

Adapt *to* THRIVE



On March 26, the Government of Bangladesh announced countrywide general holiday, an equivalent to a mass lockdown, throughout the country. This is when Humaira Khan, proprietor and head designer at Anokhi and Anikini, was not expecting too much trouble. She thought things would improve 'in no time at all,' as long as she complied with all lockdown protocols.



Few weeks into the pandemic, Khan realised her assumptions were a little premature because the virulent disease turned out to be like no other, devastating the world and stalling it for what felt like forever!

When the situation never improved, Khan faced the usual complications of running a business; piling-up of rent-expenses, utilities, employees' wages, and investments stuck as raw material.

"It was never about me, but about the many people who work for me — my company, the artisans who weave beautiful collections, the tailors who piece them together, and service girls who make every purchase a worthy experience," said the designer.

When things were not getting any better, Khan witnessed in dismay as multitudes of well-known, high-end boutique houses closed down one after the other, unable to survive amidst the rising costs and thinning revenues.

"I saw many known faces asking for zakat and charitable donations from well-wishers, to help support their workers through the pandemic. I have seen others lay-off their employees in huge numbers, unable to pay salaries. I didn't want any part in that. I didn't want any sort of donations; neither did I want to lay-off anyone. So I needed an immediate plan to help my business wade through the murky waters," stated Khan.

Apart from the apparel industry, for which Bangladesh is quite well-known all over the world, many also complement the boutique industry that clothes the citizens within the borders of the nation, especially during a few of the important occasions of the year — Pahela Baishakh, Eid-ul-Fitr, Eid-ul-Azha, Durga Puja etc.

"Bangladesh has a thriving boutique culture. Thanks to these small and medium sized boutique businesses, we are able to wear the choicest of clothing today, all throughout the year and especially during the major occasions.

"This is an industry that allows

thousands of workers their daily bread and butter. However, COVID-19 seems to have ground their lives to a halt. While we, as a business entity, have been lucky to plan a survival route—not everyone has been in the same position to be able to pull through," said the designer.

Hence, Khan's struggle was a bit different; while many in the industry were looking out for a stimulus package from the government, or help and donations from near and dear ones, she was solely looking towards self-sustenance, adaptability, and reliance on her employees' efforts to get back on track.

"I realised at once that adaptation was the key to survival. And the process began by going online — afresh and innovative medium to help customers gain a worthy shopping experience," said Khan.

She took all the preventive measures and welcomed her patrons to visit her flagship outlet, located at a posh locality in Gulshan. For those who were extra cautious, she took her label to cyberspace. She even went to the extreme effort of promoting her latest collection on all her personal social media accounts, only to be able to get everyone's attention.

"If they couldn't come to us, we had to go to them. I never did such massive, personal promotions of my business before; this time, it was different—it was about survival and the lives of my countless employees and the artisan community that I worked with," affirmed Khan.

The main idea was to keep on surviving. While she was efficient in promoting her products, Humaira Khan also noticed that her clients were getting disinterested over time, especially towards high-end, intricate clothing wear. "This is so natural during lockdowns, when we are solely meant to stay at home, work from home, and do household chores. We have no desire to wear gorgeous outfits or anything out-of-the-ordinary. Then it popped into my mind that the best

attire to don during the lockdown as we work from home would be affordable, light-weight, simple, cotton wear in basic colours that helped make us feel fresh, stylish and comfortable during these unusual days and hence, the WFH (Work From Home) collection was initiated," the designer revealed.

The new collection, appropriate for the time-period, became a local favourite. Adiba Safius Hussain, one of Anikini's regular clients and a business lady herself, was delighted to discover the new collection.

"This is absolutely necessary for the time being. I always believe that a fresh set of clothes makes a person feel better about themselves. This super comfortable cotton wear is certainly a positive outset amidst all the negatives existent today!" said Hussain.

Humaira Khan promises to be more adaptive to the situation.

"My business has to survive no matter what. My employees need to be paid their salaries, come what may. If for that I have to sell upholstery and trendy fabric for interior decoration, then I will. If my clients want it, I will make it for them. At the end of the day—it's all about survival and keeping customers happy," assured Khan.

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