

The Jamdani Economics: Of Sonargaon and an Insignia

By now, we all know that the National Crafts Council of Bangladesh and Bengal Foundation have been in talks with World Crafts Council to award Sonargaon the label of a Craft City, in recognition of the fact that the area is the weaving centre of the age-old Jamdani.

The jury is still out, but a subtle excitement can be felt among those involved, from the weavers to the traders to the patrons.

So, what difference would it make to Sonargaon and the weavers if it officially becomes a Craft City? What benefits does this recognition bring?

Fingers crossed, let us delve into some of the ways how the Jamdani economics may get a boost if Sonargaon earns the prestigious title from World Crafts Council.

But first, perhaps establishing the Sonargaon-Jamdani connection is in order. As we mentioned above, the weaving centre of Jamdani is, and has been for centuries, Sonargaon. A few accounts of this land's past would suffice as proof.

Renowned historical travellers such as the Moroccan Ibn Batuta and the English Ralph Fitch had mentioned Sonargaon. The 14th century Moroccan had praised its cotton-based products, and the Englishman, who visited in 1586, said that 'Sinnergan' has the finest cotton cloth in the subcontinent.

Quite an old and fascinating book, 'The Cotton Manufacture of Dacca', talks about Sonargaon in this way:

"It is celebrated for muslins of a thin texture, also for flowered fabrics, which are manufactured chiefly by Mahomedan weavers in town, and in the country around it. The East India Company, during the time they were engaged in trade, had a warehouse for cloths at this place, and had generally from thirteen to fourteen hundred weavers' names registered in their books."

The glory days of muslin may belong gone, but Sonargaon continues to weave the unique and extraordinary cloth called Jamdani.

So, what would this insignia of Craft City do for Sonargaon?

More or less all stakeholders agree that this would boost tourism.

"We would hope that a large number of foreign tourists will start to come and buy directly from us," Md Abu Salam of Salam Jamdani Weaving Factory said.

Weaving a premium Jamdani sari takes months of hard work and a common complaint is that it is difficult for weavers and traders alike to get the right worth. Salam, who is a weaver and a businessman as well, expects that tourism will build awareness, and hence, help achieve fairer prices.

And if tourism in the area does get a boost, it will not only be those related to the Jamdani craft who enjoy the perks: a lot of proper infrastructure and facilities are essential in making a functioning tourist destination — which, in turn, means prosperity for more people.

If not anything else, such an international recognition really puts the area on a global platform. And with that, comes more awareness, not just of the craft, but also of the sweat put in by the craftspeople.

"Global attention will bring attention to the weavers' work and products," said Dr Hameeda Hossain, revered human rights activist and author of *The Company Weavers of Bengal*.

Salam has been weaving since 1988, when he was just eight years old. With changing times, he has seen many weavers leave this craft to pursue other careers which pay better. "Some joined readymade garments factories, some became drivers," he explained. "Hopefully, if Sonargaon gets the due recognition, the trade and remuneration will improve and some of these weavers will return to their craft."

The extent of the benefits really depends on us. "It needs to be seen that the benefits actually trickle down to the craftspeople," Luva Nahid Choudhury of Bengal Foundation opined. "This recognition can also be used to make a strong case to the government and create necessary pressure to improve weavers' work conditions, at the policy-level."

But by all means, Choudhury believes that the recognition would definitely be a step in the right direction.

And World Crafts Council itself stipulates some benefits (other than tourism) that come with the recognition; such as highlighting on a global platform, the reputation and asset of a creative city, and creating opportunities for co-operation and partnership between other craft cities.

This recognition we are eying is not the first one regarding Jamdani we have earned, though. The traditional art of Jamdani weaving is enshrined in UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

We wish that soon, the Sonargaon insignia starts to improve the Jamdani economics.

Fingers crossed!



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