

#HERITAGE

Sushil Kumar Basak is a popular name in Pathrail union under Delduar upazila, Tangail. His family has been involved with the Tangail taant handloom trade for generations. Infact, Basak is the third-generation artisan to the ancient trade. However, Basak is having divided thoughts about introducing his next generation to the hereditary occupation because according to the manufacturer, the future looks bleak.

Fabrics of HERITAGE II

MEHRIN MUBDI CHODHURY

Survival story of the Tangail Taant

"Yes, once upon a time, the handloom taant was at its peak. But then came the powerloom variant, parallel to any other sector in the textile industry. That's when we had the hardest time to compete, because powerlooms have the capacity and capability to yield in greater quantity.

"But thankfully with time, people recognised the superiority of the Tangail taant (handloom cotton and silk), which is much more comfortable to wear and more durable. Plus, sari-types like the famous Tantuz could only be handcrafted and produced manually via the handloom and skilled artisans; there are no powerloom alternatives. That's when business peaked again and power looms failed to compete; in fact, they went onto produce a huge amount when the demand fell short, causing many of the powerlooms to shut down," Basak revealed.

The story seemed very uplifting and provided directions to a promising future for the taant industry. When suddenly the pandemic broke out and turned everything including the business topsy-turvy.

"It's very sad that the promising business had to be put to such an abrupt halt. We even had the opportunity to export to our neighbouring countries especially India, since there is a huge demand for the Tangail taant sari over

issues that came to the forefront were the tricks of certain dishonest businessmen.

"We have the opportunity to go big in the export market, as there is great demand for authenticity, handicrafts and heritage fabrics in the world market. However, the problem lies with few dishonest vendors, who are very crucial considering the business viewpoint. The buyers naturally want high quality colours which are well sustained and, in this case, we are tricked by few treacherous suppliers who give us adulterated colours in the name of the real and authentic. There's no process for validation and this only creates a bad image in the international market," said Basak.

While speaking to the experienced tradesman, we also understood that the Tangail silk taant, is also at the beck and call of the silk syndicate, which continuously alters the price to benefit their needs.

"If the price does not increase in the global market, but it 'does' in our local market, naturally our comparative standing would be low. Because our products would be costlier! Our request in such a case would be to establish a proper 'market regulation process' by the topmost authority, so that our industry can survive," added Basak.

A cup of tea with the veteran manufacturer also revealed few other obstacles like how the grass roots artisans were finding alternative job options with a better pay to sustain their livelihoods and did not want to return to their traditional jobs. The lockdown especially forced these people to look for alternative job options, and when they realised that driving an autorickshaw pays almost twice the amount compared to their heritage crafts, they had no other option but to move on.

"This is seriously scary for the trade. Because, the younger generation are unwilling to learn and the middle-aged are leaving the job, that means even if there is an opportunity to grow big in this industry there won't be anyone left to work. So, it is absolutely necessary to train people towards this industry, remove the obstacles that drain out the trade, and make a clearer path to former glory," concluded Basak.

En route the legacies of Pinon-hadi, and the Manipuri handloom

The name Manjulika Chakma is almost synonymous to the pinon-hadi culture in the mystic hills of Rangamati. There perhaps cannot be a more beautiful scenario than the beautiful Chakma girl fetching water from the riverbed in her pinon-hadi, with the majestic hills, set in the backdrop.

Chakma agreed to the notion — "Yes! That was a common scene once," she said, but "times have changed," she added.

The scenario is slightly different, today. The young ladies have moved out of their ancestral homes and travelled far to immerse themselves in the daily duties demanded by an urban lifestyle. No longer do they have the time or opportunity to wear their traditional garb, instead they put on western wear that is easily available and far easier to blend in with.

Chakma slightly disagrees to our assumption.

"Not everyone wears the western cloth or fusion wear or even the Dhakaite garb. Even today, the ladies of the hill tracts wear the pinon-hadi, especially the homemakers and the elderly. Even the youngsters when they return home, wear the traditional dress so the demand is still there. In fact, it is ever growing because of the increase in the number of populations of the indigenous peoples," reflected Chakma.

"I have been to the banks quite a lot of times; I have taken a natural loan instead, not a part of the stimulus package, by mortgaging my lands to keep the business running. I don't know how much longer I can keep up with this system,"

there. But the lockdown and the closure of the borders surely made a mess of the entire trade process," said Basak, to this correspondent.

Inquired, if business would get back on track when the vaccinations took centre-stage and most of the world healed back to its former state, Basak was doubtful.

"I don't think so. How do we sustain for so long, till everything gets normal? We have already lost a year with no celebrations of Baishakh or any of the Eids in 2020.

If we can't get the market in 2021, then most of the tradesmen will be phased out. Because we won't be able to pay the root artisans, who are the most important part of the trade and keep them involved with the manufacturing process. You see, not even a single sari is getting sold in a week, how can we maintain the fees of the artisans, which is set at the minimal rate of Tk 500 per sari?" the tradesman explained.

Upon further discussion, Basak revealed he was yet to get any stimulus package from the BSCIC — Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation, or the banks.

"I have been to the banks quite a lot of times; I have taken a natural loan instead, not a part of the stimulus package, by mortgaging my lands to keep the business running. I don't know how much longer I can keep up with this system," Basak revealed.

Discussing the export options, other

Photo: Sazzad Ibne Sayed
Model: Efa
Wardrobe: Tangail Taant from Tangail Saree Kutir
Blouse: Zabin Iqbal
Make-up: Md. Hossen
Hair: Gazi
Styling: Zabin Iqbal
Location: Bengal Carpet Mill, Ford Nagar, Dhamrai