

## Branding in Bangladesh: A Historical Perspective

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### Abstract

*Brands are an indispensable part of modern business. A brand is not just a name or a static symbol. A brand has evolved to become a living, breathing, entity. Although any historical preview requires a clear understanding of the concept, for brand it is difficult if one intends to assess its status at two different points in time, having a totally different meaning in the minds. Just to place the perspective, it had a status of name or symbols that identify the unique source of product or service to that which should drive the design of the total customer experience derived out of a unique trust and emotional attachment. The purpose of this article is to examine branding from a historical perspective after a very brief exploration of its modern meaning along with to portrait the picture of Bangladeshi branding.*

**Key words:** Brand, Branding, Symbol, & Historical Preview.

### Introduction

Brands serve several valuable functions. At their most basic level, brands serve as markers for the offering of a firm. For customers, brands can simplify choice, promise a particular quality level, reduce risk, and/or engender trust. Brands are built on the product itself, the accompanying marketing activity, and the use (or nonuse) by customers as well as others. Brands thus reflect the complete experience that customers have with products. Brands also play an important role in determining the effectiveness of marketing efforts such as advertising and channel placement. Finally, brands are an asset in the financial sense. Thus, brands manifest their impact at three primary levels—customer market, product market, and financial market. The value accrued by these various benefits is often called brand equity. Branding has come a long way in Bangladesh and also around the world. The concept of branding in Bangladesh existed from the pre-liberation era. At that time the magnitude of branding quite minute and not that much extended. This was due to the MNC's who use to exercise the branding concept for the Bangladeshi market. During the yester years of early induction of branding, the concept was not taken with much value due to the monopoly market. Branding was limited to focusing on merely creating buzz in the market.

### Methodology

The research has been conducted through extensive archival and historical research. There has been wide ranging reading of manuscripts and various types of literature.

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These information have been collected along with author's personal comment. The results of the archival and historical research have then been matched with more recent discussion on aspect of branding globally and Bangladesh perspectives. Additionally, this methodology moves beyond merely chronicling the past to providing a qualitative interpretation of cause of change through time through the analysis of particular episodes or empirical cases to explain broader social phenomena. Therefore, investigation, synthesis and interpretation are all incorporated in this approach, as outlined by Smith and Lux (1993), in order to better explain the evolution of brands.

### **What is a Brand?**

A brand is an identity with meaning. Meaning evoked with favorable feelings or associations in the minds of the consumer. In the absence of brand we have only a nameless entity or a mere tag of identification. A brand is projected through its name, the style of writing, product design and the packaging it has. Everything is designed to connect to consumer's sense of color, smell, taste, and sound. People view the world through their individual senses, but the brand targets on impacting all the senses at once. No distraction, no fear; the true motto for a brand to expand.

Numerous articles have been written about branding, brand extensions, brand value, brand image, brand strategy, brand associations, brand attitudes and other brand expressions. There are so many expressions that you might wonder what the difference actually is. One is tempted to believe that several of these constructs were created simply to give an impression of something unique, while all that is said is that the customer's perception of the brand should be consistent with what the brand actually is, not worse, and not better than it actually is, whatever criteria is being used by the consumer. Most branding literature is, in fact, about product development and strategy, marketing communications, product positioning and similar strategies. In other words, 'branding' is for the most part about basic marketing activities.

According to Kapferer (2004), a brand can convey up to six levels of meaning: attributes, benefits, values, culture, personality and user. The first two levels are related to the product performance, while the next three are related to product perceptions, or nonproduct related values, (Park and Srinivasan, 1994). Keller (1993) says: 'A brand is a product, but one that adds other dimensions that differentiate it in some way from other products designed to satisfy the same need'. These differences may be 'rational and tangible—related to the product performance of the brand — or more symbolic, emotional and intangible — related to what the brand represents' (p. 42). In Keller's proposal, 'product' attributes must be equal, in other words, equal just as Kapferer's two first meanings, attributes and benefits, are equalized quantities. Keller's last expression, '... but one that adds other dimensions' seems to include Kapferer's next three values: culture, personality and user. Fournier (1998) claims, 'A brand may enjoy selected

animistic properties but it is not a vital entity. In fact, the brand has no objective existence at all: it is simply a collection of perceptions held in the mind of the consumer’.

A brand is a set of mental associations, held by consumer, which add to the perceived value of a product (Keller, 2003; Cravens & Piercy, 2003). A brand is expressed through written, audio, and visual content, which is interpreted mental filters of human beings (White, web reference: Czinkonta and Ronkainen, 2001; Kotler and Keller 2006).

Coming out of the shell of product branding today, brand managers are branding every possible thing on this earth. The practice of branding in the changed business environment extends across a wide spectrum, from product to companies, to CEOs, to celebrities and to the extreme end of religion. Today, anything that falls under definition of a common noun can be a brand.

## **History of Brand**

The term ‘brand’ became extended to ‘branding’ as an act where stamping with embers or hot irons (also known as ‘pyroglyphics’) was utilized on humans to identify harlots or wrongdoers (Henning, 2000) or for identification purposes on animals (Arnold & Hale, 1940). A modern understanding of brand provided by the American Marketing Association (AMA) broadens this definition to ‘a name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or combination of them, intended to identify goods or services of one seller or group of sellers to differentiate them from those of competitors’ (Kotler & Keller, 2006, p. 274). According to Kotler, Keller, and Cunningham (2006, p. 275), ‘the earliest signs of branding for these purposes in Europe were the medieval guilds’ requirements that craftspeople put trademarks on their products to protect themselves and consumers against inferior quality’. This idea of trademarking for protection has become important in current society as a way to protect and sustain branding practices. According to George (2006, p. 175), ‘it regulates who can use communicative signs such as words, names, logos, colors, shapes and smells, and how those marks can be used’. In this article, we provide earlier evidence, by referring to various artifacts, which the practice of branding has existed since ancient times. Examples from the following periods are provided as evidence to this effect.

Branding as a concept is older than the modern theory. Even the word would have been recognized by the Vikings who used ‘brandr’ (Keller 1998) to signify the burning of the owner’s mark on livestock. It takes on a more recognizable meaning in 1587 when it meant as a stamp of quality. (Harvard Business Review 1999; Koehn 2001) This begins to tie up with more modern notions in 1602 when it was used to suggest an indelible stamp on the memory, perhaps unconsciously prompted by the iconic Tudor representations of the monarch (King 1990) presented to their subjects as a ‘brand’. Borden (1964) still saw branding in terms of trademarks as one element of the marketing mix whose main importance was the enabling of differentiation between ‘individualized’

or 'family' brands. By 1979 the brand had become an entity in its own right (Day et al. 1979) with expressed concerns about brand-switching between frequently purchased goods.

It is interesting to note that in a 1923 book Hotchkiss and Franken suggest that 'the remarkable increase in the use of national advertising during the past half century is perhaps sufficient evidence of its value . . . The goodwill of certain well-advertised names and brands is valued in the millions of dollars' (Hotchkiss & Franken, 1923, p. 1). Later they point to how things were different in the near past than in their day in the 1920s; 'It should be remembered, however, that a few years ago consumers did not know men's clothing or flour or fruit or coffee by manufacturers' brands. The habit of brand discrimination was established by advertising in these cases' (Hotchkiss & Franken, 1923, p. 34).

As such, brand personality – the most recent addition to the characteristics of brands – could not have been a component of brands prior to this period of time. Rather than a static notion of personality traits, brands actually evolve with their consumers. This idea is echoed in a recent book by James Twitchell (2004) which has a basic premise that much of our shared knowledge about ourselves comes to us through a commercial process of storytelling called branding – and we believe that this requires a mass media agent. This enhanced notion of brand begins to help answer the question of many social scientists regarding why individuals (particularly in western cultures) have been subject to such high levels of perpetual desire as evidenced by high levels of consumerism (Campbell, 1987; Leach, 1984; McKendrick, Brewer, & Plumb, 1982).

Goodyear (1996) described the evolution of brand in six stages. The first four stages represent traditional classic marketing approach where the value of brand was instrumental as it offered customers certain ends to achieve; the last two stages represent post-modern approach to branding.

Stage I: Unbranded Goods-in early days, goods were unbranded. [Products such as matchbox and paper pins still fall under such category]

Stage II: Brand as a Reference-with the emergence of mass production, customer had a choice. This forced companies to differentiable their offerings to customers. At this stage of branding, differentiation became the driving force, which was primarily achieved though changing physical product attributes.

Stage III: Brand as a Personality-with the passage of time, it became extremely essential for companies to differentiate brands on rational or functional attributes, as many products started making the same claim. Therefore, to differentiate their product form competitors, marketers started personifying their brands. Beauty soap for film star- Lux is the classic example of brand as a personality.

Stage IV: Brand as an Icon – Marlboro represents independence; Nike stands for winning and Rolls Royce as an epitome of luxury. All these brands are deeply rooted in consumers mind – they are brand icons. In this stage it appeared as if consumer owned the brands and they used it to create self-identity.

Stage V: Brand as a Company- personifying company as a brand is an ongoing change that also marks the post-modern marketing. Post-modern marketing is about consumers being proactively involved in the brand creation process. Brand as a company is a stage where a company considers strengthening the total access of information about product and service with a customer enhancing relationship.

Stage VI: Brand as a Policy- The United Colors of Benetton ad campaign creates an ethical unity, Body Shop and brings to light social issues like environment and treatment of third world people. Such are the examples of brands in the stage of brand as a policy: Today, only a few companies have entered this stage, wherein their brands are closely identified with ethical, social and political issues that are the constituent elements of the brand as a policy.

These six stages clearly define the development of a brand from a ‘me-too’ product to a power brand stage and beyond.

## **History of Branding in Bangladesh: At a Glance**

The oldest brands of Bangladesh, unlike the western world, are traced to textiles. The textile sector created distinctive brands in the form of Jamdani and Maslin. The word Jamdani is of Persian origin, from 'Jam' meaning flower and 'Dani' meaning a vase or a container. The earliest mention of jamdani and its development as an industry is found in Kautikaya (about 3rd century BC), where it is stated that this fine cloth was used in Bangla and Pundra. Jamdani is believed to be a fusion of the ancient cloth-making techniques of Bengal (perhaps 2,000 years old) with the muslins produced by Bengali Muslims since the 14th century. In his 9th century book *Sril Silat-ut-Tawarikh* the Arab geographer Solaiman mentions the fine fabric produced in a state called Romy, which according to many, is the old name of the territory now known as Bangladesh. In the 14th century, Ibn Batuta profusely praised the quality of cotton textiles of Sonargaon, near Dhaka. Towards the end of the 16th century the English traveler Ralph Fitch and historian Abul Fazl also praised the muslin made at Sonargaon. These brands came out to create a differentiation in the minds of the upper echelon of the society with their characters of quality and uniqueness. Today Jamdani has moved a step forward; it is a unique design depicted in a variety of clothings, across demography and has created a market for millions all over the globe. Further new brand like Mirpur Katan Benarasi have emerged in the sector and is taking great strides forward. This brand has uniquely positioned itself as the dream outfit during wedding. In addition, boutique is led by Aarong, with its unique feature of housing and rural uniqueness through urban touch.

Back then sweetmeat shops were very limited. Most of the Misti Karigors or Moyra at that time came from Hindu families. In Dhaka during the end of British rule there were some mishti ferrywallahs. Halwa and Morobba was the most popular treats. Mishti sellers were known as 'Halwaiwallah'. Around 1885 to 1890 Mother Boksho and Alauddin came to Dhaka from Lakhnow, India (Dhaka Pachas Baras Pahle by Hakim Habibur Rahman, translated by Hashem Sufi). They opened sweetmeat shops in Chakbazar of Dhaka. They introduced Hindustani mishti to Bangladesh. Kalachad appeared in the scene before 1947. Back then, main ingredient of Bangali mishti was Chhana. Boksho and Alauddin introduced maaoa. The most popular mishti at that time was Chondropuli. Back then shaal leaves were used instead of packets. Relatives used to visit with specially designed clay pots full of sweets. The art of making this delightful dessert is being passed down generation by generation. All around Bangladesh many tempting flavours were created by karigars whose names are still remembered and the flavours are still produced by their heirs. Chomchom of Porabari, Tangail is one such flavour that is yet desired by many. There is a saying that sweet water of the area is the secret behind its amazing taste. Roshmalai from Comilla is another wonder. In the early stages of 19 century it was called maliakari, with a little modification it became khirbhog and finally it became known as the roshmalai. Balish mishti of Netrokona is another awesome treat. Because of its huge size it is called balish (pillow). One piece of Balish can weigh up to two kgs. One interesting fact about this giant is that it can be preserved for several days without refrigeration. During the summer it remains perfect for 2 to 3 days and during winter it can last for seven days. Jogar mishti of Patuakhali, Ghuthiar shondesh of Barishal are also two precious tradition of Bengal. However, many renowned flavours have lost their originality because the use of artificial elements and powder milk is rising. Yet without any doubt Mishti is still an essential part of Bengali lifestyle. Chic paper packets may have replaced the clay pots or shaal leaves. "Mukh mishti kora" is still the popular expression during happy moments, as it adds flavours to life. Gradually more shops appeared. The tradition modified a bit, as people often brought in readymade sweets. Apart from old famous Aadi Moronchad and Alauddin Sweets many luxurious sweetmeat shops like Muslim sweets, Prominet, Rosh, Premium are now in town. The unique features of sweets were embedded in the taste, color, shape, and quality. They were branded by the place of origin from which they are originated.

Table 1: A brief history of sweetmeat in Bangladesh

<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. It is believed, a man (Dasarat by name) from Asam, first started to make Chomchom with the sweet water of Dhaleswary river mixed with the thick milk of Porabari.</li><li>2. Gopal pali prosida of Muktagacha, Mymensingh is on the foot of the Garo hills and has attained legendary status for its sweet named Monda.</li><li>3. For Pera and Rashmalai , Matribhandar and Bhogoboti of Comilla are considered the origin.</li><li>4. Natore of Rajshahi on the other hand brought another brand called</li></ol>
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Kachagolla by a small sweetmeat shop that made for visitors of a nearby hindu temple.

5. Dhaka became capital of Bengal 400 years ago and since then it had established its own brand of sweets of which Amritiand Pranhara were most known.
6. In the past, during dry season, large temporary sheds and buffalo sheds used to be erected in pastures in North Bengal. Around this sheds grew a flourishing yoghurt industry. To make yoghurt at these bathans, farmers used to boil milk and render it down to one-fourth its original quantity. This is why Bogra yoghurt is considered unique.

The third level of branding in Bangladesh is observed in the education sector which made a drastic change in the education system in Bangladesh. Dhaka University is such an educational institute once upon a time called “Oxford of the East” established in 1<sup>st</sup> July, 1921. Today, there are 13 faculties, 66 departments, 9 institutes, 34 research centres, 1,600 teachers, about 30,000 students, 18 residential halls and 2 hostels. Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology, abbreviated as BUET, is another most prestigious institution for higher studies in the country. About 5500 students are pursuing undergraduate and postgraduate studies in engineering, architecture, planning and science in this institution. At present, BUET has sixteen teaching departments under five faculties and it has three institutes. Every year the intake of undergraduate students is around 900, while the intake of graduate students in Masters and PhD programs is around 1000. A total of about five hundred teachers are teaching in these departments and institutes. BUET is the oldest institution for the study of Engineering and Architecture in Bangladesh. The history of this institution dates back to the days of Dhaka Survey School which was established at Nalgola, in Old Dhaka in 1876 to train Surveyors for the then Government of Bengal of British India. As the years passed, the Survey School became the Ahsanullah School of Engineering offering three-year diploma courses in Civil, Electrical and Mechanical Engineering. In recognition of the generous financial contribution from the then Nawab of Dhaka, it was named after his father Khawja Ahsanullah. It moved to its present premises in 1912. In 1947, the School was upgraded to Ahsanullah Engineering College as a Faculty of Engineering under the University of Dhaka, offering four-year bachelor’s courses in Civil, Electrical, Mechanical, Chemical and Metallurgical Engineering. In order to create facilities for postgraduate studies and research, Ahsanullah Engineering College was upgraded to the status of a University in 1962 and was named East Pakistan University of Engineering and Technology. After the war of Liberation in 1971, Bangladesh became an independent state and the university was renamed as the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology. Till today, it has produced around 25,000 graduates in different branches of engineering and architecture, and has established a good reputation all over the world for the quality of its graduates, many of whom have excelled in their

profession in different parts of the globe. Business education as the main stream (commodity) with some top university name like North-South, IUB, BRAC, AIUB, UIU, East-West, Southeast, BUBT, etc are the most renowned private university in Bangladesh. However, in the business education IBA remained as the top brand.

Prior to the independence of the country and after the emergence of electronic media, some specific European brands gained prominence of , the well known FMGC and packaged food included Lux, Vaseline, Lifebuoy, Lipton, Robinsons Barley, in particular and household durables and transport included, Philips for electronics, for cars Austin, Volkswagan, Morris Minor, Fiat etc. Trucks and buses were primarily by Fiat and Bedford. Some of the major bicycles were Beco and Rally. For motorbike it was exclusively Vespa. For ceiling fans, the most prominent brands were National, and Millat. Financial services were led by Habib and Lloyeds. In the shoe market Bata held the leadership and then Radu. This era of Bangladesh was gradually experiencing urban consumerism; however, at the semi urban and rural level, the disparity was still significant. The primary cause was communication.

During and right after the liberation war of the country, some national brands surfaced. Some of the major ones were; in the FMCG sector: Tibet, Piya, Gaco, Balaka, Lalbag, etc; Financial Institution: Sonali, Rupali, Janata, Pubali, Agrani, Krishi, etc; Garments: Gentila, Ferdaus, etc; Electric Products & Electronics: National and Shoinik; Greeting Cards: Azad Products; Furniture: Otobi, and so on. These prominence of local brands was primarily a nationalistic feeling of the population in general and these brands were accepted even if there were alternatives available, irrespective of the quality of the product. However, the international brand persisted to maintain their presence. For example, Soft drinks such as Coke, Pepsi, & 7up continued to dictate terms.

The automobile industry on the other hand, saw emergence of Japanese brands like Toyota, Honda, etc. The electronic sector saw popularity of Singer, Panasonic, Phillips, etc. Tobacco maintained a major share of the mind as well as the market. The major brands were Akij, Star, King Stork for the rural market and Capstan, Scissors, and later Gold Leaf, Gold Flake, and 555 for the urban market.

With the change from a more controlled to an open market economy, the scenario again changed. The influx of brands shot up and the consumers were flooded with all kinds of brands. The overall growth and number of brands since 1985 and today have been almost 88% compared to 17% during the period between 1971 to 1985. Brands have emerged at all levels. Some major brands shifts from local to international have been observed in case of FMCG (Parachute, Dove, Clear, Pantene, etc), international to local in case of pharmaceuticals (Square, BEXIMCO, Opsonin, Acme, etc). Public controlled to private both local and multinational in case of financial institutions (IFIC, Grameen, Prime, Eastern, BRAC, DBBL, Standard Chartered, HSBC, etc.) and the likes. For FMCG today the major regional brands dictate the market. However some major local brands have made inroads for short bursts of periods using unique differentiation strategies, of the



most talked about are Aromatic, Keya, Pocha, Meril, Magnolia, Jui, etc. For soft drinks the traditional international brands have been challenged by others such as RC, and Pran, while health and energy drinks have entered the list. Mineral water entered the market with Everest, and Duncan as the market innovators. Today Mum, and Fresh are the leaders who, in effect, were laggards. With the advent of the market economy, the ceramic sector has made big presence in the international market, with Monno, and Shinepukur as the trend setters. A major contribution is made by the telecom industry with the emergence of the telecom revolution so to say. Four major brands currently dictate the market with Grameen as the leader though Citycell was the first company who started this business in Bangladesh. Along with telecom, the mobile phone started its move with Nokia and Samsung with leaders. The packaged food industry made a huge jump from commodity to packaged brands. The items range to all the way from cereals to spices, Radhuni being the leader. The emergence of super stores and self-service stores during the 90s further increased the importance of branding. However, most of these were me-too products.

With the advent and growth of branding, media growth has eminent. The privatization of the media resulted in emergence of private TV channels by mid 90s which strongly supported the growth of brands. However, the actual burst of the private channels during 2001-2006 resulted in low level of capacity utilization of air time. The major channels are at present, Channel I, ATN, and NTV. The TV market during the period was dominated by Sony, Sanyo, Toshiba, and Singer, but now local brands are slowly entering the bottom of the pyramid. Furthermore, the print media has two major players, one each in English and Bengali (Daily Star and Proton Alo); while FM radio is coming with Radio Today and Radio Furti as the leaders. Amongst the new industry, Real Estate has made a huge presence, some of the strong real estate brands are Concord, Asset, Sheltech, and Bay etc.

Table 2: Most popular brands in Bangladesh

<b>Product Category</b>	<b>Leading Brands</b>	<b>Establishment Year</b>
Bank	Sonali Bank Limited	1972 (2007- Date of Incorporation)
University	Dhaka University	1921
Mobile Company	Grameenphone	1997
Cell Phone	Nokia	1865 (1992- Introduced Cell Phone)
Furniture	Otobi	1975
Newspaper	Prothom Alo	1998
Soap	Lux	1924
Shampoo	Sunsilk	1954
Soft Drinks	7up	1920
Toothpaste	Close up	1984
Electronics	Singer	1851 (1905- Began Journey in Sub-Continent)
Fashion House	Aarong	1978

By the beginning of the century, further shifts have been observed. The global economic and political shift is reengineering the brand basket. Chinese categories with huge price advantages are entering in all sectors. The Chinese Huawei is making inroads. Private airlines have entered the market with GMG at the lead. Private hospitals have been launched with huge impact, Square, United (Local) and Apollo (Regional) are the life saving brands. The telecom industry is practically leading the business sectors in terms of growth and thus all ancillary industry brands linked to this are having huge growth. With commercialization of natural gas for the transport sector, the CNG conversion plants are picking up with Rahimafrooz, Navana etc taking the lead. Importantly, with the shortage of power on the other hand, storage battery manufacturers have helped the industry to become international and are also in the IPS market. This industry is lead by Rahimafrooz. The textile sector, which gave birth to the first brands of the country, is now the major foreign currency earner for the country producing all the top brands of the world. With the growth in population, the agriculture sector is experiencing entry of branded seeds and even hybrid and genetic varieties.

Table 3: Examples of unique brands created in Bangladesh

Name	Value Innovation
Aarong	A brand built around heritage.
Fakhruddin	A brand built around Mughal cuisine.
Haji Biryani	A brand built around the unique recipe of mustard oil-based biryani.
Jamdani	A unique brand based on unique design and weaving.
Maslin	A unique brand of fabric lost in the shrouds of history.
Grameen Bank	A bank based on the novelty, “micro credit” for which Dr. Md. Yunus received the Nobel Prize.

All the above – mentioned successful brands have one thing in common: Differentiation/Novelty. The concept of “Micro Credit” is a novelty in a new category in the realm of credit system which attracted immediate global attraction.

## Conclusion

It is evident that Bangladesh is a market where brands were born and sustained. Today as we stand, the first brands of the country still stand with pride, reflecting a long heritage of success. The story of brands of Bangladesh is a clear reflection of the premise based on which branding in general is likely to succeed. It is obvious that me-too products and those having no unique value proposition are likely to fail in this market. This is a market where brands will succeed if marketed with clear divergent and natural differentiation strategy and supported through scientifically managing and caring of the brand. In addition the nationalist emotion must be associated to ensure long term sustainability. Last but not the least; we should nurture our brands properly which will create a different image globally.

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