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Districts in Focus

Khatunganj loses its glory

PRABIR BARUA CHOWDHURY, Chittagong

KHATUNGANJ-Chaktai, once popularly known as the Wall Street of Bangladesh for its roaring success serving as the number one trade centre, has been struggling to keep its pinnacle position lately.

Once bustling Khatunganj-Chaktai trade zone, which spans over a huge area astride the Chaktai canal and the river Karnaphuli, led and controlled the nation's trade and commerce for a long time.

But the proliferation of open-market and communication, Dhaka-based administration, online banking and other changing scenarios have seen the trade centre's 150-year-old glories decline.

Despite its considerable contributions in the national economy, now the trade zone is fast losing its safe and sound environment for business. Many middle-class traders complained they have to operate in a panic stricken environment because of rampant fraudulence as a group of frauds is fleecing traders' funds.

The local business leaders believe that the inclination of every sector to rush to the capital has caused this decline.

As the government and top corporate houses tend to establish their headquarters in the capital city, other businesses are also following suit because they find it convenient now to invest and operate in Dhaka.

Sayed Sagir Ahmed, general secretary of Khatunganj Trade and Industries Association, told The Daily Star that despite controlling 80 percent of imports and exports Chittagong port is struggling to attract due attention for lack of development.

"We have been approaching the government for many years to set up the office of the state minister for commerce in Chittagong but to no avail. So, it has been losing its leading position gradually," he said.

Ahmed said most banks have established their head offices in Dhaka, so the business people must go there for any important dealings including bank loans.

Ahmed also termed ex-president



ANURUP KANTI DAS

Trucks line up at Khatunganj wholesale market in Chittagong to carry goods to different places in Bangladesh.

HM Ershad's setting up the country's largest container terminal at Kamalapur in Dhaka as a disregard toward the port city. It had shocked the traders of Khatunganj and Chaktai, he added.

The traders of Khatunganj-Chaktai also feel the port city has been overlooked even by the lawmakers from Chittagong region.

Accusing the political leaders, traders said every political party had in the past promised welfare of this zone before elections, which simply vanished into thin air. Chittagong was declared as the commercial capital 15 years ago and that was the end of it, they added.

The traders also blamed themselves for the present deplorable condition. They said unprofessional attitudes, malpractices of a section of the

local traders have corrupted the trading systems.

They mentioned delivery order (DO) system, fake traders, seasonal traders and brokers have made it tough for the traditional businessmen to survive. On condition of anonymity, a trader said fraudulent practices adopted by some traders have driven away many good businessmen from here.

They said mainly three categories of traders are now active here -- those who can manage loans from the banks, the new generation traders who are there by inheritance and the temporary ones who don't belong there at all.

They said it's the first and third category of traders who turned the market into a risky affair. Most of the temporary traders cannot handle

their business proficiently and sell the goods for low prices, which turns the market topsy-turvy. Unable to digest such pranks, many traders just leave the scene, they added.

Chaktai Rice Traders Samity general secretary Omar Ajam said some seasonal traders behave most unprofessionally, and the government should intervene and take urgent steps to deal with such adventurers.

On management of law and order at Khatunganj, the association's general secretary said they asked governments on several occasions to establish a separate police station here but in vain. If the government would set up a police station there, the environment would change for better, he hoped.

Khatunganj has earned its due share of disrepute for the infamous

DO system, which was annulled by the government. Although the traders claimed that the DO system was not a bad mechanism, some crooks corrupted it.

On the new dealership system, they said if the government does not monitor the process and ensure proper use of it, it would not bring about any change in the Khatunganj trading modes.

Though Khatunganj-Chaktai is losing its erstwhile shine in trading it is still a big contributor in the national economy. Traders believe if the government ensures all facilities for the trading zone it can regain its supremacy.

They also believe if the much discussed transit proposals are implemented, Khatunganj will play a significant role in the sub-continental trading.

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Stuck in a time warp

Chief of Khatunganj Trade and Industries Association urges quick steps to prop up the wholesale market

PRABIR BARUA CHOWDHURY, Chittagong

TIME took charm off Khatunganj, once an important business hub in the country. This is how Mahbulul Alam, president of Khatunganj Trade and Industries Association, portrayed the present condition of the wholesale market.

Easy transport systems by river and road had influenced many corporate houses and banks to set up their offices in Khatunganj, turning the place into a special trading zone, he said.

"Traders used to come here to import goods through Chittagong Port in the past," said Alam. Doing business without Khatunganj was impossible to think at the time.

But many businessmen who were part of the market since its inception have left the place.

Importers now distribute almost 50 percent of imported goods among business houses without using any market such as Khatunganj, said Alam, who studied sociology at Chittagong University.

"Traders stored imported goods in the past and could sell a maximum of 5,000 tonnes in a year. Now it takes

only three to four months to sell 12,000 tonnes, as people's consumption is increasing by the day," Alam



Mahbulul Alam

said. Alam marked illegal activities of some fraudsters as one of factors for that. The frauds use fake delivery

order (DO) accounts to buy products and sometimes produce cheques that banks bounce due to lack of money, he said.

The frauds talk new traders into putting money in some products that have no market demand. Finally, the traders had to sell the

products at a much lower price to pare their losses, making the market volatile, he said.

"It has been continuing since 1986. We have asked the administration to establish a police camp here to save traders from this malpractice."

Some businessmen in the market store goods through the DO system. "It is unethical," he said, "The government has decided to establish another system against the DO. We accepted this decision. I hope all of us will cooperate with the government to let the system run successfully."

Khatunganj is also suffering from infrastructural problems. Truckers demand Tk 1,600 to carry goods from the port to Khatunganj, which is Tk 400 higher than they charge for Feni, Alam said. The 100-year-old roads are nearly out of order now. There is no proper traffic system and parking zone here, he added.

Alam also pointed to a shortage of storehouses and said: "We have to go to Sitakunda and Mirersarai to store our goods."

"The authorities are aware of these problems. The government should take steps to develop the roads soon and help the market grow further," Alam said.

He also suggested the government build such a policy so that they can get bank loans on easy terms.

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