



Districts in Focus

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Gone are the days of weavers

Most of the weavers left their inherited profession as it became tough for them to earn a living. Weavers, mainly the marginal ones, were counting immense losses, as yarn prices were unstable in the last few years

AHMED HUMAYUN KABIR TOPU, Pabna

A former handloom factory owner, Md Ikbal Hossain is now a full-time poultry businessman. He sold all his 10 handlooms and established a poultry firm at Kulunia village in Paba sadar upazila in Pabna. Mohammed Ali Jinnah of village Jalalpur Natunpara was also an established weaver a few years ago. He lost his 52 handlooms because of his failure to pay a loan. They are not the only two to experience such a fate; it is the case of many in Pabna, a district famous for the art of handloom.

Over 40,000 handloom factories out of 50,000 were shutdown in the last five years in Pabna, said Md Akmal Hossain Munshi, chairman of Handloom and Power Loom Owners' Association in the district. "Now the biggest industry of the district is under threat," Munshi told The Daily Star.

Around 20,000 to 30,000 handloom factories faced closure in the last 18 months mainly due to an unusual price hike of yarn, he said.

Most of the weavers left their inherited profession as it became tough for them to earn a living. Weavers, mainly the marginal ones, were counting immense losses, as yarn

prices were unstable in the last few years. An industry insider said yarn prices declined last month from the previous month, but still it is high, compared to the same month a year ago.

Since mid-May, each bundle of 54-count yarn has been selling at Tk 2,520 to Tk 2,550, down from Tk 2,640 to Tk 2,700 in April. The same yarn was sold at not more than Tk 1,300 in March-April last year.

Each pound of 80-count yarn is now selling at nearly Tk 305, which has also seen a decline by 15 percent from its price in April. But the price was Tk 130 to Tk 150 last year.

The prices of 40-count yarn also declined by over 14 percent in a month this year, but the present prices are 121 percent higher than the prices a year ago.

Md Israil Hossain, manager of Hamida Twisting Mills, the largest twisting mill in the district, said sudden ups and downs in yarn prices affected their business a lot.

"Six months ago, we used to deliver around 60 bales (each bale contains 400 pounds) of 80-count yarn to weavers every day, but now the amount came down to 18 bales. Six twisting machine out of 11 of our mill are not operating now," Hossain said.

"Yarn prices jumped to around Tk 2,400 per bale from Tk 1,000 and later came down to Tk 1,500. All happened in a year. This is the real picture of the unsteady market. In the last one year, these ups and downs caused huge losses to the weavers," Munshi.

Marginal weavers in Dogasi, Kulunia and Kayemkola villages of Pabna sadar upazila are going through hard times for the last few months. Less than 300 handlooms are now in operations in Dogasi Tant Palli, down from 3,000 eighteen months ago, said Samrat Shajahan, secretary of Dogasi Weavers' Association.

The marginal weavers do not have enough capital to run their factories in full swing, said Shajahan.

"Most of them manufacture cloths after taking money and yarn as loans from Mahajans (usurers). Yarn prices have doubled in the last 18 months, but the prices of cloth did not increase simultaneously."

He also said the government did not take any step to control yarn prices although the weavers across the country came up with the demand several times.

Md Asraf Ali, owner of nine handlooms, said he had permanently closed seven of his looms. "I used to produce nearly 35 to 40 lungis

every day a year ago when all the nine looms were in operations. But now I make four to six lungis per day."

The production cost of a lungi stands at Tk 220 to Tk 250, while the market price is less than Tk 200. "So how can I continue my business?" Ali added.

Ali's brother Fazlur Rahman said: "Our forefathers started this business here. All my five brothers were involved in the profession. But most of them sold their looms within a year as they failed to bear their losses any more."

"There were 39 looms in our house. My brothers maintained the business. I was involved in marketing. But three of my brothers sold their 20 looms in a span of a year. They now depend on their children for their living."

Md Faridul Islam, a worker at a handloom factory, said he is facing the most critical time in his 25-year professional life. He does not get work every day. "If I work this week, I get nothing to do in the next week. It's becoming hard to live with this profession."

Many of Islam's colleagues have joined other professions in recent times. "We are dying. The government should do something to save us," he said.

A budget boost can heal the wounds

Pabna weavers' association chief stresses government support

AHMED HUMAYUN KABIR TOPU, Pabna

HANDLOOM owners and marginal weavers in Pabna urged the government to allocate a 'smart fund' for them in the budget for the next fiscal year. They also demanded fixing yarn prices so that weavers can also determine the prices of their cloths. They also sought capital support for marginal weavers to save the country's handloom sector.

Md Akmal Hossain Munshi, chairman of Handloom and Power Loom Owners' Association in Pabna, recently talked to The Daily Star. Munshi placed some recommendations before the govern-

ment to ensure the weavers' interest in the national budget.

The sector will be destroyed without proper government support, he said, adding that most of the 1.5 lakh weavers in Pabna are marginal.

"The marginal weavers do not have enough capital. Most of them need to shut their business due to a lack of capital. They have already lowered their capital due to continuous losses. If the government manages funds for the weavers to restart their business, it will be the best support," Munshi said.

The government should take steps to make yarn prices stable for the sake of the weavers, he said.

"Spiralling yarn prices often cause losses to the weavers. We don't mind if the government even sets the price of each bundle of yarn at Tk 5,000. But we want stable market prices of yarn immediately so that our weavers can also set the prices of the cloths they produce," he said.

A syndicate of some 300 to 350 big spinning mills in the country controls the yarn market, he said. This syndicate of yarn traders hikes yarn prices according to their will, he added. "We urged the government to destroy syndicate for the sake of the industry."

The syndicate doubles or sometimes triples the yarn prices, in the name of hikes on the interna-

tional markets and takes away crores of taka from the marginal weavers, he said. "This should go for the sake of the handloom sector."

Munshi also demanded easy loans for the marginal weavers. "It is tough for the weavers to get loans from the banks in easy terms and conditions. There should be loans for the weavers on demand so that handloom factories can run successfully," he said.

There are many marginal weavers in the district who failed to repay the loans they took from banks. He said these defaulters should be treated softly and should get government help to stay afloat.



Most of the handloom factories in Pabna have faced closer in recent times due to an unusual yarn price hike.