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The World Travels of a Fleece Vest

Translated by Allison Brown

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CHAPTER 5

Tuk-tuk race, deluges, and the birth of an unplanned fleece vest – Day to day in Bangladesh's textile industry

September 1, 2005, in front of Hotel Intercontinental in downtown Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh. As three European sales representatives left the hotel they were immediately surrounded. All of the drivers of the thirty-odd three-wheeler taxis standing in front of the hotel wanted to give a ride to the “bideshis” – the foreigners. The sales reps got into Hassan's vehicle, since he was the only one who was waiting patiently in his tuk-tuk.

Many thousands of these motorized tricycles are on the streets of Asia's cities. They are called tuk-tuks – as soon as their engines are turned on it's clear how they got their name. It starts with a slow tuk-tuk, which keeps getting faster and louder, giving driver, passengers, and cargo an incredible shaking-up, even before it gets moving.

At some point it finally does get going and can hardly be slowed down. Tuk-tuks weave their way through all sorts of traffic, through the tightest of alleyways where no car can fit. And during the monsoon season it takes only two or three men to pull them out of the thickest mud.

The tuk-tuks have a cabin and can carry two, three, or sometimes even five or six people – and, if necessary, large loads of rice, newspapers, or furniture. Most lucrative, however, is when a driver has the good fortune of being able to transport a bideshi now and again, since it is possible to charge them much more than locals.

But no matter whether he takes in a lot or a little, Hassan has to hand over much of it each evening, since like most drivers he bought his tuk-tuk on credit. They borrow money from a private moneylender, who then demands ten percent interest – each month. Consequently, Hassan has to take on every ride he can.

This time he had to go to a weaving mill on the outskirts of the city. “Directly and very quickly!” demanded one of the bideshis. This command was totally unnecessary, since Hassan takes incredible pride in being one of the fastest tuk-tuks in Dhaka.

Although tuk-tuks have only three wheels, they also have particularly large and loud horns. In Bangladesh the horn is almost as important as the motor. With it, Hassan gains respect. “Beeep! Beeep! Out of the way, I'm coming through!” A pleasant breeze dispersed the pent-up heat and caused isolated palm fronds to sway. The palm trees were growing in small yards in front of whitewashed homes. Were we still in Bangladesh? Yes, Hassan's tuk-

tuk was driving through Dharmondi, one of the wealthy districts of Dhaka, past National Square.



Dhaka and environs have a population of around 14 million. At least half the people live in slums. The image of Bangladesh presented in the media is very biased: floods and hunger. But there are also beaches, parklands, and even mountains and forests, where Bengal tigers live. But then the scene changed suddenly: a slum and behind it long factory buildings that looked like giant cardboard boxes. Most were quickly erected textile factories, since the entire region surrounding Dhaka has specialized in textiles.

Hassan and his passengers were en route to one of these factories: where polyester thread went through additional processing. An entire truckload had been shipped here from Chittagong and was processed into fleece fabric over the previous four days.

Although it was daytime and the production hall was huge, it was dark and stuffy inside. And the noise! There was a rhythmic clicking and clattering from a thousand different locations. Only a few workers walked around between the mechanical weaving machines, which function in principle the same way as old hand-weaving looms. The warp yarn is stretched out in parallel rows, which are alternately pressed down and up so the shuttle with the weft yarn can be passed through. In an industrial weaving mill, the loom is simply much larger and the shuttle is shot through the space using water or air pressure. The whole thing is then frapped tightly with a kind of comb in such a way that small loops remain between the warp yarns.

These loops are then cut open in a further step, forming a lot of short, stiff hairs, like a pile carpet. They are napped with a type of rake. This makes the fleece fluffy and soft.

Numerous air spaces form between the threads. These later serve to insulate body heat. Finally, the long web of fleece fabric is rolled into a 40 kilogram (90 pound) bolt.

After driving for three-quarters of an hour, Hassan dropped his bideshis off at the weaving mill. He could have demanded four or five times the regular fare, but the guard at the gate took care of the payment, and he knew the exact number of takas that should be charged. Too bad! But Hassan's disappointment was dispelled immediately, since he received his next job – to transport bolts of fleece. The entire cabin and the roof rack were loaded by four workers and the vehicle creaked from the weight. While Hassan and the gate guard were watching as the tuk-tuk was loaded, the owner of the textile factory drove through the gate – in a brand new Mercedes. The guard watched him drive past and said to Hassan: “Things are going well in our country only for the factory owners, politicians, and generals. For everyone else there aren't any good jobs. Why does Allah let that happen?”

Hassan merely nodded briefly and climbed into his tuk-tuk. He didn't want to contradict the guard but he knew that not all bad jobs are equally bad. Being a gate guard, for example – Hassan thought – is a good bad job. Not much money, but you just have to stand around all day long, drinking tea, chatting with people, and harassing the workers. But now he was on his way to a really bad job – the dyers. He started up his motorized tricycle and hit the gas. The route he took was not particularly appealing. It went past slums and dilapidated factories. All buildings suffered from the monsoon rains. Large areas were still flooded, as were the numerous potholes in the street.

Shaken through and through, Hassan dropped the bolts off at the dyeworks. A guard made sure that Hassan didn't walk around and see too much. But it is enough just to look at the branch of the river behind the factory. One day it has a reddish shimmer; another day it is blue or green, depending on what color leftover dye the factory releases under cover of darkness. All of the water in the surroundings is contaminated. People who wash themselves in it get sick. Although people get their drinking water from wells, these are flooded by the rivers during the monsoon.

Hassan also knows what goes on in the large rickety halls. A man from his neighborhood told him. There are a lot of vats as big as small swimming pools. They are filled with leaching solutions, toxic acids, and all imaginable dyes. The fabric is first bleached until it is pure white. That insures that the final colors will be really bright.

Most of the fabric webs are unrolled by large machines and pulled through the dyeing vats. But the workers – mostly boys – keep having to reach into the vats with their bare arms to clear obstructions. And they also climb into the vats and stamp on the fabric with their feet in the toxic brine. After the dyeing process, the webs of fabric are hung to dry on lines that are hundreds of yards long. The fleece fabric then undergoes a special treatment: it is drawn through a vat with a solution that coats it to prevent pilling.

September 15, 2005, 7:45 a.m. Hassan was again waiting in his tuk-tuk at the front gate of the dyeworks. Four large bolts of fleece and one small one were crammed into his tuk-tuk. The small bolt was bright red. Loaded to the roof, the tuk-tuk rattled through the factory gate and set out for the Garni International textile factory.

At the same time, a couple hundred seamstresses were waiting there. The guards open the gates for only ten minutes. For some of the sewers it isn't easy to get there on time, since they don't own any clocks and there aren't any hanging in public places.

Hassan arrived at the textile factory shortly before 8:30 a.m. The gate was opened for him and he drove through. As the gate was closing, a petite young worker squeezed through at the last moment. It was seventeen-year-old Taslima, who ran directly into the factory and up the stairs to her floor. A guard shouted after her: "You lousy toad! The next time I'll slam the gate in your face!" That's how things are here: The young sewers, all between sixteen and thirty years old, are not treated in a very friendly way.

Taslima entered her production hall on the third floor. There were more than eighty sewing machines lined up in two long rows. She sat down at her place right in the middle. She would sit there for the next eleven to twelve hours and do nothing else but sew. Behind her the cut pieces of fleece piled up. Her department had been working for two days on a huge order for fleece vests.

She took a back piece and pinned it to a front piece, into which a pocket had already been sewn. Click, click, click, click – and the first seam at the shoulder was done. Next came the side seam. Click, click, click, click. And then the left front ...

Taslima was happy to be able to be sitting at a machine. For her first six months she was an helper, assisting five sewers and receiving only half the wages of a sewer. But she learned quickly and when one of the women in her group was absent, in no time she was sitting at her sewing table.

Click, click, click, click. Taslima adeptly attached the collar and sewed it on. She trimmed the sleeves with bias tape, turned up and sewed the lower edge of the vest, and finally put in the zipper. The first of countless vests that she would sew today was done. And no one snapped at her for coming late or – even worse – threatened a wage deduction.

The hall was overcrowded, poorly lit, and barely ventilated. Since the monsoon season was just ending, there was water everywhere. It smelled mildewy and was terribly humid. Breathing alone made you start sweating, and when you worked at a fast pace the sweat ran down your body in rivulets.

At the latest by the second or third piece of clothing she sewed, Taslima's hands started working automatically. Her thoughts drifted out of the dark, stuffy hall and back to her family. She lives out in the countryside, three hours' drive with the minibus. She can get a few days off only every two or three months to visit her family. She imagined the whole neighborhood gathered in the house of her uncle: twenty to thirty people assembled in front of the only television in the village. In Bangladesh there are only six televisions for every one hundred residents; the ratio is even lower in rural areas. So everyone gets together to watch TV; it is a social event.

However, three-quarters of the broadcasting of the private stations is nothing but commercials. It's really crazy, so much advertising in a country in which half the people survive on less than one euro per day and will never buy any of the advertised products. There are commercials for new cars and cell phones, for especially high-quality mustard oil for cooking, and cosmetic articles for women.

The BTV public station, on the other hand, offers a lot of educational programming. This is the TV channel of Taslima's favorite show. It is also the favorite show of all girls and young women in Bangladesh: *Meena* – a cartoon series comparable to *Heidi*. Ten-year-old Meena is an especially courageous girl. She likes to go to school, is smarter than everyone else in her family, and she refuses to accept discrimination against girls. She fights against the practices in which underage girls are forced to get married, girls are not allowed to receive an education, and they are not sent to a doctor when they are sick.

Girls and women usually watch television among themselves. If men are around, they moan and groan. They don't like shows like *Meena*. They want women to stay at home, blindly obey their husbands, and hand over the money they earn.

Click, click, click, click! Men also call the shots in the textile factory. The sewers are not allowed to stand up without permission of the supervisor. They are not allowed to go to the toilet without permission. They cannot even speak without permission!

Kommentar: Wenn der Bezug zu *Heidi* für Englischlesende unangemessen wäre, dann eventuell einfach: the cartoon series *Meena*.

“You are the daughter of a dog!” could be heard droning through the hall. The women get downright harassed by the supervisors – and today they seemed to be particularly angry. But why? Click, click, click, click. After what seemed to Taslima like millions of seams, they all finally heard the call they longed for: “Lunchtime – half hour break, not a second more!” The workers spread out over the entire factory grounds and sat down in small groups. They all ate and talked at the same time. And a rumor spread from group to group: The order of fleece vests had to be completed that same day. And no one on the third floor could go home until the work was finished! Oh no, thought Taslima, and gobbled down the lunch she brought with her to work: cold rice with vegetables. The women have to spend part of their lunch break standing in line to use the toilets, since they never know when they’ll get another chance.

Click, click, click, click. Taslima was back at her workplace. She barely had a chance to relax during the short break. But she is still young and full of energy. And she has a plan: Under no circumstances does she want to end up like her mother, who had eight children and never gets out of the house. She cooks for everyone and waits until everyone has finished eating – and then she eats the leftovers. Taslima and her sister are the only ones in the family who can read and write.

With help from the relatives, Taslima’s parents were able to buy a small piece of land. Their hut is on it, as is her mother’s small vegetable garden. But if her parents wanted to do farming, they’d have to lease the land from a large landowner, who would then demand half their harvest. In order to survive, Taslima’s father tries to find work during the monsoon season in Dhaka or Chittagong doing unskilled odd jobs.

No, Taslima would do it differently. She would take out a small loan from the Grameen Bank. Grameen Bank is very unusual and it exists only in Bangladesh. It charges very little interest and there are two conditions to get a loan: The family cannot have any land, store, or tuk-tuk of its own, and the borrower must be a woman. Grameen Bank knows that women are hit the hardest by poverty. That is why they use their money more wisely. Men often want to show off to the other men and then they spend most of their money on nonsense.

“What?! You want to go to the toilet again? To hang around and be lazy?!” the voice of the supervisor pervaded the hall.

The same day, 8:00 p.m. The regular work shift of ten to twelve hours was over. Taslima felt as if she had been sitting at the sewing machine for days already. But she and her coworkers were not allowed to stop. So the rumor was true: the order of 3,000 fleece vests for Germany

had to be finished by the next morning! Click, click, click, click ... another collar seam! Taslima had been tired for a long time and her arms were so weak, it felt as if jugs filled with water were hanging from them. But worst of all was that she could no longer manage to think of nice things. Now and then her eyelids slipped shut out of exhaustion and then she imagined something terrible: Water started coming in from all sides, through doors and walls, while she and her family were sleeping on the ground!

Every year her parents' house gets cut off by masses of water during the monsoon season and is halfway destroyed by the hurricanes. In order to be able to repair it quickly, it is built only of clay, straw, bamboo, and plastic sheeting. But last year everything was different – much worse. The floods lasted especially long, from early July until mid-September. The rivers overflowed their banks and flooded the lower lying regions before the higher areas gradually flooded as well. In the end only isolated villages poked out of the endless masses of water like little islands. There were no longer any streets, and there was no work. The only people who could move around at all were those who had boats. Even worse, although they were surrounded by water, there was a scarcity of good, clean, drinking water. It was difficult to cook meals. The women in the village had to share the one dry fireplace to cook.

In August the water level did not fall as it usually does, but instead started to rise again. Taslima's family quickly built a platform with barely enough space for all of them and their cow. Then one night they were all awakened when water started coming into the house and the clay walls collapsed. At some point Taslima and her siblings were up to their hips in water. In the morning the family left the hut and spent a few weeks with relatives in the city. During this time they were only able to survive because they had taken out a loan. But it was very expensive: the local moneylender demanded twenty percent interest – not per year, but per month! Her parents are stilling paying back the loan with part of Taslima's income.

Click, click ... oops! Taslima jumped with a start. She almost pricked her hand! When the women get tired and exhausted, accidents occur with the needles or sharp knives. She must never, never, never let that happen – she thought – because now that she has a job in the textile factory her family has a steady income for the first time. And that is also why Taslima would never even consider giving up the job, even if she is sometimes on the verge of collapsing from fatigue. Then she simply wipes away her tears, thinks of her family, and continues working.

11:05 p.m. Taslima and her coworkers had been working nonstop at the sewing machines for sixteen hours. The only break they had was at lunchtime. They had now completed 889 vests. Taslima had to go to the toilet urgently for hours already. But since 8 p.m. the supervisor had not allowed any women out anymore. Instead he complained the whole time, “You good-for-nothings are as slow as snails.”

The bolts of beige, blue, and brown fleece fabric were gradually getting smaller. Hopefully there will be enough fabric, Taslima prayed, or else they would be beaten. Click, click, click, click ...

1:10 a.m. They ran out of fleece fabric. Only small scraps were lying on the cutting tables. The foreman shouted to the cutters: “You dogs. You cut the pattern pieces too large! I’ll deduct that from your pay!” Taslima could not take it anymore. She stood up, walked down the aisles and looked all over for usable pieces of fleece. What would Meena, her TV heroine, do now? Then Taslima caught sight of a small bolt of bright red fleece leaning up against a small alcove. “Here! Here is some fabric!” She dragged the bolt out of the corner.

“But that is bright red!” scolded one of the cutters.

“So what!? Some Germans will certainly like the color!”

“Men in bright red vests?” The cutter looked at the supervisor questioningly. He shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t care! The main thing is that we all get to go home soon!”

So they took the bright red fleece fabric. Click, click, click, click. In no time, eleven bright red vests were sewn. My fleece vest had barely seen the light of day when it was stuffed into a carton with other vests. It had been a terrible night. But still, none of the sewers would ever quit her job.

LOW WAGES, HIGH RISK –
TEXTILE WORKERS IN BANGLADESH

April 11-12, 2005. A nine-story textile factory collapsed in the middle of the night in Savar, a suburb of Dhaka. The building had presumably been shoddily built, since it had been completed only a few months earlier. The rescue teams did not have any suitable clearing equipment and they spent eight days searching for people under the rubble, sometimes using their bare hands. The sad outcome of the disaster: 61 dead and several hundred injured. The casualty figures were also so high because the factories have no escape routes. Most of the roughly 3,000 factories that produce for export do not comply with the occupational safety laws. The only entrance is usually locked during working hours so no one can sneak in or out.

Overcrowded rooms, poor lighting, unsatisfactory safety measures. Is it any wonder that major accidents continue to occur? Since 1990 there have been 356 deaths in textile factories and 2,500 serious injuries. No one even counts the slight injuries. About two million people work in the textile industry, ninety percent of them young women under twenty-five years of age. They toil away for up to 100 hours per week (in Germany there is a 38.5 hour workweek). The legal minimum wage was set in 1994: A helper gets 930 takas per month (equivalent to 12,40 euros); a good sewer receives 1710 takas (19 euros); and an experienced sewer gets 2100 (23 euros). But the cost for a room alone costs the sewer 800 takas (9 euros). The women need the high amount of overtime in order to support their families. But often they receive, if anything at all, only part of their wages for the overtime hours. And they are harassed and beaten by the supervisors. This is why women working in the factories are demanding fair treatment. And they are fighting for a higher minimum wage, one which would enable them to support themselves and their families. But factory owners point to the increased competition worldwide and then demand the impossible: The workers are told to provide better quality and they receive even lower wages.