallel to this are the simple illiterate village women. They work terrifically hard and bear anything from four to sixteen children. The possibility of a wife's financial contribution to her family wouldn't be considered by her husband. Women are totally unselfish and many unaware of their tragic cultural position. The handicraft co-operatives and other programmes are slowly changing these attitudes, as women begin to realize their stifled potential and future opportunities. With their own hands and the raw materials, they work to better themselves. Some co-operatives have used the pool money for a village well, sewing machine or a piece of land. From these purchases, larger production and expansion is possible.

Expansion! The co-operatives did so well that they exhausted the local market for handicrafts sales. Several volunteer agencies submitted funds and personnel and worked on the idea of export. The result was the Jute Works — a Women's Handicrafts Marketing Organization. It started in September 1973 with three Bangladeshis and two foreigners operating from a house veranda. It is now a two storey building with a staff of more than twenty. This did not happen overnight. Being the first of its kind in Bangladesh, it had many problems getting established. Obtaining a good location with sufficient storage space and a firm lease was difficult. After long negotiations an export licence was finally granted. Then they had to find overseas buyers and convince them that this export business was reliable. In Dacca it was difficult to get trained and reliable Bengali personnel and rather than allow the business to rely on the expatriot employees. There is also great pressure in Bangladesh for employees to find jobs for their relations. This tends to create problems. Simply starting an organization with a positive and unified atmosphere wasn't easy. It is difficult in Bangladesh to run an honest operation and not to resort to additional payments which are usually expected.

The company is independent from any volunteer agencies and is self-supporting. Unlike the commercial exporter who will abandon one village for another one with lower prices, the Jute Works standardizes its prices and makes a fair price for the women's goods. Their goal is not to make profit or commercially sell Bengali handicrafts, but to provide a market for poor, often widowed, women's handicrafts. The Jute Works supports the co-operative system as it brings women together and ensures a just price. The Jute Works depends on the success of the co-operatives and in turn the producers now depend on the Jute Works. It is through their promotion of Bengali handicrafts that many women are supported. The total number of people involved in production is 12,000. (This includes family help.) It was less than 2,000 in 1973. The Jute Works has been careful in expanding the number of producers and in controlling the size of each group. The number of producers and the market demand must be balanced. However, the producers are not tied to the Jute Works as there is no contract between them. If a certain co-operative or programme has produced an excess, it is free to sell to anyone else. The sales orders cannot be anticipated. The Jute Works tries to stock one thousand of each article, yet the market changes. If a product is in great demand and there is a shortage of producers, the design is often taught to another co-operative.

The Jute Works is busy six days a week. If an order of baskets isn't arriving, then a truckload of sikas is. At the same time shipping crates are being made in the driveway, new designs are being worked on and women are carefully packing sikas into bales for shipment. Everything must come to Dacca. The Jute Works is the centre of the vast and spreading network of production centres. It is a dependable place for all producers, and provides the assurance and communication necessary to keep the handicraft industry running successfully.

One of the major problems is the difficulty of travel. The easiest way is to go by water, as Bangladesh has three huge rivers. Big nokas (a single square sailed boat) transport people and cargo, but most people travel in little paddled country boats. This way of travelling is relaxing, but it takes two hours to go four miles. Then they might take a bus and a two mile walk! Roads run to all the major towns and there are country buses everywhere. Most are one car width, brick surfaced, left over from the British colonial days. They are lined with basket carriers, rickshaws, cows, stacks of bricks, cyclists and children. The bumpy wooden frame buses laden with people on the top and spilling out the windows, must blow the horn the entire journey. Trains are much the same. Riding on the roof is free and the trains coming into the city are crowded with hundreds of people. These are the ways the goods arrive at the Jute Works. Often big bales of sikas are personally carried or hauled by handcart. A five mile journey into the city is a full day's expedition. People often bring





their lunch with them and do city shopping. The Jute Works tries to arrange the deliveries on different days, but many producers just can't arrive at a specific time. So goods trickle into the Jute Works at any time of the day, and they must always be ready.

The Jute Works has an elaborate paper work system for placing orders, counting rejects and paying. Often an order for sikas will have four duplicates going to the same place. The four copies will all travel by different means to assure the arrival of one. The Jute Works tries to stay in close contact with its producing areas and often the director and others from the Jute Works will visit villages to make enquiries, solve problems or just encourage. The direct contact enables the producers to relate to the Jute Works in a personal way, very important in a country where bureaucracy is over staffed and tedious.

When the goods arrive at the Jute Works, they must be checked one last time, for quality. The two quality control girls, Binodini and Doru are really busy, as shipments come in all the time. Sikas are carefully examined for length, colour of jute and strength. The girls have a nasty job. Rejecting goods that have been thoughtfully made is hard. Often producers return to their villages with half of the original load. Sikas are sometimes rejected if they contain a tiny strand of red jute. This is hard for the women to understand. But quality is the only thing that holds these products in a world market where machine-made products are easily perfected. Customers do not weigh the conditions or problems of a country against the quality of something they are going to buy. So the Jute Works' quality control is essential.

After checking, many goods are packed for export or stored in the two go-downs (storage rooms). Until the beginning of 1976, receiving, checking and temporary storage was done in one room. Even now on some days the entire building is stacked high with bales waiting to be crated and other days it is empty. Upstairs are offices and a room for designing. New designs and samples for the various villages are being made all the time. Four women work full time on these samples, and the village women copy them for accuracy and quality.



Notkal Siki



The Sisters
checking the
goods when
they arrive
in the morning.



JAGARONI

WOMEN'S TRAINING CENTRE

Like other jobs around the world, handicraft skills are not inborn. Even though village women have worked with raw jute to make simple sikas for their houses, many of the export articles are specially designed. Still using the traditional knots and weaving, many of the sikas are very intricate. Articles such as belts, shoulder bags and table mats are completely unknown. Women need to learn how to make these articles and understand the necessity of quality. When the women's handicraft co-operatives were first starting about 1968, this problem arose. Sister Michael Francis, working with one of the many Christian voluntary agencies in the country, solved it by developing Jagaroni — a women's training centre in Dacca.

Women arrive from all over the country for an eight week training course. Village women usually come in pairs and bring their own jute, needles and scissors. The course starts with simple braid and progresses to complicated sikas and wall hangings. It is taught in the usual Asian fashion of simply watching, following and thus learning. This sort of independent method leaves the women open minded toward what they can make. At the end of the course, the women are able to return to their villages

with their goods and teach other women the skills they have acquired.

Jagaroni also teaches the guidelines of co-operative working and many of the trained women return to their villages to start co-operatives. Jagaroni has also become a centre for receiving goods from scattered co-operatives. In the mornings from about ten to twelve o'clock, women haul in to Jagaroni huge hessian bags of sikas, jute ornamental angels and mats from the villages. The women come in pairs or groups, as travel, certainly travel alone, for a Bangladeshi woman is not an accepted custom. Sister Shadona, the woman in charge of the quality control, checks each sika separately. Other women sit in a dark room and singe off the jute fuzz over kerosene burners. This is done here because kerosene is so difficult to obtain in the villages and a wood fire would char the jute black. The women pay a monthly fee for the kerosene. Other women trim the bottom fringes and rebag them. Apart from the long and rough journey, the morning is pleasant for the village women. They can chat, relax, bathe and drink tea. Jagaroni is in a lovely shady compound and visitors come in and out. It is a good change of atmosphere for the women.

Jagaroni Training Centre is run by two extraordinary women named Dolly and Patricia. They are both so lively, friendly and special. Jagaroni would be different without them. Both Dolly and Patricia are deaf mutes. About eight years ago Sister Michael Francis was working in Nagori and Tongi, rural areas of Dacca, trying to organize women's co-operatives and she met with Patricia and Dolly, both Christians from the Nagori area.

Dolly's stepmother wanted to join the co-operative and Sister Mike visited the house frequently to keep in close touch. The stepmother had a strong resentment toward this young deaf and dumb child and beat her constantly. Dolly was treated as cheap labour and was cruelly mistreated. Sister Mike often went to the house to treat Dolly with ointments. A respect, love and dependence grew for Sister Mike, as she was the only kind or sympathetic object in Dolly's life. The young girl did a lot of her mother's braiding and did beautiful work. Sister Mike noticed the skill and interest, and tried to persuade Dolly's



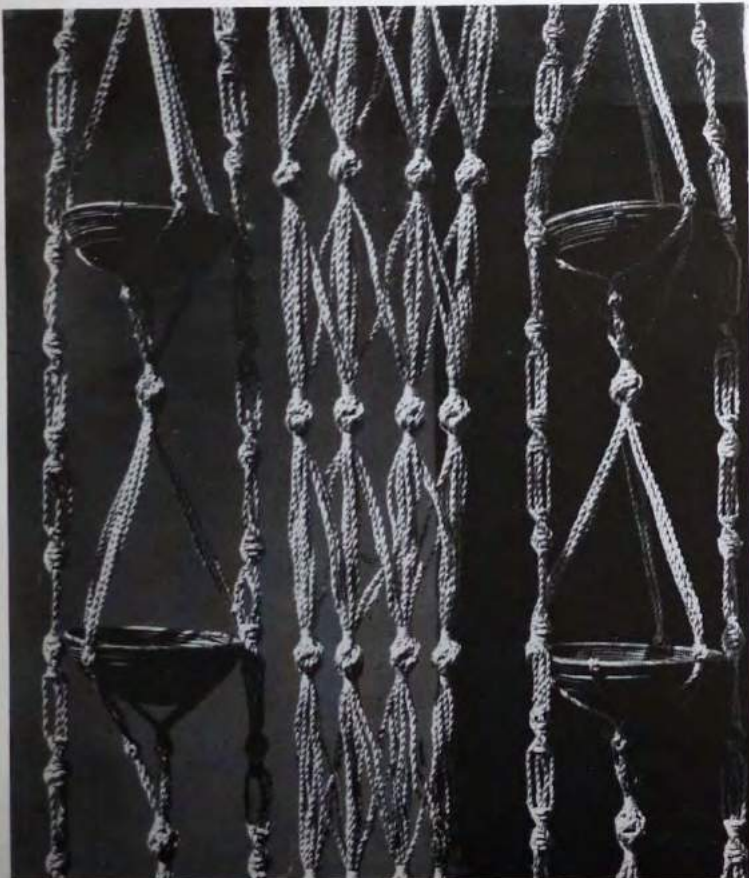
Dolly (above) with one of her young pupils.
The girl is ~~staring~~ ^{staring} her first sika.





parents to let her leave and move to Dacca. Dolly's stepmother refused, as she wanted the easy labour. The next year, after a bad crop, food was very scarce (in fact, thousands of people died in the Nagori area) and the stepmother agreed to release Dolly. Sister Mike took Dolly on the condition that she would work and earn as a woman and not have to support her mother. The stepmother reluctantly signed a paper agreeing to this condition. After receiving training, Dolly began teaching the course. After two days, Dolly told Sister Mike that she could run the course herself with no help. She has done so ever since. Dolly is an exquisite worker, and determined and independent.

Patricia's background is similar. She became deaf and dumb from typhoid fever at an early age. She was ignored by her family, but not beaten. When Dolly moved to Dacca and started working and supporting herself, the news spread around the area. A deaf-mute? Traditionally, a deformed or "hindered" child is hidden in shame and embarrassment. Dolly set a new example. Patricia was brought to Jagaroni by her family and the arrangements were discussed. Patricia's father signed a paper agreeing not to force his daughter to support her family. Both girls are in their twenties and have become independent in the last five years. They are funny together. They have lived and worked with each other for so long that they are like sisters. Their work is so excellent that there is almost a professional jealousy about them. Patricia is an expert at wall hangings and therefore doesn't interfere in Dolly's sika-making. They couldn't live without each other and they love Jagaroni! They are Jagaroni!



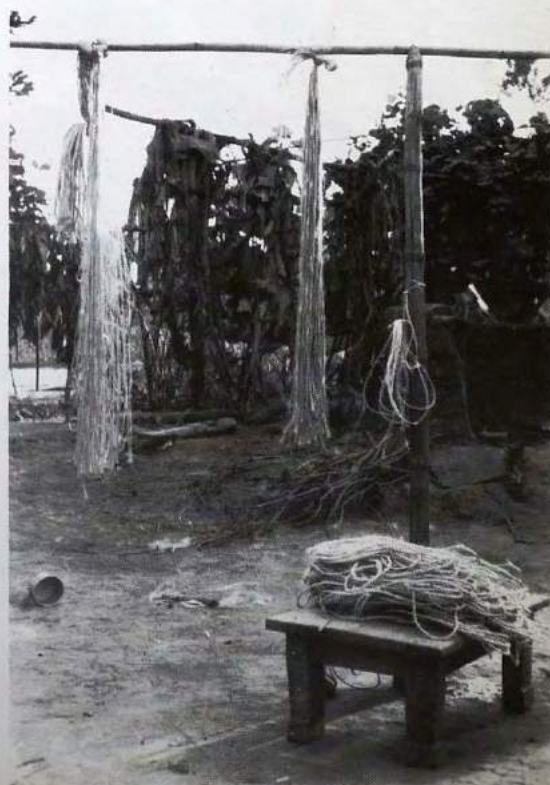
Sister Shadona and Robert (from the Jute Works) working on production sheets. Orders are placed through Jagaroni which is the checking centre for all the Nagari area production.



JALCHATRA

The co-operative in Jalchatra is Muslim and is less than a year old. The women are jute workers. At present they are all frustrated with the quality control necessary for the sikas. To them, the sika is a form of creative and useful art, which has been passed down through the generations. Every village hut is draped in sikas holding bottles, clay pots and blankets. The fact that their art is accepted by foreigners for its beauty and uniqueness, and then rejected for its lack of perfect mathematical symmetry is annoying and puzzling. The poor village woman cannot visualize 'exports', the world market or the requirements of overseas customers.

I visited the bari of a middle aged woman who makes sikas for Jagaroni. Joyton has three children, two of whom are married. Also living in her bari are her son, daughter-in-law and their four children. Her husband is a farmer and they have three pakkis (3rd acre) of land and an ox for ploughing. Joyton is a midwife, qualified only by experience, and goes to help at homes of women when she is called for deliveries. Joyton is also the director of the village co-operative committee. She was in charge of twenty women, but due to disputes, complaints and resentment about sharing in a committee pool, half left. She is the woman who communicates with Sister Bruno, the





sister in the Jalchatra Mission who first introduced the co-operative and who ships the goods to Dacca. As the director, she buys the jute monthly at a wholesale price, and then sells it to her co-operative members. She gives them a design or order and also does the first quality check. On Fridays, she brings the products to Sister Bruno, who checks quality again. Joyton picks up the cash payment for the village women and gives savings money to Sister Bruno to bank. The idea of saving money is completely strange to simple village women. Every bit of money is normally used daily for food, clothing or transport. Village families live only for the day. The savings plan encourages women to think ahead and develop some goals or wishes in life, and realize that they are obtainable. This frame of mind also inspires them to produce more handicrafts. Joyton has been making sikas for two years, "for the commercial market" she says, but her bari is draped in sikas. She showed me that two were woven as a small hammock to store blankets. This new design, appears simple to the eye. But the need for accuracy in the measurements has been a drawback. So it is not in general production. Even Joyton has her problems.

I visited Joyton's bari. Toothless, tiny and an almost naughty-looking face hiding under her purple sari, she was working on two sikas and following a worn model quite carefully.



A middle-aged woman was working on the braid beginning of a flower sika. Sister Bruno reminded her that some of last month's products had been rejected. She produced four sikas and we tried to figure out the flaws, which the woman had suddenly forgotten.



BOTNIS

THE PRAYER MATS FROM NOAKHALI

Companyganj's main road is red dirt and pitted with huge holes. The shrubbery along the road is withered and coated in a half inch of red dust. The stores in the bazaar are simple shacks and parked bullock carts block the entrances and the road. There are three cement buildings, the hospital, school and the public health and administration department. The nearest cinema, the most popular form of entertainment, is six miles away. Rickshaws wrapped in saris to hide the women inside, bump along slowly. The food stalls are filled with men smoking and chatting and there are absolutely no women. The town is quiet except for bazaar day when men bring their produce in from the surrounding area. Then it looks like a scene in an old "Western" movie.

The town is surrounded by rice fields and scattered baris. A network of little dusty paths weave in and out of the fields and the oasis looking baris. The daily prayers can barely be heard as they are not broadcast in the usual way with an amplifier. District Noakhali, in the southern coastal part of Bangladesh, is one of the strictest Muslim areas. Girls start wearing saris when they are six or seven years old and are married by the age of fourteen. The marriage is arranged by the parents and the decision to have children is completely the husband's. Women walking outside their baris not only wear a bhurka (the black overgarment) but use an umbrella to shade themselves as well. At full moon women are permitted to visit their





mothers. The women's place is in the house. Their purpose in life is to serve their husbands and bear children.

As these social customs continue, so does a form of art. It is the weaving of botnis or prayer mats. These mats are made only by women in Noakhali. They are woven for a woman's husband or father to take to the mosque. Girls start learning the craft when they are about ten and no one is forced into the trade as it is considered a distinguished artistic skill rather than a monetary one. The actual making of the botni is beautiful to watch. They weave on the diagonal with designs slowly emerging. The designs are not planned in advance and some are incredibly intricate, often with four different borders. Each one is unique, an individual work of the imagination. They are woven by women who are completely secluded from any world beyond their baris, and the home and village life is portrayed in many of the botnis. Water jugs, chickens, rice pounders and umbrellas are the material items in a woman's life. The aeroplane appears in many of them and is truly a product of the imagination. Since women have only seen them circling above their homes, each woman's plane is different, often resembling an animal.

The most dominant theme is the importance of married life, portrayed in the fruitful pomegranate tree, an elaborate wedding chair or a poem. Some of the poems have been translated and most of them tell of the women's life of only love for her husband, as he is the giver of happiness and the provider of rice and children. He is adored for sharing his life with hers. Many are reminiscent of the simple wedding ceremony; the beautiful weather, the procession through the marriage gate and the beginning of a family. The importance of marriage is also portrayed tragically in the widows' botnis. The loss of the husband is a loss of life. Without a husband, life is stopped and actions are performed in his shadow. The woman believes she has done wrong and has been punished by Allah. The poems tell of the man's goodness and the woman's empty bed. Here, the sad and meaningless existence of village widows is woven into the prayer mats.

An average 3' x 4' mat takes about two or three days to make. Since women can only work in their free time, the three months following the big January harvest is the botni season. It is cool, dry and leisurely in atmosphere. Mostak, the long leafed botni reed grows in a bamboo type thicket and these baris are surrounded with it. The cut stalks are stripped of their leaves and soaked in water for about ten days. Then they are dried and cut up into 14" sticks. The green bark is shaved off, leaving a bamboo coloured stick. This is cut into strips, tied in bunches and dried again. This is the reed which is used for the prayer mats.

Recently, the Noakhali prayer mats have been discovered by foreigners and the Jute Works. Several attempts at arranging a co-operative have failed as the village women have no mobility and the baris are far apart. At present, they are working individually and do not rely financially on their skill. In order to





Out of all the houses and from
behind thatch walls, eyes peer
through holes, but never a
word is heard or face seen.





get a steady flow of botnis, the women must understand that there is a dependable market which will support them. They also have no sense of the quality standards of the Jute Works. A list of quality points has been devised with measurements, width of reeds, tightness of weave, colours, difficulty and intricacy. Amount of writing, kind of designs and symmetry were also added, which is a pity as it enforces design instead of quality. Part of the botni charm is their lack of symmetry and their sheer simplicity. Each botni is a work of individual beauty, created spontaneously from a woman's imagination.

So, the botni weaving is a long way from a co-operative or an active Bengali handicraft. I only include it for its uniqueness as a Bengali craft and for comparison to the other developed crafts. The mats which arrive at the Jute Works do nothing to help the social status of the Noakhali women. These women are a fine example of the inferiority of the female sex in the country. They are oppressed, but are not even aware of it, as they know no other way of life. The botni making organized into a co-operative would help liberate these women by teaching them to work and communicate among themselves and realize a fragment of life existing beyond their families. The women would also produce extra income and perhaps be more respected by their husbands. This would not give them public freedom, but the realization that they are not inferior and do not have to serve and sacrifice in life. These thoughts seem idealistic after visiting Companyganj. The botnis are unique because of the area's strict social customs, religion and remoteness. Organization and commercial demand would change the true craft. However, which is the more important? The women or the botnis?





KORJONA

HINDU BASKET-MAKING VILLAGE

The cane, a spidery-like palm, is purchased from the market. The people in Korjona do grow some but they don't grow enough of the fine quality cane needed for basket production. Cane is bought by the "pon" containing about 70-80 sticks 12 feet long, for 35-60 takas. The cane is redried in the sun in open bundles. When the baskets are made certain parts of the cane stripped and flattened. A basket is started around a thin metal point (like a screw driver) until it is as large as a hand. The curve of the basket is already apparent. Then strips of cane in threes and fours are wound around and nailed on. A hole is drilled and a bamboo nail is driven in. A measure is constantly used as each basket must pass the Jute Works' depth and diameter quality check. Women and girls splice the cane; the thick, which is used for the baskets and the thin palmy strips which are used to bind the baskets. The binding is done by threading through and around the basket. Young boys split bamboo sticks and cane and also weave. They attach the rings on the bottom of the baskets for balance. The old women and girls do the dipping into gob, a shellac made from the pounding pulp of fruit. The baskets are then dried in the sun.

The baskets are a purely Hindu design and they show the beauty in simplicity of line which is also apparent in the Hindu houses. The Hindus are a 10% minority in a Muslim nation. Up to Partition in 1947, Bangladesh was a religious mixture. At that time, many Hindus were persecuted and fled to India.





Thousands of villages were burned and the few Hindus that remain are a quiet, cautious and often mistreated minority. Effectively excluded from public offices and conventional jobs, they continue with their own traditions and skills. Making a generalization, the Hindu religion is much more gay, casual and self expressive than Islam. This light spirit is very much apparent in Korjona. Firstly, it is seen in the creativity of the people. There are lovely carved dove houses and various shaped baskets around the villages. Also, the women do not observe the Muslim tradition of purdah (the wearing of the black veil for seclusion). The women of Korjona cook outdoors, run after children, chat with each other and do not have the coward approach of most poor Muslim women. The men talk to the women, and children seem less disciplined and a lot happier. Even the arrangement of the baris are different. Like the Muslim villages, the baris in Korjona are surrounded by jungly bushes, cane, palm and banana trees, but the actual homestead is open. The separate houses in the Hindu bari do not have to face each other and make a secluded courtyard. Women, men and children work, cook and play together. Even though it is a men's production group (and the only men's handicraft co-operative in Bangladesh) the basket making is a bari project in which everyone joins, and the main source of livelihood.

This village has been a production group since August 1975. Korjona is one of the three cane basket producing villages for the Jute Works. They are pleased with the way the co-operative has worked, except for monetary problems. The forty-four members have not received full payment for work yet, but already feel an improvement in their lifestyle. The president, a distinguished white bearded man, wants to buy a cow and later a tin roof for his house. Another man wants to start his children at school. This is the kind of investment and improvement the co-operative system is aiming at. It pleases the producers tremendously. It's an improvement within their lifestyle and culture. The cane baskets are not a new introduction, but a development of traditional skills.





In a few of the baris, there were little shack pavilions built specially for basket working. The houses are made of straw and jute sticks (the remaining stick after the fibre is stripped off). Their line is quite graceful compared to the squarish thatch Muslim home.



Binodini Shokar is one of the two quality controllers of the Jute Works, She chatters, smiles and occasionally looks up as baskets fly into the "pack and stack" or the reject corners. They are measured with a yardstick and looked over for cane quality, balance and grace of line.



BOGRA

A WIDOW'S TRAINING CENTRE

The many handicraft co-operatives in Bangladesh are run or sponsored by different organizations and churches. The Danish Swallows, a small Scandinavian voluntary group, have started a special handicraft programme in the small town of Bogra in north western Bangladesh. This programme trains, works with and supports widows. Most of the sixty women have been homeless since the 1971 Liberation War. First they are trained at the centre where they live for two years. Then they are relocated in villages. The Training Centre is a long L-shaped cement building, originally the Swallow office and district headquarters. The office has the only telephone line with Dacca in the area. A lot of work goes on in the Centre. Women sew in the middle of the courtyard, and behind them under shelter, other women make jute braid, place mats and runners. They worked silently when I was around with my camera. In a far corner, women quietly wove saris and towels.

Many of the widows have children who are given schooling at the Centre. Classes include exercises, dancing, garden games, handicrafts, reading and mathematics. A busy place from tot to mother. Living quarters are dormitory like, with several private rooms which a whole family shares. We often complain about cramped living conditions but there, cooking, cleaning, sleeping, studying, socializing and crying all happen in one room. The spirit of the place is good and people are happy and working hard.

After completing the training programme, the women and their families return to their old village or are relocated. The widows often have to hire help for their land. However, these women are now self-supporting thanks to their training. The Bogra women have become very well known for their jute decorated hessian bags. The women buy their jute and hessian independently, showing little dependence on the programme. In fact, there is no manager and the products are collected by four women who were previously trained at Jagaroni in Dacca. They check different villages and the Centre daily and collect the goods. Quality checking is done there too. Unlike all the other co-operatives and projects, there is no rejection of goods here. The products are rated on a scale of 1-5, five being the finest. Everything is bought, but the better the quality, the more the pay. The fours and fives go to the Jute Works for export and the







others are sold domestically. A second check is done at the Swallow office before transporting them to Dacca, and the third at the Jute Works. Slowly, these women are realizing that quality is the only thing that will establish a steady market abroad.

The beauty of this handicraft programme is that it is changing one of the more oppressive social traditions. Traditionally, a widow in Bangladesh, whether made so through war or natural death is rejected and worthless. Without a husband a woman cannot own land or a house, cannot obtain any sort of job or educate her children. Widows are social outcasts, abandoned to beg on the streets. This programme has elevated the status of these women chiefly through providing them with a skill for which they are respected. Often, they are desirable for remarriage.

MAUSAID & HARBIDE

In the area that Patricia and Dolly of Jagaroni come from, there is one of the first handicraft co-operatives. It was started to improve the villages' means of livelihood after terrible drought. The villages of Mausaid and Harbide are now extremely well off and still one of the Jute Works' largest producers. They started out making sikas and mats commercially for Jagaroni about three years ago. With more experience than other women, the co-operative now makes the most difficult and elaborate sika — the korani. In this village, the success of the co-operative system is noticeable.

The people live well. Each bari owns land, cows, radios and most houses have tin roofs. The co-operative is well organized with a president, treasurer and goods deliverer. All sikas are delivered to a woman's house on Sunday, where they are checked and then carried to Dacca on Monday. Quality control is not a problem as these women are aware of the export requirements. They are about ten miles from Dacca which is a two or three hour journey, and this proximity makes communication and understanding much better. These women have learned to work together and develop as a community. Now they are doing so well the development is more individual, and their handicraft work quite sophisticated and commercial.





SAIDPUR & MOHAMMEDPUR

CONCERN, an Irish voluntary organization has started five large handicraft programmes with refugees in the towns of Bangladesh. Since the refugees live in scattered camps and warehouses, CONCERN operates the programme from a centre, where women come daily to work or bring their finished products. Two of the programmes, located in Saidpur in northern Bangladesh, and Mohammedpur, a section of Dacca, are both working with Bihari refugees.

The Biharis, an Islamic group of people originally from Bihar (northwest of Bengal in India) immigrated to Bangladesh and remained separate from the Bangladeshi Muslims. They lived in their own sections of the towns and country, married only Biharis, speak Urdu, (the national language of Pakistan) attended Urdu schools and worked as skilled craftsmen. It was Biharis who ran the jute mills and large companies prior to Bangladesh Liberation. Lower class Biharis were known for their highly skilled labouring and the women praised for their fine handwork. However, during the Liberation War in 1971, the Biharis were persecuted, raped, killed and left homeless because of their Pakistan-Urdu loyalty. Many of them fled the country but there are still tens of thousands in Bangladesh. Many of these families were quite affluent, respected and well off. As education is important to their culture, adults have received at least a full high school

The work is the key. Concern could just give the charity and distribute food and medicine, but these women need something to do and make them feel worthwhile.





education. However, children who are over seven have not been able to continue, as there are no Urdu schools. Due to the war, these people have not only lost their material possessions, but social status and job opportunities as well. Biharis are being hired by Bangladeshis, but not for positions for which they are qualified. The thousands of Biharis who worked on the railroad in Saidpur are now jobless, and struggling to support families. The tragedy lies in these people's change of lifestyle. They are different from the majority of the poor, who struggle under the same conditions, but know no other way of life. The Biharis, lowered, have to suffer an incredibly poverty-stricken existence. The

government of Pakistan will not grant them immigration rights to Pakistan, so they are trapped, as victims of the political situation.

In both Saidpur and Mohammedpur, the Biharis live communally in camps, deserted market areas and huge warehouses. The camps are just masses of waist-high paper, plastic and thatch shanties. Excrement and garbage collects in the gullies and in the rainy season many of camps are flooded by one to two feet of water. The warehouses or "go-downs" are pitch dark except for scattered rays of sunlight coming through holes in the thatch and tin roofs. Families' living areas (about 5'—8' square) are divided by strings and shoulder height flaps of jute cloth, sari, cardboard, metal and plastic.



In the evening each family lights a fire for cooking and the go-downs are filled with a dense blue-black smoke. Babies are curled up on the ground next to the fire trying to sleep. Every scrap of paper and tin and every piece of string are used. There is not enough jute to weave a simple sika to hold a bottle, a common household item.

CONCERN has large cement-built centres big enough for the 800 women in each programme. The centre, unlike other independent co-operatives, relies very much on the overseas organizer. The CONCERN girls who stay at the centre have a full day giving orders, handing out thread and collecting finished products. There are also many Bangladeshi assistants, accountants and quality checkers. The centres are efficiently run with women arriving at 8am and leaving about 2pm. Women who do most of their work at home, come to purchase jute and bring in their finished articles for checking. At Mohammedpur in Dacca, there is very little problem with quality as the women are careful workers. However, in Saidpur, due to the lack of jute in the north, CONCERN's jute is shipped up from Dacca. The women don't have the advantage of buying one skein of a



Here is the importance of the sika ...
5 to 10 taka which feeds the family.





Checking day at the centre is chaotic as women bring large bundles of goods and all their children. Here the helpers check the sikas for length.



special kind. The jute is bought in quantity and ages very quickly. The women have no choice but to use this, so it's hardly their fault when strands of red jute appear in a sika.

In developing the Bihari women's natural talent for handwork, crochet is now the major craft. Bihari women have been making their own crochet petticoats for years. They now make shawls, T-shirts and tablecloths for export. Women crochet thousands of little circles and bring them to the centre. The circles are counted and quality checked and then weighed. About two hundred circles weigh approximately four ounces. Little account books are kept and the weight of the original thread is contrasted with the finished product. This way, no thread disappears. What the women buy originally, they would naturally want in return. Other women, called joiners, join the circles into shirts, shawls or tablecloths. Each piece is carefully examined by a helper. The pieces are then washed, as they are almost black from handling and dirty surroundings. Then they are starched and bagged.

The centres have a bank, encouraging women to save a little of each days' earnings and interest is paid as well. The women try to bank two or three taka a week, but most of it is needed for food. A small tea shop sells hot tea, rice and dahl (lentil soup) and mouri (puffed rice). There are also Bengali classes, as the Bihari women know only Urdu. As they crochet or work on sikas, they learn by repeating the alphabet.

Judging from the clean, organised centre and the chattering women, one could not imagine the wretched and depressing conditions these women live in. However, the home lives and existence that these women and families lead are the essence of the CONCERN programmes. The families depend on their father's occasional day to day jobs of manual labour with wages well below subsistence level. The women have nothing to do and cannot emerge from their shelter unless in bhurka. Even for those who are intelligent and motivated, there is no opportunity. The handicraft programme enables women to work and expand a traditional art form, break their destitute daily pattern and earn a bit more money for their family. As the poor are desperate, it's important to give them self-respect; they have helped themselves. Someone else has organized it, but they take the action and it is very satisfying. This in turn works on the social status of women slightly. Independent earnings make the women more respected by their husbands. It also grants them that little bit of daily freedom to go to the centre or purchase jute.

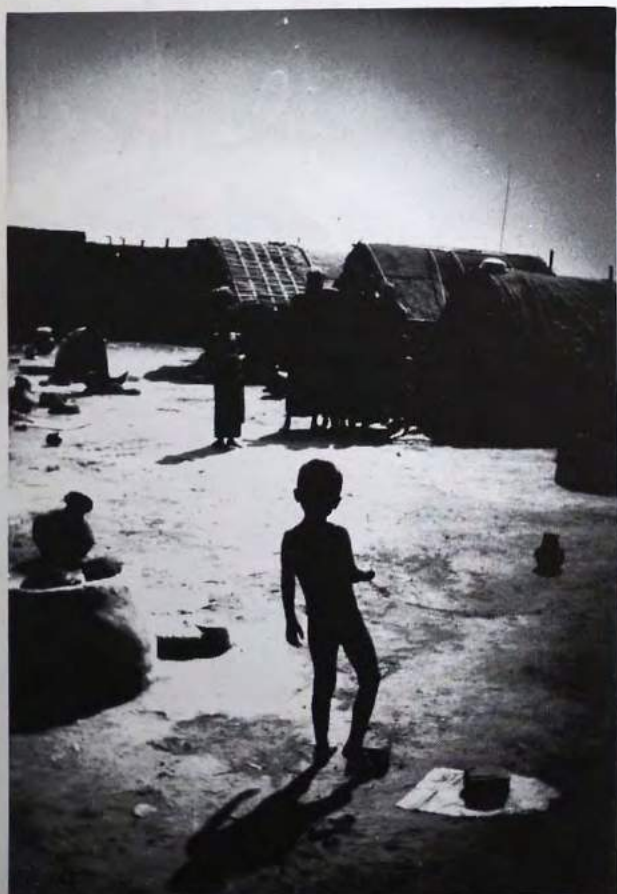
NARAYANGANJ

The women's co-operative in Narayanganj was organised in the autumn of 1972. The Muslim women's husbands work in the local Jute Shipping yard. Most of the Bihari women are widows and rarely leave the bustees. They live in long brick houses divided in single rooms. The long rows are divided by thatch walls which extend the living quarters a little further. The quarters were originally built as bachelor housing, but after the Liberation War families moved in also. They are crowded and dirty, but not miserable. Free housing is a blessing.

There are twenty-five women in the co-operative and the manager organizes all the goods and settles the problems. Another woman does the book-keeping, name filing and accounting, as she can read a little. Many of these women don't even know how to spell their names. Their signature is a thumbprint. Jute costs about 4-5 taka for the amount needed for two macrame bags. The women receive 20 taka for each bag, 1 taka goes to the woman who carries the products weekly to Dacca, so the producers can make 40-60 taka per week. That is good money. The women realize the advantage of their handicraft work as it provides money and an occupation. Some women were even planning ahead, inspired by one of their friends who had saved enough money over two years and had moved to Pakistan.

These women have been making the bags for two years and working with jute for three. It was the women's idea to start making articles to sell. At that time, Sister Michael Francis, who had introduced the jute craft-work, offered to create a design. She would not push or coax the women though. At first the women were lazy and uninspired. However, with encouragement from their husbands who do have access to a little "free" jute (even though no one would ever admit it) the women took the initiative. They organized a meeting with Sister Mike to explore the product and sale possibilities. Since the Jute Works was not in existence, there was no huge market demand or specific product order. Sister Mike designed the bag the women now make. The women now work independently; organizing, teaching, sharing and marketing the goods. There was no assistance from Sister Mike and no dependence on her.

The women gradually realized that they were working for and helping only themselves. It is one of the few co-operatives that does not rely on any outside help. The women have created the co-operative themselves and have slowly built up self respect and confidence. These Narayanganj women created a surplus for the local market, and with other co-operatives, in turn supplied the resources which created the Jute Works — a women's handicraft marketing co-operative.





Sister Mike, who began the
Women's handicraft co-operative
Narayanganj.



6 Since its birth in 1971 Bangladesh has suffered incredible hardship through floods, drought, civil war, and rampant inflation. In the midst of all this, the Bangladeshi people have struggled to keep alive.

Our television screens have told us dramatically their awful plight, but I have been privileged to see at first hand another side of the story. In this book Julia portrays the day by day working of the growing cottage industry programme. You read in these pages of a truly remarkable new hope that has come to thousands of women in the villages and the refugee camps.

Like Julia, I have seen it. And I have noticed the contrast between those who have work, and those who still have to survive in utter poverty without it. Here in Britain we have been encouraged by the way people have responded to the handicraft we are importing from Bangladesh.

TEARCRAFT is expanding, and we are doing all we can to promote the products from the kind of people Julia describes in this book.

The Cottage Industry programme makes sense. It provides work where it is most needed, uses the local raw materials, and is highly labour-intensive. I hope that this book will encourage many more to appreciate what is being done in Bangladesh, and lead many more to become personally involved. 9

RICHARD ADAMS

3 Carlisle Square,
Newcastle - upon - Tyne.

RICHARD ADAMS is the director of TEARCRAFT, a non-profit making company, run by Christians, to market handicraft goods from developing countries.

50p