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Districts in Focus

Tangail mat makers hang by a thread

MIRZA SHAKIL, *Tangail*

TANGAIL craftsmen, specialising in weaving shitol patis (mats or spreads), are facing difficulties of late in keeping the age-old form of art alive.

The industry falters on the unavailability and increasing prices of raw materials, which is cane (pati bet), rising production costs and shrinking demand.

In addition, a lack of proper marketing facilities, government support and bank loans now leave the once lucrative industry on the verge of ruin.

Around 7,000 people from the Hindu community are engaged in the mat weaving industry in the district and most of them are from the Hinganagar village in Delduar upazila. Some people from Baghutia and adjacent villages in Kalihati upazila are also engaged in the craft.

The craftsmen produce different varieties and qualities of mats that are colourful and artistically woven with various designs. They also weave a certain special variety that is called the 'lal patar pati', which may be priced up to Tk 1,500. The cheapest variety, such as the 'bukai', sells for Tk 150 a piece.

The mat is comfortable for use during the hot summer months. It is popular among people from all walks of life, all over Bangladesh.

The mat makers, however, say they do not see much profit coming in now as raw material prices, especially cane, and weavers' wages have gone up, forcing many traditional craftsmen to leave the profession.

Though cane is cultivated on 1,000 acres of land in Delduar and Kalihati

upazilas, it has become difficult to meet demand for the item. Cane is first harvested four years after establishing a plantation and it may continue to be harvested through the next 60 years, craftsman Shushil Chandra De of Hinganagar village said.

After the cane is harvested from the fields, it is dried in the sun first. It is then tied in bundles and submerged in water for two days. The plant is then boiled and allowed to dry in the sun again.

Next, the fibre is separated from the cane plant. The first layer of fibre is the best in quality and is used to weave the 'lal patar pati', the highest quality of mat. The second layer is used to make bukai, the low quality mat, Shushil said.

To make a mat at a cost range of Tk 480, Parimol De of Hinganagar said a bundle of cane is needed that costs Tk 150. He has to pay Tk 150 in wages to workers who process and separate the fibre from the plant. Another Tk 30 is needed to purchase dye and other materials, he added.

"We usually sell a shitol pati for Tk 500 to Tk 520."

Anil Chanda De, 80, another mat maker at Hinganagar village, said the demand for these mats was once very high and the prices also brought in profits.

But now, local mat makers are struggling to recover their production costs.

Housewife Rekha Rani De of the same village said all five members of her family are engaged in mat production. "Earlier, I could maintain the family easily with our earnings from mat weaving. But now, it has become difficult to do so with spiralling prices of all essentials."

Ujjal De and Shunil De of Hinganagar, two former mat weavers, said they now run a groceries store as they failed to make a living from the trade.

The mat makers sell their mats at the local market, while wholesalers also come to their homes at times to make a purchase.

They say that even though summer has set in, mat sales at the local market in Hinganagar has not peaked yet. This is unlike the trend in the past.

Local wholesalers and traders from Dhaka, Chittagong, Rajshahi, Narayanganj, Bogra, Mymensingh, Jamalpur, Narsingdi and other places thronged the market in the past to



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The weekly mat market in the village of Kamanna Para in Hinganagar village, Tangail, is yet to gain momentum this year. As the heat of summer sets in, this is the peak time for mat sales.

purchase mats.

Wholesaler Saheb Ali of Keraniganj in Dhaka goes to Hinganagar to buy mats. He sells the mats at markets and shopping centres in Dhaka. "I make a profit of Tk 50 to Tk 200 by selling a single mat, depending on quality."

Wholesaler Saiful Islam of Narayanganj said the demand for the mat made from natural fibre has gone down recently due to an influx of various other kinds of mats made

from plastic and inferior reeds, which are much cheaper.

However, local wholesaler Shunil Chanda De said the mats made from cane fibre are not only colourful, but also comfortable to use.

Mat maker Baloram De of Hinganagar said the financial situation of the craftsmen in the area has deteriorated. Many have even left the profession to make ends meet, while others are contemplating to do the same, he added.

As most of the villagers are poor, they are forced to take loans from local wholesalers, moneylenders or non-government organisations to hang on to the trade, he said.

They are eventually compelled to sell the mats at low prices in order to repay the debt, he added.

The government should take an initiative to save this traditional craft and provide bank loans to the craftsmen on easy terms, to save the industry from extinction, Baloram said.

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A woman weaves a mat.

A village of mat weavers

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HINGANAGAR, a village in Tangail, specialises in making mats or spreads, locally known as 'shitol patis'. Over 4,000 people from around 800 families in the village have been making a living from this trade for the last 200 years or more.

People in the village weave the famous shitol patis (literally meaning 'a mat cool to touch') using indigenous cane.

The village is in the Atia union under Delduar upazila of Tangail. It is situated at a convenient distance of 10 kilometres from the district headquarters. The mat makers here are from the Hindu community. They have been producing these mats for many generations now.

For the craft's sustenance, 'pati bet', (a cane variety) is cultivated on 600 acres of land in the village and most of the villagers are engaged in production related activities.

People of all ages, including men, women and children, are engaged in the production of the traditional craft. They harvest cane -- the raw material -- from the fields, and process it to separate the fibre from the plant. They weave the mats just sitting anywhere -- their homesteads, yards as well as village streets.

Weaving the mat sitting in their yard outside their house, a couple, Gopeshwar Chandra De, 85, and Anjoli De, 70, said they have been producing the mat for their whole lives. They pur-

sued their ancestral profession that has been in the village for 200 years.

"Although it is hard to make a living out of making mats these days, we still hang on to the centuries old profession as we do not know any other trade," Gopeshwar said.

Housewife Sandhya Rani said she has been weaving the mats since her marriage, that is, for the last 50 years. Three of her children are already married and they too are involved in weaving the mats. She supplies her products at a local wholesaler on contract, to maintain her family and repay debts, Sandhya added.

Another housewife, Santana Rani, of the village, said she earns Tk 150 from weaving a mat in two days. Her daughter, Shukla De, who is a class III student at a local primary school, has already learned to weave the mat. "I weave shitol patis during my free time and earn Tk 130 for a single pati. It is of much help to my family," said Shukla.

Not only Sandhya, Santana and Shukla, all the women in the village are engaged in similar work. Instead of simply sitting idle, they feel it is a great way to earn money for their families.

Mat maker Sadhan De, 75, said a market sits at Kamaynna Para in the village on Tuesdays and Fridays, where the local mat makers sell their products. Local wholesalers as well as traders from other districts, including Dhaka, assemble there to buy mats of their choice in bulk.

Mir Khalid Hossain Chandan, chairman of



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Gopeshwar Chandra De and Anjoli De separate cane fibre from plant. They have been producing mats since childhood.

Atia union, said after all these years, the traditional mat industry and its makers in Hinganagar village are facing some difficulties

of late. They need government support to survive and do better in keeping the time-worn craft alive, he added.

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