

Disinfecting service keeping cleaning companies afloat amid quarantine times

MAHMUDUL HASAN

Soon after Bangladesh reported its first confirmed COVID-19 cases on 8 March, the on-demand cleaning service provider HandyMama got busy working up a strategy to incorporate disinfecting and antiviral cleaning to its list of services.

Given the breakneck pace at which the highly contagious and lethal coronavirus is moving across the population, that has become the platform's most on-demand service.

"Before the coronavirus outbreak we had been providing only cleaning services at customers' homes and offices where little active measures had been taken to kill any virus," said Md Saim Ur Rahman, an executive for the platform's human resources, administration and culture.

HandyMama uses disinfectant chemical products of the world's top brands and follows a five-step cleaning process for the two specialised services, whose charges start at Tk 1,999 and go up to Tk 2,999.

Clad in face masks, hand gloves and protective body suits, its cleaners spray disinfectants on themselves and their cleaning equipment before entering any premise.

So far, its trained professionals have disinfected more than dozens of flats and clinics across the capital that had COVID-19 patients.

"We have also faced situations with which none wanted to get involved for fear of the virus but our people have gone there and cleaned up everything," he said.

Launched in 2015, it has been providing cleaning services for furniture, windows, grills, doors, cabinets, electrical appliances, kitchens, washrooms and floor and common surfaces at homes and offices.

The cleaning service provider has so far trained and created jobs for upwards of 2,000 professionals who have served more than 70,000 households and 5,000 businesses. Its vision is to train, certify and employ 10,000 people within the next five years.

"During the past four months, we have lost some of our regular customers because they do not want anybody from outside to enter their homes," Rahman said.

Bangladesh's caseload is amongst the top 10 in the world, meaning the demand for such services will only increase in the days to come.

To cater to the heightened need of sanitisation and disinfection services, paint maker Berger Paints Bangladesh has recently taken to helping people and businesses steer clear of any infections amid the ongoing pandemic.



Availing disinfecting and antiviral cleaning services is turning into the new norm for many amidst the pandemic, prompting the rise of new businesses hot in pursuit of this new avenue of potentials and various packages catering to all individual needs alongside those sought by establishments.

The company already had a team of professionals who provided painting services for automobiles, homes and industries using different tools, including aerosol spray guns.

"As Berger imports raw materials from different countries, we have come to know about a German-made powerful virus disinfectant, Virol-Oxy, which is effective

against viruses, especially the novel coronavirus, and bacteria and yeast," said Sayed Shorif Russel, its brand manager, told The Daily Star yesterday.

So, the paint maker imported the disinfectant, trained its painters to provide the disinfection service, which can provide up to four weeks of protection against viruses and bacteria.

On 19 July, Berger launched the full-fledged service for customers in Dhaka and Chattogram. The service will be later introduced in other big cities like Sylhet and Khulna.

The service cost is Tk 3.50 per square feet for spaces less than 5,000 square feet. For spaces of 5,000 to 10,000 square feet, the charge is Tk 3 a square feet. For spaces larger than 10,000 square feet, the charge would come down to Tk 2.5.

The solutions of Berger can be sprayed on all materials, even fabrics, and will kill 99.99 per cent of the viruses and germs, according to the company officials.

Customers will be able to book the service through the company's service centres, Berger experience zone outlets, call centre, website and official Facebook page.

"We have a responsibility to people, so we are trying to help the nation fight against coronavirus to the best of our capacities," Russel said.

Sheba.xyz, which was already providing cleaning services for homes, sofas, tanks and pipes alongside that for pest control, launched its "disinfection services for virus" soon after pandemic hit the country.

"Maintaining the coronavirus preventive measures, our service specialists have been providing the new service to our customers," said Samiul Kabir, chief strategy officer of the platform.

Their service charge starts at Tk 1,500. "Orders in our regular cleaning services are low due to coronavirus. But now the offices are opening up and customers are availing this new service," he added.

However, the virus has also led to losses for some cleaning service providers that have not incorporated disinfecting service in their repertoire in the last four months.

Launched in 2008, Max Enterprise has been providing cleaning services for office spaces of non-governmental organisations, educational institutions and residential buildings.

"Since most of the organisations are closed, our business is now facing a downturn," said Firoza Chowdhury, executive director of Max Enterprise.

However, she said they had recently launched disinfection service, which has been able to attract a pretty good demand.

Orders for services of another cleaning service provider, Gulshan Clean & Care, has plummeted since the coronavirus outbreak.

"The condition of our business is very bad. It has been a week since we received the last call from customers for our service," said Kamrul Islam, owner of the platform, which was launched in 2004.

Not a frenzied day for banks before they broke for Eid holidays

REJAUUL KARIM BYRON and MD FAZLUR RAHMAN

Banks came under milder than usual strong fund withdrawal pressure ahead of Eid-ul-Azha this year because of the coronavirus pandemic, countrywide floods and job and income losses.

The celebration might not be as festive as it was in the past because of the four-month-long pandemic, which has wiped out millions of jobs and drastically cut people's incomes.

As much as 95 per cent of the people surveyed across the country suffered a loss of income due to the shutdown and social-distancing measures enforced by the government in late March to contain the spread of coronavirus, according to a survey of Brac.

Household income of 51 per cent of the respondents was reduced to zero, while 62 per cent of the low-income earners lost work opportunities. The pandemic left 28 per cent of the respondents economically inactive, it said in June.

The latest flood dealt another blow. About 37 per cent of the country's total area has been flooded, said AKM Saiful Islam, a professor of the Institute of Water and Flood Management at the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology, after analysing satellite images.

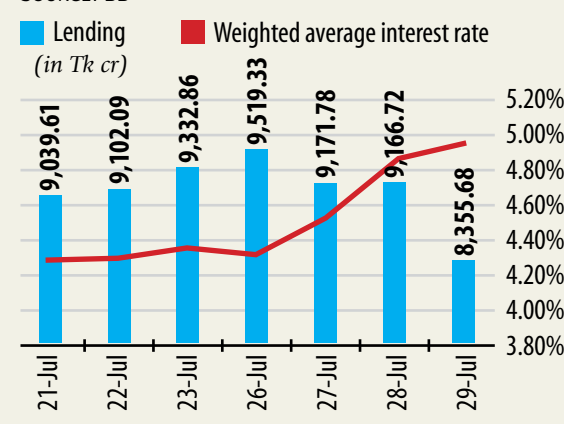
People of low-lying areas are the worst affected victims of this natural disaster. Some of them have been waterlogged for over a month.

So the fund withdrawal pressure varied from banks to banks and even branches to branches yesterday, but it was nowhere near the level seen in previous years.

For example, the Karnaphuli branch of Pubali Bank in the capital's Shantinagar area saw more deposit than withdrawal yesterday. On the other hand, another branch of the private lender in Goran witnessed more withdrawal by low-income people.

No clamour for liquidity in the call money market ahead of Eid-ul-Azha

SOURCE: BB



An employee of the Cantonment branch of state-run Agrani Bank in Syedpur under Nilphamari district said his branch faced moderate pressure. But more customers took out money from the branch in a nearby market.

"A lot of funds were withdrawn," said Md Arfan Ali, president and managing director of Bank Asia, yesterday.

The main branches faced higher transactions compared with other branches, he said. Bank Asia has 129 branches, 3,700 agent banking outlets and 150 automated teller machine (ATM) booths.

"The manager of our principal branch told me that his officials had to bring money from the central bank at 9:30 pm on Wednesday."

It seems that economic activities are accelerating, he said. "It is a good sign that people are showing more interest in spending."

Normally, people would rush to banks in the last moment during Eid. But this time, the turnout of customers was more spread out as they wanted to avoid a crowded branch for fear of coronavirus contagion, Ali added.

"There was some pressure throughout the day as people withdrew funds to pay for salaries or other expenses," said Syed Mahbubur Rahman, managing director of Mutual Trust Bank, which has 118 branches, 15 sub-branches, 146 agent banking outlets and more than 350 ATM booths.

The number of funds withdrawn was not that high, however.

In the last two days, about Tk 60 crore was withdrawn from Mutual Trust Bank, a private bank, down from Tk 200 crore to Tk 300 crore during Eid-ul-Azha previously.

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5-day Eid holiday at Sonamasjid land port begins today

OUR CORRESPONDENT, Chapainawabganj

Import and export activities at Sonamasjid land port of Shibganj upazila in Chapainawabganj will remain suspended for five days from 31 July to 4 August for Eid-ul-Azha festival.

Trade through Sonamasjid and Mohodipur land port at Maldah district in West Bengal of India would resume on August 5, said Mainul Islam, manager of private port operator Panama-Sonamasjid Port Link.

NBR relaxes rules on Certificates of Origin to facilitate global trade

SOHEL PARVEZ

The customs authority has relaxed its rules in regards to the submission of Certificates of Origin (CoO), a declaration of the place of manufacture for any product, for goods imported under the South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA) trade pact in the SAARC bloc.

The authority said it would accept electronic copies of CoOs for products imported under the SAFTA deal in absence of paper-based CoOs, it said in a notice issued on 29 July.

The benefit will remain effective until 31 December, said the National Board of Revenue (NBR) in the notice. This announcement comes at a time when normalcy has not yet returned to international trade due to the coronavirus's ongoing rampage across the globe.

Officials said that the customs authority started accepting electronically issued CoOs from May in a bid to enable importers to avail the duty-benefits on certain goods under the SAFTA.

The privilege for temporarily accepted CoOs was given for the period until 30 June this year.

"We thought the pandemic would subside by this time," said an official of the NBR.

Since the coronavirus pandemic continues to infect an increasing number of people and subsequently disrupt normal life, the commerce ministry recently requested the revenue administration to extend its deadline for accepting CoOs online for assessment on duties for products imported under the SAFTA, an agreement on tariff benefits for importers and exporters in the eight SAARC member states.

In its latest notice, the NBR asked customs stations to examine the electronic copies of CoO applications from the websites of their respective countries and match the signature for duty assessment under SAFTA.

The NBR official said that the decision to accept e-CoOs was taken at a meeting of trade officials in April in a bid the support trade.

The SAFTA agreement has a common Rules of

Origin (RoO) to determine the eligibility of any country for tariff benefits.

The deal on SAFTA, which has a common RoO to determining the eligibility of tariff benefits, came into force in January 2006, with the view to increasing intra-regional trade in South Asia.

However, intra-regional trade still accounts for little more than 5 per cent of South Asia's total trade, according to a World Bank report titled, 'A Glass Half Full: The Promise of Regional Trade in South Asia'.

The report estimates that that trade within the region could be worth \$67 billion rather than its current value of \$23 billion.

In fiscal 2018-19, Bangladesh imported 16 per cent of its \$52.40 billion of imports from SAARC countries, particularly from India.

Its exports to the SAARC region was 3.6 per cent of the total of \$29.30 billion that year, according to Bangladesh Bank data.

The central bank's figures excluded imports and exports by Export Processing Zones.

Bangladesh trails behind 14 low, middle income countries in internet usage gender gap

MUHAMMAD ZAHIDUL ISLAM

When it comes to accessing digital services, Bangladeshi women are lagging way behind men with just 16 per cent having access to the internet compared with 33 per cent of the opposite gender, according to a GSMA report published recently.

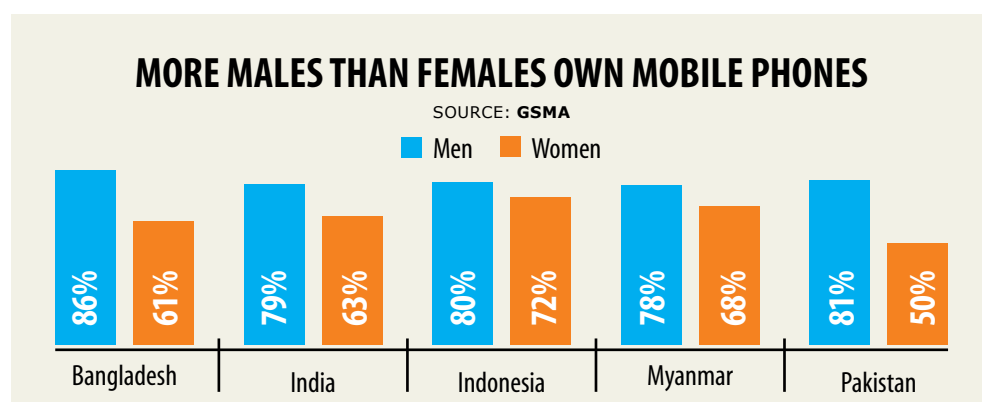
In the case of mobile phone ownership, 84 per cent of Bangladeshi men have access while for women it is 61 per cent.

The Groupe Speciale Mobile Association's (GSMA) "Connected Women, The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2020" placed Bangladesh in the ranks of Pakistan and Uganda based on the study's focus.

The gender gap for internet usage in Bangladesh is 52 per cent, the highest among the 15 low and middle-income countries (LMICs) from Asia, Africa and Latin America that the report took into account.

It interviewed 16,000 respondents and incorporated analysis of research and data from the GSMA and a range of other organisations that investigate and track the mobile gender gap.

Pakistan is faring a little bit better than Bangladesh in internet usage with 19 per cent



of its women and 37 per cent of men having internet access.

However, the country lags behind Bangladesh in case of ownership of mobile phones, which places men at 81 per cent and women at only 50 per cent.

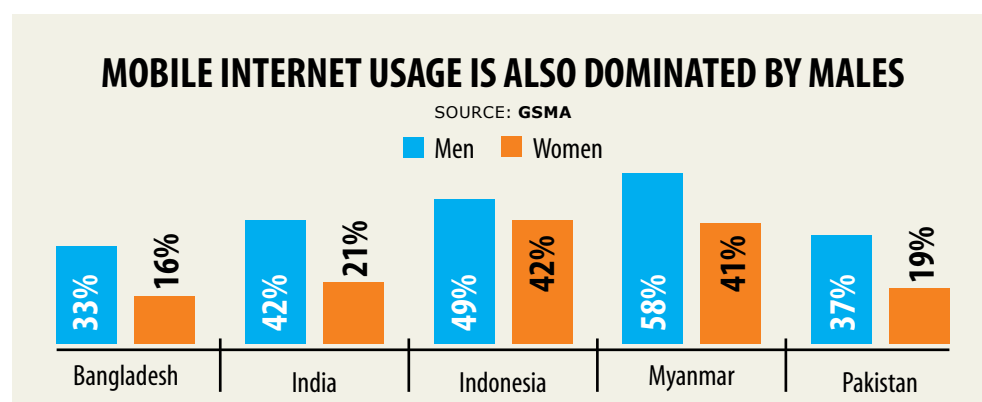
But the prospects in Uganda are brighter in comparison to Bangladesh.

Some 69 per cent of the women own mobiles phone, which is higher than in Bangladesh, while the gender gap is only 17

per cent. The gender gap in Bangladesh for ownership of mobile phone is 29 per cent, reads the GSMA report.

However, the report also mentioned that the gender gap has been gradually reducing over the years.

The research found that mobile phone ownership makes the majority of men and women feel safer, provides access to important information for the first time and supports them in work and study.



Regarding the gender gap in accessing digital services, Robi, the country's second-largest carrier, said empowering women technologically happens to be one of the most important steps that a country or company could take to strengthen its competitiveness in this digital era.

As a leading digital service provider of the country, Robi is working rigorously with some specially designed campaigns to increase the number of women using mobile phones and

internet, said Shahed Alam, chief corporate and regulatory officer at Robi.

"As an outcome of this drive, we have seen quite a significant development in mobile phone ownership of women over the past years in Bangladesh."

However, Alam also said that unfortunately, the GSMA report does not reflect this scenario because of overall low smartphone penetration and lack of proper contents.

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