

Amidst numerous stories of the struggle of our people, one that has remained consistently untold is that of our women. Deprived of social attention because tradition makes their public appearance a taboo. Handicapped by illiteracy because custom has it that their place is within the confines of homes. Constrained by a lack of opportunity because practice has it that men are better contenders for every job that society can provide. And yet in spite of the deprivation, the handicap and the constraints Bangladeshi women wage a valiant struggle for the economic betterment of the family which has remained unsung. This struggle is as spectacular in its courage, as determined in its progress and as imaginative in its variety as any other waged by men.

It is this untold story, brilliant in its scope, beautiful in its human appeal and brave in its content which attracted the sensitivity of a young American photo-journalist, Julia Brennan.

## Headway with handicrafts

FAYZA HAQ

Julia a teenage student from Columbia University, New York has brought out an interesting and unusual photo journal on "Handicrafts of Bangladesh". Like all Europeans and Americans Julia Brennan understands that Bangladesh has been the centre of floods, war, drought and devastating inflation and that the people of Bangladesh have had to toil to keep body and soul alive. Julia collected the material for the book in January and February 1976. The book is then a fascinating study of the different aspects of handicrafts which provides material for those interested in "aid through trade" and for those who would like to know more about Bangladesh as a developing country.

Julia received help from the

Jute Works (the Women's Handicrafts Marketing Organisation) which gave her a description of the relevant production centres. The young author also got her self a Bangladeshi guide who helped her with questions and translations. He also helped her plan her project. In her book Julia shows the day by day work of the cottage industry programme. She has explained how handicraft is the new hope for thousands of women in the villages and refugee camps.

Julia has shown how the handicrafts of Bangladesh are a traditional skill. The place mats and the "sikas" that beautify the European and American home come from a background of poverty, ignorance, sickness and overpo-

pulation, as the author reports clearly, with her photographic documentation and journalistic commentation. She has written how jute is knotted and woven from skeins of raw white jute. She has also carefully delineated how beautiful baskets are made from cane that is finely split and coiled into a design. Thus it has been shown how these crafts are a part of the daily life and how, encouraged and developed through the method of the cooperatives, they can serve as means of economic independence.

In course of her writing the author has explained in detail the pattern of work in the cooperatives and the Jute Works.

It has been told how the



Julia Brennan

Jute Works company is self-supporting and is unlike any commercial exporter who will abandon one village for another in search of lower price. It has been explained how the goal is not to make a profit or to commercially sell Bangladeshi handicrafts but to provide a market for the handicrafts of the poverty stricken woman, who are often widows into the bargain.

The author has studied and presented her subject with tremendous patience, care and understanding, which is remarkable in one so young. In promoting the handicrafts Julia has made a detailed study of the socio-economic position of the women and the difficulties as well as promises of the handiwork industry in a trouble strewn place. In course of the book, the author explains how the Bangladeshi woman's whole day is devoted to her family and that she has no means of having a separate job or income. It is also shown now not a all women have secure family to rely on. There are many widows and unmarried girls, who need both money and occupation. And that is where the handicraft programme comes in, it is pointed out. It is told how out of the idea of craft programmes developed the wo-



Making jute bags.

men's handicraft cooperatives.

It is stressed that Bangladeshi women are totally unselfish and unaware of their confirmed situation but how the handicrafts co-operatives are slowly making them realise their future opportunities.

The book describes how the Jute Works is the culmination of the cooperatives and how there is careful quality control of the strength, colour and length of the jute threads. There are, moreover, the women's training centres which teach the women how to make other articles besides "sikas" such as table mats, shoulder bags and belts. This is at places like Jagaroni, in Dacca, a distance from the village from where women come with their needle, scissors and own jute, as the author narrates. Julia goes into the depth of the centres and even gives the background story of the two extraordinary women, deaf mutes, Dolly and Patricia who run the Jagaroni centre. This gives a sense of immediacy, and with the help of the numerous photographs, the reader can easily imagine himself looking around the places on his own.

Writing about the special handicraft centre for widows in Bogra, Julia reports how the Bogra women have earned a name for themselves by working at the hessian bags, with jute and hessian of their own. Apart from writing about place mats and runners the author also explains, along side, how the schooling of the widows' children is carried out at the centre.

Julia has also dealt with the prayer mats of the Noakhali women. The makers of the mats have still to be organised

into cooperatives. Studying the people and their potentiality, the writer feels that the makers of the "botnis" could be organised and liberated by teaching them to work and communicate among themselves. In this way the women would have an extra income and so gain the respect of the men folk, it is again elaborated.

Whether talking about mats or belts, "sikkas" cane baskets or prayer mats or even crocheted table cloth, Julia has studied the people and their needs with enormous sympathy and understanding. She has emphasised repeatedly, and explained through her photo documentation how the women in Bangladesh have their talent in handicraft to contribute something to the progress and beauty of the world outside. Instead of being pitied and merely given aid for survival, these women should be helped to survive on their own merit by popularising and patronising the handicrafts of jute, cane and crocheted, Julia explains clearly and emphatically.

Consisting of 30 pages of text and photographic illustration, the book is a tremendous achievement in furthering the cause of the silent and suffering women folk of Bangladesh. They have been shown as shy and retreating, with their talent for handicraft pointed out as one escape out of the mortifying situation of being dependents or destitutes. Sale and export of the handicraft have been shown as their one big break. It is astonishing how a 17-year-old could do such a thorough job of searching out, analysing and reporting with sincerity and sympathy.



Specimens of cane mat



Splitting cane