

GOLDEN JUBILEE BEGINNINGS

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30

Fabrics of Heritage I

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 2

"But things have changed today," said Khatun adding on to depict a clearer picture, "Today, the men of the households encourage their ladies to do such kind of crafts because they can easily do it, while staying at home – and

each Nakshi artisan earned around, Tk 4000-5000 per month on an average in a good month, and around Tk 2000-3000 when the sales were low. And additionally, with the Nakshipalli to be set in motion, things were about to get better for the residents of the region.

Maybe with increased patronisation from our end, we might one day be able to finally give the Nakshi its due respect and the fame that it deserves.

On the trails of the Rajshahi silk Strolling down 2/7 Sir Syed Road, it is hard to overlook the antiquated silk shop that goes by the name of M/S Mollah Silk. The marquee silently beckons every passer-by to get inside and explore, and thankfully we had done the same because once inside we met the man who had built the organisation from scratch. The proprietor of the shop, Mohammad Safiul Islam was getting ready to call it a day, when we met him with myriad questions related to the famous Rajshahi silk. What came about from our conversations was completely unanticipated.

Islam had entered the silk trade back in the early '80s, along with his friend, Taimur, who was already settled in the trade. Originally hailing from Chapainawabganj, this was an industry that Islam had seen thrive right in front of his eyes. And naturally he became interested in the business.

"Everything was going well till the early '90s, when the then government removed the imposed 30 percent import tax on Chinese silk. The imported fabric was already subsidised by the Chinese government and a further deduction of import tax made it more lucrative to the traders compared to local silk.

"Pure, deshi silk failed to compete and businessmen eventually lost interest because customers became more inclined towards the foreign material," revealed the businessman.

What came about was a plethora

of obstacles in the years to come, as farmers rearing the Silk Moth – bolur chaash, stopped producing it, and replaced the mulberry trees – tuunt gach – used to feed the moth, with mango trees instead, as they were much more profitable.

"Yes, those were the dark days for the Rajshahi silk industry, when production declined drastically. That's the time when businessmen including myself, shifted completely towards the Chinese variant of the thread, which is smoother – being machine produced.

Today, the men of the households encourage their ladies to do such kind of crafts because they can easily do it, while staying at home – and do not need to go out of their houses. Additionally, it also brings in extra money allowing the women to make economical contributions in their 'united household' income."

With those thread we used to make handloom fabrics and supply it to big organisations like Aarong, Aranya Crafts, Kumudini etc., even the businessmen residing in Sadarghat used to procure 1000s of meters of our handmade fabric to make panjabi and fatua and supply it to the rest of the nation," said Islam.

To the reader, this might seem to be a gloomy revelation, to know that the silk saris proclaimed to be pure Rajshahi silk, are actually spun with Chinese silk, but they are still handloom. Sadly, the confessions do not end right there,

because according to Islam, even this format of survival, by the silk artisans of our nation, discontinued.

Today, there's a cheaper synthetic copy of the thread, imported from a neighbouring country that is way below the price of the Chinese variant.

"The synthetic variant is termed as 'reshom' in our country," said Islam. He added on to explain, "It is nothing close to the original reshom, but is a cheaper copy that customers find affordable." And with a syndicate playing with the prices of the Chinese thread, we are all at crossroads and nothing else.

"A 1 kg thread costs around Tk 5000-6000 which makes it Tk 500 per yard and at retail price it goes around Tk 600-680 (balaka silk), additionally that means the cost price for a single panjabi would be something close to Tk 2000-3000, while with the cheaper reshom variants, an average panjabi can be made within Tk 500-600, which can easily be sold in the market at Tk 1000-1500 retail rate. How can we ever compete with that?" questioned Islam.

During our rendezvous, we also learned that the government's sericulture board was operating at a much smaller scale than anticipated, rearing the Bombyx-Mori, (the scientific name for the silk moth) at a limited quantity. But according to the veteran silk enthusiast and trader, there was a lot of opportunity to contribute and help revive the industry.

"To encourage revival of the lost industry, the government can grow tuunt gach on its khas lands, helping to revive the bolur chaash culture as a primary step to revival and then it can train the new generation artisans with the knowledge of silk-making process from the still existent experts in the field," said Islam.

And right he was, for this is a creative job that requires finesse, where the knowledge of the craftsmanship can

only be passed down from the master craftsman to his apprentice. And this culture has already stopped for a long time now. To revive – it would mean learning the trade from the still surviving artisans and if they are all gone then it will only be 'too late' to turn back.

Islam concluded with few haunting words, "You can't blame the artisans from leaving their traditional job. Every other job including a rickshaw puller's pay around Tk 500 for a day's work (mojuri) and our artisans don't even get that. If we cannot value their gift, why will they stay?" he said, in a regretful tone.

The explanation was heartfelt and logical, on the other hand the benefits of reviving the industry also pose to be extremely lucrative, because that would mean, traditional silk artisans from the Rajshahi belt, including those who were involved with the sericulture, mulberry tree rearing etc., would get an opportunity to earn their living via an age-old method that was unique to the culture of their region, and we as a nation would earn the pride of wearing our nation's 'very own silk' and maybe even export it to other nations.

Not imported, not mill processed but made with pure 'khat khati kath' as the experts call it. Pure, handcrafted, Rajshahi silk, made with pure love and excellent craftsmanship of the skilled artisans of Bangladesh – almost as valuable as gold, if not more!

Photo: Sazzad Ibne Sayed
Model: Nobel

Wardrobe: Vegetable dyed silk from Aranya

Blouse: Zabin Iqbal

Make-up: Md. Hossen

Hair: Gazi

Styling: Zabin Iqbal

Location: Bengal Carpet Mill, Ford Nagar, Dhamrai



do not need to go out of their houses. Additionally, it also brings in extra money allowing the women to make economical contributions in their 'united household' income," said Khatun.

Upon inspection we discovered that



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