

Bangladeshi handicrafts ride out pandemic tide

MOSTAFA SHABUJ, Bogura

While nearly every business sector in Bangladesh has been hit by the fallouts of the coronavirus pandemic, handicrafts have continued faring well in the global market.

With exports beginning in 1980, such products which are made entirely by hand or by using only simple tools have come to create an international market of more than \$20 million, as per the Export Promotion Bureau's (EPB) estimate of fiscal 2019-20.

This fiscal year, manufacturers and exporters have already attained half that figure in just four months to October, bagging \$10.84 million from foreign countries. In comparison, it was \$7.34 million in the same period last fiscal.

Handicrafts export has been annually increasing by \$2 million to \$4 million for the past five years, as per the EPB.

In the international market, the demand for Bangladeshi handicraft products has been growing day by day, even during the pandemic, said Golam Ahsan, president of the Bangladesh Handicrafts Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BANGLACRAFT).

When the coronavirus hit Bangladesh in March, all factories

throughout the country had to shut before opening two months later.

"During that time, around Tk 200 crore worth work orders from foreign buyers were cancelled. We had become hopeless because we have over 400 handicrafts companies and some 92 per cent of them are exporters," said Ahsan, owner of Sun Trade.

"But the global market for Bangladeshi handicrafts has become normal now, and we are getting orders online." Bangladesh mainly exports rugs, bags, buckets, home furniture, textiles and decoration items and storage solutions to almost 60 to 70 countries in Europe, Asia, South America and Latin America.

"We have been preparing to export even to China as the country opened up giving duty-free access to 200 Bangladeshi products," said Ahsan.

Every year Bangladesh arranged handicrafts exhibitions in Germany, Hong Kong, the US, Italy and France, from where some 50 per cent order of the year's work comes.

"But this year we were able to arrange only one exhibition in Germany before coronavirus hit the world," he said.

Orders from abroad from July to November 15 had totalled around \$20 million, and hopefully, the final



MOSTAFA SHABUJ

Bangladesh's handicrafts not only promise increasing foreign currency earnings through exports but also women empowerment. Last fiscal year over \$20 million-worth products were exported, propelled by a workforce including around four lakh women, half of whom are based in their own homes, working for exporters throughout the country. The photos were taken in Bogura's Sherpur upazila recently.

amount at the end of the fiscal would cross that of last year, he said.

Classical Handmade Products BD, one of the biggest exporters, secured \$6 million worth orders this fiscal year.

BD Creation secured orders worth \$3.4 million as of November 15, said its senior manager for the commercial department, Md Al Amin.

Its Bogura factory manager, Farid Uddin, said, "We have exported

handicrafts worth around Tk 1 crore every month in the past four to five months from Bogura's Sherpur upazila."

Cottage-based small manufacturing units have been considered essential industries since the early and medieval times, according to Bangladeshia.

Early records show that the Gangetic muslin had reached even Roman and Greek empires. At the same time, Chinese and Arab travellers also took note of the fine cotton and silk

produced in Bengal, says the national encyclopaedia.

Since the 16th century, fine handwoven textile and ivory, silver and metal objects were prized possessions at Mughal courts and consumption by rulers and the elite promoted development.

These material goods themselves were no less significant. The baskets, pottery, wall hangings, handbags, travel kits, toys, ashtrays, carpets

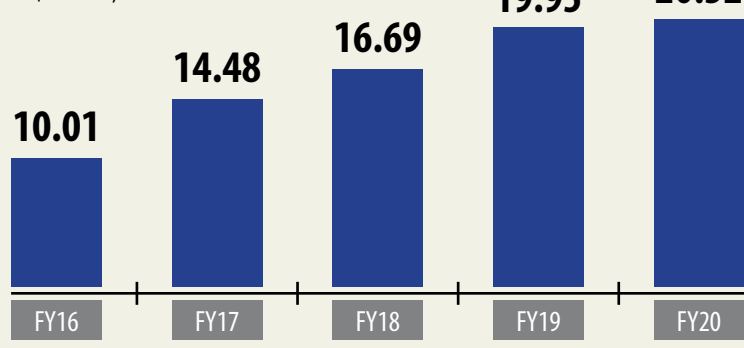
and embroidered quilts reflected the culture, heritage and creative expressions of people with unique artistic skills.

Made out of clay, wood, cane, bamboo, metal, and later on jute and leather, these were characterised by the utility, sustainability and environment friendliness blended with aesthetic appeal and suitability for everyday use.

READ MORE ON B2

Handicraft exports

In \$ million; SOURCE: EPB



ADVERTORIAL

Evaly: analysing trends, creating opportunities

In conversation with Mohammad Rassel

Mohammad Rassel, CEO of Evaly, speaks to The Daily Star about the story behind the origin of Evaly, which has significantly picked up prevalence in the e-commerce world. He talks about his journey from being a banker to creating an e-commerce conglomerate in Bangladesh and how he has managed to overcome tough competition in recent years through his unique style of market analysis and giving benefits to both consumers and retailers.

DS: What was the initial concept/inspiration behind starting Evaly? What were the initial challenges that you faced?

Mohammad Rassel: I started my career as a banker. I saw many importers and manufacturers who were suffering in terms of product distribution. I began my journey as a businessman with products for children and imported them. Through that, I understood what difficult of a task it was to deliver products throughout the whole country and how costly it was.

Many retailers in our country did not have any proper system to monitor their inventory. So, retailers like me and others had a difficult task of predicting how much materials should we buy or import without analysing data.

Distribution was the major challenge, and hence, I started to look for a way to resolve this problem. It was not my problem alone. A large number of business owners faced the problem. E-commerce was the only viable solution that I saw to beat this major challenge. So, that's where the concept of Evaly came, and we knew from the very beginning that it wouldn't be that easy. Because the consumers have to know that there is a platform where they can buy the authentic product at a low price. Manufacturers or importers should also know that there is a place where they can sell their products

and manage their cash flows and inventory at the same time. So, that's where the inception of Evaly came from. The whole business is structured in a way that customers will get to know about our initiatives in a broader way. Even our name is constructed in a way that it is optimised to come first when you search the name Evaly.

The challenges that we faced initially was collecting funds for primary investment. I found that it was not easy for us to acquire that investment because at that time Alibaba bought a large number of shares from Daraz and investors were reluctant to put in money in fear of a large competitor in the market.

We started by selling products based on cash on delivery, which was risky for us because we had to buy the product from the retailers before selling it and if problems were raised about the product, we were the ones that incurred the loss. So, we planned to make this process safer for both parties by making the pre-pay process.

We also wanted to give a lot of advantages to our customers because they can easily buy these products from elsewhere. Thus, we wanted to focus on our pricing along with our services to attract customers who were not used to the e-commerce platform. We also sought credit lines from our suppliers, and our services are improving gradually because of this internal process that we created.

DS: As we can see from the description of your company, app development plays a pivotal role in your product. Do you think app development and technology has revolutionised the e-commerce industry and helping in building more startups? How is it helping you differentiate yourself from traditional businesses?

Mohammad Rassel: I should like to thank our Honourable Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina for taking steps to digitalise the nation and for undertaking initiatives to increase the number of smartphone users in our



Mohammad Rassel

country. The biggest economies in the world have been steadily growing and expanding as a result of the massive digitalisation and e-commerce is breaking barriers to create more and more business opportunities for those nations. Therefore, all the credit goes to our prime minister for taking these measures for the welfare and growth of the nation.

When I started planning my business based on apps and internet, I looked at the initiatives the government was taking for ensuring internet penetration in the masses and felt confident to start our establishment. Even some smartphone companies like Samsung are manufacturing products locally, which will inevitably decrease the price of smartphones in our country. By the blessing of the internet, app development and mass marketing through it, we have maintained our growth and are looking to expand more into the future. Also, it is helping us in attracting more casual customers than traditional businesses, which offer low-quality services and have less marketing

exposure.

DS: Do you think it is much easier to market products nowadays because of the abundance of social media platforms? Or does traditional media still play an essential part?

Mohammad Rassel: We have a different outlook on this matter. Rather than focusing on what media platforms or marketing tools we are going to use, we try to analyse the current trends in society and market and try to construct a marketing campaign based on the trends.

We are preferably using digital media like Facebook, YouTube, and Google for a particular segment of our customer base. But, we still believe in the power of traditional media because most of the people of our country still find the traditional media as the source for accurate information. So, we heavily advertise our products on television channels and newspapers as well. We are also working on a social site for our consumers.

DS: We are in a dire situation right now because of the pandemic. Many businesses and plans are on hold.

But before that, was the climate for starting a startup favourable?

Mohammad Rassel: The mass use of smartphones has started to take off for quite some time now. So, I would say the climate for setting up startups was favourable. But most people were failing to properly make use of these resources that were readily available to them. You cannot blame the people who initially start them as well. If you look at Silicon Valley, a lot of startups make foray each year, but just a handful of them reach the top to become giants of the industry. So, failure is something that comes along with startups.

But you have to persevere those obstacles, and keep working towards your goals, make proper use of the resources that are available to you and learn from your initial mistakes. Even during the pandemic, a lot of people have used the resources and problems that are existing in the market to their advantage and built startups to solve them.

DS: A lot of the times we see people have spectacular ideas to create businesses but lack the initiative or confidence. A lot of fear works within them. What would be your words of wisdom to those people to overcome these obstacles?

Mohammad Rassel: If you don't want to take risks, you can find and take the easy route. But if you're going to take risks to construct your ideas into reality, you have to climb the mountain. That doesn't mean you should jump into it without researching, analysing or training. You should not jump into a pond without learning how to swim.

Fear is an essential part of the process. It will help if you use that fear to gain knowledge about what you are trying to get into and learn the entire process first. You should also expect failures in the beginning as well because not all businesses take off after starting. You shouldn't get disheartened because of failures. You should strengthen your resolve and work harder to get your ideas off the ground.

DS: The rapid growth of e-commerce in recent years has astonished a lot of people. What are the significant impacts that e-commerce is having on the business landscape of Bangladesh?

Mohammad Rassel: E-commerce is giving businesses to manage their inventories properly. Because of knowing the exact amount of materials they need to procure through analysing their data, they have been able to reduce a lot of costs in keeping a surplus inventory, which most of the time results in losses as well. It is also helping them acquire materials based on the number of orders they get. If you look at it from a national level, it is having a significant impact on the growth of our GDP as well.

Also, reducing the costs of businesses are, in turn, helping consumers get a quality product at affordable prices. The standard of living of our citizens is increasing day by day as a result of the growth of e-commerce. So, both parties are getting equal benefit from e-commerce platforms. It is helping us in exporting our products.

DS: What is the upcoming project/initiative that your customers should be excited about?

Mohammad Rassel: We plan to give as many services as possible. We currently have Evaly, E-food, E-khata and some other ventures. We are eyeing at making a healthcare platform called E-Health in the coming days. We are also interested in developing tech for the education sector and the agriculture sector.

We are not that innovative; we are just trying to follow the existing business processes and demands and trying to take initiatives that are more effective and efficient than our competitors to provide better services to our consumers. That's our goal. It is the reaction of the customer that we are listening to developing these platforms rather than surprising them with it. If the market demands certain services, we will try our best to fulfil those needs.