

Shital pati makers on the verge of extinction

They are in trouble for rising cost of raw materials, falling demand



The hindu community of several villages in the region, such as Hinganagar of Delduar upazila and Chatipara of Kalihati upazila, has been engaged in the 200-year-old industry for generations.

PHOTO: MIRZA SHAKIL

DISTRICTS IN FOCUS

MIRZA SHAKIL, Tangail

Traditional shital pati makers in Tangail are on the verge of extinction due to increasing cost of raw materials and drastic fall in demand.

Besides, a lack of marketing facilities, government support and easy access to finance have only deepened their woes in the face of fresh lockdowns to curb the spread of Covid-19.

Shital patis are made of cane fibre that grows around water bodies. The mats feel cool to the touch, making them popular for home decoration during hot summer months.

The hindu community of several villages in the region, such as Hinganagar of Delduar upazila and Chatipara of Kalihati upazila, have been engaged in the 200-year-old industry for generations.

Just two decades ago, around 7,000 families in the two upazilas were involved in the industry but now the number is not more than 2,500, according to local mat makers.

Many craftsmen left the profession as profits shrivelled due to a hike in raw material costs and their workers' wages.

Although cane fibre is cultivated on

around 1,000 acres of land in the Delduar and Kalihati upazilas, it has become difficult to cater to local demand due to the harvesting process.

Cane fibre can only be harvested four years after a plantation is established. However, the same plantation can continue to be harvested for the next 60 years, they said.

After the cane is harvested, it is sun-dried before being tied into bundles and submerged in water for two days.

The plant is then boiled with a dye and sun-dried once again.

Once this process is complete, the cane fibre is separated from the plant. The first layer of fibre is the best in quality and is used to weave 'lal patar pati', the highest quality mat.

The second layer is used to make bukai, which is of lower quality, they added.

People of all ages and genders are engaged in the industry as these mats can be woven just about anywhere, from their homes or even on the streets.

But despite these various challenges, around 8,000 hindu families of Delduar's Hinganagar and Kamannapara villages are sticking to their ancestral profession.

Local mat makers produce different varieties and qualities of shital pati, which are artistically woven with various designs.

A lal patar pati or red leaves mat can be sold for up to Tk 1,500 while cheaper varieties such as bukai are priced around Tk

150 per piece.

During a recent visit, 11-year old Chandra Dey and 10-year-old Anonto Chandra Dey of Kamannapara village were seen separating cane fibre under a shed at their home.

They said they do the work to earn what they can to help out their impoverished families.

Shilpi Rani Dey, a housewife of Hinganagar village, said it takes two days to weave a shital pati, for which she gets Tk 150 as a wage.

"Most of the women in the village, including my in-laws, are engaged in the industry to earn for their families without sitting idle after completing household chores," Dey added.

Boloram Chandra Dey, a veteran mat maker of Kamannapara village, said he has been producing shital patis for about 65 years.

Dey chose to hang onto the ancestral profession as he knows no other trade.

"The demand for these mats was once very high, but now local producers are struggling to meet production costs," he added.

Subrata Dey, a 30-year-old weaver of the same village, said he was previously engaged in mat making full-time.

But now, he has opened up a grocery store and only makes mat during his free time in order to make ends meet.

"It is very difficult to maintain one's

livelihood by just weaving mats. So, many of the local producers have chosen other professions," Dey added.

A market sets up on Tuesdays and Fridays in Kamannapara village, where local mat makers can sell their products.

Wholesalers and traders from all over the country come to the market to buy the mats in bulk.

For example, wholesaler Nandalal Dey, who hails from Sirajganj, said he buys shital patis from Tangail for sale at a number of other districts, including Jamalpur, Netrokona and Narsingdi.

He makes a profit of roughly Tk 200 from each mat depending on its quality.

"However, I sold less mats last year compared to the years before due to the Covid-19 pandemic," Dey said.

"Now the peak season [summer] has come again so I hope to sell a good number of mats if the situation does not further deteriorate," he added.

The wholesaler went on to say that the demand for shital pati has fallen in the past decade due to the influx of cheaper alternatives made from inferior materials, such as plastic.

When it comes to financing, local mat makers can avail loans between Tk 50,000 to Tk 1 lakh, according to Shahnaj Begum, assistant general manager of the Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation's Tangail office.

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Time to gear up alternate banking



OPINION

MAMUN RASHID



Bangladesh has seen a significant rise in consumer banking or retail offering by banks or a few non-bank financial institutions (NBFI) in recent days. During the coronavirus pandemic, banks and NBFIs are often being seen advising their clients to transact online or through alternate channels instead of visiting the branches. Reportedly much of the personal banking or retail transactions are being handled online from home or mobile internet.

Though there are identified issues of cybersecurity breaches and control lapses, this rise is likely to gain momentum due to the creation of more and more wealthy clients with diversified product demand with improvement in telecommunications and internet services. Even before the pandemic, we have seen fewer and fewer clients were willing to come to the banks.

The alternate channel is coming out to be the best way to serve the emerging client needs. Credit cards, debit cards, ATM (automated teller machine), SMS or mobile banking, and internet banking have come out as proven tools. Even in Bangladesh, banks are focusing more on establishing or nourishing alternate channels and allocating increased resources.

As of December, banks reportedly had 10,000 plus ATMs distributed throughout the country, with Dutch-Bangla Bank alone owning almost 48 per cent of the facilities. Q cash, another network, has reportedly put up around 1,000 ATMs. There are two more ATM networks that are respectively driven by Brac Bank's OMNIBUS and AB Bank's Cash link.

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The way banking activities in Bangladesh are moving ahead, alternate banking channels will be mainstreamed soon, experts think.

GLOBAL BUSINESS

Logjam deepens at the world's ports as pandemic strikes shipping



China's Lianyungang Port is one of many sites racing to keep ahead of the global shipping gridlock created by the pandemic.

AFP, Lianyungang

Towering cranes work overtime swinging containers from cargo vessels in the eastern Chinese port of Lianyungang, racing to keep ahead of a perfect storm unleashed by the pandemic that has created gridlock in global shipping.

As the huge containers were flung onto trucks with a thunderous clang, Shi Jiangang, a top official with Chinese shipping company BonDEX Logistics, reflected on the backlog. "It's been a very great challenge," he said.

The ship being offloaded was a South Korean vessel that normally also carries passengers but has been given over entirely to cargo.

In the distance, a fleet of other vessels waited offshore. Lianyungang is not alone. The

global shipping network that keeps food, energy and consumer goods circulating -- is facing its biggest stress test in memory.

Maritime trade came under the microscope after a Japanese-owned megaship ran aground in the Suez Canal, blocking the busy channel for nearly a week.

It was refloated last week but the larger crisis remains, amid warnings that soaring freight costs could affect supplies of key goods or consumer prices.

The situation arose last year as the expanding pandemic jammed the sprawling, predictable patterns by which shipping containers are shared around the world's ports.

When many countries began easing Covid-19 restrictions late last summer, a wave of pent-up demand from

hunkered-down consumers bingeing on internet purchases delivered a shock to supply lines.

Exports from nations like China soared. But since the end of 2020, vessels have piled up outside overburdened Western ports, leaving Asian exporters clamouring for the return of empty containers needed for further shipments.

At Lianyungang -- China's 10th-busiest port, according to the World Shipping Council -- desperate firms are pressing rail-cargo containers into maritime service, placing rush orders for new ones, and rerouting some shipping to other Chinese ports.

The price to ship a 40-foot container from Lianyungang to the United States has soared to more than \$10,000, from the usual \$2,000-\$3,000, Shi said.

UAE gamers want in on multi-billion-dollar industry

AFP, Dubai

From a brand new facility in Dubai, young gamers are hosting virtual regional eSports competitions sponsored by global brands as they shoot to become major players in the multi-billion-dollar industry. Indian expat Saad Khan said he realised there was "huge opportunity" in promoting eSports in the region four years ago, when he saw people crowding into rapidly sprouting cyber cafes in Dubai, one of the UAE's seven emirates.

That's when Khan, who has a strong background in technology, decided to found Gamers Hub Media Events (GHME) to host e-Sports tournaments in the Middle East and North Africa. "We're here for the gamers, we are here for our sponsors, and we are here to give the best experience possible," said 45-year-old Khan, who is CEO of the company.

In an effort to diversify its oil-dependent economy and boost its soft power, the United Arab Emirates and its legion of young expats have in recent years jumped into a range of sectors, including sports and technology.

The global games and interactive media industry grew 12 per cent to \$139.9 billion last year, according



Young fans test laptops in a gaming zone at Gitex Shopper in Dubai World Trade Centre.

AFP/FILE

to US-based data analytics company Nielsen.

Meanwhile in the Gulf, the gaming market is expected to reach \$821 million this year, with the UAE and Saudi Arabia the biggest players, according to consulting firm

Strategy&- 'Ecosystem forming' - "There's a huge sponsorship value that has increased... the number of gamers has increased, and I'm also seeing a lot of teams being formed, which was not happening before," said Khan, who declined to disclose GHME's profits.

World Bank confirms key elements of new climate action plan

REUTERS, Washington

The World Bank announced a new Climate Change Action Plan aimed at helping developing countries achieve measurable reductions in greenhouse gas emissions and pledging to mobilise large-scale resources to aid the transition out of coal.

World Bank President David Malpass said key elements of the plan had been presented to the bank's board on Thursday and underscored the need to take urgent action.

He said the bank had provided \$83 billion in climate finance over the past five years, peaking at \$21.4 billion in 2020, but the new plan would see those levels increase. The new plan, first reported by Reuters Wednesday, commits to making financing decisions in line with efforts to limit global warming, but stops short of promising to halt funding of fossil fuels, as many campaigners had urged.

"Our collective responses to climate change, poverty and inequality are defining choices of our age," Malpass

said in a statement, underscoring the need to "help countries maximize the impact of climate finance, with measurable improvements in livelihoods through adaptation, and measurable reductions in greenhouse gas emissions through mitigation."

To achieve these goals, Malpass said 35 per cent of World Bank Group financing, on average over the next five years, would have climate co-benefits, and 50 per cent of the bank's climate financing would support adaptation and resilience.