

The Silent Revolution: How RPA and IIoT Are Reshaping Bangladesh's Production Lines.

Quazi Nazmul Hossain

Group CTO at Apex Holdings Limited

Abstract - Bangladesh's manufacturing sector—particularly its ready-made garment (RMG) industry—is undergoing a profound yet largely unnoticed transformation driven by Robotic Process Automation (RPA) and the Industrial Internet of Things (IIoT). This silent revolution is redefining production efficiency, quality assurance, and global competitiveness. Through the integration of sensor-enabled machinery, real-time data analytics, automated workflows, and semi-autonomous production systems, factories are improving output consistency, reducing defects, and minimizing downtime. These technologies also enable predictive maintenance, supply-chain transparency, and faster decision-making, helping Bangladeshi producers meet stringent international buyer demands. However, the transition presents significant challenges, including high capital investment requirements, skills gaps within the workforce, and concerns related to job displacement—particularly for low-skill labour segments. Despite these hurdles, evidence suggests that the strategic adoption of RPA and IIoT can enhance Bangladesh's position in the global manufacturing ecosystem by enabling smarter, more resilient, and more sustainable production lines. This paper explores the drivers, implications, and future trajectory of this digital-industrial shift, emphasizing the need for coordinated industry and policy responses to ensure an inclusive and competitive transformation.

Keywords - RPA, Industrial Internet of Things (IIoT), Smart Manufacturing, Bangladesh RMG Industry, Automation, Digital Transformation, Predictive Maintenance, Industry 4.0, Production Efficiency, Workforce Reskilling, Smart Factories, Manufacturing Competitiveness, Data-Driven Operations, Textile Industry Innovation.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Apparel (RMG) Industry

In Bangladesh, the gap between a buyer placing an order and the goods shipping is often 90 days. Competitors like Vietnam are pushing to lower this. The Ready-Made Garment (RMG) sector is the engine of Bangladesh's economy, contributing over 80% of the country's export earnings. However, the era of relying solely on low-cost labor is fading. To survive the "Fourth Industrial Revolution" (Industry 4.0), Bangladeshi factories are increasingly turning to Robotic Process Automation (RPA) and the Internet of Things (IoT).

IoT: The "Eyes and Ears" of the Smart Factory

Real-Time Production Monitoring (Digital Sewing Lines)

- How it works: Smart sensors (like RFID tags or Wi-Fi modules) are attached to sewing machines. They count stitches, needle run time, and idle time.

- Impact: Traditionally, line supervisors manually recorded hourly production on whiteboards. IoT digitizes this instantly. Management can see exactly which line is falling behind target in real-time on a tablet and intervene immediately.

Predictive Maintenance

- How it works: Vibration and temperature sensors on expensive machinery (e.g., automatic cutters, spreaders) detect slight anomalies that precede a breakdown.
- Impact: Instead of waiting for a machine to break and halting a line for 4 hours, the system alerts maintenance teams to service the machine during a lunch break. This drastically reduces "unplanned downtime"



Sustainability & Utility Management (Green Factories)

- How it works: Smart flow meters monitor water usage in dyeing plants (ETP) and electricity consumption on the floor.
- Impact: With European buyers demanding strict environmental compliance, IoT provides immutable data logs proving that water was treated correctly and energy wasn't wasted. This is critical for factories competing for LEED certification.
- RPA: The "Digital Workforce" in the Office
- While IoT handles the machines, RPA handles the mountain of paperwork and data entry that merchandising, commercial, supply chain and planning teams face.

Automated Order Processing (Merchandising)

- The Pain Point: Merchandisers spend hours manually copying data from buyer tech packs (PDFs/Emails) into internal ERP systems.
- The RPA Solution: Bots can "read" emails from buyers (e.g., H&M, Zara), extract order details (size, color, quantity), and populate the factory's ERP system automatically.
- Benefit: Reduces order processing time from days to minutes and eliminates data entry errors (e.g., typing "1000" instead of "100").

Supply Chain & Inventory Tracking

The RPA Solution: Bots can automatically check inventory levels against incoming orders. If fabric stock is low, the bot can trigger a purchase requisition or alert the procurement team. It can also scrape shipping websites to track raw material

shipments and update the "Estimated Time of Arrival" (ETA) for planners.

Compliance & Payroll Reporting

The RPA Solution: Generating monthly compliance reports for buyers involves gathering data from HR, production, and safety departments. RPA can pull this data from different software and compile it into the standardized formats required by audit bodies like BGMEA or Accord/RSC.

Real-World Impact in Bangladesh

Adoption: Early adopters of digital tracking have moved away from manual "gum sheets" to digital dashboards, allowing them to predict delays before they happen.

Coats Digital (FastReactPlan): widely used in Bangladesh, this software integrates data (often fed by IoT/RPA sources) to optimize production planning, helping factories to reduce air freight costs by ensuring on-time delivery.

Quality Control: AI-driven computer vision (cameras inspecting fabric) is slowly replacing manual fabric inspection, reducing the Defect per Hundred Units (DHU) rate.

The Challenges of Adoption

Despite the benefits, the transition is not seamless.

- High Initial Capital: Installing thousands of sensors and licensing enterprise software is expensive. Giant factories are only proceeding with such digitalization.
- Skill Gap: There is a severe shortage of local engineers who can maintain IoT networks or script RPA bots. Factories often have to rely on expensive foreign consultants.
- Infrastructure: Unstable internet connections and power fluctuations can disrupt IoT networks, causing data gaps.
- Workforce Resistance: Mid-level management and workers often fear that "monitoring" is just a tool to punish them or that automation will cost them their jobs.

Future Outlook

The future of the Bangladesh RMG sector lies in a "Phygital" (Physical + Digital) approach.

- Short Term: Large factories will continue to adopt IoT for energy monitoring (to save costs) and RPA for various departments (to save time).
- Long Term: As wages rise and buyers demand shorter lead times (Fast Fashion), even smaller factories will be forced to adopt "Light IoT" solutions to remain competitive.

Practical Example A: The "Self-Healing" Supply Chain

The Old Way: A floor manager notices a shortage of zippers for a specific batch. They write it down, walk to the procurement office, and a purchase officer manually types a Purchase Order (PO) later that day. Result: A 24-hour delay.

The RPA + IIoT Way

- IIoT: RFID tags on inventory bins detect that zipper stock has dropped below 15%.
- RPA: A software bot receives this signal. It automatically logs into the supplier's portal, generates a PO for the exact quantity needed to finish the batch, and sends it.
- Result: Reordering happens in seconds, not hours, preventing line stoppages.

Practical Example B: Predictive Maintenance for Sewing Lines

The Old Way: A sewing machine motor burns out. The line stops. The mechanic is called. Production halts for 4 hours.

The RPA + IIoT Way

- IIoT: A vibration sensor on the sewing motor detects a slight irregular wobble (invisible to the human eye) that suggests a bearing is failing.
- RPA: The bot reads this sensor alert. It checks the mechanic's digital calendar, books a maintenance slot during the lunch break, and automatically issues a requisition slip for the replacement bearing from the warehouse.
- Result: Zero downtime. The machine is fixed before it ever breaks.

Sector 2: The Footwear & Leather Industry

The relocation from Hazaribagh to the Savar Tannery Industrial Estate was meant to modernize the sector, but the non-functional Central Effluent Treatment

Plant (CETP) remains a barrier to achieving Leather Working Group (LWG) certification. IoT offers a decentralized solution to monitor compliance and regain buyer trust.

- IoT (The Eyes & Ears): A network of physical sensors attached to machines, storage units, or environments that collect real-time data (e.g., a sensor detecting that a tanning drum is too hot).
- RPA (The Digital Hands): Software "bots" that mimic human actions on a computer. If IoT provides the data, RPA processes it (e.g., a bot reading the sensor data and automatically emailing the maintenance team to fix the drum).

Smart Effluent Monitoring (The "Blame Game" Solver) Currently, there are disputes over which tannery is discharging waste above the permitted limit, overloading the CETP.

- The IoT Solution: Install IoT flow meters and chemical sensors at the discharge point of each tannery unit.
- The Benefit: Real-time data logging to a central cloud dashboard. This creates an immutable record of compliance for international auditors, proving which specific units are adhering to environmental standards.

Precision Chemical Dosing

Leather processing is chemically intensive (Chrome, Formic Acid, etc.). Manual dosing leads to overuse, which increases costs and pollution load.

- The IoT Solution: Smart drums equipped with sensors that measure pH and chemical concentration in real-time.
- The Benefit: The system alerts operators exactly when the chemical reaction is complete, preventing "over-processing." This can reduce chemical costs by 15-20% and lower the toxicity of the wastewater.



Humidity & Temperature Control (Rawhide Preservation)

Bangladesh's humid climate is the enemy of rawhide storage.

- The IoT Solution: Smart sensors in storage warehouses that monitor humidity levels. If humidity spikes, the system automatically triggers dehumidifiers or ventilation fans.
- The Benefit: Drastic reduction in raw material spoilage (bacterial growth) before the tanning process even begins.
- While IoT handles the physical leather, RPA revolutionizes the digital workflow. In Bangladesh, "lead time" (time from order to shipment) is often dragged out by paperwork and manual data entry.

Automated Bill of Materials (BOM) Generation

For a footwear manufacturer receiving a tech pack from a buyer like Timberland or Decathlon involves complex calculations.

- The RPA Solution: When a design file is received, an RPA bot extracts the data and automatically populates the ERP system with the required Bill of Materials (leather consumption, thread, sole material, glue).
- The Benefit: Reduces BOM generation time from days to minutes, eliminating human calculation errors that lead to material shortages later.

Export Documentation & Customs Integration

Exporting from Bangladesh involves repetitive interactions with the Export Promotion Bureau (EPB), customs, and freight forwarders.

- The RPA Solution: Bots can auto-fill "Form-E", Commercial Invoices, and Packing Lists by pulling data directly from the factory's production orders. They can also scrape shipping websites to track vessel schedules.
- The Benefit: Eliminates data entry errors (which cause customs delays) and frees up supply chain officers to focus on negotiation rather than typing.

Vendor Management & Invoice Processing

Large manufacturers deal with hundreds of local suppliers for boxes, adhesives, and accessories.

- The RPA Solution: Bots can "read" incoming PDF invoices from suppliers via OCR (Optical Character Recognition), match them against the original Purchase Order (PO), and schedule payment if they match.
- The Benefit: Streamlines cash flow and improves relationships with the local supply chain.
- The true power emerges when these two systems talk to each other.

Practical Example C: Intelligent Leather Utilization

The Old Way: A master cutter inspects a hide for scratches and insect bites, then manually places dies to cut the leather. This relies heavily on human judgment and fatigue.

The RPA + IIoT Way

- IIoT: High-definition cameras scan the leather hide, mapping imperfections and grain direction digitally.
- RPA: The software takes this map and calculates the "nesting" (cutting pattern) to maximize yield. It then updates the Costing Sheet in the company's finance system to reflect the exact leather usage for that specific production run.
- Result: Waste is reduced by 15-20%, and accurate costing helps management price their shoes more competitively.

Practical Example D: Chemical Compliance in Sole Attachment

The Old Way: Workers manually mix adhesives for shoe soles. If the temperature or ratio is wrong, the sole separates after export, leading to massive claims from foreign buyers (e.g., Nike, Adidas, Timberland).

The RPA + IIoT Way:

- IIoT: Sensors inside the mixing tank monitor temperature, humidity, and chemical ratios in real-time.
- RPA: If the temperature deviates by even 1°C, the bot flags the specific batch number in the Quality Management System (QMS) and halts the generation of shipping labels for that batch until it is re-inspected.
- Result: 100% compliance transparency. The manufacturer can prove to the buyer that every shoe was bonded under perfect conditions.



The "Made in Bangladesh" Advantage

Adopting these technologies offers three exceptional benefits for Bangladeshi industrialists:

- Traceability for Western Buyers: European Union regulations (like the upcoming Digital Product Passport) require brands to know exactly where and how their goods were made. RPA can automatically compile these compliance reports from IIoT data, giving Bangladeshi factories a premium status.
- Beating the Labor Cost Curve: Wages in Bangladesh are rising. By automating the "boring" work (data entry) and the "invisible" work (monitoring machines), factories can increase output without linearly increasing headcount.
- Energy Efficiency: With energy prices soaring in Dhaka and Chittagong, IIoT sensors can monitor energy spikes in heavy machinery, while RPA bots can generate reports identifying exactly

which machines are wasting power, allowing for immediate correction.

A Path Forward

The transition to "Industry 4.0" does not require building a new factory from scratch. It starts small: retrofitting sensors on critical machines and deploying RPA bots for the most repetitive back-office tasks.

For Bangladesh to move from being a "garment maker" to a "manufacturing powerhouse," the integration of the digital (RPA) and the physical (IIoT) is not just an option—it is the only way forward.

II. CONCLUSION

The convergence of Robotic Process Automation (RPA) and the Industrial Internet of Things (IIoT) is quietly redefining the structure and strategy of Bangladesh's manufacturing sector. What began as incremental upgrades to machinery and workflow systems has evolved into a broad technological shift that strengthens operational efficiency, enhances product quality, and deepens integration with global supply chains. Through real-time data visibility, predictive maintenance, digital workflow automation, and semi-autonomous production capabilities, factories are transitioning from labour-intensive to insight-driven production environments.

Yet this transformation is not without complexity. High implementation costs, fragmented technological readiness, and persistent skills gaps pose significant barriers—particularly for small and medium enterprises. Moreover, concerns surrounding labour displacement and heightened monitoring underscore the need for proactive, inclusive transition strategies. For Bangladesh to fully capitalize on this silent revolution, coordinated efforts among policymakers, industry leaders, and educational institutions are essential. Investment in workforce reskilling, digital infrastructure, and supportive policy frameworks will be critical to ensuring that automation enhances competitiveness without compromising social stability.

Overall, the adoption of RPA and IIoT holds substantial promise for elevating Bangladesh's global manufacturing position. If navigated thoughtfully, this transformation can enable a more resilient, sustainable, and technologically advanced industrial ecosystem—one capable of securing long-term growth and competitiveness in an increasingly digital world.

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